

MEANING AND REPRESENTATION OF TRADITIONAL CRAFT: THE CASE FOR A LOCAL JAPANESE LACQUERWARE¹

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Introduction

Together with the Tsugaru dialect, Tsugaru *shamisen* music, and Tsugaru *kogin* stitching, Tsugaru lacquerware is an important part of the representation of the Tsugaru District of Aomori Prefecture, Japan.² In addition to the local connection by place-name designation, Tsugaru *nuri*, as the lacquerware is known, is a commodity both commonplace, and highly valued within Tsugaru. As will be detailed in this paper, Tsugaru *nuri* can be found in the vast majority of households in the Tsugaru District in one form or another, even if nothing more than a pair of lacquered chopsticks. It is also highly regarded as a gift object, an act of great social importance in Japan, and can be purchased at a number of Tsugaru *nuri* specialty shops in Hirosaki City, the principal city of the Tsugaru District, as well as in area department stores throughout the prefecture. Tsugaru *nuri* is also an important tourist commodity, cast as the primary traditional craft of Tsugaru at most tourist centers and shops throughout the area.³ As such,

¹ This research reflects a continuation of research reported on in the author's chapters "Tradition and Modernity in Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware: Perspectives of Preservation and Promotion, Production and Consumption," in Christopher S. Thompson and John W. Traphagen, eds., *Wearing Cultural Styles in Japan: Concepts of Tradition and Modernity in Practice* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2006), pp. 234-263; and "Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware: Nation-State Patronage and the Representation of a Local Craft" in Nanyan Guo, ed., *Tsugaru: Regional Identity on Japan's Northern Periphery* (Dunedin, New Zealand: Otago University Press, 2005), pp. 99-119.

² The Tsugaru District comprises the western half of Aomori Prefecture, the northernmost prefecture of Honshu, Japan. These are examples of place-designated indexing of Tsugaru: a local dialect (Tsugaru *ben*), a traditional and highly distinctive form of *shamisen* playing and musical style (Tsugaru *shamisen*), and a particular stitched pattern (Tsugaru *kogin*).

³ Examples of advertising will be referred to in this paper; inclusion of Tsugaru *nuri* lacquerware in prefectural and municipal brochures is, for the

Tsugaru nuri is an important presence in both the everyday lifestyle and the socio-cultural consciousness of Tsugaru residents, as well as having important potential in the economic vitality of the Tsugaru District and Aomori Prefecture as a whole.

In order to contextualize this multi-dimensional character of the lacquerware in its contemporary setting, this paper examines the varied meanings and representations which have characterized Tsugaru nuri over its history. After briefly outlining the historical background of Japanese lacquerware as a whole in terms of meaning and representation, this examination focuses on how the meanings ascribed to Tsugaru nuri have evolved over its 300-plus year history – first from status symbol by Edo-period (1600-1868) feudal elites to a representative traditional Japanese craft by modern-day administrations both national and local, and ultimately to an expensive yet highly-valued local commodity for the area and the prefecture. This paper illustrates how various representations have accompanied this historical arc, from the secretive *te-ita* hand samples of Edo to a legally designated traditional craft in the 1970s, and now to a lacquerware being reinvented by the local lacquer crafters and rediscovered by the people of Tsugaru. The paper closes by noting how the contemporary representations of Tsugaru nuri lacquerware, focusing on a human interest orientation and reflecting an educational/experiential orientation, point to new considerations of the common frameworks of localism and the attributes of craft, together with traditional status signification and touristic commoditization.

Research on crafts, both in general and in Japan, is extensive, yielding diverse frameworks and underlying a number of meaningful interpretations of contemporary socio-cultural phenomena. Noris Ioannou, in prefacing his edited work *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives*, noted that the art versus craft debate that accompanied serious study of crafts in the past has given way to an integration of approaches which includes the historical, cultural/anthropological, socio-political, socio-economic, and philosophical.⁴ The approach adopted here is thus multi-

most part, a given – for web-based examples of such portrayals see www.pref.aomori.jp/tour/bussan/bus_06e.html, www.city.hirosaki.aomori.jp/kankou/tewaza/tewasa/html, and www.city.hirosaki.aomori.jp/gaiyou/yutaka/jiba-e.html.

⁴ Noris Ioannou, *Craft in Society: An Anthology of Perspectives* (South

dimensional, grounded first and foremost in examination of the history and contemporary reality of the lacquerware itself. As outlined by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, grounded research involves first, the development of broad categories which organize the examination, second, the identification of specific cases which demonstrate the relevance of the categories, and third, the development of generalizable analytical frameworks.⁵ For the research herein, these are seen in terms of the historical progression of evolving meaning for the lacquerware, the accordant representations that accompany this evolving meaning, and what this contributes to heretofore developed theoretical frameworks.

In that this paper focuses on Japanese lacquerware, which is relatively unexamined as a Japanese craft, and does so in a manner that covers a broad historical expanse up to the present using varied methods based principally on a highly grounded approach, the paper is offered as a “position piece,” a starting point for examining and framing meaning and representation found in the social context of traditional crafts. Further contextualizing the paper is its use of a specific local case for the Tsugaru District of Aomori Prefecture, significant in light of David Torsello’s reference to the scarcity of social scientific literature focusing on both the Tohoku Region of Japan in general and Aomori Prefecture specifically.⁶

The Historical Background of Japanese Lacquerware

Lacquer sap had been used in Japan in the Prehistoric Period, evidenced in the numerous findings of lacquer use in artifacts from Jōmon (ca 10,000 BCE – ca 300 BCE) archaeological sites, several of which are located in Aomori Prefecture. It was, however, with the introduction of Buddhism in the middle of the sixth century that lacquerware use in a more contemporary sense had been identified, primarily in the appurtenances like sutra boxes and altar bases that accompanied Buddhist practices. The ensuing history of lacquerware in Japan followed the broadest political and cultural trends of Japanese history, which, to a degree, highlight the meanings of the lacquerware throughout this history. While various works

Freemantle, Australia: Freemantle Arts Centre Press, 1992), pp. 11-45.

⁵ Barney G. Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory* (Chicago: Aldine Transaction, 1967).

⁶ Davide Torsello, “The Paths to Difference: Social and Economic Choices in Three Post-war Agrarian Settlements of North-Eastern Japan,” *Social Science Journal Japan* 5/1 (2002): 37-53.

have included descriptions of specific pieces of lacquerware, detailing the artisan and the technique, Onishi Nagatoshi, Beatrix von Rague, and Ann Yonemura provide detailed accounts of the historical development of Japanese lacquerware overall, with ample references to how this development was influenced by political, sociological and cultural events of the time. Much of the historical summary which follows is based on their works.⁷

The lacquerware of the Heian period (794-1185), one of the earliest periods with an extensive array of lacquered goods, reveals the extent to which early consumption was a function of the aristocracy of the Kyoto Court, seen in demand for religion-related lacquerware, as well as a wide variety of utensils, writing boxes, bookshelves, chests and tables, comb boxes and toilet cases, lamp and mirror stands, and sword scabbards and saddles. While this early consumption had a clear religious function, it was also an indicator of social status. The transition from the Heian to the Kamakura era (1185-1333) ushered in a 250-year period of domestic war, as the two lines of the Japanese Imperial House engaged in a struggle for succession. While these courts continued to foster and patronize the arts, including lacquerware, up to the beginning of the Muromachi era (1333-1568), the long wars of succession left them so financially impoverished that they no longer had the means to support artistic undertakings of any kind. With the power of the Imperial Court decentralized at the end of the era of Civil Wars, the large *daimyō*, feudal clans situated throughout Japan, invited the now-impoverished artisans to their provincial seats. In those

⁷ Japanese lacquerware is well-described as a traditional craft and the specifics of particular pieces and artisans are available; see for example Japan Craft Forum, *Japanese Crafts* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1996); Rupert Faulkner, *Japanese Studio Crafts: Tradition and the Avant-garde* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1995); and Masami Shiraishi, *Rainbows and Shimmering Bridges: Contemporary Japanese Lacquerware* (New York: Japan Society, Inc., 1996). Examinations of lacquerware which include consideration of the social context, historical or contemporary, include Onishi Nagatoshi, *Urushi: Uruwashi no Ajia* [Urushi: Elegant Asia] (Tokyo: Dai-Nippon insatsu, 1995); Beatrix von Rague, *A History of Japanese Lacquerwork* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976); and Ann Yonemura, *Japanese Lacquer* (Washington D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, 1979), as will be detailed herein.

places that were spared the ravages of war there arose localized centers of culture, which in many cases fostered production and development of lacquerware, most notably in Yamaguchi, the then-seat of the Ouchi clan, Odawara, seat of the Hojo clan, and the port city of Sakai, an independent area of Osaka. In the Momoyama period (1568-1600), a growing consciousness of the relationship between the function of an object and its decorative form on the part of the elite patrons ushered in the notion of functional beauty. This would result in two tiers of production of lacquerworks, one which was of high decorative quality and another of practical items for everyday use. A class barrier had thus been broken; lacquerware was no longer just beautifully decorated lacquer objects primarily used for votive offerings to temples or status symbols for nobility, but also included simply-styled functional utensils for everyday use by the middle classes as well.

The Edo period (1600-1868) provided a backdrop for great development in Japanese lacquerware directed by both central and local systems of patronage – in this case, an act of sponsorship of the works for a specific form of private consumption. The Tokugawa shogun and his successors, after establishing centralized power, summoned numerous lacquer artists to their court in Edo and provided them with handsome commissions for the production of original lacquerware pieces. The Edo period also saw the institution of the *sankin-kōtai* system, the stipulation that *daimyō*, the provincial feudal leaders, spend alternate years in the Edo capital and at their provincial estates, providing the means for lacquerware to further prosper in outlying areas. While ostensibly a means of keeping the *daimyō* under control while imposing a costly standard of living, the *sankin-kōtai* system also allowed for lacquerware pieces, as well as a variety of innovative patterns and the techniques to create them, to find their way to the regional power centers. This process ultimately provided the social mechanism for emergence of the *kawari-nuri*, or “changed lacquer techniques,” the highly localized lacquering techniques which developed in the provinces under the patronage of the local feudal families and led to the emergence of distinct local lacquerwares. The chief concern of the lacquer masters of this period was to satisfy the needs of the feudal elites for ceremonial showpieces. Innovation of style, often a function of the use of local materials and development of specific lacquering techniques, was key to the success of the lacquer master. One example of this can be found in the sword scabbard and saddles used by the shogunate and local *daimyō*, with an estimated three hundred types of *saya-nuri* (sword-scabbard-

lacquerings) developed over the Edo period. The major provincial lacquers which emerged under the patronage of the *daimyō* and still exist today include Wajima nuri (Ishikawa Prefecture), Aizu nuri (Fukushima Prefecture), Wakasa nuri (Fukui Prefecture), and Tsugaru nuri (Aomori Prefecture).

In 1867, the last Tokugawa shogun was forced to resign his power, and so began the Meiji period (1868-1912), bringing fundamental changes in the power structure of the nation-state and the meaning of lacquerware. The *daimyō* lost their existing sources of revenue, and thus their capacity for patronage. The lacquer masters, with their principal means of financial support gone, now had to adapt to living off the sales of their work. This was a difficult transition, as the time investment for producing even relatively ordinary lacquerware was substantial, yet the return on such an investment of time was tenuous. However, from the late 1880s, efforts aimed at institutionalization of the lacquer industry were undertaken. The Tokyo Art School (Tokyo Bijutsu Gakkō) was founded in 1888, and included a lacquer training division. The Nihon Shikki-kai [Japan Lacquer Association] was established in 1889, and in 1890, the Emperor Meiji (1852-1912) convened the Imperial Academy of Art, an art advisory council which included a representative for lacquerware, signaling support by Japan's most exalted personage. The creation of the National Museums in Tokyo (proposed 1871; completed 1882), Kyoto (founded 1889), and Nara (founded 1889) helped foster public interest in the native arts of Japan, including lacquerware. By the end of the Meiji period, the patronage of the feudal elites had been replaced by the institutionalized support of educational institutions, a lacquer association, and various museums. These institutions provided legitimacy and some measure of support for Japanese lacquerware in this period of transition.

In the mid-1920s, during the early years of the Showa period (1926-1989), Yanagi Muneyoshi's (1889-1961) expression of the notion and meaning of Japanese folk crafts brought about a revival of interest in Japanese folk art, sparking awareness of the beauty and importance of local lacquerwares among the general public. In 1927, lacquerwork was included for the first time in the annual government-sponsored art exhibition, the Teiten (later changed to Nitten). In 1928, the Industrial Arts Institute (Sangyō Kōgei Shiken-jō), a technological research institute, was founded, with lacquerware the special province of the Tohoku Institute located in the northern part of Honshu. In response to the overwhelming national focus on industry and mechanization that accompanied the period of high economic

growth in the decades following World War II, the Japanese government took measures to protect Japanese arts and crafts. Under the provisions of a 1951 legislative act, the National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties (Bunkazai Hogo Iinkai) was established in 1954. In 1975, the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries was established by what is now the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, as a means of promoting traditional crafts at a grass-roots level.⁸

The Meanings and Representations of Tsugaru Nuri

As Yonemura pointed out, Japanese lacquerware was, and is, as much art as craft, “a living art in contemporary Japan, providing functional bowls, trays, and containers of familiar traditional shapes for daily use as well as exquisitely formed and decorated objects which are unique works of art.”⁹ The artistic lustre and functional durability of Japanese lacquerware was, and is, a combinative function of the lacquer and the lacquering technique. The lacquer, *urushi* in Japanese, is applied in multiple layers, each a thin coating which is allowed to harden before the application of the next layer. It is in these many layers of lacquer that the beauty and the value of the lacquerware piece emerge. There are any number of local varieties of lacquerware found throughout Japan, and currently twenty-two traditional lacquerwares designated by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries.¹⁰ These regional lacquerwares are differentiated primarily on the basis of some aspect of regional representativeness: an aesthetic element such as a particular motif, pattern or color scheme; the application of some specific lacquering technique developed by the lacquerers in that locale; or use of a particular local variety of wood as the base or some local material in the lacquering process. This combination of material, technique, and motif is important in producing both a local meaning, a connection with the lacquerware among local residents, as well as a regional identity, wherein the lacquerware

⁸ See the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries [Zaidan hōjin: dentōteki kōgeihin sangyō shinkō kyōkai] website at www.kougei.or.jp.

⁹ Yonemura, *Japanese Lacquer*, p. v.

¹⁰ The Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries' website (see Note 8) lists twenty-two such regional lacquerwares on its English-language page for lacquerware at www.kougei.or.jp/english/lacquer.html.

serves to represent the place. The lacquerwares are not just figuratively representative of the place of origin, but take on the characteristics of the place in a very literal sense as a tangible part of the place, as well.

Summarizing Satō Takeji, Tsugaru nuri is the joining together of wooden base forms with lacquer sap in what were once highly secretive, and are now still little-known techniques.¹¹ Through a labor-intensive and time-consuming process of lacquering and polishing, these techniques result in lacquered pieces with intricate and exquisitely detailed surface patterns and astonishing longevity. In that respect, Tsugaru nuri differs little from other regional lacquerwares. From the standpoint of a designated traditional craft, as established by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, the meaning of Tsugaru nuri, like other lacquerwares, emerges through: (1) being used mainly in everyday life; (2) being primarily manufactured by hand; (3) being manufactured using traditional techniques; (4) being made with materials which have been traditionally employed; and (5) being an industry of regional nature.¹² The artistic and complex character of the four designated patterns of Tsugaru nuri are, however, distinct from other regional lacquerwares, emerging through specific techniques in applying the multiple applications – as many as forty for a single piece of Tsugaru nuri – of base lacquers, then pattern lacquers, and finally surface lacquers. The final patterns are dictated by the pattern lacquer layers, which after being covered by the colored surface layer lacquers, are brought out with sanding and polishing, a lengthy process which works through the overlying surface lacquer, revealing the pattern that lies underneath. These techniques and patterns are reflected in the naming of the four contemporary lacquerware styles. *Kara-nuri*, written

¹¹ Satō Takeji, *Tsugaru nuri* (Hirosaki: Tsugaru shobo, 1977); see also Satō Takeji and Hashimoto Yoshiro, *Tsugaru nuri shikki* [Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware] (Aomori: Asahi insatsu, 1987).

¹² See the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries' homepage at www.kougei.or.jp/english/promotion.html. See also Takashina Seiya and Takazawa Miyuki, "Dentōteki kōgeihin sangyō no shinkō" [Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries], *Refurensu: kokuritsu kokaizushokan chosa – rippo – kosa – kyoku* [National Government Library Legislation Examination Bureau], 51/2 (2001): 121-129; and Miwa Ryusaku, "Tokushu: dentōteki kōgeihin no shinkō to mirai e no keishō" [Special: Succeeding to the Future of Promotion of Traditional Crafts], *METI Chūgoku keizai sangyō-kyoku* [2001 Bulletin] 726 (2002): 20-32.

with the character meaning Chinese, foreign, or, most likely applied to the lacquerware as it emerged at the time, arabesque, and created with a specially designed spatula-like tool to apply the pattern lacquer which yields a colorfully specked pattern, is by far the most common Tsugaru nuri style. *Nanako-nuri*, written in either the phonetic hiragana syllabary or with the kanji character for fish repeated twice followed by the kanji for eggs, is made by spreading dried rapeseed on the surface of the wet pattern lacquer layer, which then resembles roe (hence the naming) and which produces in the final pattern minute circles covering the entire piece. *Monsha-nuri*, written using the characters for crest and lace or gauze, has a surface pattern that is just that, the appearance of lace created by application of burned rice husks to a layer of wet lacquer, which itself overlays a previously created pattern, all of which is then sanded through and polished. *Nishiki-nuri*, written in characters which mean brocade, has the most stylistically structured pattern of the Tsugaru nuri styles, consisting of combinations of specific techniques yielding a combined arabesque and fret pattern.

Status Symbol, Traditional Craft and Contemporary Commodity

As with other regional Japanese lacquerwares, the origins of Tsugaru nuri lie in the patronage-based quest for originality on the part of the local elites of the Edo period and the development of a local *kawari-nuri* as described above. Like other regional lacquerwares, following this origin, Tsugaru nuri also underwent local and national processes of institutionalization and eventually traditionalization.

After taking control of the region in 1589, the Tsugaru clan gained formal recognition by the Tokugawa government, and in 1610, began building a castle in what was to become Hirosaki City. Following the practice of the time, the Tsugaru Lord sponsored craftsmen from the southern castle towns of Kyoto and Osaka, among them carpenters, stoneworkers, blacksmiths, and lacquer masters, to lead in the construction. Following completion of the castle, these lacquer craftsmen, in responding to the demand for original works of lacquerware on the part of the local elites, established a local lacquer industry – what would become Tsugaru nuri. Numerous entries in the feudal clan diaries show the practice of patronage for these lacquer artisans, most notably in the issuing of invitations and provision of salaries of rice and property offered to lacquer masters.¹³ Clearly the meaning of Tsugaru nuri for these feudal elites was

¹³ Mochizuki Yoshio, *Tsugaru nuri* (Tokyo: Rikogakusha, 2000), p. 18.

status, a status purchased with patronage. Proof of the extent of this patronage and the variation in lacquer designs in the multitude of local *kawari-nuri* styles produced in the Tsugaru District can be seen in the 514 *te-ita*, literally hand-boards, discovered recently by descendants of the Tsugaru family.¹⁴ The hand-sized *te-ita* (hence the term) are lacquered in what would have been either the lacquer crafter's best and most original style or a color and pattern scheme that the crafter thought would be pleasing to a particular potential patron.

With the abolition of the Tokugawa government bringing the end of local clan control and the associated patronage, Tsugaru nuri was, like all Japanese lacquerware at the time, forced to accommodate a more market-oriented approach. However, an example of the initial institutionalization of Tsugaru nuri was the inclusion of the lacquerware in Meiji-period government attempts at showcasing Japanese crafts on a global stage, as Tsugaru-produced lacquerware was shown at the Vienna International Exhibition of 1873, and thereafter at Philadelphia in 1875, and Paris in 1878. It was for these events that the term "Tsugaru nuri" was coined, in order to distinguish it from other regional varieties of Japanese lacquerware. Throughout the Edo period, what would come to be called Tsugaru nuri lacquerware was in fact referred to with a variety of other terms, in most cases reflecting combinations of craftsman (*Tsugaru-kozaki-nuri*), local place-name (*Hirosaki-nuri*), technique (*hineri-nuri*, literally twisted lacquer), and pattern (*shimofuri-nuri*, literally salt and pepper lacquer).¹⁵ The Vienna International Exhibition represented the first established reference to the lacquerware produced in the Tsugaru District using a regional reference, highlighting a meaning for the lacquerware as a craft representative of Japan on the international stage and Tsugaru on the national stage. It also signaled the start of a process of standardization of Tsugaru nuri, as representative patterns of what was to be referred to as Tsugaru nuri had to be established and maintained.

¹⁴ As reported in both of the local Aomori and Tsugaru newspapers, the prefecture-wide *Tōnippon* and the Tsugaru-based *Mutsu shinpo* (both April 4, 2003). Property of Hirosaki City, the *te-ita* have been designated cultural artifacts and are being analyzed by a committee of leading local Tsugaru nuri artisans.

¹⁵ Satō Takeji, "Tsugaru urushi kōhin no koshō ni tsuite" [Regarding the Naming of Tsugaru Lacquerware Goods], *Shi-shi Hirosaki* 10 (2001): 122-133.

As shown in Table 1, production of Tsugaru nuri from this period on reflected both events on a national and global scale and increasing institutionalization of the production of the lacquerware. Modest good fortune and the establishment of a production association in 1907 were followed by setback with the start of World War I, after which, the economic depression which occurred in the late 1920s and the national concentration toward World War II adversely affected lacquerware production. The post-war period from 1950 to 1980 saw a steady increase in the fortunes of Tsugaru nuri, as what had to that point been considered a luxury item was designated a product worthy of prefectural promotion in 1949 and, corresponding to Japan's period of high economic growth and increasing disposable incomes, became an item purchased in greater amounts by ordinary residents through the 1960s and 1970s. The suspension of imports of Chinese lacquerware products in 1958 represents an early government attempt to shelter the industry, while in 1975, Tsugaru nuri was designated a Traditional Craft Product by the Minister of Economy, Trade, and Industry, further establishing and solidifying the four techniques and accordant patterns as standards of the craft tradition. Post-1980 saw a slight downturn in production, most likely attributable to the increasing availability of reasonably-priced alternative goods of functional and stylistic character to accommodate the changes in the lifestyles and preferences that were taking place even among the rural Aomori residents, who still make up the primary market for Tsugaru nuri.

Table 1. Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware Production 1880-present

Year	Prod (yen)	Major Events
1881	5,697	Tsugaru Nuri in the 2nd Domestic Promotion Exhibition ¹
1897	9,079	
1906	45,056	Tsugaru Nuri Production Association ² established (1907)
1914	26,000	Start of First World War
1921	140,337	Market in Tohoku and Hokkaido Districts enlarged
1928	129,600	Global depression; 55 lacquer enterprises – 98 employed

1931	91,400	Aomori Prefectural Industrial Experimental Station ³ established
1936	202,337	79 lacquer enterprises – 233 employed
1939	153,171	Second World War begins
1949	13,950,144	Tsugaru Nuri designated as Prefectural Small Business Promotion Product ⁴
1951	26,82,930	Tsugaru Nuri Exhibition opened in Tokyo
1958	203,100,000	Suspension of imports of Chinese lacquerwares
1973	1,535,000,000	Establishment of the Tsugaru Nuri Danchi (production complex)
1975	1,930,800,000	Designation of Tsugaru Nuri as Traditional Industrial Art Object ⁵
1980	2,186,690,000	Production peak in 1978: 2,397,695,000; 678 lacquer craftsmen identified
1995	1,840,000,000	449 lacquer craftsmen identified (1996)
2000	1,121,000,000	

Note: (1) Dainikai naikoku kangyō hakurankai; (2) Tsugaru nuri sangyō kumiai; (3) Aomoriken kōjō shikenba; (4) Aomoriken chūshō kigyō shinkō taisaku; (5) Dentō kōgeihin. Source: Mochizuki, *Tsugaru nuri*, pp. 35, 36 and 39.

As the focus of the meaning of Japanese lacquerware in general shifted from that of social status for the feudal elites to a high-priced commodity with the end of the feudal era, early post Edo-period institutionalized support can be seen in the establishment of various associations and museums in the Meiji period, culminating thereafter in the National Commission for the Protection of Cultural Properties and the Japanese Arts and Craft Association in 1954. For Tsugaru nuri, such institutionalization and support came with its inclusion in an international exhibition in 1873 and its subsequent designation as “Tsugaru nuri.” Local support came with the establishment of the Tsugaru Nuri Production Association in 1907 and the Prefectural Industrial Experimental Station in 1931 (which included a lacquerware research division), and with the lacquerware’s designation as a Prefectural Small Business Promotion Product in 1949.

However, to fully contextualize the transition from traditional craft to contemporary commodity, it is necessary to examine the Traditional Industrial Arts Products Promotion Plan: Tsugaru Nuri Lacquerware (Shinkō jigyō ni kakaru dentōteki kōgeihin: Tsugaru nuri), inclusion in which accompanied Tsugaru nuri gaining status as a Traditional Craft Product in 1975. This promotion program is underwritten by the national government under the Law for the Promotion of Craft Industries of 1974, with the First Stage of the Promotion Plan for Tsugaru nuri lacquerware undertaken during the period from 1976 to 1984, the Second Stage from 1996 to 2001, and the Third Stage now underway. The objectives and budgets of the First, Second and Third Stages are clearly identified in the respective Promotion Plan Activity Reports.¹⁶ There are nine principal areas of activities, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Principal Activity Areas in Promotion Plan Activity Plans

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1. Activities related to securement and training of successors
 2. Activities related to maintenance and reform of techniques
 3. Activities related to the securement of raw materials
 4. Activities related to development of demand
 5. Activities related to improvement of working conditions
 6. Cooperative-based activities: securement of raw materials and sale of goods
 7. Provision of product information to consumers
 8. Activities associated with aged society
 9. Activities related to promotion with other Traditional Industrial Arts and Crafts
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Source: Hirosaki City Commerce, Industry and Tourism Division, Promotion Plan for Tsugaru nuri Lacquerware, first and second Stage Promotion Plan Activity and Status Reports, third Stage Promotion Plan Proposal.

¹⁶ Copies of the reports for the three stages, first (Dai-ichiji shinkō keikaku ni okeru shinkō jigyō no jishi jōkyō hōkoku), second (Dai-niji shinkō keikaku ni okeru shinkō jigyō no jishi jōkyō hōkoku), and third (Shinkō keikaku nikakaru nitei shinseisho: dai-sanji shinkō keikaku), were obtained from the Hirosaki City Commerce, Industry and Tourism Division.

Examining the focus and progress of the promotion plan reveals how the meaning of Tsugaru nuri has changed from traditional craft to commodity over the period of the plan itself. The budget plans and actual expenditures for each of the Promotion Plan activity areas for the First and Second Stages as well as the budget plan for the Third Stage are given in Table 3. More important to note than the fact that the amount of funding budgeted and ultimately allocated has dropped over the three stages is the clear shift of focus in the provision of funds from the First Stage to the Second and Third Stages. In the First Stage, both plan and expenditures are, as shown in Table 3, concentrated on “cooperative activities” (activity area #6) and “improvement of working conditions” (activity area #5); combined, these two areas accounted for ninety-four percent of total budget expenditures.

Table 3. Promotion Plan Budgets and Expenditures

Activity Area	First Stage			Second Stage		
	Plan	Expend	Percent	Plan	Expend	Percent
1. Successor Training	2.9	1.4	63	2.9	3.7	63
2. Technique Maintenance/Reform	.1	.01	23	9.8	2.6	17
3. Securement of Raw Materials	3.9	2.7	93	10.9	2.8	17
4. Development of Demand	1.3	1.9	198	25.4	52.8	131
5. Working Conditions	35.4	17.8	67	18.0	0.0	0
6. Cooperative Activities	55.3	75.5	181	3.5	3.5	64
7. Product Quality	.6	.4	84	1.5	3.2	250
8. Aged Society Activities	.2	.1	51	4.4	7.4	107
9. Industrial Arts Crafts Industry	.3	.2	73	23.7	24.0	64
	(100)	(100)		(100)	(100)	(100)
Total Budget ('000 yen)	1,191,184	1,584,763	133/100	61,160	38,710	63/100

Table 3 (Continued)

	Third Stage Budget Proposed
1. Successor Training	6.5
2. Technique Maintenance/Reform	1.7
3. Securement of Raw Materials	3.0
4. Development of Demand	84.2
5. Working Conditions	0
6. Cooperative Activities	1.1
7. Product Quality	1.3
8. Aged Society Activities	0
9. Industrial Arts Crafts Industry	2.2
<hr/>	
Total Budget ('000 yen)	29,079

Note: Plan is budget plan, Expend is budget expenditures, and Percent is expenditure as percent of budget plan. Source: Hirosaki City Commerce, Industry and Tourism Division, Promotion Plan for Tsugaru nuri lacquerware, first and second Stage Promotion Plan Activity and Status Reports, third Stage Promotion Plan Proposal.

In the Second Stage, the scope of the plan was much broader, prioritizing “development of demand,” followed by “activities for promotion of Traditional Industrial Arts Crafts Industry,” “working conditions,” “provision of raw materials” and “maintenance of technique.” However, expenditures ultimately focused on “development of demand” (activity area #4) which comprised over half of expenditures, and “promotion of Crafts Industry” (#9) which comprised another quarter, together accounting for seventy-seven percent of total budget expenditures. In the budget plan for the Third Stage, the focus is further concentrated, focusing almost exclusively on “development of demand” (#4), set to comprise eighty-four percent of the budget. Clearly the focus of the activities prioritized in the plan has shifted from those directed toward improving the local infrastructure and productive capability of the Tsugaru

nuri lacquerware industry itself to those directed toward the national market potential of the lacquerware through increasing consumer demand for Tsugaru nuri. The meaning of lacquerware as promoted through the Promotion Plan has shifted from that of a local traditional craft in need of industry reform and stabilization to that of a Japanese traditional craft worthy of recognition on a national level, yet requiring state-supported efforts to stimulate consumer demand.

Contemporary Meanings Reflected in Consumption and Media Representation

Investigations on the consumption of Tsugaru nuri undertaken in 1989 and 1993 reveal a variety of contemporary meanings for the lacquerware, some related to the craft itself with others related more to aspects of the consumption of the lacquerware.¹⁷ The 1989 report shows that ninety percent of prefectural respondents indicated having Tsugaru nuri. Contextualizing this level of possession, however, is a response showing that over eighty percent of these prefectural respondents have received Tsugaru nuri in some form as a gift, with just under fifty percent indicating having purchased Tsugaru nuri for themselves. The report shows that Tsugaru nuri is seen as expensive by a majority of local consumers, as well as being a high quality item having pleasing coloration, design, and an attractive form. When purchasing Tsugaru nuri, nearly sixty percent indicated that the coloration and design were significant factors, with a little over one-third citing the presumably negative aspect of price.¹⁸

¹⁷ The most complete data on Tsugaru nuri are found in the *1989 Hirosaki City Regional Industries Conditions Investigation Report*, *1993 Tsugaru Nuri Production Investigation Report* and the *Aomori Prefecture Traditional Craft Industries Promotion Plan "Development of Demand" Activity Report (1998)*. Sponsored by the Hirosaki City Chamber of Commerce, the 1989 report is based on responses of 128 lacquer craftworkers. The 1993 report, undertaken by the Aomori Prefecture Economic Affairs Bureau, the Hirosaki City Chamber of Commerce, and the Prefectural Industrial Experimental Station, is based on responses by 115 lacquerware enterprise respondents, 24 lacquerware sales enterprises within Aomori Prefecture and 61 outside, as well as the 120 participating consumers within the prefecture and 113 from outside.

¹⁸ As for the exact responses: Tsugaru nuri as expensive (expensive: 71%; ordinary: 25%; inexpensive: 4%); as a high quality item (high quality: 52%;

The 1993 report cites a national survey by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Crafts Industries that shows Tsugaru nuri is recognized nationally by just over thirty percent of respondents, well behind the other main regional lacquerware, Wajima nuri (Ishikawa Prefecture), which had near universal recognition (95%), and Aizu nuri (Fukushima Prefecture (67%). Within the Hokkaido-Tohoku regional block, however, Tsugaru nuri was recognized by nearly three-quarters of respondents, still behind Wajima nuri but equal to Aizu nuri. The report shows that for respondents from outside Aomori Prefecture, the price of the lacquerware is less of a concern than for prefectural buyers, as less than half considered Tsugaru nuri to be expensive and price was cited as a factor in purchases by fewer than ten percent. The coloration, pattern, and form are seen for the most part as ordinary by the tourist respondents, but, together with references to the Tsugaru nuri brand and the quality of Tsugaru nuri, these were viewed as important considerations in making purchases.¹⁹

Perhaps more revealing were the free responses on Tsugaru nuri included in the 1993 survey, which, as was the case above, revealed both positive and negative sentiments. Respondents cited the “high quality” and the “high value” of Tsugaru nuri, the “specialized skill” of the lacquer craftsman in creating a “special good,” the “traditional and historical value” of a lacquerware which was “representative” of the area, the “strength” of the lacquerware, and its “calming influence.” One respondent opined that lacquerers should make less Tsugaru nuri and charge more for each piece. However, responses also alluded to the fact that the overall uniformity of the designs made each piece “unoriginal,” the darkness of the coloration was “depressing,” and the fact that Tsugaru nuri was “too expensive,” doesn’t match a “modern lifestyle,” and lacks a “modern feel.”

The meanings ascribed to Tsugaru nuri are also revealed in contemporary media representations, where the lacquerware is contextualized on the basis of its history, its local presence, and its human interest value, while also oriented toward the product itself, for which there

ordinary: 44%; inferior: 4%); as having pleasing coloration and design (good: 50%; ordinary: 45%; bad: 5%); and as having attractive form (good: 32%; ordinary: 58%; bad: 10%). Respondents indicated a focus on the following when purchasing Tsugaru nuri: pattern and color (56%); price (36%); quality of the piece (4%); lacquering skill and technique (2%); and form (2%).

¹⁹ *1993 Tsugaru Nuri Production Investigation Report.*

is equal contextualization of elements of tradition and modernity. This examination of media representation is guided by the work of Martin Bauer and George Gaskell on the notion and practice of social representation, which is based on an analysis of the following components:

- (1) the typified process of communicating the contents – the diffusion, propagation, and propaganda of the contents;
- (2) the contents of the communication itself – the objectification in images and metaphors, which yield anchors in naming and classification;
- (3) the consequences of the communication – the opinions, attitudes, and stereotypes that result from the communication; and
- (4) the eventual social segmentation that results – the functional referencing and carrier systems that emerge.²⁰

This examination of media representation of Tsugaru nuri lacquerware is based on two separate analyses of newspaper articles related to Tsugaru nuri as carried in a local Tsugaru and a prefectural-level newspaper (the *Mutsu shinpo* and the *Tōnippo*, respectively), one analysis is an overview of the thematic orientation (n=43) and the other an analysis of a traditional versus modern orientation in the representation (n=27), both as assessed by native Japanese speakers and readers. In the two examinations, native Japanese speakers were given instructions and then asked to provide evaluations as to the thematic orientation in the former and the traditional versus modern orientation in the latter.

As shown in Table 4, while descriptions of new products, information on events including exhibitions and product fairs, and historical references were common elements of the media representations of Tsugaru lacquerware, representation focusing on a human interest element and educational and experiential activity associated with the lacquerware were also evident.

²⁰ Martin Bauer and George Gaskell, “Towards a Paradigm for Research on Social Representations,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior* 29/2 (1999): 163-186.

Table 4. Social Representation of Tsugaru Nuri in the Media

focus on general activity	18	focus on events	14
<i>education/experiential</i>	7	local (exhibitions)	12
lacquerware piece designation	3	national/international	2
government policy action	3	focus on history	11
organization/association activity	5	<i>focus on human interest</i>	10
focus on product and production	15	crafter profile	4
new products	10	award report	4
aspects of production	5	Tsugaru nuri essay contest	2
		Newspaper in Education columns	5
		total =	78

Note: Figure is number of articles; articles viewed=43; multiple coding (1.8 codings/article)

Examples of the human interest orientation can be seen in lacquerware artisan profiles, as in an article headlined “Relating the Warmth of Tsugaru nuri – This Woman’s Job” (August 2, 1999, *Tōnippo*) and “Widening the World of Tsugaru nuri with a Feeling of Commonality” (February 3, 2002 in a *Mutsu shinpo* column titled “Form of the Modern Family”), both of which introduce local lacquerware artisans.²¹ Examples of the educational aspect to the media representation of Tsugaru nuri can be found in the three-times per month “Newspaper in Education” columns in *Mutsu shinpo*, which, in six columns over a two-year period, focused exclusively on Tsugaru nuri lacquerware.²² The contents of these columns focused on the “skill and technique of the Tsugaru nuri artisan” (two columns), the connection of Jōmon period lacquer and contemporary Tsugaru nuri (weak as it is), two columns highlighting the use of Tsugaru nuri lacquering techniques and patterns in the medals awarded at the 2002 Asian Winter Games held in Aomori Prefecture, and finally, a column describing the Edo, Meiji, and Taisho period history of Tsugaru nuri

²¹ Translation of article headlines by author.

²² For a full consideration on Newspaper in Education in rural Japan, see Anthony Rausch, “Newspaper in Education in Rural Japan: Education and Local Identity Creation – The Practice of Locally Scholastic NIE,” *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication* 14/2 (2004): 223-244.

lacquerware. The experiential representation can be seen in the following two examples: “Hirosaki Junior High School Students Experience Making Tsugaru nuri” (January 28, 2000, *Tōnippo*) and “Aomori Traditional Craft Exhibition – Hands-on Classroom Opened” (November 30, 2002, *Mutsu shinpo*). A visit to a Tsugaru nuri specialty shop confirms this educational focus on a broader as well as “point-of-sale” basis, as detailed explanations accompanying lacquerware displays are now standard. Likewise, lacquer crafters working on pieces are now featured in the largest tourist center of Hirosaki City, with pieces in need of a final buffing available for tourists to purchase, complete, and take home. The techniques of Tsugaru nuri, guarded secrets of the Edo period and mysterious to most since then, are now on display for all to see.

Further contextualization of the representation of Tsugaru nuri reflects the inherent tension of tradition versus modernity in considerations of traditional crafts in contemporary society – to be traditional, the craft must stress its traditional character, but to be popular, the craft must adapt to modern functions and tastes. Using a five-point Likert scale, informants evaluated the 27 articles on the basis of whether the focus was predominantly on the lacquerware product, some sort of human interest perspective or providing some information, as well as indicating the relative emphasis on tradition or modernity of the article. Of the 27 articles considered by respondents, 18 had a photo or photos, with eight photo depictions of individuals, 16 of objects, and six of lacquerware-related events. Eight of the 27 articles focused on individual lacquer crafters in some way, an indication of the human interest element associated with the lacquerware, and 12 of the articles were part of a series-based column. The results can be summarized overall as an equal balance between a focus on the representation of the lacquerware, some sort of human interest angle, and informational content. This is seen numerically, in the number of articles and individual responses for which the particular assessment exceeded the median for that assessment category (for focus on the lacquerware, 13 articles and 170 responses in which the assessment of the focus on lacquerware exceeded 3.46 on a five-point Likert scale, as compared with 14 and 154 for focus on human interest and 14 and 156 for focus on information). It is also seen in terms of the relative strength of the focus (the mean assessment: 4.52, 4.46 and 4.49, respectively; see Table 5). Likewise, within each of these broad focus categories, the emphasis was fairly even between tradition and modernity, based on similar comparison of article/case numbers and the mean responses, with modernity slightly

more emphasized in the human interest category of articles.

An example of an article which focuses on traditional aspects of lacquerware is, “Prefectural Treasures: Edo-period Tsugaru nuri *te-ita* (sample boards) Designated Cultural Objects” (April 4, 2003, *Tōnippon* and *Mutsu shinpo*), whereas an example stressing modernity with the human interest orientation is, “Using a Youthful Personal Style to Create – Introducing Tsugaru nuri Crafter Mr. M” (December 13, 2002, in a *Mutsu shinpo* “Living in Tsugaru” column).

Table 5. Tradition versus Modernity in the Representation of Tsugaru Nuri

	mean (SD)	: median	articles - cases
focus on lacquerware aspect	4.52 (.50)	: 3.46	.. 13170
focus on tradition	4.09 (.79)	: 2.80	.. 8116
focus on modernity	4.07 (.82)	: 2.82	.. 8110
focus on human interest aspect	4.46 (.50)	: 3.28	.. 14154
focus on tradition	3.86 (.84)	: 2.59	.. 6101
focus on modernity	4.10 (.77)	: 2.87	.. 9109
focus on information aspect	4.49 (.50)	: 3.50	.. 14156
focus on tradition	3.99 (.85)	: 2.77	.. 6100
focus on modernity	3.90 (.82)	: 2.87	.. 9101

Note: n=27; number of articles per reader=avg 12.5; mean based on 5 pt. Likert response with 5 high; articles/cases indicated assessment which exceeded median by article readers.

In a similar manner, promotional materials carried in the local newspaper media also seem to strike a balance between tradition and modernity. In an advertisement declaring November 13 as *Urushi no hi* (Lacquer Day), the title and text stresses both the history and local tradition of Tsugaru nuri as well as the modern character of lacquerware (November 12, 2002, *Mutsu shinpo*). While citing Tsugaru nuri’s 300-plus year history and stressing its essence as a *dentōteki kōgeihin* (traditional craft) of the local area, the advertisement also stresses the importance of “discovering the *new* traditional craft of Tsugaru nuri – one which matches contemporary lifestyles.”

The consumption of Tsugaru nuri is a complex combination of attitudes about price, quality, design, coloration, and form. The media and advertising-based representations outlined above highlighting the history and local character of traditional local lacquerware, together with images of an accessible, humanized and contemporary lacquerware through a focus on educational and experiential activities, constitute a contemporary construction of Tsugaru nuri that reflects efforts to create a new meaning to be adopted by consumers.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

A description of the background and historical arc of meaning and representation for both Japanese lacquerware and Tsugaru nuri lacquerware comprised the body of this paper. For Japanese lacquerware overall, the meaning was shown to have shifted from a primarily religious function in the Heian period to one of social status over the succeeding 600-plus years, which then gave way to lacquerware becoming an institutionalized traditional craft in recent times. In the case of Tsugaru nuri, the detailed overview outlined how the meaning ascribed to it originated in the early 17th century in signifying social status among the Edo-period local Tsugaru elites, which with the onset of the Meiji period gave way to simultaneous meanings in representing Japanese crafts on the international level as well as being a highly-prized and highly-priced commodity for the local people of Tsugaru. Standardization of process and form together with institutionalization through association-based activity and efforts to promote the industry at the local level followed, which was accompanied by traditionalization of Tsugaru nuri on a national level with its designation as a Traditional Industrial Art Object in the mid-1970s. Over the course of the three-step Promotion Plan that accompanied this designation, the focus of traditionalization evolved to commoditization with the shift from preservation by way of industry stabilization to promotion and development of demand. Thus, this is clearly a transition of meaning for Tsugaru nuri from status symbol to being a representative Japanese craft, to a place-designated traditional craftware, and ultimately to an important local craft commodity.

Contextualizing the meaning ascribed to Japanese lacquerware in its Heian period origins, Mary Helms, in a study of craft production in traditional, non-industrial societies, argued that objects produced by skilled artisans, and available only to the elites of the society represented a tangible means of embodying intangible characteristics of gods, ancestors, or heroes,

qualities which confer honor and power in the human realm.²³ By the Edo period, however, the meaning of lacquerware, both in the major political center of Japan as well as in the outlying domains, had shifted to that of social status, and this was the case for Tsugaru lacquerware as well. The incorporation of Tsugaru lacquerware into the realm of national craft showpiece in international exhibitions in the late 1800s together with its “naming,” presumably mutually agreeable to promoters at the national as well as local level, can conceivably be contextualized by Karen Wigen’s explanation of how the local proto-industrial crafts were drawn into broad agendas in which regional pride expressed in such crafts furthered national goals. In her study of an area of Nagano Prefecture, cotton-spinning, paper making, the production of lacquerware, and silk reeling, all important factors of local identity, were utilized in the drive to industrialization in the late 19th century; “[a]ll of these legacies could usefully be invoked in the name of modernization.”²⁴ A paradoxical outcome of local craft as an accomplice to national modernization is complex, but it is clear, as Wigen points, out that while most understood that such local industries represented a means of enticing national resources into the region and bringing the region into modernity while at the same time potentially undermining local identity, the incentive of fully realizing such opportunities prodded many to take up serious study of the premodern history of these crafts, thus contributing to a strengthened local identity. At this point in the examination of Tsugaru lacquerware in the history of the Tsugaru District, however, it is not clear if this was the specific dynamic at work, signaling an important question for further research.

This paper opened by outlining three circumstances of Tsugaru nuri lacquerware that serve to contextualize its contemporary but still evolving meaning: its ubiquity in the households of Tsugaru, its social function in the act of gift-giving, and its potential as a tourist commodity. That Tsugaru nuri, a locally-produced craft with a long local history and a powerful place-name signification, is a common commodity within its own geographical frame of reference is not surprising. The ubiquity of

²³ Mary Helms, *Craft and the Kingly Ideal: Art, Trade, and Power* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1993).

²⁴ Karen Wigen, “Constructing Shinano: The Invention of a Neo-Traditional Region,” in Stephen Vlastos, ed., *Mirror of Modernity: Invented Traditions of Modern Japan* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1998), p. 238.

possession of Tsugaru nuri by local residents, whether by purchase or received as a gift, is a function of what can be seen as a combination of historical and contemporary localism – the fact that Tsugaru lacquerware has long been and continues to be produced in Tsugaru.

Tsugaru nuri as important in both gift-giving and tourism is a more combinatively complex question, explained by the continued status signification of the lacquerware as this pertains to the social ritual of gift giving together with Tsugaru nuri's attributes as craft as portrayed in its local representation and tourist advertising. While cheap plastic-based Tsugaru nuri-patterned lacquerware is produced and sold in Tsugaru, the status signification generated by the attributes of the highest quality Tsugaru lacquerware as craft is still apparent. Gloria Hickey outlined such attributes of craft in general as rarity in being handmade, sophistication in the skill required to make it, preciousness due to the nature of the materials and the time invested in labor, expressiveness in its referencing as an object in function and/or historical or traditional background, and its enduring character.²⁵ Tsugaru nuri is handmade, it is created in mysterious and laborious processes, it is comprised of precious raw materials in the raw lacquer sap, and it is referenced as a local object, highly functional, with strong associations of tradition and history, and it is long-lasting.

The institutionalized support, which was offered to Tsugaru nuri on the basis of such attributes as recognized by the Association for the Promotion of Traditional Craft Industries, shifted, from an early focus on the nature of the production of the craft to the development of demand for the craft. This points to a recognition that objects are ultimately seen in a social sense as not simply possessing such essential properties, which is to say the attributes of craft, but rather as also deriving significance from the social meanings that are attached to such properties. Brian Moeran pointed out that what often is deemed “aesthetic” in Japan is, in fact, an amalgam of three divergent qualities: aspects of “aesthetic” (*biteki kankaku*), “commodity” (*shōhin kankaku*), and “social” (*shakai kankaku*) values.²⁶ Considering this with respect to the ritual of gift giving in Japan, John Clammer theorized that cultural capital in the ritual of gift exchange is

²⁵ Gloria Hickey, “Craft Within a Consuming Society,” in Peter Dormer, ed., *The Culture of Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), pp. 85-86.

²⁶ Brian Moeran, *Lost Innocence: Folk Craft Potters of Onta, Japan* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), p. 132.

accumulated not so much by the act or the timing of exchanging the gift, but rather through a demonstration of mastery of the current and continually evolving semiotics of the objects themselves, which Hickey furthered in direct reference to crafts by pointing out the necessity for a semiotic, shared association of the essential character craft between giver and recipient.²⁷

As detailed herein, Tsugaru nuri, with its combinative attributes of a distinctive color and pattern, a functional commodity form, and an important social weight, still clearly fulfills the demands of this complex ritual for many in Tsugaru. For others, negative characteristics, which are likewise conceived of as beyond the extent of the attributes of craft, such as uniform patterns, depressing coloration, and unappealing forms, marginalize the craft in all respects, not just in the realm of gift-giving. Likewise, the commoditization of Tsugaru nuri as a tourist commodity depends not so much on the object itself or the representation of its history or tradition, but rather, as Toda Kazuhiro, Watanabe Takasuke, and Murata Takao point out, on an organized and systematic phase approach to incorporating traditional crafts into the realm of tourism in a manner in which tourists, through the manipulation of touristic place, touristic time, and touristic motivation, come to know the craft, appreciate the craft, buy the craft, and ultimately disseminate the craft.²⁸ Marion Markwick, however, notes that, given the complex forms which modern tourist commoditization of craft take on, local craft production often ultimately splits into two distinct lines, with different meanings ascribed the craft for the tourist, on the one hand, and for locals, on the other.²⁹

The question that emerges from this paper and will organize future research on traditional crafts, not only in Japan, but elsewhere, concerns to what degree localism and the attributes of craft, together with the traditional status signification and touristic commoditization, will continue to provide

²⁷ John Clammer, *Contemporary Urban Japan: A Sociology of Consumption* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Press, 1997), p. 17; and Hickey, "Craft Within a Consuming Society," p. 86.

²⁸ Toda Kazuhiro, Watanabe Takasuke, and Murata Takao, "Dentōteki kōgeihin no kankōteki shiyō shuhō ni kansuru kenkyū" [A Study on Ways of Application of Japanese Traditional Crafts for Tourist Promotion], *Toshi keikaku: bessatsu – toshi keikaku ronbunshū* [City Planning Review: Special Issue – Papers on City Planning] 32 (1997): 271-276.

²⁹ Marion Markwick, "Tourism and the Development of Handicraft Production in the Maltese Islands," *Tourism Geographies* 3/1 (2001), p. 28.

meaning, and ultimately sustainability, to traditional crafts in contemporary society. From the examination outlined herein, most notably the articles profiling individual lacquer artisans and describing the lacquer-related educational and experiential activities, it may be that the focus on the essential attributes of Tsugaru nuri, as well its status signification and its touristic potential, is giving way to a localism based on knowing the “who” and the “how” of the lacquerware. While such a focus on the individual is clearly antithetical to the notions of Japanese craft as the outcome of the craft community, as outlined by Soetsu Yanagi, notions which Moeran asserts were adopted by most Japanese when he wrote “the moral tone found in Yanagi’s concept...and adopted by present folk craft leaders, would appear to extend to a large section of the Japanese public,” this trend toward recognition of individualism in the traditional crafts in Japan is a reflection of the reality of the meaning folk crafts take in contemporary society.³⁰ As innovations in both design and form of lacquerware progress, it is ultimately the individual crafter that is recognized as innovator, as it was in the Edo period of patronage-supported lacquerware production.

The undertaking of Tsugaru nuri-based educational and experiential activities, together with the media representations of such activities, may be indicative of a turn toward development of both a Tsugaru nuri knowledge base and a more involved appreciation of Tsugaru nuri. Millie Creighton explored these themes in her examination of Japanese craft vacations, contextualizing such activities with notions of nostalgia, gender, and identity.³¹ The findings on representation highlighted herein, however, identify an element of modernity that is as apparent as tradition and nostalgia. Moreover, rather than targeting Tsugaru tourists, the representations which focus on lacquer crafters and educational and experiential activities ultimately influence Tsugaru locals, albeit locals who can be conceived of as Tsugaru nuri tourists – those who, despite living in

³⁰ Soetsu Yanagi, *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight into Beauty* (Tokyo: Kodansha International, 1972), pp. 197-215; and Brian Moeran, “Making an Exhibition of Oneself: The Anthropologist as Potter in Japan,” in Eyal Ben-ari, Brian Moeran, and James Valentine, eds., *Unwrapping Japan: Society and Culture in Anthropological Perspective* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1990), pp. 117-139.

³¹ Millie Creighton, “Spinning Silk, Weaving Selves: Nostalgia, Gender, and Identity in Japanese Craft Vacations,” *Japanese Studies* 21/1 (2001): 5-29.

Tsugaru, know little about their local lacquerware or want to know more.

For Tsugaru lacquerware, a localism based in local origin and continued local production, together with traditionalization and commoditization that combine the inherent attributes as craft with status signification with an increasing focus on human interest and educational/experiential elements, all point to a complex conceptualization of traditional crafts in contemporary society. While history and tradition were evident in the representation that underlies the focus on development of demand in the recent promotion of Tsugaru nuri, an equal focus on knowing both the crafters and about the craft itself signals new elements that will shape the future place of Japanese traditional crafts in contemporary society. The meanings that have emerged over the history of Tsugaru nuri have provided the basis for contemporary representations that focus on origin and history as well as the products. However, contemporary representations that focus on a human interest element together with the educational and experiential activities that are increasingly associated with Tsugaru nuri are indicative of the new meanings of traditional craft in Japan: meanings based on a more personal connection with the individual artisan and an educational-based understanding, together with an experiential appreciation of the lacquerware.