

Lacquerware: The Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School

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I. The Modernization of the Aizu Lacquerware Industry

In 1898 the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School was established in Aizu-Wakamatsu City. Its start was somewhat later than that of the Hongō Ceramics Apprentice School founded in 1895 in the neighboring ceramics-producing center of Hongō village. Although various factors affecting the establishment were discerned in the process leading up to it, it is first necessary to clarify the background of the local community, particularly the trend of the Aizu lacquerware industry which was directly correlated to the establishment of the school.¹

During the period of the fief governments, the reputation of Aizu lacquerware was considered the best in the country. When Hoshina Masayuki took over the fiefdom in 1641 this position became unshakable, but credit was also due to Tanaka Gensai who in 1787 pursued the reform of the fief government as well as industrial promotion. The protective encouragement rendered by the fief government as seen in the introduction of various technological innovations improved the quality of Aizu lacquerware and enhanced its reputation. It also exercised control over those engaged in the lacquerware industry.

The fief government functioned like a wholesaler providing payment in advance thus dividing the merchants from the artisans. It had control over lacquerers by monopolizing the lacquer liquid, and it regulated the merchants with the use of the trade corporation (*kabunakama*). Despite such government control, a group of lacquerware merchants who had been given the sales monopoly rights steadily accumulated real capability. These merchants played the leading role in the new

development of the Aizu lacquerware industry when Japan entered the period of liberal economic activity after the Meiji Restoration.

After the Aizu war in 1868 the Aizu lacquerware industry, which had been reconstructed under the leadership of major wholesalers belonging to the former trade corporation, seemed to have emerged into an unprecedented boom due to favorable exports and an extended domestic market. Because the industry fell into the evil of slipshod manufacturing and bargain sales it lost its reputation. The wholesalers belonging to the Lacquer Shops Association (formerly the trade corporation) made the utmost effort to regain credibility. Despite the Matsukata deflation, which subsequently affected the Aizu lacquerware industry so severely that it hit the bottom of a depression from the end of the 1880s, the reputation of Aizu lacquerware improved as the industry received all the progress awards given by the third domestic industrial promotion exhibition of 1890.

The production value which was still restrained at that time began to grow abruptly from the end of the 1890s. A comparison of the increase for the period starting from 1900 to 1911 made by Aizu as against that of the nationwide producers showed that while Aizu-Wakamatsu nearly tripled its production value, the nationwide figure did not even reach 1.4 times. Such rapid progress was largely due to various technological improvements, but what was more salient was the opening of the Gan'etsu railway from Kōriyama to Wakamatsu in 1899.

The market, expanded and accessible, increased the tendency for people to change professions and for artisans to become merchants. The number of lacquerware merchants was increased decisively. Many small-production artisans (producers) emerged at the same time to meet the demand for lacquerware. To cope with fluctuating market conditions as well as securing producers, the lacquerware wholesalers at this stage saw the need to control the producers through advance payment and supply, which was one step further than previously being primarily involved in purchasing. The advanced payment wholesaling system that characterized the social and economic structure of the Aizu lacquerware industry was thus established in this process.

Those who held the dominant position in the manufacture and sale of Aizu lacquerware were wholesalers-merchants. The wholesalers made independent calculations of the cost and the income, and they were responsible for the entire operational risks. The artisans produced either on advance payment or partial payment of funds upon the commencement of work. The finished products were then sold to clients (wholesalers in consuming centers and retailers). Thus the artisans

manufactured articles after receiving advance payment and supplies of production materials from the wholesalers. They also delivered the finished products to the wholesaler. When an artisan had an exclusive contract with a specific wholesaler, he was designated a wage worker. During the period of the fief governments, divisional relationships in the production process were already established in the Aizu lacquerware industry such as the production of plain log wood for bowls, plain board wood for a tier of boxes, log lacquer, board lacquer, and gold lacquer. After the Meiji Restoration, the process of ground coat lacquer was also specialized. The wholesalers held a position similar to the pivot of a fan, as they assumed control over these production processes as well as over divisional relationships and monopolized sales by isolating artisans from the distribution process.

There were already over one thousand artisans in the Aizu lacquerware industry at the end of the Meiji period. The core of these people consisted of artisans who had completed apprenticeship. Those who entered as apprentices were not only the children of lacquerers and the poor in the city but also the second and the third sons of farmers in the prefecture and from other prefectures. Their training was based upon the traditional apprenticeship (the so-called apprentice service).

As a result of the opening of the Gan'etsu railway, remarkable progress was made by the Aizu lacquerware industry, and at the same time a production system in which artisans were controlled by wholesalers through the advance payment system was established. These characteristics had already begun to appear in the 1890s. The Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School was established in the midst of such a trend in the Aizu lacquerware industry.

Nakagawa Shuntarō, a Fukushima prefectural official (School Affairs Section Chief) who followed the vocational education theory put forth by Tejima Seiichi, principal of the Tokyo College of Technology, was directly involved with the founding of this school. He exerted himself to implement the Meiji government's policy on vocational education at the prefectural level. The local response to his activities was led by the lacquerware wholesalers who were interested in the qualitative modernization of manpower so that it would become the basis for the development of the Aizu lacquerware industry. This interest is clearly seen in a statement written by the school to enlighten ordinary people: "The hopes of this school are revealed in the description of the outline of the apprentice school."

According to the statement, the traditional apprentice system was indirectly criticized because it trained no more than the "animalistic ability" of apprentices who had been made like mere machines without

independent capabilities. In contrast, it was stated that because apprentice school education made efficient use of "spiritual ability" in addition to "animalistic ability," it would contribute to the improvement and development of the lacquerware industry in a proper way as it would harmonize and promote these two abilities.² This statement reveals the intention of the apprentice school, which tried to correspond to the policy of production increase and industrial promotion through the modernization of traditional industries.

The lacquerware school offered three courses: the lacquer course (log lacquer and board lacquer), the gold lacquer course, and the plain wood manufacturing course. The period of study was for three years, and the admission requirements were that students be over 12 years old and graduates of ordinary elementary school. This school was a full-time school that did not supplement the ordinary elementary school. In this regard, this school was different from the character of the Hongō Ceramics Apprentice School because its main emphasis was on worker training. Nevertheless, the number of actual applicants was so few that initially the school enrolled just over one-third the quota of 60 students.

The reason for poor enrollment could be that the nature of the apprentice school was a half measure in Wakamatsu City; apprentices who should have entered this school could not afford the education financially as they came from poor families, while children from the middle and the upper classes who could afford further education tended to enter Aizu Middle School. The school authorities viewed this situation as "deriving from baneful practices of despising vocation which was generally found among children with some education while children of those engaged in this industry were so preoccupied with finances that their parents disregarded their educational obligation."³ The majority of the students enrolled in this school were the children of lacquerers, gold lacquerers and plain wood manufacturers who were master craftsmen and, therefore, better off financially.

Consequently, Wakamatsu City established a system which provided subsidies to students and granted a monthly scholarship of 25 sen (which was later raised to ¥2.50) in addition to tuition exemption. This system was, to some extent, effective as the number of students in 1903 almost reached the quota. Furthermore, through a revision of the curriculum, the number of periods a week was increased to 39 hours from the initial 24 hours. In addition, the content of classes was improved.

Such efforts made by the city authorities regarding the training of lacquerware workers were naturally in keeping with the national policy,

and those who strongly supported and promoted these efforts were the upper echelons of the Aizu lacquerware industry centering on the committee members of the apprentice school.⁴ The core of the committee members consisted of lacquerware wholesalers who were on the lacquerware trade committee. Since the lacquerware wholesalers had already become influential enough by this stage to change the trend of the Aizu lacquerware industry, it is not surprising that the fundamental trend of the apprentice school was also under their discretion. The establishment, reinforcement, and further upgrading of the apprentice school to that of a technical school was basically done at the instigation of the wholesalers.

Although the apprentice school was supposed to be an educational institution for traditional apprentices, the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School enrolled instead children of master artisans. Even if traditional industry was to be modernized on the basis of technical education in a restricted sense as stated by Tejima Seiichi, the original intention thus was not achieved because the educational target, which was a key factor, was different from what it should have been.

Regarding the school as an institution for the training of mid-level personnel who would eventually succeed the masters, it could be said that the school was to some extent effective. Nevertheless, the vocational content of the school was so poor that it far from satisfied the demands of the students. It was natural that the number of applicants was small. Since there was an intrinsic limitation to the single management pursued by the city, it was difficult to expect any improvement to be made in the equipment.

Thus, there was an emergence of a movement to establish an upgraded prefectural technical school through the amalgamation of the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School and the Hongō Ceramics Apprentice School, whose experience was beyond the capability of the village despite a national subsidy. The function of the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School was to train mid-level personnel in the lacquerware industry, but its significance is that it paved the way for the establishment of a prefectural technical school.

The upgrading of the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School to a technical school came to change the intrinsic character of the apprentice school. Although the aim of the apprentice school in its initial period was to modernize traditional industry by exposing apprentices to school education, the transformation to a prefectural technical school meant abandoning the zeal to modernize the traditional apprentice system.

II. The Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School

The educational policy and the school system of the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School were as described already, but apart from the regular course there was a special course (with a quota of 20 students) whose period of study was more than six months but less than a year, and there was a special study program of up to one year for the graduates of the school. The staff comprised nine members: a principal, three teachers and assistant teachers in charge of various subjects, four teacher aides in charge of practicals, and one secretary. This situation, however, did not reach the standard number of teachers for apprentice schools.

The annual budget for 1901 when all three grades came to exist was ¥ 2,989 and 4 sen, of which 75% was spent on personnel costs, which was followed by practical training costs of a mere 7.5%.⁵ Because the number of students was insufficient to reach the basis to qualify for a national subsidy, most of the funds were managed by a city tax subsidy.

There were so few applicants in the initial years that the number of students did not reach capacity even in 1901. This failure was due not only to an insufficient number of applicants but also to the fact that many dropped out after enrollment. To counter this Wakamatsu City established the system of providing subsidies to students and made an effort to recruit enough students. Moreover, the executive members of the lacquerware trade association went around persuading the children of their colleagues in the same trade to enroll in the school. As a result, the number of students finally increased to the point of reaching the quota in 1903. Although the number of students in a course varied dependent upon the year and grade, generally there were more students in the gold lacquer course to which nearly half of the students belonged in 1903.

Concerning the curriculum, in the initial stage the number of periods a week was limited to 24 hours and the number of subjects was also limited. The number of periods a week was greatly increased to 39 hours from 1902 and the content of the curriculum was improved with an increase in the number of subjects from seven to ten. The number of periods was also increased, and practical classes were increased by ten hours from 12 to 22. The subjects taught in the same year were as follows (the figures in parenthesis denote the number of periods a week in each year): Ethics (first year: 1, second year: 1, third year: 1), Reading (2, 2, 2), Composition (1, 1, 1), Arithmetics (3, 3, 2), Physics and Chemistry (2, 2, 2), Lacquer Work History (0, 0, 1), Lacquer Work

Methods (1, 1, 1), Plain Wood Manufacturing (1, 1, 1), Drawing (6, 6, 6), and practicals (22, 22, 22).

Such a revision of the curriculum seems to have strengthened the apprentice school, which acted as the parent body in the movement to create a prefectural technical school through the amalgamation of the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School and the Hongō Ceramics Apprentice School. Incidentally, classes were held from eight in the morning until four in the afternoon, and it was arranged that academic subjects were taught in the morning while practical training was given in the afternoon.

When examining the background of the teachers in charge of these subjects, they could be clearly divided into those who taught the basic academic subjects and those who took charge of practical training. The principal as well as the teachers, acting teachers, and assistant teachers came from samurai families and were graduates of such schools as the Tokyo Technical Teacher Training Center, the Tokyo Arts School and the normal school. They were in their 20s and 30s. In contrast to this group, the teacher aides came from commoners' families without formal schooling and half of them were in their 40s, one was in his 30s and the rest were in their 60s.

The former were professional teachers who, upon graduating from educational institutions for teacher training, became qualified to teach at middle schools, vocational schools, and upper elementary schools; the latter were lacquerers and plain wood manufacturers of the master class engaged in lacquerware production in Wakamatsu City. These people were chosen above others in the trade to instruct students because of their superior technical ability.

What was the condition of the buildings and equipment? The school building was in a state "the same as that of a temple school in the Tokugawa period.⁶ A two-storied structure was additionally built as classrooms to a regular house with a godown, and the space was so limited that it was more like a tutoring class than a school."⁷ Although there is a record for 1901 revealing that the total area of the practical training factory was 48 *tsubo* (158.88 square meters), practical training was often carried out at the respective artisans' houses.

Since the objective of the apprentice school was to offer a rational, systematic education in accordance with modern scientific knowledge in addition to the methods of traditional apprenticeship, the education should have been for those wishing to enter traditional apprenticeships. However, because most students came from poor families, they could not afford to continue studying for three years at the apprentice school. As a result, those who actually entered were the

children of lacquerers, gold lacquerers, and plain wood manufacturers of the master craftsman level in the lacquerware industry whose economic standing was relatively higher.

Nevertheless, students later came from Nagano Prefecture, and there were also children of parents from other occupational backgrounds, especially farmers' children. A further examination of the background of the local students revealed that the majority of the parents up to the third graduating class were engaged in occupations which were equal to the lacquerware industry.⁸ The occupational background of the parents was clarified further from the fourth class onwards, and seven of the ten students were the children of those engaged in the lacquerware industry. Concerning the relationship to the head of the household, the second and third sons made up about half the number of students followed by the eldest sons.

The academic background of the students up to the third class revealed that two-thirds had graduated from ordinary elementary school and completed one year of upper elementary school. The majority of the students from the fourth class had completed two years of upper elementary school, and there was an overall improvement in the academic background. While the majority of the students up to the third class entered the school at the age of 12, the average age of the students entering the fourth class had increased to 15 years and 6 months.

What were the capabilities of the students? Since the Aizu Middle School had been established in Wakamatsu City as an institution for regular secondary education, it was common for the children of the middle and the upper classes in the city and the suburbs to wish to enter this school which enrolled excellent students. In comparison with this school, the apprentice school, being a vocational school, was regarded as one rank lower. Thus people took little interest in the apprentice school, and the students who were enrolled came from limited backgrounds. Low enrollment in the initial years of its founding was partially due to such a lack of local interest and a mediocre reputation.

Despite the fact that few students were recruited, their quality was good. One teacher who taught there from the period of the apprentice school to the initial phase of the technical school had this recollection: "Unlike the middle school students who were on their way to succeeding in life, the apprentice school students not only had an awareness that they were to become the backbone of the local lacquerware industry in the future but also had academic zeal in the improvement and development of lacquerware [and] were so enthusiastic that they invited themselves to teachers' houses after class and studied."⁹

In reality, "most of the graduates of the apprentice school came to

be engaged in the lacquerware industry and were at the same time the backbone of the association."¹⁰ As stated earlier, since most of the students entering the apprentice school were the second and third sons and the successors of lacquer workers in the city, after their graduation, whether they were engaged in lacquerware manufacturing at home or became independent after several years, it was certain that they would become important pillars supporting the Aizu lacquerware industry. There was also a tendency for students who came from areas other than Wakamatsu to start their own business in Wakamatsu after graduation.

III. From Apprentice School to Technical School

Regarding the plan to merge the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School and the Hongō Ceramics Apprentice School to create the Fukushima Prefectural Technical School, it was considered appropriate that a technical school with a dyeing and weaving course be first established in accordance with the Regulations for Technical Schools. A lacquer work course and a ceramics course were to be subsequently created in accordance with the Regulations for Apprentice Schools. Although a budgetary proposal based upon this plan was presented to the Fukushima Prefectural Assembly in 1899, it was rejected on the ground that the prefecture could not afford it.

Because Wakamatsu City donated land and then offered to donate a building, the Prefectural Assembly finally granted approval. The Prefectural Technical School thus came to be opened in April 1904. This school's dyeing and weaving course was started in accordance with the curricula of advanced level technical schools while the lacquer work course and the ceramics course were run as regular apprentice courses in accordance with the Regulations for Apprentice Schools (ordinary technical school). It might be more factually accurate to state that the lacquerware apprentice school and the ceramics apprentice school were transferred to the newly established technical school with the dyeing and weaving course. It was impossible for both apprentice schools to be upgraded to a technical school simply by amalgamation. Lacquerwork and ceramics just managed to be included in the technical school curriculum in the shadow of the weaving industry whose modernization and mechanization were relatively easy.

Although these two courses were classified as advanced level technical courses from the 1912 academic year, they had increasingly less significance in the school. The students entering the school remained few in subsequent years; of 33 graduating classes before World War

II only seven classes graduated more than ten students, and as many as ten graduating classes had fewer than five students. The condition was such that there was only one graduate for 1916 and 1923.¹¹

Even though there appears to have been a move to abolish the lacquerwork course, this was somehow prevented. Nevertheless, this school changed direction to correspond solely to modern industries through the successive establishment of courses such as applied chemistry in 1917, machining in 1939, and architecture in 1945 when World War II ended. Consequently, the two courses consisting of lacquerwork and ceramics which had provided a foothold at the time of the establishment of this school gradually declined.

Notes

1. Regarding the Aizu lacquerware industry and the Aizu Lacquerware Apprentice School, Satō Mamoru, Sata Genji, Haneda Arata, Itagaki Mikio, *Totei kyōiku no kenkyū* [Studies on Apprentice Education] (Ochanomizu Shobō, 1962).

2. Satō et al., *Totei Kyōiku*, pp. 81–83.

3. Refer to *Totei gakkō kankei shorui tsuzuri* [A File of Apprentice School Related Documents], Aizu-Wakamatsu City Office.

4. Refer to *Totei kyōiku no kenkyū*. It states that “the committee members selected from those in the lacquerware industry on the basis of accomplishments and reputation will confer on important matters regarding this school such as expenditure, budget, and others.”

5. Refer to *Totei gakkō kankei shorui tsuzuri*.

6. Temple schools, *terakoya*, were schools for commoners with classes originally held in spacious temple halls. Attendance averaged three years, with schools of between 10 to 100 students. By the Meiji Restoration, there were 11,000 such schools, and about 50% of the male population and 15% of the female population had attended them.

7. *Kaikō 35 nen shi* [A 35-Year History of Aizu Technical School] (Fukushima Prefectural Aizu Technical School Alumni Association, 1941), p. 50.

8. Refer to *Totei gakkō kankei shorui tsuzuri*.

9. See *Kaikō 35 nen shi*.

10. Satō Mamoru, Sata Genji, Haneda Arata, Itagaki Mikio, *Totei kyōiku no kenkyū*, *Mensetsu chōsa shiryō*, 1961, p. 4. Incidentally, the number of students graduating from the apprentice school was as follows: 7 in 1900, 3 in 1901, 3 in 1902, 9 in 1903, 12 in 1904, and 10 in 1905. (See *Kaikō kaishi* [Aizu Technical High School Alumni Association Bulletin], Commemorial Issue of its Semicentennial Anniversary. Fukushima Prefectural Aizu Technical High School Alumni Association, 1956.

11. See *Kaiko kaishi*.