

All Aizu on BITOWA

In the sleepy historical city of Aizu-Wakamatsu, three hours north of Tokyo by train in Fukushima Prefecture, a small collective is working to combine modern sensibilities with the region's 400-year-old tradition of lacquerware, and help take the craftsmanship of the local artisans to the twenty-first century global marketplace. Gavin Blair reports.

The history of *urushi* lacquerware in the Aizu area can be traced back to 1590 when Gamo Ujisato, the local feudal lord of the area set its development in motion by introducing the tradition from his previous fiefdom in what is now Shiga Prefecture in central Japan. Aizu, and its industries, were damaged by the civil

wars that befell Japan in the years that followed, but by the late nineteenth century, the city had established itself as a center of excellence for lacquered crafts.

Like traditional crafts around the world however, Aizu lacquerware has faced a challenging environment in recent years, with

cheap imports and an aging body of artisans threatening its survival. Bitowa was formed in 2005 by a group of younger businesspeople with plans to bring together local craftsmen, broaden the range of products they make, and market them under a common brand.

The Bitowa group partnered with Japan Brand even before it



The "BITOWA" line is a series of products decorated with the Bitowa brand crest using the *taka-makie* style of high-relief lacquer on a base executed by *hana-nuri* lacquering with grinding, the main characteristic of Aizu lacquerware. Pictured, a cotton box, cup and soap dispenser.

began officially displaying and selling its pieces in 2006.

“We had more than twelve companies in the group at the beginning, but not everyone agreed on the way we were doing things, so now it’s settled down to four companies,” says Norihiro Endo, managing director of Endo Tadashi Shoten, a lacquerware workshop with a long history in the Aizu-Wakamatsu and one of the Bitowa founding companies.

Endo explained that all the current partners in Bitowa were natives of Aizu-Wakamatsu who had moved to Tokyo to pursue careers in fields as diverse as finance, music, business consulting and aeronautical engineering, before returning to their hometown determined to revive their local industry.

“We’ve all faced some hard times but we all have a lot of pride in the *monodzukuri* manufacturing of Aizu and don’t want to see it disappear” says Endo.

One Piece, Multiple Talents

What sets apart the way Aizu lacquerware products are made is that each of the elements that make up the pieces is carried out by a different artisan.

“A *sowashi* makes the flat pieces of wood for boxes or trays, and a *kijishi* makes bowls and other round pieces. Then an *itamono-nurishi* applies lacquer to the flat pieces, and a *marumono-nurishi* does the same for round items. Finally, a *makie-shi* coats the designs on the surfaces of the pieces,” explains Endo.

While maintaining the traditional elements of the region’s crafts, the Bitowa group has adapted them to suit contemporary tastes and needs.

The various Bitowa ranges now include

items such as radio casings, TV stands and iPhone covers (prototype). Although not all the traditional artisans in Aizu agree with the new directions they’ve taken, the enthusiasm and passion of the group have convinced many that embracing new ideas is essential for this quiet old city to survive.

“The processes that go into traditional lac-



Bitowa’s “Modern” series combines elegant design with a sense of casualness. Products in this series, like the little containers pictured, come in white, turquoise green, magenta, orange, yellow green, and navy.

quer are so intricate that they end up being very expensive,” says Endo. “So we’ve simplified some of them, such as reducing the number of lacquer layers, in order to create goods that can be used for everyday life, not just decoration.”

Nevertheless, even the supposed simplified pieces display the character and crafts-

JAPAN BRAND

manship that has developed over four centuries in the Aizu Urushi tradition. The wooden canisters used for holding Japanese tealeaves, and the wooden cups from the same range, are striking both in their simplicity and their incredible lightness.

The Bitowa group has already begun selling its goods globally online, and has direct sales channels to Germany, France and China.

“We are planning to test market in London next year and also start exhibiting and selling some of our pieces in Shanghai and Beijing,”

And also put something back into the middle of the community.”

The city’s other major industry is tourism, due to its impressive castle and samurai history. However, this year many tour groups have cancelled their trips amid radiation fears, simply because Aizu-Wakamatsu is in Fukushima Prefecture. The city is located 100 km inland from the crisis-hit nuclear plant and a range of mountains in-between mean it is apparently unaffected.

“Look, the radiation readings here are lower



The Bitowa “Order” line focuses on furniture such as chests, dressers and TV board, table and stools.

COURTESY OF BITOWA

explains Endo enthusiastically.

Closer to home, where the Bitowa group members’ hearts definitely are, a Bitowa café is opening in July in Aizu-Wakamatsu.

“It’s going to be in that space there,” says Endo, proudly pointing out a shop currently being renovated in the middle of the city. “We are going to use Bitowa items as serving dishes in the café, and put other products on display in Aizu too—we hope to sell some as well.

than they are in Tokyo,” says Ichiro Kanke, mayor of Aizu-Wakamatsu, pointing to a Geiger counter on his desk that fluctuated between 0.03 and 0.06 microsiverts an hour as he spoke. “If you check the background radiation readings of certain other major cities abroad, you’ll find they’re higher than they are here.” **HJ**

Gavin Blair is a freelance journalist living in Tokyo who writes for publications in the United Kingdom, United States and Asia.