



PART I LACQUERWARE CONQUERS THE EUROPEAN MARKET



IMPORTS OF ORIENTAL LACQUERWARE

LACQUER IN EUROPE

Small numbers of Chinese luxury goods were already reaching Europe during Roman times via the Silk Road. However direct trade between Europe and the Far East only became possible in the 16th century thanks to the huge improvements in navigation techniques and the newly discovered sea routes. The Portuguese were the first to reach Asia. They were soon followed and overtaken by the English and the Dutch who were far better organized thanks to the trading companies they set up in the early 17th century. Later still the Flemish, French and Danes developed their own trading fleets.

After the fall of the Roman empire oriental goods continued to reach Europe sporadically via the Italian ports of Genoa and Venice. Most of these imports came from the Arab world. The lacquered shields and quivers and book bindings with Islamic motifs were typical of Muslim regions. These objects reached Europe by the Silk Road, i.e. came in via an overland route in trade caravans and were passed from one caravan to the next.

THE PORTUGUESE PIONEERS

When the Portuguese reached India in 1496 the stage was set for the direct and profitable spice trade between the Far East and Europe. By 1514 they had already sent an expedition from India to China. In 1509 they negotiated directly with Chinese merchants in Malacca, on the western Malay coast. As from 1517 they acquired considerable trading rights in Macao, a peninsula close to the Chinese port of Canton. Portugal was the first nation to bring spices, Chinese silks, lacquer and porcelain by sea to Europe. It was also the first European country to trade with Japan, an island discovered by accident in 1543 after a shipwreck. The lacquerware manufactured by the Japanese for the Jesuits from the late 16th century onwards were true export items made for Western taste and with Western motifs, the so-called Namban lacquerware. This was a totally new type of lacquer made specifically for the European market. Cabinets, chests, bible stands and crucifixes, based on European models, were entirely lacquered and decorated with flowers, animals and birds in golden lacquer and mother-of-pearl inlay. Unfortunately the Portuguese Jesuits were not only interested in trade but also in religion and started to preach Catholicism in Japan. This was how they lost their monopoly on trade and by the early 17th century were overtaken by other countries. Spurred on by the huge profits to be made in the spice trade, the Dutch and British each set up their own company for trade with the Far East early in the 17th century. They also began to export lacquerware to the West.

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Gismondi collection (Paris)

THE WORLD'S FIRST MULTINATIONAL

The inhabitants of the Northern Low Countries decided to seek out their own sea route to the East in order to get round the Spanish trade embargo which was depriving them of spices and other Asian goods. The first ships left in 1595 with the financial support of some émigré Southern Netherlanders.

The outcome of the competition between the various groups setting sail for Asia was that spice prices at source went up and prices in the Northern Netherlands plummeted. As a result, people decided to cooperate and in 1602 the "Verenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie" was set up. The emergence of this first ever "multinational" was possible thanks to the input of Southern Netherlands capital and know-how. Petrus Plancius, the maker of a globe and the man behind the first "Hollandse en Zeeuwse" expedition to the East Indies, was born in Flanders.

Contrary to the Spanish and Portuguese fleets, the VOC didn't restrict itself to the export of spices and fabrics but deliberately traded in artefacts such as lacquer and porcelain.

This remained however a small proportion of total exports. At first porcelain was carried as ballast for tea, but orders were also placed for porcelain with specific motifs.

The same occurred for lacquer exports. The models and to a certain extent the decoration of lacquerware were specified by the Netherlanders. July 1610 saw the arrival of the VOC vessel "De Roode Leeuw met Pijlen" with the first consignment of Japanese goods for the Netherlands.

From 1639 the Northern Netherlands held a unique position insofar as they were the only European country still allowed to trade with Japan. "Verlackt" furniture (from Japan)



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is frequently mentioned in the daily registers or minutes of the VOC in the Far East. Lacquer cabinets, usually recorded as "comptoire" were particularly popular, as were lacquered chests, cases, tables, jugs and shaving bowls, all made in Japan for the European market. Cabinets in lacquer, or "comptoire", were manufactured under Dutch influence.

They were large black-lacquered export cabinets closed by two doors. The mother-of-pearl decoration was absent and in accordance with European taste doors and drawers bore landscapes or floral motifs in gold lacquer. This sort of lacquer furniture, belonging to the "pictural" type, was very popular in Europe, and was copied both in China and in Europe.

In 1659 50 lacquered cabinets filled with cotton wool left Batavia for the Netherlands. That number had doubled by July 1661. The "Java" left Batavia in February 1681 for Amsterdam with "1002 stuckx divers Japans lackwerck". The same ship called at Enckhuizen where it landed "2 stuckx Japance verlackte comptoiren en 1000 ditto verlackte doosjes". From 1619 on Batavia was the main launching harbour for VOC ships. There was also a Chinese neighbourhood with Chinese craftsmen .

BRITANNIA RULES THE WORLD

The English East-India Company (1599-1858) was mainly involved in the spice trade with India but right from the start also imported lacquerware. In 1614 the English ship "the Clove" brought back from its first trip to Japan a whole load of cabinets, chests and other lacquer objects to the port of London. In 1623 Britain



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decided that trade with Japan was not sufficiently attractive and lost interest in the country. After 1639 the British were no longer welcome there. Early trade links between England and China existed in the early 17th century but it wasn't until the last quarter of that century that those in charge of the East-India Company grew more interested in direct trade with China. Although the early stages were difficult, the Chinese route greatly contributed to the prosperity of the English Company. In the 18th century It was to become the world's greatest commercial fleet thanks to the export of China tea.

As the British could only purchase Japanese lacquer at second hand (via Chinese merchants), they started to export Chinese imitations of Japanese lacquer. These objects were based on European models and decorated in the Japanese style. The British thus influenced the form and decorations of the lacquer industry. The competition between the two trading companies led to several wars between England and the Northern Netherlands, mainly fought at sea. By the end of the 17th century the VOC had lost its hegemony and from then on profits fell as well, even though the volume of exports didn't decrease.

Inspired by the example of the English and Dutch, the Danes, Flemish and French also set up trading companies with the Far East. Generally they did not play any major role due to the deadly competition of the great sea powers. As a result their share of lacquer imports was smaller.

SIAM, GATEWAY TO THE EAST

In 1664 Colbert created the French "Compagnie des Indes Orientales" but it never became as powerful as its Dutch or British competitors. In 1665 the first French fleet set sail for the East but China and Japan were at first closed to French merchants. The French exported Chinese and Japanese luxury goods they bought from Chinese merchants in Siam (Thailand). The first Chinese goods reached France by this route and the French saw Siam as the gateway to the Far East. In 1684 a French delegation visited Siam. On this occasion

The king of France received not only porcelain but also lacquered furniture, chests and screens.

In 1700 the French set up a trading house in Canton and started to import Chinese lacquerware directly. The same year the cargo from the "Amphridite"'s first Chinese voyage was sold in the port of Nantes. A notice appeared in the journal "Mercure" announcing the sale. As it proved successful the decision was taken to start importing goods directly. On the return trip of the second journey the load included amongst others 45 crates of screens, 22 crates of lacquered tableware and 35 crates of varnished cabinets. The Jesuits in China sent a large amount of lacquered furniture back to Europe, hence the name in France of "vernis de la Chine Amphridite".

THE "OOSTENDSE COMPAGNIE", A VICTIM OF ITS OWN SUCCESS

Between 1719 and 1739 the Flemish occupied an honorable position in trade with China. The Oostendse Compagnie (GIC), created in 1722, managed to compete with the EIC and the VOC in the tea trade but were not active in the trade in artifacts. Lacquerware was carried on board in the personal luggage of the crew or as gifts but not as commercial goods for the company.



THE PRESENCE OF ORIENTAL LACQUERWARE IN EUROPE

AT HOME IN THE HIGHEST CIRCLES

Various types of Asian lacquer started to arrive in practically all European countries from the 16th century on. Lacquerware first appeared at court, then spread to the wealthy middle classes. All inventories of large collections mention lacquered furniture, boxes, chests and musical instruments. Lacquerware probably first reached Lisbon in the first half of the 16th century. In 1557 an inventory was made of the property of Catherine of Portugal, wife of King Joao III. It shows she owned lacquerware from various countries including China, Japan and the Ryuku islands. At the end of the 16th century an inventory of Ambras castle mentions Japanese lacquer. As king of Portugal, Philip II in 1580 - 1585 received a number of Chinese chairs exported from Macao to Spain via Goa.

It was mainly in the second half of the 17th century that a large amount of Japanese and Chinese lacquer reached the European market. Thanks to less rigid rules in the Chinese labour market there emerged a group of lacquer artists ready to manufacture items whose shape and decoration were suited to European taste. These were either small objects such as boxes, but also furniture, including the very popular lacquered cabinets. The exported lacquerware was then in turn imitated on the European market by local craftsmen.

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WHAT IS LACQUER? THE MATERIAL

At the time when Chinese and Japanese lacquer objects became popular in Europe, the art of lacquer could already boast a long history in both countries. There was however a great difference between lacquer work from the Far East and lacquer from India and the Near East.

VEGETABLE LACQUER FROM THE FAR EAST

The material used to this day in the Far East is the resinous sap of the lacquer tree, found in countries such as China, Japan, Thailand, Burma and Laos. "Rhus vernificlua" is the lacquer tree from China and Japan. The substance extracted from the tree is called "chi-chou" in China and "urushi" in Japan. Vegetable lacquer is harvested by making Y-shaped incisions in the lacquer tree. This is mainly done in the summer when the tree produces most sap. The lacquer oozes out of the incisions in the form of a grey, viscous liquid. The raw sap is filtered and then constantly stirred over a low heat, thus allowing the water to evaporate. Once certain oils have been added the lacquer is ready for use. Typical components of lacquer are urushiol (55-70%) which produces the hard film when drying and laccase (less than 1%) which starts the drying process. Furthermore the process requires very warm and humid conditions. Unlike most paints, lacquer doesn't dry because of the evaporation of solvents but through the polymerisation of the urushiol. Applying the lacquer is a difficult and delicate process. Each layer must dry out completely before it can be polished and only after that can the next layer be applied. The final layer is carefully polished until the characteristic glossy sheen of lacquer appears. It takes from 10 to 48 hours for a thin lacquer layer to dry thoroughly. Working with lacquer demands great expertise and plenty of time. It is also a health hazard since liquid lacquer is poisonous. Once hardened, lacquer is very resistant to various acids and alkali, can be exposed to heat, damp and termites. In some of the European travel tales about the Far East much is made of the exceptional physical properties of Chinese lacquer when applied as a protective coating to tables.

Right from the beginning of lacquer art, attempts were made to colour it. This could be achieved by mixing the transparent lacquer with a limited number of mineral and vegetable pigments. Since lacquer rejects certain natural pigments, the colour range of Oriental lacquer used to be fairly limited. The most common colours in the Far East were red and black. Green, yellow, gold and silver were also often used.

LACQUER OF ANIMAL ORIGIN

Shellac is the resinous secretion produced by a type of scale insect, "Tachardia lacca" or "Coccus lacca", from which the name lacquer is derived. The word "lacquer" itself comes from the Persian "lakh" meaning 100.000. This is a reference to the large number of these insects that nestle on certain resin-rich deciduous trees of south-East Asia, sucking the red, resinous sap and then excreting it on the branches. The term lacquer is derived from shellac, a substance that has nothing in common with the resinous sap used in the Far East and is thus a misnomer. The "coccus lacca" is mainly found in the Near East, but also occurs in countries such as India, Thailand and Laos. Shellac is not soluble in water but it is in alcohol or in oil. This produces a transparent lacquer varnish with a reddish tint. Lacquer techniques were similar from Persia to India and are believed to have originated in Egypt. A combination of shellac and tree resin is often used in the making of lacquer varnishes.

