

A Japanned Cabinet in The Metropolitan Museum of Art

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DURING THE LAST DECADES of the sixteenth century, when Oriental lacquer was introduced to the West in small quantities, its novelty and the liveliness of its exotic imagery first attracted European attention. Later, when lacquer goods became more readily available, the material's inherent qualities, such as its luster, hardness, and resistance to stains, were appreciated.¹ Lacquer furniture came to Europe in sizable amounts only at the beginning of the seventeenth century. It was at that time that the East India Companies established trade on a regular basis with the Orient. Imported lacquered screens, chests, and cabinets were much prized in European houses, but the supply fell far short of demand, and a market for European imitations grew steadily during the last quarter of the century.

The main ingredient of Oriental lacquer, sap from the tree *Rhus vernicifera*, a sumac found in all parts of China, was not available in Europe. The process of making genuine lacquer remained unknown till 1720 when the Italian Jesuit Filippo Bonanni described it in his *Trattato sopra la vernice*.² European craftsmen, therefore, had to substitute varnishes or paint in their attempt to achieve a similar effect.³ Although the European techniques gradually improved, they never produced a substance as hard, lustrous, and waterproof as Oriental lacquer. The European lacquer process was known as "japanning," a term applied indiscriminately to imitations of Chinese, Japanese, and Indian lacquer ware.

Imitations already existed early in the seventeenth century,⁴ but the production of European imitation lacquer did not come into full bloom until the last two decades of the century. Closely following imported

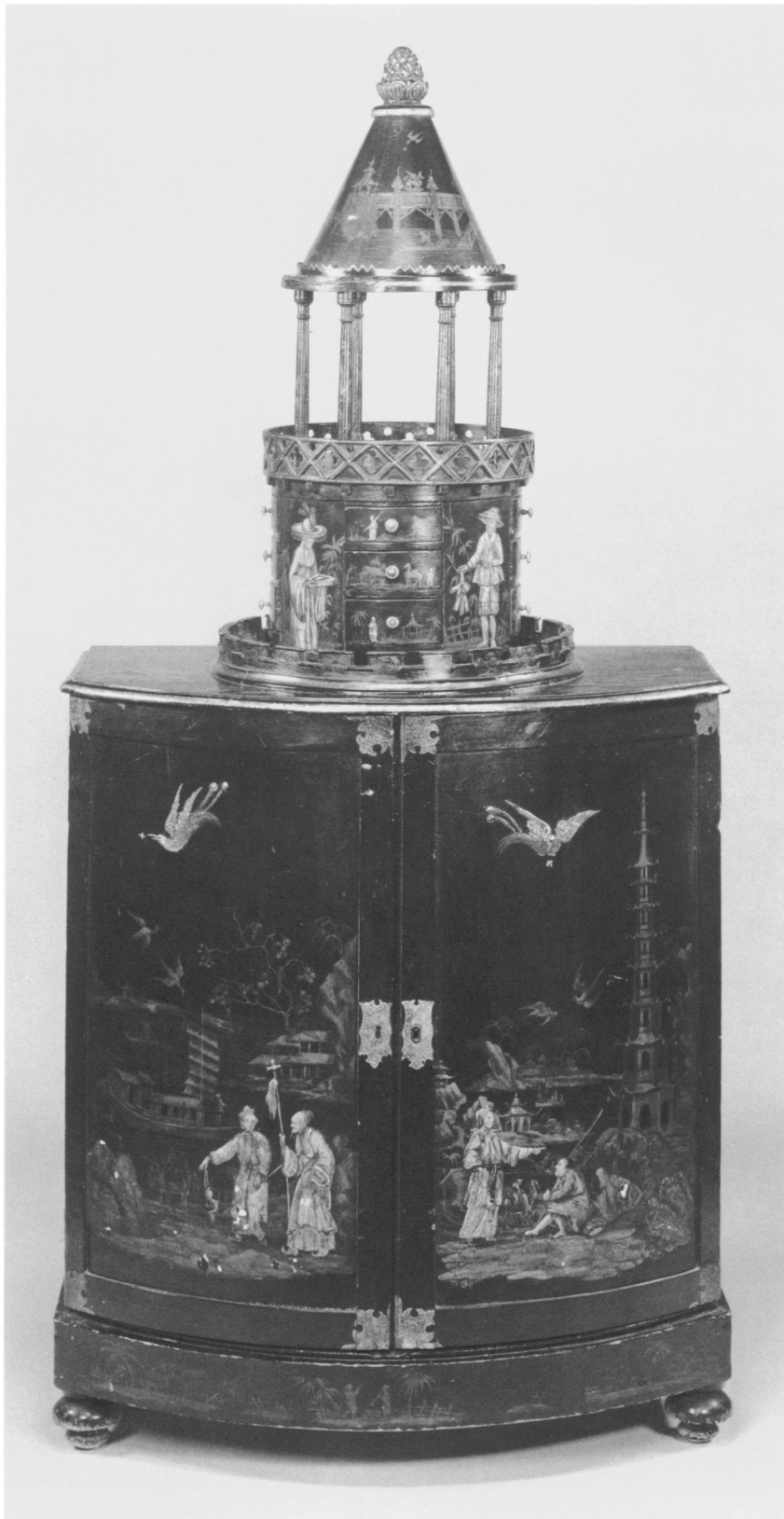
prototypes, a large quantity of square two-door cabinets with numerous small inside drawers were made and are still preserved. The elaborately carved and gilded stands on which these cabinets are mounted are purely European additions. Patterns for the decoration of japanned furniture were derived initially from imported porcelain and lacquered objects, as well as from Oriental fabrics and wall hangings. Illustrations in travel and mission reports, like John Nieuhoff's *Het Gezantschap der Neêrlandsche Oost-indische*

1. M. Jourdain and R. Soame Jenyns, *Chinese Export Art in the Eighteenth Century* (Feltham, 1967) p. 17.

2. H. Huth, *Lacquer of the West* (Chicago/London, 1971) p. 22. The sap of the *Rhus vernicifera* is a syrupy resin. After superfluous moisture has been removed by prolonged boiling, it is applied to wood, leather, or other materials, with or without the addition of color. Fine lacquer may have more than 200 coats of the resin. Each layer is allowed to harden slowly in a damp atmosphere and is then polished with a fine charcoal dust before the next layer is added. The very hard finish that results can be decorated with designs carved in relief, painted, or inlaid with gold.

3. European lacquer imitations are made from lac, the resinous substance deposited on trees by the female *Laccifer lacca*, an Asian scale insect. Lac is scraped off the twigs (stick lac), ground (seed lac), then dissolved in alcohol, and processed to form varnish (shellac). Several coats of this varnish were applied to wood; each coat was dried in an oven at close to 300° F. The decorations were added next, mostly raised in plaster; the whole surface was burnished afterwards. Later imitations were simply executed in paint and then varnished.

4. H. Honour, *Chinoiserie* (London, 1961) pp. 44–45. The inventory of Henry Howard, first earl of Northampton, made at his death in 1614, lists a number of imitation lacquered pieces of furniture; e.g., "a field bedstead of China worke blacke and silver branches with silver with the Armes of the Earl of Northampton upon the headpiece."





1–3. Cabinet, English, ca. 1760–65. Painted and varnished pine, overall 68 (cabinet 37, superstructure 31) × 32 × 19 in. (172.7 × 81.3 × 48.3 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Bequest of Emma A. Sheaffer, 1974, The Lesley and Emma Sheaffer Collection, 1974.356.130

Compagnie . . . (Leyden, 1665), a description of a Dutch embassy to the emperor of China in 1656, proved to be especially influential.⁵ In addition to prints by Europeans who had actually visited China or Japan, an even larger number of designs were published by artists who had never been to the Far East and for whom the distinctions between the countries in that part of the world were seldom clear. These prints and the late seventeenth-century and eighteenth-century japanned decorations based on them often reveal more about the perceptions Europeans formed of the Far East and its people than the reality. Intricate and sometimes comical effects can be found as the artistic phenomenon known as chinoiserie was enthusiastically exploited in the West.

John Stalker and George Parker's *A Treatise of Japanning and Varnishing*, published in London in 1688, contained not only technical information on how to make lacquerlike varnishes but also useful designs for the decoration of cabinets, screens, and small items such as powder boxes.⁶ The designs, according to the authors, were derived from Oriental objects but they "helped them a little in their proportions, where they were lame or defective, and made them more pleasant yet altogether as Antick."⁷ Japanners, cabinet-makers, and draughtsmen who established themselves before 1695 as "Patentees for lacquering after the manner of Japan" certainly used these patterns; several pieces of furniture with Stalker and Parker

5. Rosenborg Castle in Copenhagen contains a room with japanned panels depicting scenes based on illustrations from this book. See G. Boesen, "Kineserier på Rosenborg om Høllandske lakerere i København i det 17 arhundrede og deres forbilleder," *Historiske Meddelelser om København Årbog* (1977) pp. 30, 34, pl. 1.

6. This book was of major importance for English japanning and later manuals are largely indebted to it; see R. Edwards, *The Dictionary of English Furniture* (London, 1954; reissued 1983) II, p. 268.

7. J. Stalker and G. Parker, *A Treatise on Japanning and Varnishing* (London, 1688; reprint, London, 1960, 1971) p. xvi.

designs are extant.⁸ The book was intended primarily for the amateur, as japanning had become a fashionable occupation for young ladies. In 1689, for example, Edmund Verney heartily endorsed his daughter's wish to learn to japan:

I find you have a desire to learn Japann, as you call it, and I approve it; and so I shall of any thing that is good and virtuous, therefore learn in God's name all Good Things, and I will willingly be at the charge so farr as I am able—though they come from Japan and from never so farr and looke of an Indian Hue and colour, for I admire all accomplishments that will render you considerable and Lovely in the sight of God and man.⁹

The vogue for lacquer furniture declined in the late 1720s, only to come back in full force twenty years later, but throughout this time the art of japanning remained a popular pastime. *The Method of Learning to Draw in Perspective . . . Likewise a New and Curious Method of Japanning . . . so as to imitate China; and to make black or gilt Japan-Ware as Beautiful and Light as any brought from the East-Indies* was published in 1732 and dedicated to Lady Walpole, the prime minister's wife, who was an enthusiastic japanner. More books appeared over the next twenty years, containing technical information, designs for furniture, architecture, and ornament, and useful patterns for amateurs and professionals.¹⁰ An outstanding work of the type, *Designs of Chinese Buildings, Furniture, Dresses, Machines, and Utensils* by William Chambers, was published in 1757. Sir William Chambers (1723–96), architect to the royal family and tutor to the future George III, is famous for his work on public buildings, country houses, and gardens. His projects for the royal family included laying out the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew for Augusta, Dowager Princess of Wales. Chambers embellished Kew Gardens with the Chinese Pagoda, and temples, pavilions, and bridges, both classical and Oriental in style.¹¹ The son of a Scottish merchant, Chambers was born in Sweden, and traveled to Bengal and twice to Canton in the 1740s as an employee of the Swedish East India Company. *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, published some ten years later, after he had established himself as an architect, contains sketches drawn during these trips. His introduction announces a highly corrective purpose:

It was not my design to publish them [the sketches]; nor

would they now appear, were it not in compliance with the desire of several lovers of the arts, who thought them worthy the perusal of the publick, and that they might be of use in putting a stop to the extravagancies that daily appear under the name Chinese, though most of them are mere inventions, the rest copies from the lame presentations found on porcelain and paperhangings.

In addition to the architectural drawings, Chambers published illustrations of furniture and clothing useful as models for cabinetmakers and designers of masquerade costumes. The drawings of utensils and machines include vases, teapots, and other vessels, as well as bellows.

Between 1758 and 1762, two editions of another important work on japanning appeared, *The Ladies Amusement; or, Whole Art of Japanning Made Easy*, published by Robert Sayer, a London print and map seller who also sold materials for japanning. With approximately fifteen hundred drawings and designs by various artists, including Jean Pillement (1728–1808), this was a major source for japanners and other decorative artists. Its thin paper allowed easy transfer to any surface, and in fact many pieces of furniture display its designs. Such publications reflect an upsurge in the popularity of the Chinese style. A passage in a contemporary journal, *The World* (1753), clearly illustrates this appeal:

According to the present prevailing whim everything is Chinese or in the Chinese taste: or, as it is sometimes more modestly expressed, partly after the Chinese manner. Chairs, tables, chimney-pieces, frames for looking-glasses, and even our most vulgar utensils are all reduced to this new-fangled standard.¹²

A remarkable bow-fronted cabinet from the Lesley and Emma Sheaffer Collection in The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a fine example of japanned English furniture (Figures 1–3). This gilded and painted

8. Examples are listed in W. Holzhausen, *Lackkunst in Europa* (Brunswick, 1959) pp. 66–70.

9. Honour, *Chinoiserie*, pp. 73–74.

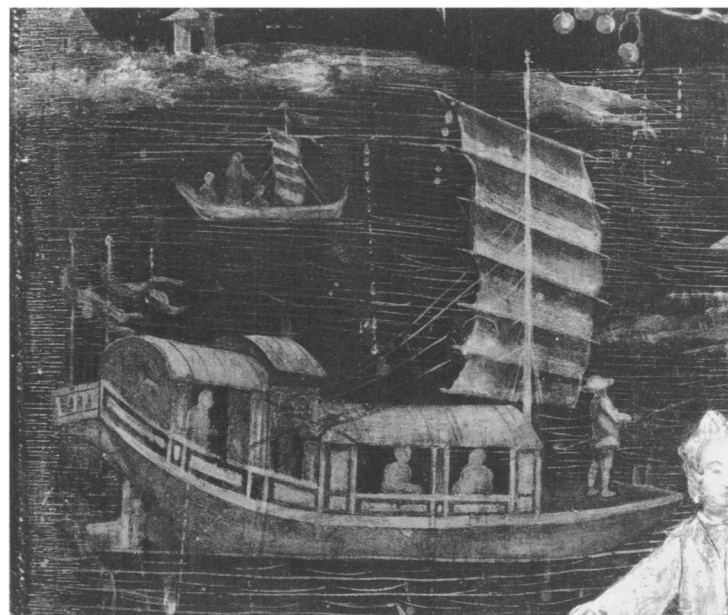
10. To name only a few: W. and J. Halfpenny, *New Designs* (London, 1750–52); E. Edwards and M. Darley, *A New Book of Chinese Designs* (London, 1754); P. Decker, *Chinese Architecture* (London, 1759).

11. For a good account of Chambers's work see J. Harris, *Sir William Chambers: Knight of the Polar Star* (London, 1970).

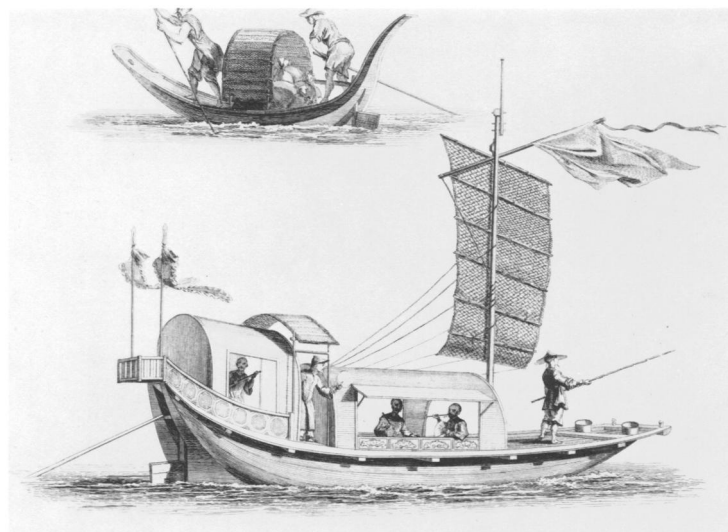
12. Edwards, *Dictionary of English Furniture*, II, p. 73.

wood cabinet consists of two detachable parts and rests on four mushroom-shaped feet. Its lower part has two doors. The cylindrical superstructure, containing twelve drawers with small ivory knobs, is surmounted by a pavilion with a conical roof. The roof is set on six slender columns and crowned with a pinecone. On the cabinet's front, sides, and superstructure are Oriental scenes in brownish and golden tonalities. The decorations show human figures, animals and birds, boats, and architecture, partly in low relief, in a country setting including a river. A coat of whiting is visible where the top layer of varnish has been damaged. The cabinet's back and interior are not decorated. The mounts and escutcheons on both doors, as well as the keyhole on the left door, are trompe-l'oeil decorations. Only the keyhole in the right door is functional. The cabinet's unusual shape makes it difficult to determine its original purpose. Although a number of surviving eighteenth-century china cabinets and bookcases feature pagoda roofs and Chinese ornament, it is unlikely that this cabinet was intended to display objects as it has no glass doors or open shelves. It may have been designed for a lady's dressing room; Thomas Chippendale considered a "Lady's Dressing-Room: especially if it is hung with India Paper" as a "proper" place for furniture in the Chinese manner.¹³ The cabinet's lower part, now containing three shelves, could have been used for storage, maybe even to hold a chamberpot. The twelve drawers of the top section may have held toilet or sewing articles. Did the pavilion once house a Buddha statuette?

In decorating the cabinet the japanner resorted to previously published collections of engravings. Some of the Oriental details on the door panels are inspired by the Chambers book *Designs of Chinese Buildings*. For instance, the Chinese junk on the left door has an identical counterpart in Chambers (Figures 4, 5). The three main standing figures on the cabinet doors (Figures 6, 7) are also derived from Chambers. Although shown in reverse, both figures on the left door, described in the book as a country woman and a mendicant bonze, or Buddhist monk, the former with a fish and a pole, the latter with a staff, and the "lady of quality" with an outstretched arm on the right



4. Cabinet, detail of left door



5. Engraving by P. Sandby after William Chambers, from Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings* (London, 1757) pl. xvii (detail). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library

13. T. Chippendale, *A New Edition of the Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (London, 1762), description of pls. xxvi–xxviii.



6. Cabinet, detail of left door



7. Cabinet, detail of right door

8–10. Engravings by C. Grignion, from Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library



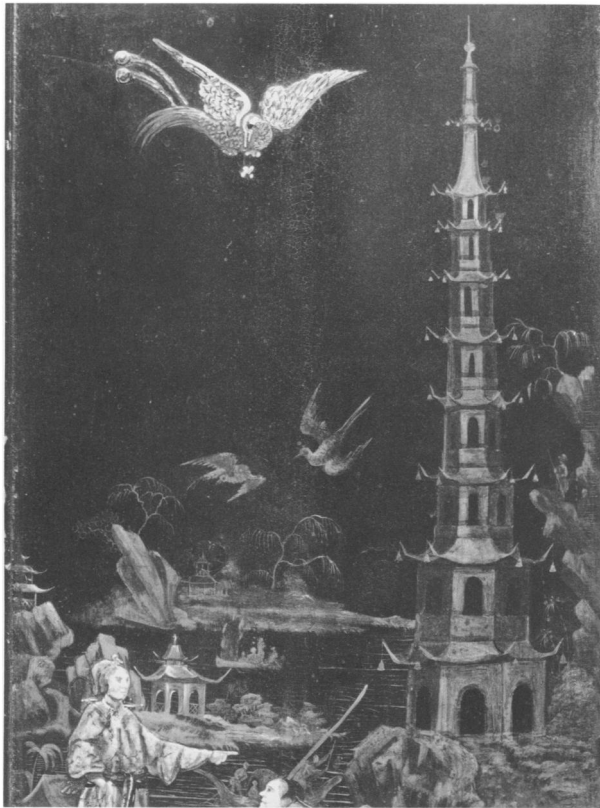
8. *A Country Woman*, pl. xix, fig. 6



9. *A Mendicant Bonze*, pl. xx, fig. 4

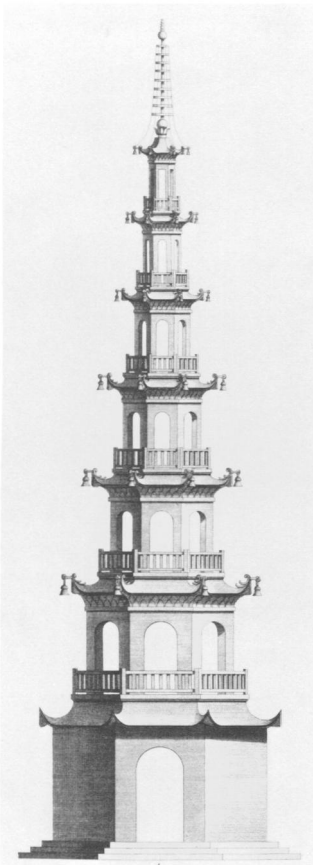


10. *A Lady of Quality*, pl. xx, fig. 3



11. Cabinet, detail of right door

12. Engraving by P. Fourdrinier after Chambers, from Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, pl. v, fig. 1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library



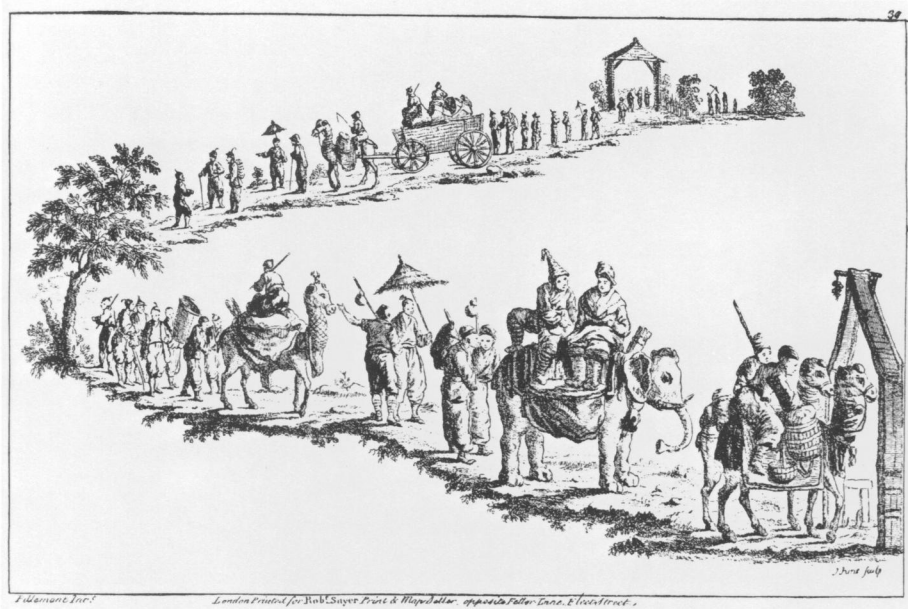
door are clearly copies of engravings in Chambers's work (Figures 8–10).¹⁴ Individual drawings have been rendered here in small groups and placed in charming scenes. It is likely that the pagoda on the cabinet's right door was inspired by a Chambers illustration (Figures 11, 12).

Other decorations on the Sheaffer cabinet are based on engravings in Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*. For example, an illustration in this manual, after a design by Pillement, shows a seated "Chinese" with a fishing pole (Figure 13). This is probably the source for the seated man on the right door (Figure 7). Although the image has been reversed and details like the cross-ties on the legs have been omitted, the pose of both

14. See Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, p. 14, for his list of the seventeen Chinese characters illustrated; not all these figures were engraved from his own drawings (ibid.). Some of the engravings in the book appeared in the French translation *Traité des édifices, meubles, habits, machines et ustensils des chinois* (Paris, 1776). These engravings diverge from those in the original edition in being smaller, printed in reverse, and differently arranged.

13. Engraving after Jean Pillement, from Robert Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement* (2nd ed., London, 1762; facsimile, Newport, Mon., 1959) pl. 40. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library





14. Engraving by J. June after Pillement, from Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*, pl. 30. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library

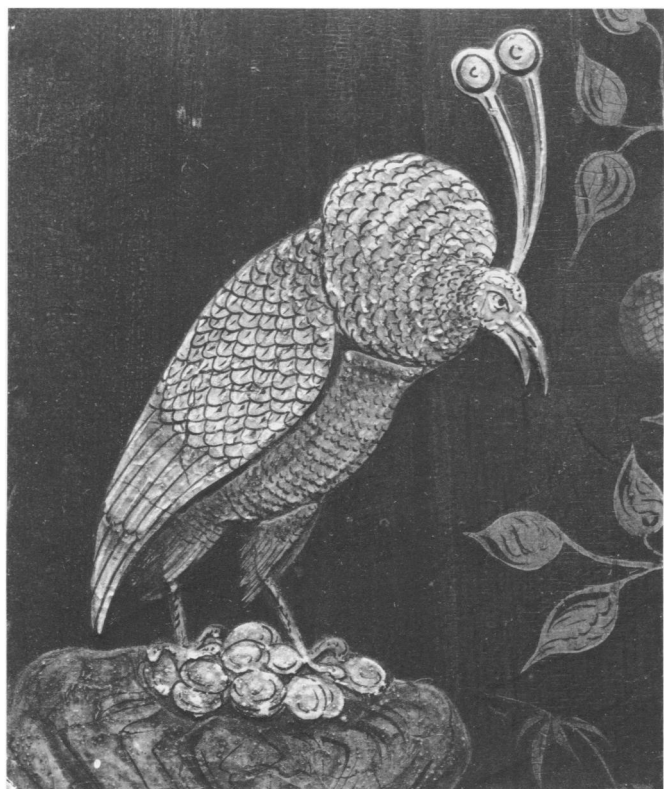


15. Cabinet, detail of left door

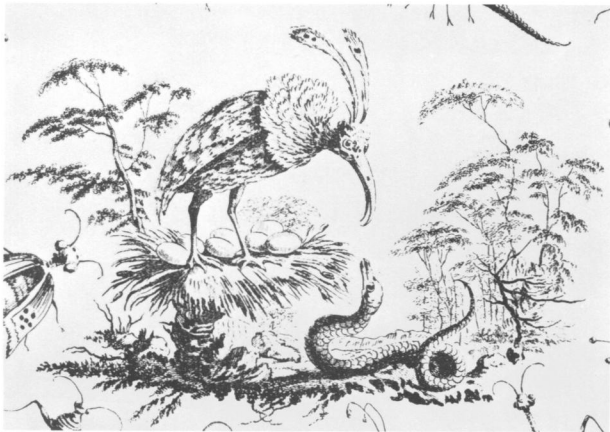
17. Cabinet, detail of left side



16. Engraving by P. Benazech after C. Fenn, from Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*, pl. 75 (detail). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library

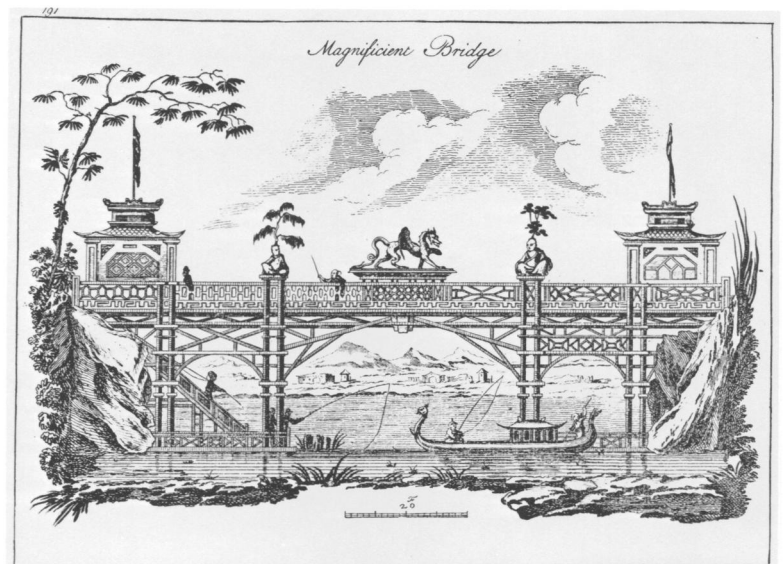


18. Engraving after Pillement, from Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*, pl. 64 (detail). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library



19. Cabinet, detail of superstructure

20. *Magnificent Bridge*, engraving from Sayer's *The Ladies Amusement*, pl. 191. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library





21–24. Cabinet, details of the superstructure

figures is essentially the same. Another design by the same artist in the Sayer book depicts an elephant and two riders (Figure 14); an almost identical group can be found on the left door (Figure 15). The two figures walking behind the elephant on the cabinet are a medley of details from the four figures walking behind the elephant in the engraving. The camel visible on the cabinet's right door (Figure 7) might have been suggested by one of the camels in the same engraving. Several birds are derived from prints in this book. The bird near the top of the right door is similar to one drawn by the otherwise unknown C. Fenn (Figures 11, 16). The exotic bird with two long feathers on its head, guarding its eggs, on the lower left side of the cabinet is related to a bird by Pillement (Figures 2, 17, 18). It is also likely that the bridge painted on the roof of the pavilion is derived from *The Ladies Amusement* (Figures 19, 20).¹⁵ There are differences, but the winged beast and the seated Buddha-like statues on the railings of both bridges are very much alike. The overall composition with the boat in front of the bridge links both scenes. Some of the small illustrations of buildings found on both door panels and on the drawers above may have been suggested by other plates in the Sayer book.

Neither Chambers nor *The Ladies Amusement* seems to have been the source of the four standing figures between the drawers of the superstructure (Figures 21–24). Two of them, the women dressed in long

garments, carry objects that suggest unfamiliar musical instruments. One of the two male figures holds a snake, the other is depicted with what seems to be a cluster of bananas.

The unusual form of the cabinet's superstructure is actually in accord with the spirit of the period. Among the several manuals on furniture published around the middle of the eighteenth century, Chippendale's *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (1754) included several designs for "Chinese" furniture and illustrations suitable for japanning.¹⁶ None of Chippendale's drawings, however, with their bamboo-like fretwork and pagoda roofs with upturned corners, seems to have influenced this piece of furniture. Its pavilion top, with slender columns and steep roof, resembles not only Chinese structures but also classical temples. This mixture of characteristics is not in itself surprising, since, in addition to the "Chinese manner," the Gothic Revival and Neoclassicism were already coming into fashion. Several design books

15. This print appeared earlier in Edwards and Darley, *A New Book of Chinese Designs*, pl. 55. It also appeared in Decker, *Chinese Architecture*, pl. 6.

16. T. Chippendale, *The Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director* (London, 1754) pls. xci, cix, cxviii; idem, *A New Edition of the Gentleman and Cabinet-Maker's Director*, pls. cxxxv, cxxxvii, cxlii. Designs intended for japanning were also included in W. Ince and J. Mayhew, *The Universal System of Household Furniture* (London, 1762) pls. xlvi, xlix.

present a *mélange* of all three currents. The title alone of one manual, *A New Book of Chinese, Gothic, and Modern Chairs*, written by Matthias Darly and published in 1750–51, makes this manifest. In the Chambers book, it is striking to see that some of his Chinese temples and garden structures are classical in appearance, bearing friezes as well as Greek key patterns. Chambers's illustration of a garden building (Figure 25) has a superstructure which is not far removed from the pavilion of the Sheaffer cabinet.

The cabinetmaker and japanner who designed and decorated this piece of furniture remain unknown. Very few names of japanners have been preserved, and even these can seldom be connected with extant furniture.¹⁷ The overall designer of the Sheaffer cabinet certainly possessed imagination, and it may at least be said that the japanner was a competent copyist—perhaps one of the host of amateurs who worked in this medium.

The date of the cabinet is no more certain than the identity of its makers. The not very elaborate way of japanning practiced here, a single layer of paint and varnish, indicates a date in the second half of the eighteenth century. The prints used as models, however, give some general guidelines. Chambers's book was first published in 1757 and two editions of *The Ladies Amusement* appeared between 1758 and 1762.¹⁸ The adaptations of their plates prove that the cabinet must have been decorated later; a likely date is around 1760–65. The form of the cabinet also corresponds to the admixture of exotic elements fashionable during this period, before Neoclassicism began its regime of formalized shapes. Above all, the cabinet displays the exuberance and charm of japanning in its heyday.

17. Giles Grendey (1693–1780), a London cabinetmaker, is a happy exception. A magnificent suite of red lacquer furniture made by him is preserved. Part of the set is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London; the Metropolitan Museum has a side chair (37.115) and a table (37.114). See C. Gilbert, *Furniture at Temple Newsam House and Lotherton Hall: A Catalogue of the Leeds Collection*, 2 vols. (London, 1978) I, pp. 79–81, no. 61.

18. Although some of Chambers's plates were published in reverse in the French edition of 1776 (see note 14 above), that edition could not have been used, since for instance the country woman with a fish is missing from it. The bridge, pl. 191 in *The Ladies Amusement*, had already been published in 1754 (see note 15 above), but to find it in combination with the seated man, the elephant group, and the birds makes it more likely that the Sayer book was used during the planning of the cabinet's decoration.



25. Engraving by Fourdrinier after Chambers, from Chambers, *Designs of Chinese Buildings*, pl. vi, fig. 1. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Thomas J. Watson Library