

“Today, I want you to learn a new word. That word is *urushi*.”

Suzanne Ross always begins her overseas lectures this way. The word “*urushi*” refers to both the tree (*Toxicodendron vernicifluum*) and its sap, which is used as a coating material that becomes strong and glossy when hardened. Due to its adhesive, preservative and, of course, aesthetic qualities, it’s been part of daily life in Japan since ancient times. Nowadays, *urushi* is also the generic name used to describe all wooden products coated with it. Some other Asian countries also use it, but with items made in Japan over



The sap is extruded one drop at a time by cutting grooves into the tree. Apparently, only trees grown in Japan produce *urushi* that can withstand its climate.

9,000 years ago being the oldest in the world,<sup>[1]</sup> Japan’s use is special. Also used for restoration of national treasures, *urushi* is one of Japan’s important traditional cultures.

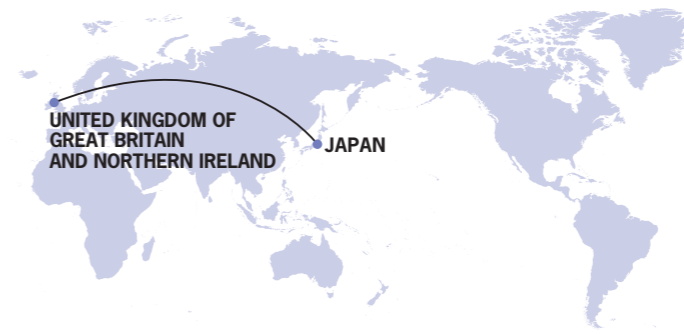
While still an art-school student in London, 19-year-old Ross visited an exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts and fell in love with a deep black and beautifully inlaid *urushi* inkstone box. “I want to study *urushi*!” an inspired Ross resolved, and she left for Japan on a one-way ticket. “I naively thought I would master it in about three months and return to England,” she recalls, but the unfathomable depths of *urushi* have been captivating her for more than 35 years. Among Japan’s *urushi* production regions, Wajima City, where Ross has studios and a gallery, has a reputation for the highest quality pieces, which are called the “*Urushi no Jo-ob* (Queen of *Urushi*).”

Wajima is home to Ishikawa Prefectural Wajima Institute of Lacquer Arts, where grand masters impart the art to the next generation. Ross, a four-time graduate of the school recalls, “It was amazing to learn from national living treasures,

who not only taught techniques, but also motivated us.” Due to *urushi*’s many complex processes, students normally choose to specialize, but Ross studied everything—an amazing feat for one person. This achievement empowered her to break out from stereotypical concepts of tradition and create original *urushi* of contemporary relevance.

“This *urushi* accessory is one of my contemporary works. Each bead expresses a different quality: matte, shiny, and textured.” Other examples are a bowl decorated with lace soaked in *urushi*, and a plate appearing metallic because of silver powder sprinkled over the *urushi*, a technique called *maki-e*. “*Urushi*’s range of expression is infinite,” says Ross.

“*Urushi* is translated as



lacquerware in English, but I disagree. *Urushi* is far superior to anything synthetic. It is light, strong and exudes elegance. Anyone who uses *urushi* tableware once, is instantly hooked. There is no going back to plastic tableware after that. Extracted from a single species of tree, *urushi* is all natural. So, instead of ‘lacquerware,’ I call it ‘*urushi*’ to convey its uniqueness and to distinguish it from synthetic products.”

For the sake of *urushi*, Ross channels all energies into her activities as an artist, and into her lectures and workshops both in Japan and abroad. This year, she and fellow *urushi* kindred spirits are launching an *urushi* NPO to link up all the production regions and present a unified “Japanese *urushi*” to the world. “Although it all comes from the same plant, it differs so much by region and by artist. I think “Japanese *urushi*”

would best be presented to the world as a combined force, and information on it should be shared in English worldwide.” She also challenges issues currently facing *urushi* are a shortage of artists and toolmakers inheriting the traditions and a dwindling supply of trees and the skilled craftsmen to tap them. “I want to spread the virtues of *urushi* to the world, so people buy it, use it, support it and want to study it. We must first protect the trees—if there is no sap, it’s all over.”

Ross believes in telling others about the good things in life. “*Urushi* is beautiful and versatile. If it disappears, the world loses a great treasure, forever.” *Urushi* lured her from London to faraway Japan. We cannot allow its shine to fade into history. ✨

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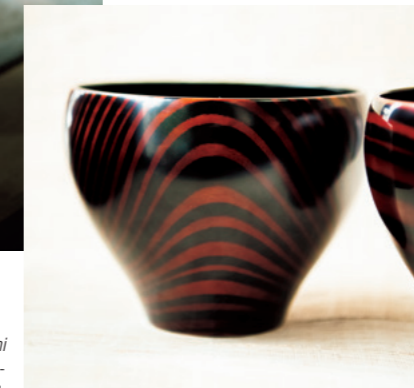
# Urushi: Preserving the Treasure for the World

Suzanne Ross is Japan’s unofficial ambassador for *urushi*. Her beautiful works and strong message grab hearts both in Japan and overseas.



Ross’s line of accessories allows the wearer to truly discover *urushi*’s virtues.

Ross creates two types of bowls: original and traditional. “In my original pieces, I explore modern ways to bring out the best of *urushi*, while my traditional pieces keep the traditional skills alive,” she explains.



Wooden bowls coated with *urushi* highlighting the grain exude an all-natural one-of-a-kind feel.



**Suzanne Ross**

Born in London, United Kingdom, she arrived in Japan in 1984. As an *urushi* artist, she departs from traditional styles to create original pieces inspired by Japan’s natural beauty. At Wajima Kobo Nagaya, in central Wajima, one can view her pieces and some of her work processes.

[1] According to Hokkaido Government’s official website (in Japanese)