



A schoolgirl enjoys her breakfast from a bento box.

Bento Boxes and Japanese Lacquerware

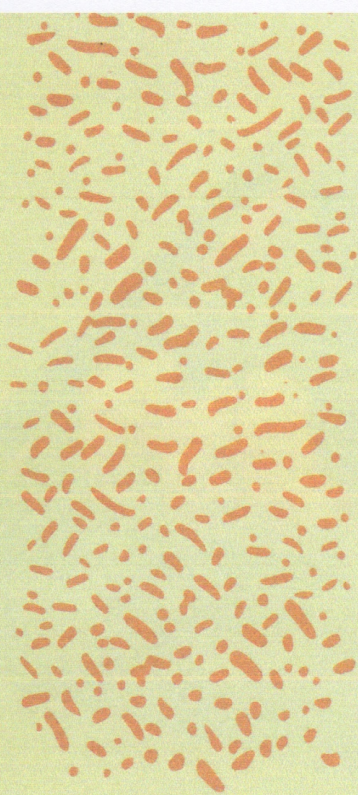
by Colette Weil Parrinello

If you're taking your lunch to school or work in Tokyo, or if you're eating in a restaurant, your meal is probably in a *bento* box. Bento means "convenient" and is an individually boxed meal. But a bento box is more than a lunchbox with sections for items such as rice, meat or fish, and pickled or cooked vegetables. It symbolizes historical tradition and culture, and serves as a display case for the food, the care of the preparer, and the care in its contents.

While there are different stories about how long the bento box has been in use, one story

traces the word "bento" to the warlord Oda Nobunaga in the 1500s. Oda Nobunaga handed out meals in bento boxes to people in his castle. Early boxes were made of handcrafted lacquered wood known as lacquerware. Modern-day boxes may be made of mass-produced material, or of handcrafted Japanese lacquerware, reminiscent of ancient designs.

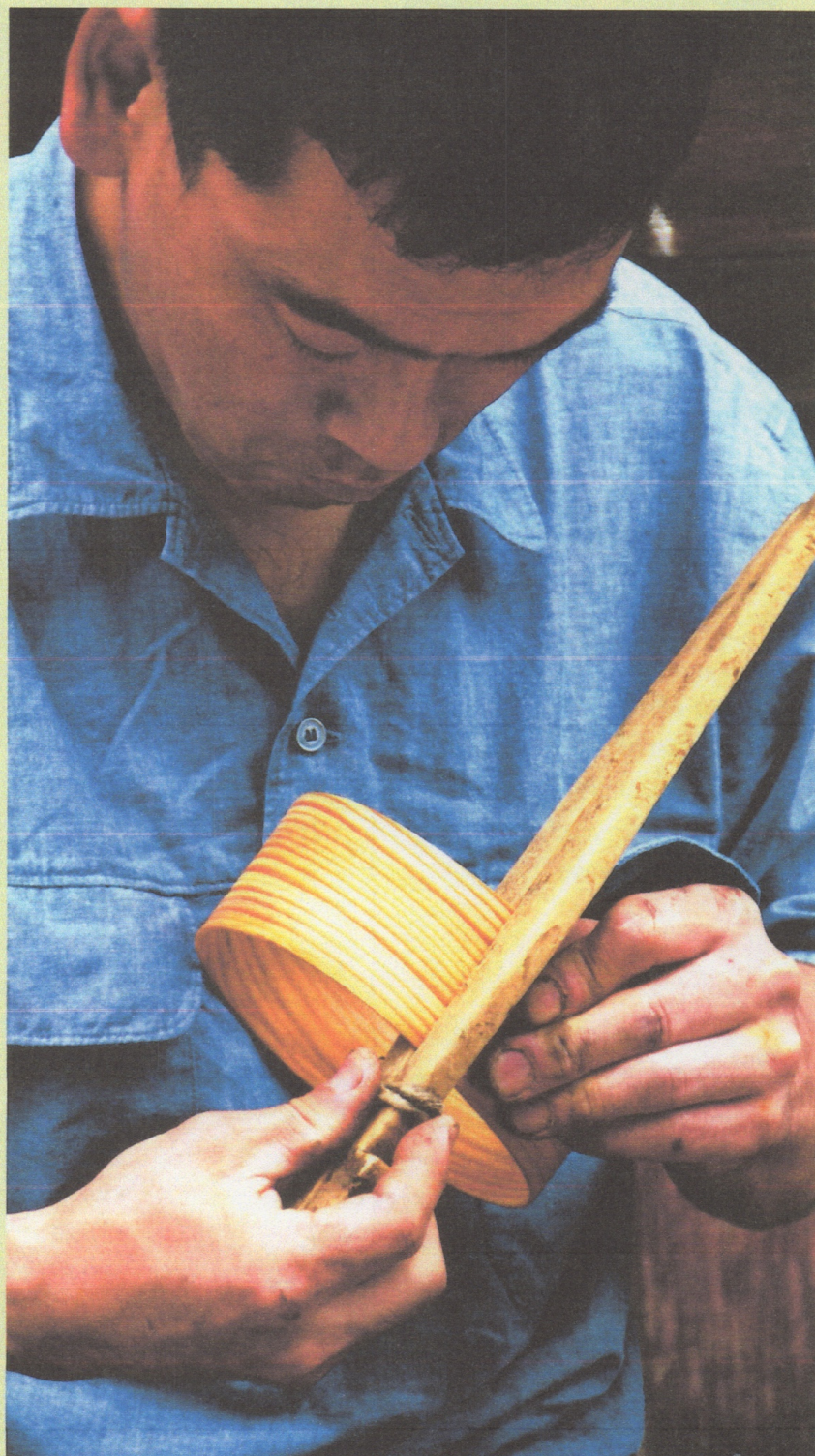
A bento box made of Japanese lacquerware is revered for its lustrous, deep shine and durability. Lacquer is the sap or resin from the *urushi* (oo-roo-shee) tree that becomes a clear liquid. Lacquerware dates back 9,000 years.



Some craftsmen still use traditional techniques to make bento boxes.

Wood or bamboo is the common base for lacquerware. The item is painted black or red, and the lacquer is applied in coats. Japanese lacquerware is typically black, brown, amber or red, and is known for its gold luminescence, bright patterns, and glossy finish. It is decorated with characters, animals, flowers, or other designs.

In ancient times, lacquerware was treasured because of the artisanal skill involved in making it. Two hundred thin layers of lacquer were applied to some objects, with each coat requiring drying and polishing before the next layer could be applied. Some pieces could take up to 10 years to complete! Creating lacquerware is still a complex procedure, with artisans and specialists involved in 33 stages and 20 to 30 coats of lacquer.





The compartments of a bento box keep food separated.

Japanese lacquerware bento boxes are cherished for their beauty and craftsmanship, inside and out. When a meal comes in a lacquerware bento box, you have been honored with care and nurturing.



Colette Weil Parrinello is a frequent contributor to FACES. She has worked in Japan in the video game industry and made dear friends who gave her beautiful Japanese lacquerware. She is a regional advisor for the Society of Children Book Writers and Illustrators.

FAST FACTS:

- The food inside a school child's bento lunchbox may be as creatively designed as the box. Moms take great care designing food characters and unique displays.
- Japanese lacquer contains the highest proportion of one component (compared to lacquer in other countries) that is the source of its unique properties—ironically it's the same chemical that's found in poison ivy or oak or urushiol.
- Harvesting lacquer involves cutting incisions into the bark of the lacquer tree. The sap drips into containers attached to the tree.
- Lacquerware is eco-friendly, super durable, and naturally resistant to heat, acid, and alkali. Two thousand-year-old lacquerware excavated from mud still had its sheen and shape.