

A Sixteenth-Century Lacquered Chinese Box

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AN UNUSUAL CHINESE BOX entered the collection of the Department of Asian Art at the Metropolitan Museum in 1992. It is simply constructed from wooden slats glued together to form a rectangular container; the trapezoidal sides of the hinged lid rise to a square top (Figure 1). The exterior is dressed in a brown lacquer, applied over fabric and a thin layer of gesso, and decorated, on all sides except the back, with pictorial decoration in gold.¹ Each short side has a brass handle.

The most interesting of the decorations, in a Chinese context, are a portrait of a pope, on the top of the lid (Figure 2), and a scene of the Expulsion of Hagar (Genesis 21), on the front panel (Figure 3).² In the latter, Hagar, carrying a loaf of bread, and her son, Ishmael, with his customary staff, are about to set off into the wilderness. To the left is Abraham, his hand outstretched in a gesture of rejection; behind him is a household member or an angel. Unfortunately, the face of Abraham is damaged and partly covered with red paint. Whatever architectural background was depicted in the model—surely Western—from which this scene is derived seems to have been beyond the ability of the decorator to copy. Behind Hagar and Ishmael there are merely a screen and, in the distance, an awkwardly rendered enclosure with leaning walls. At the right are two entwined trees, which also may have been copied from a Western source. This motif occurs often in Chinese painting as a symbol of husband and wife, but to interpret it as such here is to assume that the artist responsible for the decoration of the box had some inkling of the relationship between Abraham and Hagar.

The left side of the box (Figure 4) shows a bearded man sitting on his haunches atop an ottoman and clasping his knees. He appears to be naked except for the peaked hat with backflap (the “Phrygian cap”) on his head and the cloak draped over his arm and spread out under him. In front of the man are his knapsack (resembling a pumpkin) and a gourd for

water on a carrying pole and his pointed shoes, or clogs; in the background are two entwined trees—as in the scene of the Expulsion of Hagar: one looks almost like a palm, and the other has heavy foliage that hangs over the seated figure. A large phoenix with spread wings hovers overhead. On the right side (Figure 5) is another figure resting on the ground under a tree with a pair of birds (perhaps falcons) in its branches. The figure has curly hair and possibly a beard, which is partly hidden by the metal plate of the handle. He (or she) is naked, but drapery covers the lower part of the body. An attendant at the left, with an elaborate headdress, brings the reclining figure an object that cannot be identified because of the damage to the lacquer surface. In the lower right corner is a lobed pouring vessel distinctly Southeast Asian in shape. The border decorating the two handled sides, which consists of alternating triangular motifs, is possibly a variant of that commonly seen in seventeenth-century Chinese decorative arts, but the border surrounding the scene of Hagar on the front almost certainly was adopted from a European pattern.

The jumble of artistic traditions continues in the decoration of the sloping sides of the lid. On the front (Figure 6) is an image of a man with a long beard and a squarish hat, wearing a large earring and a heavy coat with a thick collar. He sits cross-legged on a square mat, with his hands on his knees, and leans against a backrest. In front of him, under a tree, is a pair of long-necked birds, one of which has foliated tail feathers like those of a phoenix; behind him are two recumbent animals, perhaps a doe and a pig. In the background are mountainous forms and a somewhat clumsily rendered waterfall. Depicted on the left panel of the lid (Figure 7) is a man reclining on the ground against a large pillow or bag, a basket with a carrying handle before him. In the distance are waves. The rear panel of the lid (Figure 8) includes a man in a cornfield holding a plant, with wavelike motifs that appear to be representations of wind filling the rest of the pictorial space. On the right panel (Figure 9) are two elephants, again amid imagery of a cornfield and waves.

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Figure 1. Lacquered and painted wooden box, China, Ming dynasty (1368–1644), late 16th century. H. 11 in. (27.9 cm), W. 10½ in. (26.7 cm), D. 7 in. (17.8 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, Florence and Herbert Irving Gift, 1992 (1992.114)



Figure 2. Detail of top of lid in Figure 1, showing a portrait of a pope, possibly Sixtus V

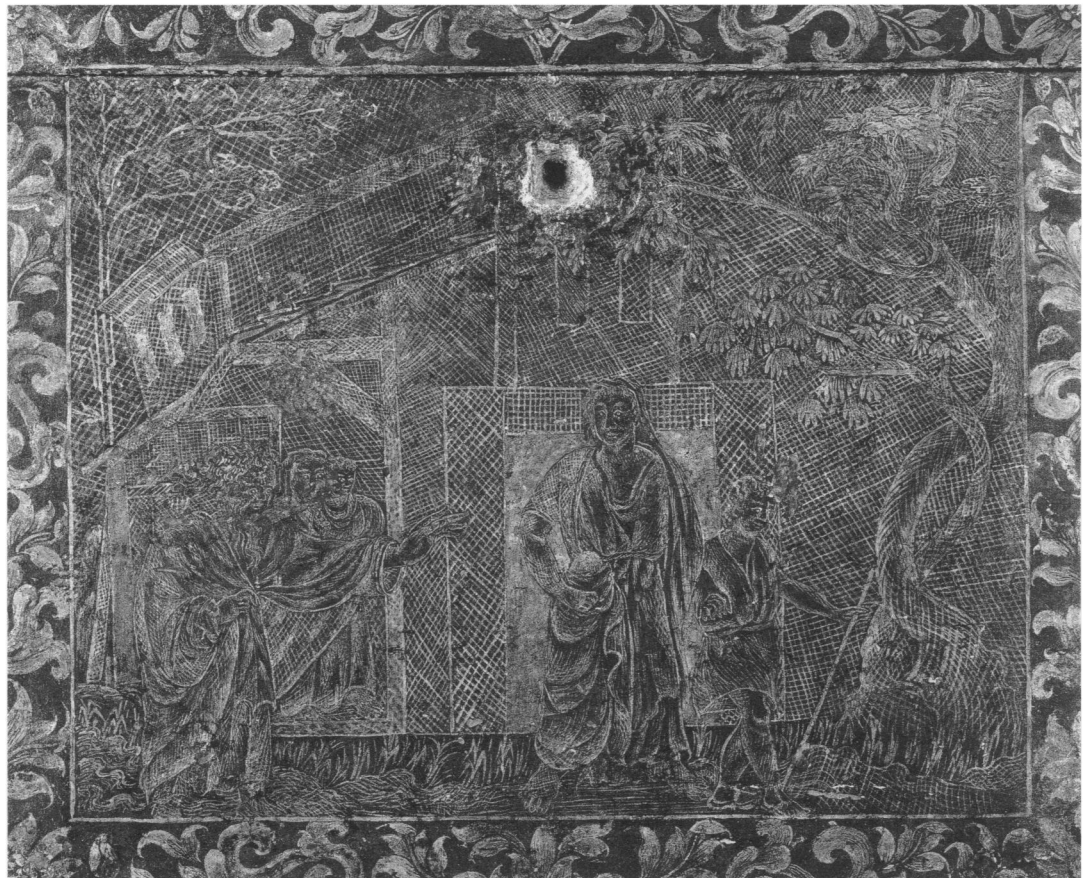


Figure 3. Detail of front panel in Figure 1, showing a scene of the Expulsion of Hagar

The box's decorative scheme and the pictorial compositions represent an uneasy confluence of cultures and artistic traditions. The portrait of the pope and the depiction of the Expulsion of Hagar, for which the artist must have copied European prints, include more successfully drawn figures than the other "foreign" scenes, which the artist seems to have invented, employing motifs derived from European prints and Indian drawings, as well as traditional Chinese decorative patterns. For example, the large earring worn by the cross-legged seated figure for centuries has been a standard device in Chinese art to indicate a foreigner. The cross-legged sitting position, ottoman, water vessel, and elephants can have only Indian drawings as their source. While a seated figure (usually supposed to represent a gentleman scholar) in a landscape is a common subject in Chinese painting, a traveler shown resting is rare in Chinese art. (Travelers in Chinese paintings are customarily represented on the move.) This theme also must have come from Western sources. The natural elements included in the landscapes also mix Western and Chinese conventions. The miniaturized mountain peaks in the distance are not presented in the Chinese manner, nor is the wind, but the depiction of water comes close to the traditional

Chinese approach. Equally fascinating is the artist's somewhat successful attempt at indicating chiaroscuro by means of cross-hatching—a technique that can be interpreted as learned from copying European engravings but is in any case necessitated by the use of gold painting, which is not amenable to shading.

This brings us to the dating of the box. The internal evidence—the shape and the technique of painting in gold on dark-colored lacquer—suggests that the box dates from the sixteenth to the mid-seventeenth century, late in the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), and that it was made somewhere on the southern coast of China. The shape derives from a variety of storage box in common use in China from about the tenth century.³ It was also the standard type for storing Buddhist sutras, from the twelfth century onward. Many of these boxes were manufactured in the southern coastal provinces of Zhejiang and Fujian, important centers of printing and lacquerwork. In Japan, a number of sutra boxes of similar shape are preserved in temples and private collections. They are decorated in black lacquer with etched-gold decoration (the incised lines in the lacquer are filled with gold) and some of them bear an inscription dated 1315 and giving the place of manufacture as Hangzhou, in Zhe-



Figure 4. Detail of left handled side in Figure 1, showing a bearded man sitting on his haunches atop an ottoman and clasping his knees



Figure 5. Detail of right handled side in Figure 1, showing a figure resting on the ground under a tree with a pair of birds (perhaps falcons) in its branches



Figure 6. Detail of front lid panel in Figure 1, showing a man with a long beard and a squarish hat

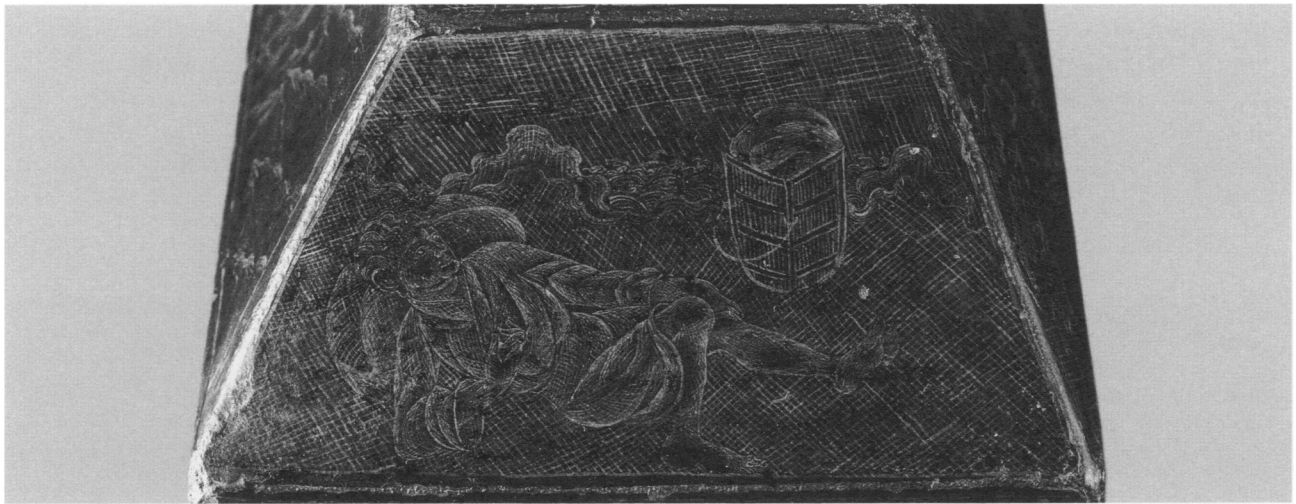


Figure 7. Detail of left lid panel in Figure 1, showing a man reclining on the ground against a large pillow or bag

jiang Province.⁴ By the late Ming period, to meet the demands of an increasingly prosperous population in South China, a large number of storage and gift boxes were made, decorated in various lacquering techniques; however, the elaborate etched gold was replaced by the cheaper and time-saving surface-gold technique. The decoration of the Metropolitan Museum's box conforms to this style, though the shape of the lid was modified so that the flat top is a square instead of a rectangle, with the sides proportionate to the base of the lid—obviously, in order to better frame the medallion portrait of the pope.

The date of the box can be narrowed down once the pope is identified. Of all the bearded pontiffs of the late sixteenth century, the most likely candidate is

Sixtus V (r. 1585–90; Figure 10). This identification fits in well with the historical context, as it was during the pontificate of Sixtus V that the Jesuits first were allowed beyond Macao and Canton, into the interior of China.⁵ If, indeed, the portrait on the box is that of Sixtus V, it would be one of the earliest attempts by a Chinese artist to copy a European image. It was, of course, not necessary for the Jesuits to enter China for Chinese craftsmen to have seen pictures with Christian subjects. Soon after the Spanish settled in the Philippines in the late 1570s, they began to commission ivory and wood carvings of religious figures from craftsmen in Zhangzhou, on the Fujian coast, across the South China Sea from Manila.⁶ Before that, Portuguese traders from Goa and Macao were conducting



Figure 8. Detail of back lid panel in Figure 1, showing a man in a cornfield holding a plant



Figure 9. Detail of right lid panel in Figure 1, showing two elephants, a cornfield, and waves

illicit commerce along the coasts of Zhejiang and Fujian—with the connivance of local officials.⁷ It was not necessarily the Jesuits who brought the portrait or medallion of Sixtus V to China, as their relationship to the pontiff was never an easy one; it could just as well have been the Franciscans in Manila, for they found greater favor with the pope.⁸

While the mode of transmission of Christian images into China in the sixteenth century is difficult to trace, the historical records are much more accessible for the period spanning the end of the sixteenth century through the seventeenth. After the Jesuits established themselves in Beijing, a considerable number of large folios of engravings of religious and secular subjects were transported to China. One of Christoph Plantin's

illustrated Bibles reached Macao in 1603 and was taken by a Jesuit to Beijing the following year.⁹ Abraham Ortelius's folio atlas of the world, *Theatrum orbis terrarum*, was among the gifts presented to the Wanli emperor by the Italian missionary Matteo Ricci upon his arrival in Beijing in 1601. This work included engravings of the pope and the nobility of the Holy Roman Empire.¹⁰ Several volumes of Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg's *Civitates orbis terrarum*, published in Cologne between 1572 and 1616, also made their way to Beijing at the beginning of the seventeenth century. The likely influence that engravings from this work exercised on seventeenth-century Chinese landscape painting has been discussed by Michael Sullivan.¹¹ Illustrations in seventeenth-century Christian



Figure 10. Lorenzo Fragni, called Laurentius Parmensi (d. Rome, after 1618), *Medal of Sixtus V*, 1585–90. Bronze, diam. 1¼ in. (3.2 cm). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Gwynne M. Andrews, 1930 (31.33.197)

publications in China often were copied directly from Western engravings. This fruitful meeting of East and West lasted until 1705–6, when the activities of Catholic missionaries were seriously curtailed as a result of the confrontation, based on hubris and ignorance on both sides, between the Kangxi emperor and Pope Clement XI (r. 1700–1721) on the question of ancestor worship. In the eighteenth century, Jesuit artists worked only at the imperial court and had little or no influence outside of Beijing.

All known instances of the impact of European pictorial art on Chinese painting and woodblock prints in the early seventeenth century are related to activities at the imperial court and to the interaction between Jesuit missionaries and the Chinese intelligentsia. This is obviously not the case with the Metropolitan Museum's box, however. Apart from the Christian images and the attempt at chiaroscuro, there are elements in the decoration of the box that must have been derived from contacts with the people and objects of India and Southeast Asia. There are also indications that the artist responsible for the decorations was familiar with representations of foreigners in traditional Chinese art. This brings us back to the conjecture that the box was produced at or near one of the ports along the South China coast—a center of international trade conducted by both Euro-

peans and Asians—in the late sixteenth century, during the reign of Sixtus V or shortly after. The pictorial ornament on the box combines diverse styles and motifs adapted from various sites along the East–West trade route. It evinces a meeting of several artistic traditions that might have resulted in a creative synthesis but did not—thus providing further proof that unless a seed is planted in fertile ground, it will not flourish.

NOTES

1. Examination of the box by Richard E. Stone in the Metropolitan's Department of Objects Conservation has shown that the "lacquer" is in fact an oil paint. In South China, beginning in the sixteenth century, wooden and basketry containers are often decorated on the exterior with lacquer or with a combination of lacquer and oil paint, especially for polychrome decoration. In the present case, oil paint alone is used, and the gold decoration has been applied on the surface with a mordant—a possible indicator of European influence.
2. The author gratefully acknowledges the guidance of James David Draper in identifying the portrait on the box as a papal one, as well as in locating literature relating to Sixtus V. Dr. Draper also clarified the iconography of the scene of the Expulsion of Hagar for the author.
3. A lacquer box of this type, with gilt-bronze borders—two of which contain Buddhist sutras—was found in a pagoda in Suzhou dated 961; see *Wen Wu* 11 (1957), pp. 38–45, figs. 2, 3. A mural in the tomb of Zhang Shiqing (d. 1116) in Xuanhua, Hebei Province, depicts a storage box of similar shape.
4. For an illustration of one of the dated boxes, see *Chanoyu no shiki: Karamono* (Lacquer tea utensils: Chinese objects), exh. cat., Chadō Shirōkan, Kyoto (Kyoto, 1989), no. 64. Another box with the same inscription and date is in the Jōdoji temple in Onomichi, and an undated box is in the Daitokuji temple in Kyoto.
5. In 1586, Sixtus V received word that the Jesuits had entered China; see Ludwig von Pastor, *The History of the Popes*, ed. Ralph Francis Kerr (Saint Louis, Mo., 1952), vol. 21, p. 181. This news took nearly three years to reach the pope.
6. For an account of Chinese ivory carvings for the Spanish in Manila, see Derek Gillman, "Ming and Qing Ivories: Figure Carving," in *Chinese Ivories from Shang to Qing* (London, 1984), pp. 35–52.
7. C. R. Boxer, *South China in the Sixteenth Century* (London 1953), pp. xvii–xxxvi.
8. Pastor, *History of the Popes*, p. 183 and also p. 139.
9. Jonathan D. Spence, *The Memory Palace of Matteo Ricci* (New York, 1984), pp. 87–88.
10. Michael Sullivan, *The Meeting of Eastern and Western Art* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 44.
11. *Ibid.*, pp. 44 ff.