East Asian Lacquer
The Florence and Herbert Irving Collection

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
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JAMES C. Y. WATT AND BARBARA BRENNAN FORD

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART
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Contents

Foreword  PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO  vii
Collectors’ Note  FLORENCE AND HERBERT IRVING  viii
Acknowledgments  x

Introduction  JAMES C. Y. WATT  1
  Map and Chronology  4

China  JAMES C. Y. WATT  12
  Lacquer of China  15
  Catalogue  40

Japan  BARBARA BRENNA FORD  150
  Japanese Lacquer: Makie and Negoro  153
  The Momoyama Flowering: Kōdai-ji and Namban Lacquer  HAINO AKIO  163
  Catalogue  174

Korea  JAMES C. Y. WATT  300
  Lacquer of Korea  303
  Catalogue  312

Ryukyu Islands  JAMES C. Y. WATT  326
  Lacquer of the Ryukyu Islands  329
  Catalogue  338

Appendix of Marks  372
Glossary  376
Selected Bibliography  379
Index  383
The study of Asian art in this country has lagged in one major area, that of works of art in lacquer. During the greater part of this century, while branches of the decorative arts of Asia such as ceramics and bronzes were being avidly collected and studied in major American museums, relatively little attention was being paid to lacquer. The collections of the Metropolitan Museum sadly reflect this state of affairs. Although a few masterpieces were acquired over the years, including some very fine late-nineteenth-century inro and makié pieces collected by such important benefactors as the H. O. Havemeyers, the Asian lacquer collection can only be described as embryonic. Thus it gives us especial pleasure to note that the exhibition of lacquers from the Florence and Herbert Irving Collection consists mostly of promised gifts to the Museum, and that we not only mount a fine exhibition, but celebrate the donation of one of the most distinguished and comprehensive assemblages of Asian lacquer to be found in the Western world.

One of the reasons for the neglect of Asian lacquer in the West is its scarcity; because of the extreme fragility of the medium relatively few examples have survived, even in the countries where lacquer was produced. Over the years, the Ivings have searched out fine lacquerware from virtually all corners of the earth to form their remarkable collection. The Museum is especially grateful to be the ultimate beneficiary of this dedicated, knowledgeable, and timely search. It is doubtful whether another collection of the scope and quality of the Irving Collection could be assembled in the foreseeable future.

In order to keep this exhibition to a manageable size and to present works of the various cultures that are roughly coeval, the decision was made not to include Japanese pieces of the modern era or the very early Chinese material, dating from the Han period, which will be the subject of a separate study and catalogue. A careful, original analysis of the entire collection has been conducted under the direction of James Watt, who worked with Barbara Ford. In publishing this catalogue, they and the staff of the Department of Asian Art have documented the exhibition and also embarked on a systematic study and informed interpretation of the unique art form that is lacquer.

Philippe de Montebello
Director
The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Collectors’ Note

Our interest in the arts of Asia began some years ago in Tokyo when we first met Alice Boney, the legendary collector-dealer. That interest has grown ever since in both strength and diversity, leading us into various branches of Asian art. However, our collecting of lacquer had a comparatively late start. Our first lacquer object was a Qianlong-period carved lacquer brush holder (no. 44 in this catalogue) formerly in a succession of English collections, which we acquired to enjoy simply as a brush holder, an example of the superlative decorative arts of the eighteenth century that would sit comfortably in a European drawing room of the period as in a Chinese scholar’s study. The piece became our introduction to a new art form, and we began to look at other examples of carved lacquer.

The first lacquer object we purchased as a work of art was the “two-bird” dish, number 21 in this catalogue, that is now one of several such masterworks of Chinese carving in our collection. That was more than ten years ago. Our taste for Asian lacquers soon extended to the simple and elegant forms of the monochrome wares of the Song period (no. 1) and the precise, austere craftsmanship of Japanese Negoro lacquer, with its infinitely fascinating surface texture (nos. 70–93). In time we found that, without setting out to do so, we had gathered examples of most of the types of Asian lacquer made from the twelfth century to almost the present day. The Korean group was the last to be formed. Because of the rarity of early Korean lacquer, we count ourselves fortunate in having been able to acquire a small group that nevertheless is representative of what we consider the finest work of the Choson period. As for the Ryukyuan wares, they perhaps reflect the eclecticism of our own taste in Asian art. During these years of collecting we have been greatly aided in various aspects of acquisition by Robert Ellsworth and Roger Keverne, and we should particularly like to acknowledge the tireless efforts of Klaus Naumann to further our search for fine lacquerware.

In every collector there is a wish to own and a wish to share that are not necessarily incompatible. Thus when, one day two years ago, Philippe de Montebello and James Watt came to view our collections and expressed keen interest in our lacquer collection, we readily entered into a series of discussions. The outcome was our pledge to make a gift to the Metropolitan Museum of our lacquer collection as it stood then, the donation to be preceded by the exhibition of a selection of objects from the collection. The exhibition is now a reality and is accompanied by this catalogue.

During the past two years we have worked closely with Wen Fong and his staff at the Department of Asian Art in developing all the areas of our collection, but particularly with James Watt and Barbara Ford in collecting lacquers. We would like to record our grateful
thanks to James and Barbara for the scholarship and hard work they have put into writing this catalogue and also into mounting the exhibition, which they did together with the Museum’s chief designer, Jeff Daly. Our thanks are due Dr. Haino of the Kyoto National Museum both for his learned advice and for the essay he contributed to this catalogue.

We have enjoyed the activity of collecting as much as we have savored living with these works of art. Now the pleasure is ours of sharing our collection with the public. For us there is no better setting for this shared delight than The Metropolitan Museum of Art, an institution that years ago nurtured our love of art as it has done for generations of visitors.

FLORENCE AND HERBERT IRVING
Acknowledgments

Our thanks go first of all to Florence and Herbert Irving, who made their lacquer collection available for study and exhibition, offered constant encouragement and support for our work, and shared with us their love for these works of art and their knowledge about them. It has been an exciting and rewarding task to select, study, and catalogue the exhibits.

In the course of conducting research for this project we received generous help and cooperation from colleagues in many museums, including Tokugawa Yoshinobu and his staff, especially Koike Tomio, at the Tokugawa Art Museum, Okuma Ritsuji at the Hayashibara Museum of Art in Okayama, Haino Akio at the Kyoto National Museum, Kawada Sadamu and Sakata Munehiko at the Nara National Museum, Nishioka Yasuhiro and Komatsu Taishū at the Tokyo National Museum, Jessica Rawson and Jane Portal at the British Museum, Rose Kerr and Craig Clunas at the Victoria and Albert Museum, Christiaan Jörg at the Groniger Museum, and Thomas Lawton at the Freer Gallery of Art. Felice Fisher at the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the staffs of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Idemitsu Museum of Arts, Tokyo, responded readily with information and photographs.

The labor of many people contributed to the preparation of this catalogue. Anita Siu rendered invaluable assistance with background work for the entries in the Chinese section. She searched out most of the comparative pieces in other collections and assembled much of the reference material. Her preliminary notes on individual pieces provided a basis for the descriptions in the entries and contained excellent observations on the stylistic characteristics of different periods. Hyung-Min Kim was equally helpful in work on the Korean lacquers and gave much-needed critical advice. The selection of Japanese lacquers was made in consultation with Haino Akio, whose connoisseurship and scholarship shaped the presentations to a considerable extent. Masako Watanabe assisted ably and with unflagging enthusiasm and perseverance in the historical and iconographic research. Jack Jacoby, librarian of the Department of Asian Art, and his assistant, Yangming Zhu, always managed to obtain bibliographical information and reference material from other libraries with amazing speed and accuracy. Jennifer Casler, Paul Verona, and Nina Sweet typed parts of the manuscript.

A big vote of thanks is due our editor, Ruth Kozodoy, who orchestrated the writing and assembling of the entire catalogue with meticulous care. The editorial effort, overseen by John O’Neill, also included the skillful production of the book by Matthew Pimm; attentive checking of the bibliography by Jean Wagner and Arthur Tobias; Robert Palmer’s able compilation of an index; and the map, precisely made by Wilhelmina Reyenga-Amrhein. All 180-odd objects were painstakingly photographed by Lyn Gardiner. The book’s elegant
design is the work of Howard Gralla. The expert mechanical artist was Steffie Kaplan. Valuable advice was given by Joan Holt, and essential assistance by Elizabeth Powers and Mary Smith.

Dick Stone and his colleagues in the Objects Conservation laboratory performed all the conservation work necessary to prepare the lacquers for exhibition and made technical studies of many of the pieces. Although in most cases it has not been possible to report on the studies in this catalogue, some of the conclusions about dating and provenance presented here were based on their results. When mention is made of a technical aspect of a lacquer work, such as the nature of a metal wire or the construction of a substrate, it is always based on laboratory results.

Mounting an exhibition of lacquer presents special demands which were handled with skill and sensitivity by Jeff Daly, Chief Designer, and Zack Zanolli, Lighting Designer. Jennifer Casler coordinated the entire undertaking that this exhibition represents, a responsibility whose aspects are too numerous for individual mention. Her efficient management made the work easier for everyone connected with the project, especially the curators. She was ably assisted in the care and storage of the lacquers and in organizing the photographic work by the department’s technicians, especially Eric Rasmussen. Finally, Nina Maruca in the Registrar’s office planned and organized the transportation of the delicate works of art. To all the above mentioned, our heartfelt thanks.

James C.Y. Watt
Barbara Brennan Ford
NOTE TO THE READER

A short citation in the notes refers to a full citation that will be found in the corresponding Bibliography. Thus, for a note in the China section of the book, consult the China section of the Bibliography, unless the citation directs otherwise.

Japanese names are given with surname first, except for names of authors writing in English.
Introduction

The word lacquer carries a variety of meanings. It brings to some minds the splendor of an eighteenth-century European drawing room with richly decorated walls and furniture, perhaps displaying Orientalizing motifs. In the Islamic world lacquer is employed to cover and protect the exquisite miniature painting on book covers, boxes, and doors. To the inhabitants of present-day East Asia, lacquers are everything from cheap, reusable chopsticks to highly priced works of art sold in department stores and galleries. In fact, the term lacquer has been used to describe many types of glossy protective coating applied to all kinds of materials including textiles, wood, and metal. In some cases lacquer is also a medium for painting. This catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies are concerned with lacquering practiced as an artistic activity in East Asia from medieval times to the nineteenth century. A few words of explanation are necessary to place this tradition in context.

The English word *lacquer* presumably comes from the Hindi *lakh*, which designates the lacquer used in India. *Lakh* is a gummy substance deposited on trees by certain species of insect, such as *tachardia lacca*, and known in English as resin lac or shellac. This type of lacquer is the basis of some of the varnishes used in the “japanning” of European furniture from the sixteenth century onward; nevertheless it is not at all similar chemically to East Asian lacquer. For this reason, some authors have chosen to employ the Japanese word *urushi* in recent literature on the subject of East Asian lacquer to distinguish it from other types of lacquer. In this catalogue, however, which deals only with East Asian lacquer, the common term *lacquer* will be used.

The Nature and Properties of Lacquer

East Asian lacquer is made from the sap of the lacquer tree (*rhus verniciflua*), which is native to central and southern China and possibly to Japan. The essential component of lacquer sap is called urushiol after the Japanese *urushi*, meaning lacquer. A hydrocarbon, urushiol makes up 60 to 75 percent of the sap; the rest consists of about 25 percent water, 2 percent albumen, and 4 percent a gum similar to gum arabic along with a small quantity of the enzyme laccase.

Urushiol polymerizes when exposed to oxygen as it changes from a liquid to a solid state; thus, it is in essence a natural plastic. The process is initiated by the catalytic action of laccase, a constituent of lacquer sap. Like modern synthetic plastics, lacquer, once dried, is
remarkably resistant to water and acid, and to a certain extent, heat. Therefore it is ideal for use as an adhesive and binding agent and as a protective coating on all kinds of materials, especially wood, bamboo, textiles, and leather.

For lacquer to set or “dry” it must be exposed to a rather high relative humidity (75 to 85 percent) and a temperature between 70 and 80 degrees Fahrenheit. To facilitate the drying process, freshly painted lacquer is placed in a damp room or a pit dug in the earth—called yinsbi (shaded room) in China and urushi-buro in Japan—where the relative humidity is maintained at a high level, if necessary by constant spraying of water. Although raw lacquer is a highly toxic substance which in most people induces an allergic reaction similar to that caused by poison ivy, it becomes inert once it is dry, when the urushiol has polymerized.

The very property that makes lacquer such a fine coating material also necessitates application of the raw lacquer in very thin layers so that it can dry properly. If the lacquer layer is thick, as soon as its surface dries the lacquer beneath is cut off from contact with the humid air and will remain forever liquid. Thus to produce a lacquer coating of substantial thickness the raw lacquer must be applied in many layers, each no thicker than .03 millimeters and each allowed to dry before the application of the next layer. As the drying process for one such layer takes up to forty-eight hours, the length of time required for making a lacquer object can be considerable. It is said that early Ming lacquerwork generally has thirty-six layers; in Ming carved lacquers, however, a lacquer coating of up to two hundred layers is not uncommon.

Before lacquer sap can be used for coating, it is stirred: first at room temperature for about half an hour, then at a temperature increasing from 68 to 115 degrees Fahrenheit for two to four hours, until the water content has been reduced to only 2 to 4 percent. At this point the sap changes in color and viscosity, and the resultant liquid, known as raw lacquer, is ready for application. Sometimes the unprocessed sap is used for the base coat of the substrate and the raw lacquer for the top layers. For intermediate layers, especially in Chinese lacquer, a composition of lacquer and “ash” is often used as a foundation for the top coating. The “ash” is a powder which can be made of a variety of materials, such as sandstone, pottery, charcoal, animal horn, bone, and mollusk shell.

Lacquer sap, a treacly substance, is gray in color when first tapped from the tree, but on exposure to light and heat it turns dark brown—the color of raw lacquer—and ultimately a dull brownish black. The color can be altered by the addition of pigments while the lacquer is still liquid. The most commonly used pigments are cinnabar or vermilion for red, Chinese ink (carbon) or an iron compound for black, and orpiment for yellow. Not all mineral pigments mix well with lacquer, however; therefore oil-based paints are sometimes used for the surface decoration of lacquers, especially to introduce colors that cannot be achieved in the lacquer. This technique is known in China as mituosen (the old Chinese name for litharge, an oxide of lead which is added to oil paints as a drying agent) and in Japan as mitsuda-e. The technique is sometimes referred to as “litharge painting.”
Classes of Lacquer

A distinction can be made between two broad classes of lacquer objects. In one, the lacquer is applied purely for the purposes of protection and decoration and does not change the form of the decorated object beneath it; wooden chairs and leather armor decorated with lacquer are examples. An object in the second category is made mostly of lacquer, supported by a non-lacquer core or substrate. Typical of this class are lacquer boxes and containers, of which the core can be almost any material—perhaps hemp cloth, wood, or metal—encased in a lacquer coating so thick that it modifies the object’s form, giving it a plump, fleshy shape that can be decorated by carving in addition to the usual techniques of inlay and painting. In the first category, the strength of the object depends on its material and method of construction, and the lacquer serves to protect its surface. Objects in the second category are essentially fragile, because the thick layers of lacquer lack tensile strength and are liable to crack and flake off the core surface.

What are known as lacquer objects—that is, lacquer objects as works of art—are all those in the second category and also those in the first category for which lacquer plays a significant part in the surface decoration. Other types of objects are best referred to as lacquered: for instance, plain lacquered chopsticks, or oil pipes lined with lacquer.

An interesting borderline case is presented by Japanese Negoro lacquers. On these objects the lacquer surface is plain and relatively thin, and was originally applied for purely protective purposes; however, as the lacquer surface wears away, its appearance becomes as fascinating as some abstract painting. The aesthetic appeal of Negoro depends to a certain extent on the absence of lacquer.

There are thus three basic aspects to the aesthetics of lacquer. First is the sensual quality of the material itself, whether as a pristine polished surface or in a state of wear. Second is the pictorial decoration of lacquer, achieved by incising on the lacquer surface, painting in either lacquer or oil colors, or inlay of materials such as mollusk shells, precious stones, and metals. Third is the art of carving solid lacquer.

The Development of Lacquer Types

Lacquer as an art form developed in China along two distinct paths, pictorial (or surface) decoration and carving of the lacquer. Rarely are the two techniques used in combination. In early times, surface decoration took the form of painting or inlay. During the Han period, incised decoration was also used (fig. 1). After the tenth century the techniques of qiangjin (engraved gold), diaotian (filled-in), and diaoqi (carved lacquer) gradually evolved. Detailed descriptions of these techniques appear in the essay on Chinese lacquer that follows and in the catalogue entries. The art of inlaying lacquer with mother-of-pearl was intensively developed during the Song period. In the sixteenth century, after a lapse of about a thousand
### Chronology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHINA</th>
<th>JAPAN</th>
<th>KOREA</th>
<th>RYUKYU ISLANDS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Neolithic</td>
<td>Jōmon (Neolithic)</td>
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<td><strong>1600</strong></td>
<td>Shang</td>
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<td>Zhou</td>
<td>1000</td>
<td>Bronze Age</td>
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<tr>
<td>475</td>
<td>Warring States</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>Three Han States</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>221</td>
<td>Qin</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Yayoi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>206</td>
<td>Han</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>B.C.</strong></td>
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<td>57</td>
<td>Three Kingdoms</td>
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<td><strong>A.D.</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>220</td>
<td>Three Kingdoms</td>
<td>250</td>
<td>Kofun</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>207</td>
<td>Western &amp; Eastern Jin</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>420</td>
<td>Northern &amp; Southern Dynasties</td>
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<td>Early Heian</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>Unified Silla</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Five Dynasties</td>
<td>898</td>
<td>Late Heian</td>
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<td>Chūzan monarchy</td>
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years, the painting of lacquer was revived, but it was seldom if ever employed on carved lacquer.

When carved lacquer was invented is not known. Writers of the later Ming period believed it had originated in the time of the Tang Dynasty (618–906), and certain twentieth-century authors cite in support of this theory the lacquered armor from the eighth or ninth century collected by Aurel Stein at Fort Miran in Central Asia (and now in the British Museum). The fragments of lacquered hide armor are “decorated” with circular indentations revealing distinct layers of lacquer of different colors. Although this has been called the earliest known instance of true carved lacquer by the renowned lacquer scholar Sir Harry Garner, it is doubtful that the makers of the armor had decoration in mind. Moreover, the
lacquer coating is less than one millimeter in thickness, far thinner than the indisputably ornamental carved lacquer of the Song and Yuan periods. Carved lacquers of a thickness sufficient for relief carving were produced no later than the Southern Song period, as is known both from archaeological excavations and from materials that were brought to Japan at the end of the Song period. Although the time when carved lacquer emerged remains uncertain, it is evident that its greatest flourishing took place from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century. Carved lacquer is a uniquely Chinese achievement in lacquer art and is also, in a way, lacquer art in its purest form.

In Japan, on the other hand, the underlying shape of the object is never lost sight of, and in lacquer art surface decoration is paramount. The earliest lacquer surface decoration known in Japan, apart from simple designs painted on lacquered objects of the prehistoric period, is the gold and silver foil inlay of the Nara period (see p. 154). Almost certainly this technique was transmitted from Tang China, the source of the dominant cultural influence on Japan at the time. However, as so often happened with cultural transplants from China, once this technique of lacquer decoration had been introduced into Japan it took on a life of its own and in fact continued to develop there into recent times. (Meanwhile, the same technique all but died out in China after the demise of the Tang Dynasty in the tenth century.) During later periods other metals were also used for inlay in Japan, such as lead, tin, and pewter. A technique developed to the highest degree in Japan is the use of gold and silver in powder form, either mixed in to form gold or silver lacquer, or sprinkled over the lacquer surface to create a graduated gold or silver effect. Indeed, the Japanese lacquerer exploited every physical property of lacquer: as a liquid for painting; as a solid surface that can be built up in certain areas of the composition; and as an adhesive, especially for gold and silver (in either foil or powder form). The resultant works often display great subtlety and delicacy, and maki-e (gold or silver) lacquer is one of the supreme achievements of Japanese decorative art.

In Korea too it is known that lacquer surfaces were decorated with metal foil inlay more or less contemporaneously with the Tang Dynasty period in China, during Korea’s Unified Silla period (see p. 304). In the subsequent Koryŏ period, however, perhaps following the lead of southern China under the Song Dynasty, mother-of-pearl inlay became the dominant decorative technique for Korean lacquer, and it has continued as such to the present day. Although lacquers of the Koryŏ period exhibit some marked similarities to a certain class of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer produced in Song China, gradually Korean lacquer evolved a distinctive national style. The finest lacquerware of the late Koryŏ and early Chosŏn periods makes rich use of mother-of-pearl inlay, often in combination with tortoiseshell, and gives an impression of great sumptuousness.

Another area in East Asia with a long tradition of lacquer manufacture is the Ryukyu Islands. Now part of Japan, these islands maintained a high level of political independence throughout most of their history, even while owing a certain degree of allegiance to both China and Japan. In the period from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century, when international trade was very active in the China Sea, the Ryukyu Islands acquired from the
southeastern coastal regions of China many of the styles and techniques that have characterized their decorative arts. Almost every class of Chinese lacquerware produced during the Ming period has its counterpart in Ryukyuan products. Indeed, with certain types of lacquerware of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries it is often difficult to distinguish between products of the Ryukyu Islands and those of Fujian Province in China. The similarity is particularly strong for one class of presentation boxes and for other containers with basketry sides and painted decoration.

Lacquer as Luxury

Lacquerware with elaborate decoration requiring labor-intensive manufacturing processes made its first appearance in China during the Warring States period (fifth to third century B.C.), as far as it is possible to tell from the archaeological evidence we have now. It soon drew strong criticism from alarmed economists and social commentators, who disapproved of the attractive luxury item. While lacquer was of course not the only luxury article being produced, it was the one most often cited by writers of the late Warring States and Han periods for exemplifying glaringly excessive spending and the waste of human effort. Fine lacquer was also opposed on moral grounds by Confucian scholars and officials for its “wanton [display of] skill,” yiqiao, a worldly distraction that could “sway the mind” of the ruler. But this criticism had little effect on the eager imperial patronage of lacquer production during the Han Dynasty and in subsequent periods when the treasury could sustain the expenditure. Much of what has been preserved of old lacquer down the ages and collected today, especially in Japan, is to some degree related to imperial or aristocratic patronage in China, Korea, or Japan.

Not all the finest lacquerware was made in official workshops. During some periods there was sufficient affluence in certain parts of China to support the commercial production of fine lacquerware. This was the case in the southeastern provinces of China during the late Song and Yuan periods (13th–14th century) and in late Ming times (late 16th–early 17th century). Indeed, in times of economic prosperity it was the commercial workshops of southern China that provided the innovative ideas and techniques which made the history of later Chinese lacquerware so interesting. Nevertheless, the ancient admonition against lacquer somehow worked its way into the artistic conscience of Chinese craftsmen, and we find the same warning repeated by one of the most successful commercial lacquer makers of the sixteenth century, Huang Cheng, whose detailed account of lacquer manufacture is an invaluable resource for the study of lacquer today. Of course Huang Cheng did not need to be reminded that if his products had not had the power to “sway the minds” of his customers, he would not have enjoyed the wealth and leisure that allowed him to write his book. Yet one wonders whether a nagging qualm did not place an unconscious restraint on his work, prompting him to produce designs with more of what we would call “taste.”
A very beautiful example of early-fifteenth-century carved lacquer in the Palace Museum, Taipei, bears an inscription that was added by the Qianlong emperor in 1782 and that begins: “Lacquer [in itself] is cause for ten officials to protest; what if it is also carved?” Qianlong was one of the most prodigal spenders in Chinese history and certainly was not voicing either repentance or apology. Nevertheless he was aware of the traditional disapproval, whether or not he understood it, and he saw fit to combine an allusion to it with his evident enjoyment and approval of the lacquerer’s art.

Lacquer Gifts and Trade Goods

Being luxury objects, lacquers were often presented as gifts in diplomatic exchanges between the nations of East Asia from about the eighth century onward. Prominent Buddhist monks played an important part in maintaining these exchanges, especially those involving China during the Song period, when the enfeebled imperial court was not in a position to require acknowledgments of allegiance from neighboring countries. Lacquer was also offered to powerful court officials, usually on an unofficial basis, by seekers of personal advantage. There are records of Japanese gifts of mother-of-pearl and makié lacquer to the Chinese court and temples and to the Korean court during the late tenth and eleventh centuries.
a diplomatic mission to the Liao state in northeast China, the Korean official Mun Kong-in (d. 1137) privately gave mother-of-pearl articles and other luxury items to the reception officer of the Liao court. In Japan, records are preserved detailing gifts presented by the court of Ming China to the shogunate in the early fifteenth century; they included carved and qiangjin lacquer. These lacquers are important for study because usually they are of the highest quality attainable at the time. Some of them are still preserved, at least in Japan, in temples and in private collections and museums of the descendants of military lords. In China a handful of “tribute” lacquer from the Ryukyus is still in the collection of the Palace Museum in Peking, but these are late works, dating from the eighteenth century. One of them is of exactly the style and workmanship of number 169 in this catalogue.

These official gifts exchanged by the ruling houses and Buddhist temples accounted for a certain percentage of the movement of lacquerware among Asian countries. However, the amount was negligible compared with the quantity of lacquer exchanged as trade goods.

Both international trade among Asian countries and long-distance trade between the Arab world and the South China coast expanded rapidly in the tenth century and continued unabated until the sixteenth century, when the European sea powers entered the market and the trade pattern slowly changed. Presentations of “tribute” goods to the imperial court of China were made by foreign nations not so much out of the desire to acknowledge Chinese suzerainty as to secure imperial favor for trading on the open market. At the height of this trade almost every nationality was involved, and the goods carried by traders were not necessarily those produced in their home countries. Chinese ceramics were brought to the Persian Gulf by Arabs and were distributed by Malays from various entrepôts in Southeast Asia to smaller islands in (present-day) Indonesia. It is likely that lacquer was among the goods traded from the tenth century on, but the earliest mention made in Chinese literature of lacquer as an article of trade is in a work published about 1225 by Zhao Rugua entitled Zhufan zhi (Records of foreigners). However, very little early trade lacquer, if any, has survived.

It sometimes happened that exported goods eventually returned to their country of origin. During the reign of Yongle (1403–24), according to the Jiaying fu zhi (Gazetteer of Jiaying District), Japanese and Ryukyuan trade emissaries presented to the Chinese imperial court carved lacquers by Zhang Cheng and Yang Mao, both famous fourteenth-century lacquerers of China’s Jiaying District. It is said that only then did the Chinese emperor learn about the work of the finest commercial lacquer artists of the previous (Yuan) dynasty. The trade in lacquer was not confined to Asia. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston owns an Indian-type lacquer box of Gujarati origin inlaid with mother-of-pearl which was made for export to Mamluk Egypt (fig. 2). The decoration of this unusual object combines Mamluk designs with a type of floral scroll common to fifteenth-century mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer from China, Korea, and the Ryukyu Islands. Better known is the group of trade lacquer that was exported to Europe from Japan during the Momoyama period and is described by Haino Akio in his essay for this catalogue.
Information about this intense exchanging of works is of more than incidental interest to the historian of lacquer art; it is an important factor to consider when discussing the origins of particular styles and techniques of lacquer manufacture in different areas. Those studying the subject must also undertake a newly critical reading of the historical records of exchanges, since it cannot always be assumed that lacquerware was the product of the country from which it was sent.

The exhibition that this catalogue accompanies is drawn from the extensive collection of East Asian lacquer of Florence and Herbert Irving and includes examples of all the major traditions of lacquer work in East Asia from about the thirteenth century onward. It is hoped that the exhibition and the catalogue will serve to introduce to visitors and readers a remarkable art form which is common to all East Asian countries but is still relatively little known in the Western world.

JAMES C. Y. WATT

Notes

1. For a detailed account of the chemistry of lacquer see Kumanotani Ju, “The Chemistry of Oriental Lacquer,” in Urushi Study Group, 1988 (see General Bibliography). Other papers in the same symposium volume are concerned with various technical aspects of lacquer work in East Asia.


6. Some of these gifts are cited and discussed in Yoshino Tomio, “Kōrai no raden ki” (Mother-of-pearl lacquerware of Koryō), Bijutsu kenkyū, no. 175 (May 1954), pp. 1–13.


10. From the 1685 edition of the Jiaxing fu zhi, quoted in Suo Yu-ming, Chung-kuo chi’i kung-i (see n. 3), pp. 41–42.

11. The box was the subject of an unpublished paper delivered by Simon Digby at a symposium held in connection with the exhibition of Indian art at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, in 1982.
China
Lacquer of China

The Chinese have used lacquer continuously for more than six thousand years, since Neolithic times. There are two sides to this use, the industrial and the artistic, and they are not mutually exclusive. Lacquer’s practical value is as great today as it was in prehistoric days. The physical properties of lacquer make it an ideal material for insulation and protection, whether for rendering a pottery or wooden vessel impervious to liquids, insulating a musical instrument from changes in the surrounding atmosphere, or lining the pipes in contemporary chemical and petroleum plants, thus facilitating the flow and making frequent cleaning unnecessary. Indeed, the industrial uses of lacquer continue to increase in the modern age, although the areas of application change; one that has declined in recent years is as an adhesive for mechanical binding. It is precisely because of its ability to function as a binding agent, however, that lacquer first developed into an important material for decorative arts in China. When combined with pigments it became a medium for painting, and it could also be employed as an adhesive for appliqué and inlay work.

Early Beginnings

During the Bronze Age the use of lacquer for artistic purposes continued to be developed, and the art had reached the phase of its first maturity by the Shang period (ca. 1600–ca. 1100 B.C.), as was confirmed in 1973 by the discovery of lacquer fragments at the late Shang site of Taixi in Gaocheng County, Hebei Province. The fragments are elaborately decorated in black and red with patterns similar to those on contemporary bronzes and also have turquoise inlay. Lacquer vessels inlaid with mollusk shell have been found at the Western Zhou sites of Pengjiagou in Luoyang and Fangshan in Peking.

The next stage was reached during the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.). By that time the lacquer tree was being cultivated in many areas and had become one of China’s most economically important crops. Lacquer tree plantations were a source of wealth for both feudal lords and landowners, a fact amply reflected in the literature of the period. In most parts of the country lacquer was used for practical purposes, such as construction and the waterproofing of armor. Advances that took place in the artistic use of lacquer were made in the south, in the state of Chu in central south China and in the states of Ba and Shu, both in present-day Sichuan Province. Ba and Shu were incorporated into the state of Qin in the late fourth century B.C.; the type of lacquer produced there subsequently was officially Qin, but in spirit it was Ba-Shu.
Because Chu culture exerted a great influence on that of all neighboring states during the Warring States period, lacquerwares from the Chu and Ba-Shu areas shared certain common forms and decorative motifs. They differed, however, in the types of wares produced, styles of decoration, and treatment of the common motifs. These differences became more pronounced after the annexation of the Ba and Shu states by the powerful state of Qin, whose home base was in northwest China. During the past twenty years there have been significant finds of lacquer artifacts at Warring States sites in central and southern China which have enabled archaeologists to describe and discuss the differences between the Chu and Ba-Shu “schools” of lacquer manufacture.

Broadly speaking, Ba-Shu lacquerware includes the greater number of vessels and other objects of daily use, some of them in the shapes of animals and birds, while the Chu state produced fewer vessel varieties but more lacquerware of other types, such as decorated musical instruments and sculptural pieces in the form of drum stands, tomb guardian figures, and openwork screens. Ba-Shu artists used the motifs of animals, birds, and fish, as well as geometric patterns derived from other art forms, such as bronzes. They also borrowed the characteristically Chu motif of the dragon-cloud. These elements, whether regular in shape or not, are arranged in an orderly manner. By the end of the Warring States period these motifs had become abbreviated into a system of semi-abstract patterns (fig. 3). The decoration of Chu lacquer, on the other hand, is more fluid and complex, employing a vast repertory of fantastic animal, bird, and anthropoid forms which at some times seem interrelated in order to express a mystical idea or vision, at other times to serve a narrative purpose—as with the lacquer paintings on zither fragments from the Chu tomb at Xinyang (fig. 4). The theme of this series of paintings appears to be a magical hunt; the execution is based on realistic depictions of actual hunts and of an archery contest, seen on pictorial bronzes of the Warring States period such as a cup with a ring handle in the Shanghai Museum. Another type of Chu decoration is apparently the realistic representation of activities at the courts of feudal lords, featuring scenes of formal processions and court entertainment. Non-figural aspects of Chu decoration seem to have evolved from images of dragons and phoenixes arranged in surrealistic patterns. This approach to pictorial composition is also evident in contemporary silk embroidery (fig. 5). There is no doubt that the exciting recent finds of Chu lacquer represent the beginning of a tradition of pictorial art that was to last until the Six Dynasties period.

Opposite


Bottom right: 5. Silk embroidery pattern. China, Chu State, 4th–3rd century B.C. From Jingzhou Museum, Chu Tomb no. 1 at Maoshan, Jiangling (Peking, 1985), fig. 59
Important as the painted lacquer of Chu was in the early history of Chinese painting, as a lacquer industry it gradually became a local enterprise during the Han period. At the same time the Ba-Shu tradition took over the central position in the production of fine lacquer.

Han Period

The incorporation of Ba-Shu into the Qin realm toward the end of the Warring States period may have had important consequences for the subsequent development of the lacquer industry in China. The highly organized Qin state (which eventually built the first Chinese empire) excelled in bureaucratic administration; although there is no explicit record on this score, it is likely that the organization of Ba-Shu workshops was put on a solid footing during the first century of Qin rule. Moreover, this region of China, owing to both its early induction into the Qin sphere and its relative isolation from the rest of China, was spared the devastation of the wars and upheavals accompanying the final campaigns for the unification of China and the civil strife that followed the breakdown (in 207 B.C.) of the short-lived empire. Thus at the beginning of the Han period Ba-Shu became the most productive center of lacquer manufacturing. Its products were apparently exported to every part of the country, including areas once part of the heartland of the Chu state, as is demonstrated by lacquer finds from the tombs of the house of the Marquis of Dai at Mawangdui in Changsha, Hunan Province, dating from the reign of Emperor Wen (ca. 179–157 B.C.). Marks on some of these lacquer objects, which are numerous and spectacular, indicate that they were made in workshops in Chengdu, the capital of the commandery of Shu.

In about 140 B.C., toward the end of the reign of Emperor Jing or the beginning of the reign of Emperor Wu, the workshops in Sichuan, previously managed by the city administrations, came under the direct control of the central government.8 This is the first of a number of instances throughout Chinese history in which the imperial administration took over a flourishing artistic industry, as a result raising the quality of the workmanship and arresting the artistic development of the product. However, it was the sheer quantity of labor expended in order to carry out every stage of manufacture with meticulous care—and the concomitant rise in production costs—that drew fierce criticism from conservative officials at Emperor Wu’s court. Sichuan was also the center of production for gold and silver articles, so it is not surprising that lacquers from the official workshops were often embellished with inlays and rims of gold, silver, or gilt bronze, adding to the sumptuousness of the objects. Some of these objects, mostly vessels for food or wine and containers for toiletries and clothing, have survived in burials and have been excavated in the present century.9 Often, particularly in the case of drinking cups, they are inscribed with the names of all the craftsmen responsible for every stage of their production (as many as eight) and of the administrative staff of the workshop (fig. 6).10

With the fall of the Han empire early in the third century A.D., the official production of fine lacquer presumably ceased, and the first great period of lacquer art was brought to a

close. In the History of the Kingdom of Shu (221–63), mention is made of the importance of silk production as a source of revenue, but not of lacquer. Nor is lacquerware listed among the treasures and objects for the ostentatious display of wealth by the famously rich during the time of the Six Dynasties (220–589). This decline in the status (as opposed to the general use) of lacquer can be attributed, at least in part, to the influx of exotic goods from abroad, which reached north China by overland route and the southeast coastal areas by sea. Gold and silver objects and articles made of imported materials such as ivory, coral, glass, and precious stones seem to have taken over as requisite symbols of luxurious living.
Tang Period

The preference for precious metals and exotic imported materials continued through the Tang period. Although there were official workshops for the making of lacquerware, they were not required to produce high quality work. The training period for lacquer workers in these official workshops, along with that for craftsmen in related areas such as armor, bamboo, and “willow bending” (see below), was only one year. Makers of fine works of art, in contrast, were required to train for up to four years. The training period for musical instrument makers, for example, was three years.  

However, there was one class of luxury article in Tang China that had to do with lacquer; it was ware decorated in the technique known as pingtuo, in which cutouts from

7. Mirror back. Bronze with pingtuo decoration, h. 6½ in. China, Tang Dynasty, 7th–9th century. Courtesy of the Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., acc. no. 44.8
thin sheets of gold and silver were inlaid in a smooth lacquer surface. The attractiveness of this decorative technique lies in the glitter of metal against the black background and in the elegant shapes of birds and other motifs which are articulated in great detail by means of finely chased lines. This technique was most frequently applied to the backs of bronze mirrors, which were among the gift items presented by the Emperor Xuanzong (r. 712–55) to his favorites (fig. 7). Other precious and semiprecious materials were also inlaid in lacquer, including mother-of-pearl. In all these articles, however, lacquer only serves as the ground and as an adhesive for the inlay; it plays a subsidiary role in the artistry of the object. The production of pingtuo and “precious inlay” works was stopped by order of the Emperor Suzong (r. 756–62), at least in the official workshops, after the country was devastated during the An Lushan rebellion in the middle of the eighth century.\(^{13}\)

The comparatively low status of lacquerware during the Tang period is further evidenced by the absence of lacquer articles from the treasures recently found in the crypt of the pagoda at the Famen Temple in Fufeng County, about sixty miles to the west of the Tang capital, Chang’an (present-day Xi’an).\(^{14}\) Famen Temple was one of the temples favored by Tang imperial patronage. Its pagoda crypt was closed in the year 874 and was not reopened until 1987, when the pagoda was restored. Among the treasures that had been offered to the temple and housed under the pagoda were many items of gold and silver, imported glass articles, elaborately woven and embroidered silks, and a class of fine celadon porcelain hitherto known only from the literature of the period and presumably not seen since the tenth century. But there was no lacquer, except for two porcelain bowls with pingtuo decoration.

Apart from pingtuo work, practically all extant Tang lacquer is plain and black. The forms of Tang lacquerware, as of ceramics, are borrowed from gold and silver objects and from glass vessels, as is illustrated by a group of late Tang to early Song lacquer bowls and boxes found in Jianli County of Hubei Province in 1978. These pieces are in an excellent state of preservation and after excavation and subsequent drying are seen to have retained their shapes remarkably well.\(^{15}\) Archaeologists attribute the durability of these objects to the construction of their substrate. A core, made by coiling thin strips of fir wood (about 2 mm in width), was covered with hemp cloth soaked with a lacquer mixture, after which the piece was primed and finished with surface coatings of lacquer. A pingtuo ewer of the Tang period preserved in the Shōsō-in in Nara, Japan, has a substrate of similar manufacture.\(^{16}\) Thus it can be said that although lacquerwares were not highly valued during the Tang period, they were certainly well made. And if records are anything to go by, very large quantities of plain lacquer were made at the Tang court.\(^{17}\)

The method used in the Tang period for constructing the substrate for lacquer is well illustrated by an early lacquer bowl in the Irving Collection (fig. 8). It is most likely a Tang piece, but an early Song date cannot be ruled out, since both the shape of the bowl and the type of substrate continued into the eleventh century.

It should be mentioned that in Korea during the Unified Silla period (668–935), lacquer substrates were also made from strips of wood; these were woven into the shape of the
vessel, not merely coiled. Both willow and fir were used for this purpose, as in China, and in both the Tang and Silla administrations this work was carried out in the willow (or willow-bending) department.

It is interesting that Jianli, the site of the Tang finds, is located in what was the heartland of the ancient Chu state, adjacent to Jiangling County where the Chu capital was situated and where there is the greatest concentration of Chu burials, which have yielded to archaeologists a large number of lacquer finds. According to the History of the Tang (Xin Tangshu), the district of Xiangzhou just to the north was the manufacturing center for “tribute lacquer”; thus it may be assumed that the standard of production was considered adequate for imperial needs.

Song Period

The Song Dynasty was established in 960 after another period of division of China into smaller states. It occupied only the central and southern provinces of Tang China; northern China was ruled by non-Han ethnic groups, with the Khitan (the Liao state) occupying most of Mongolia and Manchuria as far south as Peking, and the Tanguts (the Xixia state) in the northwest. Thus the Song empire was cut off from Central Asia, and later in the twelfth
century it was to contract further. In other words, Song China was comprised of those provinces that had grown and used lacquer since at least the Bronze Age. From the very beginning the Song government pursued a policy of reviving traditional Chinese culture. The stage was well set for the second great period of lacquer art in the history of Chinese material culture. It lasted from the late Song period to the end of the Ming period, that is, from about the twelfth to the seventeenth century, with a high point in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The Irving Collection encompasses nearly every type of lacquer produced in this period and beyond, down to the Qing period.

The revitalization of the artistic lacquer industry during the Song period was a gradual process. Early Song lacquerware, judging from numerous recent archaeological finds, developed directly out of Tang production. Like that of the late Tang period, early Song lacquerware for daily use was mainly monochrome and took its shapes from contemporary gold and silver ware. However, the places of manufacture indicated by inscriptions on excavated pieces were far more numerous than in the Tang period, with Hangzhou and Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province also becoming important centers of production.\(^{20}\) Lacquer finds from a mid-Northern Song period burial (eleventh century) have cores constructed of the same coiled wood strips as Tang lacquer.\(^{21}\) In the Song period, however, there was an increasing tendency to decorate monochrome wares, as can be seen with the scallop-rimmed dish that is entry number 1. Originally it had a gilded floral pattern in the center and a scroll design on the rim; the gold has since worn off.

Luxury items of the early Song period, again following Tang tradition, were inlaid with gold, silver, mother-of-pearl, and semiprecious stones. A good example is the sutra box found in the crypt of the Rui'an pagoda in Suzhou, which actually predates the official founding of the Song Dynasty in 960 but already shows a distinct change in style from Tang inlay work.\(^{22}\) While post-Tang work retains a certain degree of exuberance in the use of precious materials, it has lost some of the exoticism of Tang decoration. From this point we lose track of the development of lacquer inlay decoration in China until near the end of the Song period in the thirteenth century, since there have been no archaeological finds of Song mother-of-pearl lacquer and no extant example can be attributed to the period on technical or stylistic grounds. Nevertheless, it is very clear that during the Song period mother-of-pearl became the material most commonly inlaid in lacquer and that, furthermore, a gradual refinement in the technique of mother-of-pearl inlay allowed the best work in this category in the beginning of the twelfth century to be characterized as “approaching the very limits of fineness and ingenuity.” This (loosely translated) is how several mother-of-pearl containers are described in a tale told by the polymath Hong Mai (1123–1202).\(^{23}\)

For the fact that mother-of-pearl lacquer was in common use in Hangzhou throughout the Southern Song period there is ample testimony, recorded both in eyewitness accounts and in historical documents.\(^{24}\) It seems that in addition to boxes and containers, mother-of-pearl furniture was made at this time in considerable quantity for use in well-to-do households. This is corroborated by one of the very few large paintings surviving from the Southern
Song period, a picture of children at play made by the court painter Su Hanchen in the early twelfth century (fig. 9). A lacquer garden stool is depicted in this painting in such detail that we can read not only the style but even the technique of the mother-of-pearl inlay. On the basis of this painting (the connoisseurship of Chinese painting in its present state offers no reason to doubt its authenticity), several conclusions can be drawn: first, the style of mother-of-pearl lacquer inlay known from fourteenth-century examples was already well established in the early twelfth century; and second, as its red and green coloration indicates, the inlaid material was the inner layer of the haliotis shell, as opposed to the thicker shells (often *turbo cornatus* or *turbo marmoratus*) that had been employed up to the early Song period. The earliest archaeological find that confirms the use of haliotis for inlay comes from a burial in Datong, Shanxi Province, dated to 1262. It is a circular box decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay in floral patterns and must have been either a product of north China in the final years of the Jin Dynasty (1115–1234) or an import from Southern Song China.25

The genesis, sometime in the Song period, of this new style of mother-of-pearl inlay is, at present, obscure. This is a problem both intriguing and vexing, whose solution is hampered by the absence of concrete archaeological data and complicated by the possibility of mutual influences between China, Korea, and Japan. Even the literature of this period serves to confuse rather than elucidate. For example, in the *Song shi* or *History of the Song* it is recorded that in 988 the Japanese monk Chônen (Chinese: Diaoran) sent as gifts to the Chinese court a group of lacquerwares that included a mother-of-pearl inlaid, flower-shaped box.26 This describes a type of Koryô lacquer (classified as type B by Okada Jô; see the essay on Korean lacquer in this volume) better than it does any known Japanese lacquer of the period, although the date is much earlier than that assigned to extant Koryô lacquer. Or another example: Xu Jing, a member of a Chinese diplomatic delegation to Korea in 1124, recorded with admiration the mother-of-pearl lacquer he saw in Korea.27 Based on this mention alone, a number of scholars have proposed that mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer was a Korean invention that was introduced into China after Xu Jing’s time, which, as we have seen, both literary and artistic evidence indicates is not the case. It is true, however, that a strong stylistic and technical similarity exists between one type of Koryô lacquer and Chinese Yuan lacquer (also discussed in the Korean lacquer essay). However, in view of the uncertainty of the dating of Koryô lacquer and the lack of information about pre-Yuan mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer in China, questions of possible mutual influence remain to be answered.

When we reach the fourteenth century there is no lack of examples of Chinese mother-of-pearl lacquer, most of them in Japanese collections.28 The tradition established in the fourteenth century remained strong throughout the Ming period, and because of this conservative tendency, dating Ming mother-of-pearl lacquer is almost as difficult as sorting out the early development of this type of decoration in Korea, China, and Japan. Moreover, by the fourteenth century the Ryukyuan factor comes into play (see the essay on lacquer of the Ryukyus), further complicating the matter. In the Irving Collection there are two Chinese pieces that
can lay claim to a late-fourteenth-century date, one on the basis of its unusual shape and the floral patterns on its borders (no. 54), one because of its pictorial decoration (no. 55).

Other technical innovations of the Southern Song period are less open to speculation, because they are not shared by other countries (until much later periods) and because the archaeological record, though sparse, provides a clear picture. There are three new techniques worthy of note: “engraved gold” (qiangejin), “filled-in lacquer” (called cuanxi and xipi in the Song period, tianqi and diaotian later on), and carved lacquer (diaojin). The technical literature on these methods is often unnecessarily complicated and confusing, focusing on semantics and the derivations of the technical terms rather than providing a general explanation of the process. In this catalogue Chinese terms will generally not be used unless they are of a general nature and can easily be defined, and an attempt will be made to point out common elements among techniques that are known by different names. The three techniques mentioned above all depend on the use of a cutting instrument on the lacquer
surface (which can include a lacquer paste or putty mixture over which the final coatings of fine lacquer are applied). The engraved gold technique involves incising thin lines on the lacquer surface and subsequently placing gold foil or powdered gold in the grooves. In filled-in lacquer, cavities made in the lacquer surface by drilling or cutting are then filled in with lacquer of another color (see p. 34 for a description of another type of “filled-in” lacquer made in the Ming period). In carved lacquer a design in relief is carved into the lacquer.

With the invention of these techniques in the Song period, lacquerwork in China entered a new stage—in which lacquer was used as a solid material to be worked like ivory or rhinoceros horn. (See the carved ivory box in the Irving Collection, fig. 10.) A striking example of this new approach is the box (no. 16) on which dragons and clouds are treated exactly as they are on jade carvings of the same period. When these techniques are referred to as innovations it is not meant to suggest that they were not employed in more primitive versions in earlier times or that the ability to utilize them did not previously exist; rather, that Song lacquerers developed them to such an extent that a new form of lacquer art was created.

It is in carved lacquer that we find the greatest variations in technique, which give rise to different artistic effects. For example, lacquer layers of varying colors (each the result of
repeated applications) can be built up into a coating of considerable thickness; then, when a
groove is cut into the lacquer, a series of colored bands are revealed, enhancing the decorative
effect of the carved design. This type of carved “marbled” lacquer is called *tixi* (pronounced
tee-hsee), and the design employed is usually based on the “pomme scroll” motif, a trefoil
pattern which may be seen on the box number 6. Its name comes from the shape of the
ring-pommel of early Chinese swords (fig. 11). The Japanese name for the pommel scroll
pattern is *guri*, a term that is now commonly used in Western writing on Chinese lacquer
as a synonym for *tixi* lacquer as well as to describe any kind of carved lacquer with the
pommel scroll pattern.

In another type of carved lacquer, “carved colors” (*ticai*), which is also made by carving
into a thick layer of lacquer consisting of strata of different colors, the depth of the carving
is varied so that separate parts of the design appear in contrasting colors. This technique
was mainly employed in the Ming period, however, especially in the sixteenth century (see
no. 33).

Although there are several archaeological finds of *tixi* lacquer from Southern Song sites,
so far there have been no finds of carved monochrome lacquer of the Song period. However,
a number of carved monochrome lacquer pieces preserved in Japanese temples and private
collections have good claims to a thirteenth-century date. Of particular importance is a
group of such pieces in the Engaku-ji temple in Kamakura. They are reputed to have been
brought to Japan by the founder of the temple, Mugaku Sogen (his Chinese Buddhist name
is Wuxue Zuyuan) in 1279, the year of the Song Dynasty’s demise. Extensive studies con-
ducted by scholars of lacquer in recent years have left little doubt that these are indeed
products of the late Song period. Other carved lacquer pieces in various Japanese collections
have also been dated to the thirteenth century by comparing their form, construction, pictorial
style, and carving technique with those of the Engaku-ji pieces.

The criteria established for identifying late-Song carved lacquer enables us to recognize
three items in the Irving Collection that belong to this rare early group, numbers 4, 16, and
17. The technical and art-historical reasons for their attribution are discussed in the entries;
here it suffices to mention certain characteristics shared by all pieces in the group. First is the
very high quality of the top lacquer layer (amounting to perhaps the twenty uppermost

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weapone) (Peking, 1957), pl. 56
coatings), which is always lustrous and translucent under strong light. Second is the relatively large area of ground exposed. The ground seems to be composed of a fine, puttylike lacquer mixture, sometimes “tempered” with some coarsely ground material which is highly reflective, like specks of mica. In color the ground is either a dull yellow (orpiment) or a bright red (cinnabar), and, although now covered with the dust accumulated over centuries, it plays an integral part in the overall color scheme and pictorial composition. Embedded within the layer of carved black lacquer, just under the lustrous, translucent top stratum mentioned above, is a stratum of perhaps several coatings of red lacquer, also lustrous and translucent. This thin red layer relieves the solid blackness of the lacquer and enhances the definition of the carving, but whether it is there for these reasons is not known.

Yuan Period

The late-Song style described above, which began sometime in the early thirteenth century, did not stop with the end of the Song Dynasty in 1279 but probably continued, with some modifications, to the end of the thirteenth century or into the first decades of the fourteenth. What we might call the Yuan style in Chinese art seems in fact to have begun in about 1320, nearly halfway through the Yuan Dynasty. This is certainly true of the better-studied branches of Chinese art, such as paintings and ceramics. Similarly, the Yuan style generally persisted to the end of the fourteenth century, and it was not until the reign of Yongle (1403–25) that a distinct Ming style began to emerge.

The fourteenth century was the high point in the development of Chinese carved lacquer, at least in terms of technical virtuosity; whether the products of this period are regarded as artistically superior to late-Song carved lacquer is entirely a matter of personal taste. Two pieces in the Irving Collection, one in red (no. 19) and the other in black (no. 20), typify the fourteenth-century style. The first carries the signature of Zhang Cheng, one of the most famous lacquer artists of the late Yuan period, and may well be one of the very few surviving works by the master. In their decorative motifs these fourteenth-century dishes continue the traditions of the late Song period, and the motifs of paired birds among flowers (see no. 18) found particular favor with fourteenth-century lacquer artists. Technically and stylistically there were important changes, however, most noticeably a greater complexity of design and an increased plasticity to the relief carving. The latter is particularly evident in the treatment of the flower petals and leaves, which curl naturalistically and fold over at the edges. In the thirteenth-century style the birds and plants do not overlap in pictorial space, whereas the fourteenth-century carver, using only a slightly thicker layer of lacquer, created relief sculptures of exuberant and complex design that cover the surface of the article, leaving no ground exposed. This is a supreme moment in the history of lacquer art in China, when great artistry was matched by technical virtuosity. Looking at these pieces one thinks of the passage in Wang Zuo’s enlarged edition of the Gégù yáolùn (1462): “In the Yuan period the rich houses commissioned lacquerware without imposing a time limit.”

Although
the remark was made in reference to mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer, there is every reason to believe that it applied to carved lacquer as well.

Another type of Yuan carved lacquer that had its origins in the late Song period features figures in a landscape or architectural setting. The pictorial designs came from genre paintings of the Song period, but certain conventionalized elements were added when the scenes appeared on carved lacquer. A variety of diaper patterns, mainly derived from designs of brocaded textiles, were used to represent the ground (the earth or a tiled floor) and the air. This convention would remain with carved lacquer depictions of landscape and architectural scenes throughout all subsequent periods. A magnificent example of this type of Yuan lacquer is a large lobed dish with a scene of children at play in a garden (no. 23). As with the Yuan “two-bird” dishes discussed above, the sculptural quality of the carving is striking.

Of the different types of carved lacquer of the Yuan period, that which has survived in the greatest number is tixi, mentioned above. Tixi lacquer can be predominantly either red or black, with only one or two thin layers of the other color included somewhere in the carved lacquer, or it can be composed of two or three alternating colors of equal thickness. The third color is usually yellow (as in no. 9). Occasionally there is a fourth color, green (see no. 14). That a large number of pieces of this type are extant is reflected in the Irving Collection, where by type they are the major group and also constitute the largest group among the pieces selected for inclusion in this exhibition and catalogue. Whether the relative abundance of this lacquerware is due to its production in large numbers at the time or simply to its having survived better than other types is unclear. It is also quite possible that we have not been able precisely to distinguish Song from Yuan works and either of those from later copies. Most of the tixi pieces included here have some claim to a fourteenth-century date, but in one or two cases a wider margin than that has been allowed in the dates assigned in the catalogue entries. They have been sequenced in their probable chronological order.

The great advances that took place in Chinese lacquer art during the Southern Song and Yuan periods were the consequence of free enterprise rather than government sponsorship. The Southern Song government encouraged overseas trade as a means of support for the great concentration of population along the southeast coast of China and also as a way to increase state revenue through the collection of tariffs. Under Mongol rule during the Yuan period there was much discrimination against the southern Chinese in the world of officialdom, but for traders and manufacturers (except those who worked as conscripts in state-run workshops), the opportunity for engaging in private enterprise was probably as good as it had ever been. After the upheavals that affected so many parts of the world in the period of Mongol expansion, the early fourteenth century was a relatively peaceful time in East Asia. International sea trade between southeast China and maritime countries from Southeast Asia to the Middle East reached a peak in the fourteenth century before the first Ming emperor, for fear of disrupting the old social order, sought to bring the freewheeling activity under control.\textsuperscript{32} Overwhelming evidence of this intense trade activity is provided by the
massive finds of Song and Yuan ceramics on the islands of Southeast Asia, although this evidence has not yet been incorporated into academic writing on Chinese history. Lacquer was part of this trade but, as with other trade goods which are less durable than ceramics, there are no archaeological remains. Although the lacquer export wares might not have been of the quality that we associate with Yuan lacquer today, the sheer volume of trade must have greatly strengthened the industry as a whole. The general prosperity engendered by the growth of trade and industry in this period in turn provided the economic basis for the patronage of luxury goods, including fine lacquerware such as that included in this catalogue. It was also at this time that writers on the connoisseurship of works of art began to treat lacquer as a subject deserving study and comment, along with other arts such as jade and bronzes.

*Ming Period*

That the late-Yuan style persisted to the end of the fourteenth century, as mentioned earlier, does not mean that under the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368–99) there was little or no change. The changes, however, were more in the nature of increased conformity to certain established patterns than of new departures in style and technique. Thus, the pattern of paired birds on a floral background, a feature of carved lacquer since late Song times, continued to appear on carved lacquer to the end of the fourteenth century, but the two-bird dishes of Yuan and early-Ming date gradually became standardized in style, decoration, and size (see entry for no. 20). Additionally, there is every reason to believe that tixi lacquer also continued to be popular until the late fourteenth century (see nos. 11–13).

The most important document for the study of lacquerware of the first twenty-five years of the Ming period is a list of lacquer items that were gifts from the Chinese court to the Japanese shogunate late in the first year of the reign of Yongle (1403). Prominent among these gifts are two-bird dishes of the type represented by number 21. The back of each dish is decorated in one of several ways: with the same flowers that accompany the birds on the front (peonies in the case of no. 21); or with “flowers of the four seasons” (no. 24); or with the “fragrant grass” scroll (no. 20). The fragrant grass scroll is a survival from the Yuan period, while the flowers of the four seasons motif is an instance of the formalization or standardization of earlier floral borders. In carved lacquer this motif is actually an excellent indicator of a date between the end of the fourteenth century and perhaps the end of the second decade of the fifteenth.

Lists exist of Chinese diplomatic gifts to Japan between 1403 and 1434, which are useful in other respects as well, providing information about the types of lacquer produced for or used by the Ming court. The gifts consisted mainly of carved red lacquerware, with some red qiangjin (engraved gold) and a very few objects of black lacquer. From this it can be deduced that carved red lacquer was the favored type of lacquer for court use from the very beginning of the Ming period up to the reign of Xuande (1425–35). The deduction is
easily confirmed by the collections of early-Ming lacquer in the Palace Museum, both in Peking and Taipei. Of early-Ming qiangjin little or nothing has survived either in the palace or in Japan, because qiangjin lacquer of the early Ming period consisted mainly of larger pieces made for utilitarian purposes, such as small chests and furniture. There is no doubt that the pair of sutra covers in the Irving Collection, number 49, represents this "lost" type of qiangjin lacquer of the Yongle period; they are hence of the utmost importance and fill a gap in our knowledge of early-Ming lacquer. The covers are exactly the kind of article that would have been decorated in qiangjin lacquer during this period.

The first sign of a change in style as a result of direct government control over production is provided by objects like the cup stand number 28, which exhibits all the characteristics of official ware of the early fifteenth century (see the entry for this piece). These works display a striking uniformity in both workmanship and decorative design. The cup stand has the reign mark of Yongle incised with a sharp point inside the foot-ring. Other pieces with similar marks are known. Some, like the cup stand, were most likely products of the Yongle reign, but others having the same mark are in an earlier, late-fourteenth-century style, like that of number 24 (although this particular piece is not marked). The possibility is thus raised that the Yongle mark was put on earlier products. Adding to the confusion are quite a few pieces of early Ming carved lacquer on which a bold Xuande mark in regular script is engraved and gilded over the thinly incised Yongle mark (which was not always erased beforehand). They constitute the only known instance of the mark of an earlier period being altered to that of a later one. Writers such as the authors of the Dijig jingwu lue (a description of buildings, scenery, and activity in and around Peking in the late Ming period) offered the explanation that in the Xuande period official workshops were not able to provide lacquerware of the quality and to the specifications laid down in the Yongle reign. To avoid punishment the craftsmen secretly bought Yongle pieces from the palace eunuchs and changed the marks to Xuande. This seems a plausible explanation, especially since the lacquers described in the Dijig jingwu lue were supposed to be those sold in the flea market of Peking at the City God's temple, where questions were not asked about the provenance of the objects.35 There still are such pieces with altered marks in the Palace Museum today.36 Another possible explanation for the confusion of reign marks is that because carved lacquer took so long to make, it was not possible to meet commissions from the palace during the early years of a reign. There are, of course, pieces bearing the standard mark of Xuande of which the authenticity is not in doubt.

One distinct trend in official ware of the early fifteenth century is the increased use of symbols of imperial status, such as dragons and phoenixes. Gradually all other motifs became subordinate to the dominant dragon, and so remained for the duration of the Ming period. One need only look at the catalogues of lacquer in the Palace Museum(s) or the sixteenth-century official wares in this catalogue (nos. 32–39 and 50–53) to observe the result of the overpowering constraint imposed on craftsmen in the official workshops. In the face of so much insistent effort to reassure the emperor of his imperial status one is grateful
for a little exercise of the imagination, as when, in number 52, a pine tree is transformed into a dragon.

After the reign of Xuande, the Ming court was thrown into a series of crises which culminated in 1449 in the capture of the Emperor Yingzong during the battle of Tumu, northwest of Peking, as the emperor and his eunuch adviser Wang Zhen were marching to meet the invading Oirat Mongols. Peking itself was threatened at one stage, but the Mongols retreated when reinforcements from the outer provinces were mobilized. Yingzong was released in 1450 after his younger brother was proclaimed emperor and a heavy ransom paid. Not surprisingly, production in the official workshops was disrupted during such unsettled times. The difficulties of studying porcelain of the Interregnum period (1436–65) are familiar to students of ceramics. With lacquer the apparent gap in the production of official wares was much longer, extending from about 1436 to the beginning of Jiajing’s reign in the year 1522. However, carved lacquer certainly was produced in this period, although not marked with a reign date and distinctly different in style from the official wares of the early fifteenth century. The biggest concentration of this type of mid-Ming lacquer, to which number 31 in this catalogue belongs, is in the Palace Museum in Peking.

Before discussing the mid-Ming groups it may be useful to recapitulate the characteristics of carved lacquerware made to this point. The salient feature of early carved lacquer into the fourteenth century was the sculptural treatment of discrete elements which, be they birds, trees, figures, or houses, are raised on a flat ground. This approach was adhered to for landscape scenes through the fourteenth century, except that in the late pieces the ground is patterned. With flower and bird or floral patterns, even when the flower leaves and branches began to overlap, exposing little or no ground, the spatial relationships of separate elements and the physical structure of the plants were rendered with skill and clarity. There are no sharp edges in the relief sculpture. This style of carving, which one associates with the Jiangnan area or more specifically with the district of Xitang in Jiaxing where the famous masters Yang Mao and Zhang Cheng practiced their craft, was continued in the official wares of the early Ming.

With the mid-Ming group represented by number 31, however, there is no ground, and the carving is sharp and all on the same plane or at least in the same layer. These works seem to answer to the description given by late-Ming authors discussing the workmanship of Yunnan Province: “The lacquer is not hard, the knife does not hide its sharpness [i.e., the cutting marks are visible], and the corners are not polished smooth.” Wang Zuo, writing in the mid-fifteenth century, also notes that some Yunnan wares are dark in color, which is the case with number 31 and most other examples of this type. However, as is explained in the entry for that piece, the questions posed by Yunnan lacquer are far from settled.

This mid-Ming group can probably be traced to antecedents in pieces like number 22 and is not unrelated to some finer wares of the early fifteenth century, such as the “three friends” box in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (fig. 12). The difference is that on both the dishes of number 22 and the Philadelphia box, the plants are carved at two or three different levels depending on whether two or three plants are represented, while in the mid-Ming
group all the components are compressed into the same level. Comparison with the Philadelphia box is particularly interesting because the subject of the carving, the “three friends” —pine, bamboo, and blossoming plum—is also the most common motif in this mid-Ming group and is found on number 31. Indeed, some Chinese scholars, in order to avoid use of the term “Yunnan lacquer,” have started referring to this group as the “three friends” type. The interrelationship between the “Yunnan” and Xitang traditions is yet another problem to be solved.

On the dating of the “three friends” group there is little doubt. Apart from this theme, the examples in the Palace Museum in Peking feature motifs like the winged dragon and what Western scholars have called the “foliated dragon” (a Sinicized version of the Indian makara, a mythical sea monster), which are common motifs in Chinese decorative arts of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. The motifs are not seen on any other kind of lacquer in any other period. Lacquers of this group seem to have disappeared after the mid-Ming period. It appears that they were made only in the time after official wares stopped
being manufactured in the early Ming period and before their revival in the Jiajing and Wanli eras in the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{41}

Official wares of the Jiajing and Wanli reigns consist of two main types, carved polychrome lacquer (no. 33) and “filled-in” lacquer (nos. 50–53). The former is easy to explain. It is just a variation of carved lacquer in general, and its popularity is undoubtedly due to the fashion for colorful decoration during this time.\textsuperscript{42} Its one technical feature worthy of note is the fact that the gouge was the main instrument used in carving, as opposed to the single-edged knife of earlier periods. This must be interpreted as a labor-saving measure.

“Filled-in” lacquer (\textit{tianqi}) is much more difficult to describe. According to the \textit{Xiuushi lu}, a manual for lacquer manufacture written in the early seventeenth century, there are two kinds of filled-in lacquer. The first is known as \textit{loukan} (carve and inlay), in which certain areas are cut out of the otherwise finished lacquer surface and lacquer lumps of different colors are set into the cavities. There are two varieties of this method, wet-color inlay and dry-color inlay. In the former, colored lacquer is laid into the excavated areas, while in the latter, the cavities are filled with clear lacquer and powdered pigment is applied on top. The former is much the more common method, however, and dry-color inlay is no longer used today.\textsuperscript{43} Compared with inlay, the other “filled-in” lacquer method, known as \textit{moxian} (polish-reveal), is more complex. It seems that certain parts of the design composition, such as the tree trunk in number 52, are raised on the primed surface by repeated application of thick lacquer (\textit{chouqi}) of various colors until they reach what will be the heights of the top layer. Then the ground is filled in with fine lacquer of a different color until it rises above and covers the previously raised areas. The entire surface is then polished down to reveal a colorful composition. When this method is used, the boundaries between different color fields are not sharp, but they are given greater definition by engraved and gilded lines (see no. 50). Thus all \textit{tianqi} (“filled-in”) lacquer wares are, strictly speaking, both \textit{tianqi} and \textit{qiangjin} (“engraved gold”) lacquer. In every object of \textit{tianqi} lacquer in this catalogue both the inlay and the polish-reveal methods are used.

The term “official ware” has been applied to the finer wares of the Ming period, which usually are decorated with dragons and other symbols of imperial status and marked with reign dates, sometimes including the year of manufacture. It should be pointed out that little is known about their actual place of manufacture, and so far it has not been possible to associate a particular type of lacquer with a particular workshop. It is not at all certain whether unmarked pieces like the mid-Ming group were also the products of official workshops. Nevertheless, it may be worthwhile briefly to describe the bureaucratic organization of government-run handicrafts in the Ming period.

There were, essentially, two kinds of official or government-run workshops. Workshops of one type were part of the Ministry of Works (Gongbu), which was divided into four departments, at least two of them containing lacquer workshops. One is the Yingshansi (Department of Construction and Manufacture). According to the local history of Jiaxing District, during the reign of Yongle the lacquer craftsman Zhang Degang (son of the famous
Zhang Cheng; see no. 19) was appointed an associate director of a subdepartment of the Yingshansi, the Yingshanshuo, which controlled eighteen workshops of which one was for lacquer. Later, during the Xuande reign, another master craftsman, Bao Liang, was given a similar post.44 If indeed lacquer craftsmen from Xitang, Jiaxing, were appointed to offices in the Yingshanshuo, this could explain the dominance of the Xitang style in the official wares of the early Ming period. Still, we do not know where the Yingshanshuo was, as there was a parallel establishment in Nanking for every government department in Peking from the reign of Yongle onward. Quite possibly Zhang Degang and Bao Liang served in Nanking, especially since the capital was not moved from Nanking to Peking until late in the reign of Yongle.

There were also official workshops within the Imperial Household (Neifu), which was run by eunuchs. The Imperial Household encompassed twenty-four departments and at least two of them, the Neiquanjian and the Yuyongjian, produced fine lacquer. The departments were responsible for providing household articles of all sorts, from furniture and stationery to umbrellas and pots and pans. Of the ten workshops in the Neiquanjian, one was for making lacquer items such as furniture and mirror boxes. The products of the Yuyongjian, as described by Liu Ruoyu (1584–?), a eunuch who served in one of the production departments of the Neifu in the early seventeenth century, included mother-of-pearl inlaid, filled-in, and carved lacquer.45 These are exactly the types of official wares from the period that are known today; there exist, in fact, two mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquers with the Yuyongjian mark of the Longqing period (1567–72).46 Like the Ministry of Works, the Imperial Household had a full bureaucratic establishment with a branch in Nanking; there are references in Ming literature to lacquer being sent from the Neiquan in Nanking to the palace in Peking during the reign of Jiajing.47 In addition there were workshops run by local governments at every level, especially in areas specializing in certain types of handicrafts, some of them under direct control of the central administration.48 This brief summary should be sufficient to demonstrate the complexity of the organization of handicraft activity in the Ming period and should correct the impression that the Yuyongjian or any other single branch of the government was solely responsible for the production of lacquer.

As is demonstrated by the box number 53, the production of official ware continued up to the beginning of the seventeenth century. For various reasons, chiefly economic but also administrative, production declined rapidly in the later years of Wanli, and no official ware to speak of was made after this reign (1572–1620). At the same time, the commercial production of lacquer in south China was reaching its highest level since the Yuan period. These commercial wares were decorated with painted designs (no. 67), mother-of-pearl inlay (no. 61), or basketry panels (nos. 65, 66). The high quality of these products is testimony to the relative affluence of the southeastern provinces of China, which benefited from thriving industries and external trade, much of it illicit. The revival in the sixteenth century of painted decoration using oil colors (“litharge painting”) in addition to colored lacquer reflects frequent contact with Japan, where at this time there was a similar revival. It is not known at
present who initiated the revival, and perhaps that question is not particularly important. All the different types of commercial lacquerware made in coastal south China were also produced in the Ryukyu Islands.

The last aspect of Ming lacquer requiring examination is the later stage of the development of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer. As the preceding discussion and the essay in this catalogue on Korean lacquer suggest, the early history of mother-of-pearl lacquer poses some of the most intricate problems in the entire history of East Asian lacquer. By the fourteenth century the picture becomes clearer, at least for Chinese lacquer. The dating of Chinese mother-of-pearl lacquers of the Ming period is made somewhat easier by referring to woodblock prints, which often provided the basic patterns for mother-of-pearl inlaid decoration. However, once a pattern entered the repertory of the lacquer decorator it followed a history that is not always easy to trace. For the late Ming period further confusion is provided by Ryukyuan products. These were often made in the style of earlier Chinese models, imitating not only their pictorial composition but also technical features, such as the use of metal wire borders and the concentrated application of shells in representations of buildings. The resemblances cause difficulties both in dating lacquers and in identifying their provenance, but in most cases these are not insurmountable. A similar situation exists with painted lacquer and lacquer with basketry, but here dating is not a problem because the Ryukyuan products were contemporaneous with their Chinese counterparts. The extraordinary similarity between certain types of Chinese and Ryukyuan lacquer, although it may frustrate the scientific investigator and dent the ego of the connoisseur, is itself an important historical fact.

Qing Period

The final development of mother-of-pearl inlay decoration on lacquer occurred in the reign of Wanli and matured somewhat later in the early years of the reign of Kangxi (1661–1722). A great emphasis was placed on the coloristic and chiaroscuro effects of the mother-of-pearl inlay.49 This brilliant technique is represented by an unusual piece in this collection, number 62, and is described in its catalogue entry. The most magnificent example of this type of lacquer, in the Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst in Berlin,50 is a screen that stood behind the throne in one of the audience halls of the Kangxi emperor. Later on in the Kangxi era there was a further development in this technique which is represented by the oval dish number 63. Several pieces of lacquered furniture decorated by this method in the Palace Museum are marked with dates in the 1670s.51 This type of lacquer exemplifies many aspects of the Manchu influence on Chinese decorative art, manifested in miniaturization and richness of surface decoration, and may reflect the nomadic taste for glittering treasures of portable size.

Activities of the Qing court were recorded in minute detail. When it comes to objects made for palace use, the history of every article of note can be traced from the moment when an imperial order was given by the emperor (and recorded verbatim) to the conclusion of the
project, which was noted complete with the names of the officials and craftsmen involved
and the words expressing imperial appreciation or criticism of the finished articles. As a
result of studies drawing on the palace archives relating to lacquer and also the publication
in recent years of lacquer objects in the Palace Museum collections, the overall history of
lacquer production in the first half of the Qing period has become clear. Generally speaking,
the finest products of the Kangxi era were the mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquers discussed
above. During the Yongzheng reign (1722–35), the taste was for gold-painted decoration,
often combined with lacquer and oil colors (see no. 68). A particular favorite of the Yongzheng
emperor was gold and colored lacquer in the style of Japanese makie lacquer. Some of these
Chinese makie pieces are still extant and can be matched to records of their production.
After the early seventeenth century, carved lacquer was not produced again in Peking until
the Qianlong reign (1735–96). During the early years of this reign, lacquer carving was done
in the palace workshops by craftsmen skilled in the carving of other materials such as bam-
boo and ivory (see no. 44). In the course of the reign of Qianlong, carved lacquer became
the major type of lacquerware produced (see nos. 43–47).

With the rapid political and economic decline of the Qing Dynasty following the reign
of Qianlong, many palace workshops were closed down, and the output of those that re-
mained diminished in both quality and quantity. One might say that fine lacquer as a branch
of the decorative arts in China ceased to exist after the eighteenth century (although of
course everyday utensils, such as food boxes and chopsticks, continued to be made). There is
no specimen of post-Qianlong lacquer in this catalogue except for a piece of export ware
(no. 69), perhaps made at the very end of the reign, which brings up the rear in this parade of
Chinese lacquer covering nearly six centuries of its history.

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Notes

Urushi Study Group, 1988 (see General Bibliography), pp. 189–95.
2. Hebei Provincial Institute of Archaeology, A Shang Site at Taixi, Gaocheng (in Chinese; English
abstract) (Peking, 1985), color pl. 2. See also Hebei Museum and CPAM (Committee for the Preserva-
tion of Antiquities and Monuments), Hebei Province, “The Shang Dynasty Site at Taixi, Gaocheng County, Hebei
Wenwu, no. 10 (1972), pp. 20–28, fig. 5. The Fangshan find is illustrated in Wang and Zhu, 1989, no. 10.
4. Suo Yu-Ming, “Xianqin dianji zhong suojiande Sandai gigong” (Lacquer craft as seen in pre-Qin liter-
ature), in Zhongguo gigongyi yanjiu lun ji (Collection of essays on the lacquer art of China) (Taipei,
1977).
5. See “Lacquered Objects,” in Li Xueqin, Eastern Zhou and Qin Civilizations, trans. K. C. Chang (New
6. Reported by the Cultural Bureau of Henan Prov-
ince in Wenwu cankao ziliao, no. 9 (1957), pp. 21–22, with color and black-and-white illustrations.
8. Yu Weichao and Li Jiahao, “Mawangdui yihao Hanmu Chutu qi qi zhidhi zhu wenti” (Questions con-
cning the place of manufacture of lacquerware found in tomb no. 1 at Mawangdui, in Yu Mingzhao, ed., *Mawangdui Hanmu yanjiu* (Studies on the Mawangdui Han tombs) (Changsha, 1981), pp. 358–64.

9. Large quantities of late Western Han and early Eastern Han lacquer from Sichuan workshops were discovered in the 1920s by Japanese archaeologists at the ancient site of Lolang (in Korean: Nangnang) in northern Korea. They are described in a number of excavation reports and monographs written in the 1930s, notably Harada Yoshiito, *Lo-Lang* (Tokyo, 1930). In more recent years, similar finds have been made in Guizhou Province in southwest China. See Guizhou Provincial Museum, *Report on Excavations of Han Tombs at Pingba, Qingzhen County, Guizhou* (in Chinese), *Kaogu xuebao*, no. 1 (1959), pp. 85–103.


11. See the section on Shaofu in Xin Tangshu (Peking and Shanghai: Zhonghua Shuju, 1975), *juan* 48, p. 1269.

12. The *Yongyang zazu*, written by Duan Chengshi (ca. 803–863), records some of the gifts given by the Emperor Xuanzong to An Lushan when the latter was a favorite at the Tang court. Among them are objects in pingtuo work including a ladle, a tray for dumplings (bunten), and a food stand. See Duan Chengshi, *Yongyang zazu* (Peking: Zhonghua Shuju, 1981), p. 3–4.

13. See the biography of Emperor Suzong in Xin Tangshu (see n. 11, *juan* 6, p. 159.


17. The Korean scholar Ch’oe Ch’i-wŏn (b. 857), who served on the staff of Gao Pian (d. 887), governor of Huai’sin (encompassing the lacquer-producing areas in present-day Hubei and Jiangsu provinces) during the reign of Emperor Xizong (873–877), submitted 15,935 pieces of lacquerware to the imperial court in the year 879. See Ch’oe Ch’i-wŏn, *Kyoeon p’iyong* (with a modern Korean translation) (Poryŏng, 1968), p. 118.


25. The original excavation report stated that the inlay was “fish bone”; see Museum of the City of Datong and the Commission for the Preservation of the Yungang Caves, Shanxi Province, “Excavations of the Yuan Dynasty Tombs of Feng Daozhen and Wang Qing at Datong, Shanxi” (in Chinese), *Wenwu*, no. 19 (1962), pp. 34–43. In a later publication the inlay was described as haliotis shell; see Zhou Nanquan and Ye Qifeng, “Origin and Development of Mother-of-Pearl Inlay” (in Chinese), *Gugong bowuyuan yankan*, no. 1 (1981), pp. 52–58.


30. Nishioka Yasuhiro, “Nansō yōshiki no chōshitsu: Suio-tei-zu, sekishikifu-zu bon nado o megutte” (Southern Song-style carved lacquer—a lacquer tray with a scene of the Zuiweng Pavilion, a lacquer tray
32. Wu Han, “Shiliu shi ji qian zhi Zhongguo yu Nanyang” (China and the South Seas before the sixteenth century), Qinghua xuebao 11, no. 1 (January 1936), reprinted in Wu Han shixue lunzhuzhu xuanshi (Peking, 1984), pp. 604–45.
34. Ibid., p. 22.
35. See the section on the market at the City God Temple in Liu Tong and Yu Yizheng, Dijing jingwu lue (Sights and scenes in the imperial capital); preface dated 1615 (Shanghai: Gudian Wenxue Chubanshe, 1957), pp. 65–71.
37. Liu and Yu, Dijing jingwu lue (see n. 35), p. 69.
38. Cao and Wang, Xinzeng Geyao lun (see n. 31), p. 2.
40. The “foliated dragon” is frequently seen on Ming blue-and-white porcelain of the period from the Chenghua through the Zhengde reign (ca. 1465–ca. 1520); survivals of the motif are sometimes found on carvings of the Jiajing reign. See, for example, the “foliated dragon” on the base of a stone column of the entrance gate to the Ming emperors’ tombs outside Peking, illustrated in John M. Addis, Chinese Ceramics from Datable Tombs (London and New York, 1978), p. 161, pl. 48d. The gate was erected in 1540 during the reign of Jiajing. This dragon is comparable to one on a carved lacquer bottle in the Palace Museum, Peking; see Palace Museum, 1985, no. 162. The winged dragon was popular at about the same time. It is seen, for example, on a blue-and-white porcelain bowl dated 1520 and a jar dated 1549; see Sheila Riddell, Dated Chinese Antiquities (600–1650) (London and Boston, 1979), nos. 65, 67. The winged dragon also appears on a carved lacquer box in the Palace Museum, Peking; see Palace Museum, 1985, no. 164.
41. Yang Boda at the Palace Museum, Peking, is of the opinion that the Yunnan school continued in the official workshops until the end of the Ming period.
43. Wang, 1983, section 100, pp. 95–96. It should be noted that the interpretation of the different processes of tianqi in this work differs considerably from Sir Harry Garner’s account (Garner, 1979, p. 179). In the present catalogue, Wang Shixiang’s version is followed.
47. Tan Xisi, Ming dazheng ziyao (Essentials of Ming administration), early sixteenth-century edition, quoted in Wang Chunyu and Du Wanyan, Mingdai huangguan tu jingji shibiao chutan (Enquiries into the eunuch officials and the economic history records of the Ming period) (Peking, 1986), pp. 46–47.
49. The earliest known piece employing this technique is a box dated 1609 in the Cleveland Museum of Art; see Watt, 1985, no. 29. There is now no doubt that the lid with its mother-of-pearl inlaid decoration is of the same date as the lower half of the box, which carries the dated inscription, although there was some uncertainty on this point at the time of that publication.
53. See, for example, Wang and Zhu, 1989, no. 159.
1 Dish with scalloped rim

Black lacquer with traces of gold decoration
D. 12 3/8 in. (32 cm)
China, Song period, 11th–13th century

This dish is of a type that finds an equivalent in ceramic wares of the Song period, particularly in the Ding wares of Hebei Province. The formal correspondence between certain types of Song lacquer and Ding ceramics is exact, even down to the shapes of the base and the construction of the mouth rim—as with this dish. There are also similarities in the decoration. A number of Ding ware dishes of both the white- and black-glazed varieties have gilt decoration, applied after firing, which must have been inspired by the gold decoration of lacquer dishes such as this one. On this dish as on many others, the gold leaf applied over the painted lacquer decoration has worn off, leaving only the clear lacquer underpainting, which is barely visible. The center of the dish was decorated with a floral spray, the flattened rim with a geometric scroll.

Although there is little textual evidence to support Zhu Qiqian’s assertion that Dingzhou produced lacquerware as well as the famous ceramics of the Song period,¹ the material evidence certainly supports his view.

². See Zhu Qiqian’s preface to the 1927 edition of the Xu sham reprinted in Wang, 1983.
2. *Dish with petal border*

Black lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 7 1/4 in. (18 cm)
China, late Song to Yuan period, 13th–14th century

Like catalogue number 1, this dish has parallels with Dingzhou ceramics, including its protective metal rim. Ding ware porcelain dishes and bowls were often fitted with a metal rim to cover the lip, which was unglazed because the wares were fired upside down. With the lacquer pieces, which are as thin-bodied as the porcelains, the metal rim served to prevent chipping at the edges or to cover up previous damage.

This type of lacquer dish, with its borders shaped like overlapping petals, is conventionally given a Song date, probably on the assumption that all simply shaped, plainly lacquered, thin-bodied cups and bowls are Song work. However, it is doubtful that this pattern of rotating floral petals, which is one of the great decorative motifs of the Yuan period, was used much before the thirteenth century anywhere in China, even in the north. By the fourteenth century the design was appearing with great frequency in the architecture and decorative arts of China. The most complete and intricate example of the pattern is to be found on the Juyong Gate outside Peking (fig. 13). The gate, the single most important surviving monument for the study of the art of the Yuan empire, was built in the mid-fourteenth century.

On the base of the dish is a stamped square seal which reads *Lushi di* [or shou] ben, the mark of the maker or owner.


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3 Round lobed box

Black lacquer with pewter wire and mother-of-pearl
D. 8 3/8 in. (22 cm); H. 7 in. (17.8 cm)
China, Yuan period, 14th century

This box is made up of lobes modeled to resemble the petals of a lotus, a ubiquitous motif in Sino-Tibetan art of the Yuan period. The pewter wires are incorporated both for decorative effect and for added strength. The interior of the box is lacquered red, and an openwork mother-of-pearl medallion carved with running dragons encircling a shou (longevity) character is set on top of the lid. The box holds a shallow tray, lacquered red on the upper surface and black below, whose extended rim rests on the flanges at the mouth of the box. A container like this was probably made for holding toiletries.

Lacquer boxes with lobed sides and pewter trim and of various shapes form a distinct group among lacquerware of the Yuan period. These forms probably owe something to contemporary silver ware. Boxes identical in shape to this one are in the collections of the Freer Gallery (Washington, D.C.), Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto), Seattle Art Museum, and Tokyo National Museum. An ivory box of similar form is also known.²

1. For an example with a different shape, see Dragon and Phoenix, 1990, no. 24.
4 Brush handle and cover

Carved polychrome lacquer (tixì)
L. 10½ in. (25.6 cm)
China, late Song to early Yuan period, 13th century
Published: Oriental Ceramic Society of Hong Kong and Fung Ping Shan Museum, University of Hong Kong, *Arts of the Scholar’s Studio* (Hong Kong, 1986), no. 183.

This brush has all the characteristics of the earliest known tixì lacquer. Although other examples can be seen in most catalogues of major lacquer exhibitions in Japan, this type of lacquerware is very little known in the West. The pieces all have a top layer of lustrous brownish-black lacquer which at the edges is translucent and a deep ruby red. The carved geometric design is not standardized, as became the case in later periods, and one can hardly find two pieces of the same design. The alternating colors under the black surface are red and yellow, sometimes interspersed with thinner layers of black, as in this example. There is a contrast between the colors of the surface and the cutaway areas as well as between the exposed red and yellow layers. The cutting is done at a wide angle and the area of top surface left intact is small compared with that of the carved areas, so the black surface functions as a positive element in the composition.

The shape of the brush handle is also significant. Most brush handles of the Ming and Qing periods are straight (see no. 30), whereas earlier brushes have articulated handles like this one; other examples are in the Tokugawa Art Museum.² Again, no two brush handles of this period are exactly alike.

Confirmation for the dating of this type of lacquer is provided by a fan handle found in the tomb of Zhou Yu (d. 1249 or possibly 1261) which in both style and technique displays all the characteristics described above.³

The Zhou Yu fan and the Irving brush handle have an interesting feature in common. The core around which the fan handle was formed was subsequently extracted, and a rod was inserted to which the fan was attached. The rod remains loose from the lacquer handle so that the fan can rotate freely. Radiographs of this brush handle show that its original core too was entirely removed, even though it would only have been necessary to remove a small portion of it to accommodate the brush tip.

5 Plaque
Carved black lacquer
D. 12 7/8 in. (32.7 cm)
China, late Song to Yuan period, 13th–early 14th century

The purpose of this large plaque, which has a leather
back lacquered red, is not known. Perhaps it served
as a base for a flower vase, a use it might still be put
to today in Japan. Both the lacquer and its carving
display the characteristics of early work. The thick
lacquer body is built up with lacquer mixtures that
vary in composition, progressing from fairly coarse
material in the lower levels to transparent lacquer of
the best quality in the upper strata. In areas where the
top layer has separated from the main body of the
lacquer it is a transparent deep red, although it ap-
pears black in reflected light. This use of transparent
lacquer for the top layer is observable in nearly all
early carved “black” lacquer.

The dating of this plaque is based on technical con-
siderations. If the attribution is correct, the plaque is
one of the earliest known carved lacquers with the
pommel scroll pattern (see p. 27). During the Yuan
period the pommel scroll became the dominant ele-
ment in the patterns decorating non-pictorial carved
lacquer (see nos. 6–11). This was in contrast to the
decoration on earlier examples of this type of carved
lacquer, such as number 4, where the main designs
were not composed exclusively of pommel scrolls and
the overall patterns varied from piece to piece.

While executed with a sure touch, the carving has a
distinctly rough appearance, distinguishing it from
other known thirteenth-century pieces. The marks and
sharp edges left by the cutting tool were not polished
smooth, resulting in an unfinished look.

The use of “soft” lacquer, in this case lacquer mixed
with ash and other tempering material, and the ab-
sence of a fine finish were cited by Ming authors as
characteristics of carved lacquer from Yunnan, in
southwest China. It is not known whether this was also the case with wares produced earlier than the Ming period. The important questions posed by Yunnan lacquer are far from solution at the moment, and it would be rash to attribute a provenance to any piece solely on the basis of these two features. All that can be said about this plaque is that it is not a standard product of the Jiangnan area, the area where most of the earliest carved lacquers, such as number 4, were produced.

6 *Rectangular box with pommel scrolls*

Carved red lacquer with black layers (tixi)

L. 7 7/8 in. (20 cm); W. 4 7/8 in. (12.8 cm); H. 2 7/8 in. (6 cm)

China, Yuan period, first half of the 14th century

The thick shell of red lacquer on this box incorporates two thin, evenly spaced layers of black. The carved design is composed almost entirely of pommel scrolls, with filler patterns occupying the spaces between them. Although lacquer carved with pommel scrolls probably had its beginning in the late Song period (see no. 5), the style of such carving underwent a radical change sometime during the Yuan period, probably in the early fourteenth century. The change seems to echo a growing predilection for sculptural and high relief forms in general, as can be seen, for example, in porcelain decoration of the Yuan period. This box can be taken as typical of the Yuan style of carved lacquer. Instead of the forms with
sharply cut, straight sides found in the earlier period (nos. 4, 5), the box has high-relief scrolls which are carved and polished to a rounded fullness and are divided by deeply cut, narrow grooves. This carving gives the impression of tightly packed elastic forms and generates a sense of vital energy that characterizes much carved lacquer of the period. The sculptural quality of the relief carving is so strong that it totally over-takes the formal aspect of the box, which is to say that the object looks more like a piece of sculpture than a box.

The structural strength of the lacquer is undermined by the large number of deep cuts, some of which seem to go right through the lacquer to the foundation layer. For this reason a number of cracks have developed in the lacquer, especially at points of stress, such as along the horizontal bands that circumscribe the box, and in areas of physical weakness, such as those where the lacquer is cut down to form low ridges.

The interior and base of the box are lacquered black.
7 Oval dish with pommel scrolls

Carved red lacquer with black layers (tixi)
L. 9½ in. (24.1 cm); w. 6½ in. (16.6 cm)
China, Yuan period, first half of the 14th century

This shallow dish has twelve pommel scrolls on its top, symmetrically arranged to fill the oval field. The scrolls are carved and polished to a round fullness. Visible near the bottom of the narrow grooves is a layer of black lacquer. The artist's exploration of plastic energy and subtle use of contrasting color layers indicate, as with number 6, a Yuan date.

The piece is constructed with a mesh fabric over its core. Inside its low oval foot-ring, the base is painted black. The raised bands and the rim of the dish are deeply fractured in many places.

A similar oval dish is in the Lee family collection, Tokyo.¹

¹ Illustrated in Dragon and Phoenix, 1990, no 5.
8 Round dish with pommel scrolls

Carved black lacquer with red layers (tixi); inscription on base (see Appendix)

D. 12½ in. (31.7 cm)

China, late Yuan to early Ming period, late 14th century

In design, quality of lacquer, and technique of carving and polishing, this piece and number 11 have much in common. There are three thin layers of red in the black lacquer of this tixi dish. At the bottom of the grooves, visible in several places, is a foundation layer of a yellow lacquer mixture. Fractures in this yellow layer reveal a loosely woven fabric that covers the wooden core.

Written in red lacquer on the base are the two characters guanlan (watching the rapids), a reference to a saying of Mencius: “There is a way to observe water, [you] watch it where the flow is rapid.” Here the characters probably give the name of a previous owner’s studio or style.

A similar dish is in the Los Angeles County Museum.¹


9 Round dish with pommel scrolls

Carved black lacquer with red and yellow layers (tixi)

D. 6½ in. (16.6 cm)

China, late Yuan to early Ming period, late 14th century

In both style and technique, this dish is close to number 8. It differs somewhat in scale and pattern and in having two thin layers of red lacquer and one of yellow lacquer, whereas in number 8 all three layers are red. A ring of pommel scrolls surrounds a central design of five sunken C-scrolls around a circle, forming a relief pattern in which mushroom and spearhead shapes alternate. A number of examples of this type of fourteenth-century lacquer are known; one, of an earlier date, is in the Palace Museum in Peking.

The entire surface is covered with a network of fine, short cracks, and the black base has long, irregular cracks within its low foot-ring.
10 Large circular box with pommel scroll design

Carved red lacquer with black layers (tixi); signature on base
D. 13 ⅜ in. (33.2 cm); H. 5 ⅜ in. (14.6 cm)
China, late Yuan to early Ming period, late 14th century

The decoration on the lid of this box, with pommel scrolls surrounding a six-cornered motif composed of four barbed curlicues, follows a pattern well established in tixi lacquer going back to the late Song period.¹ However, compared with the carving of earlier pieces (nos. 6, 7), these relief scrolls have little plastic quality and their composition lacks vitality. The inventiveness is also gone.

On the base of the box is the incised signature of Yang Mao; during the late Yuan period he and Zhang Cheng (see no. 19) were the most famous artists of carved lacquer in the district of Jiaxing in Zhejiang Province, then the center of the carved lacquer industry. It is not possible, given our present state of knowledge, firmly to attribute carved lacquer pieces to particular artists. There has not been any systematic
study of all the known pieces with signatures, not even those of Yang Mao and Zhang Cheng. If Yang Mao lived to the very end of the fourteenth century it would have been possible for him or his workshop to have produced this large food box. Certainly the sheer high quality of the lacquer and the workmanship are worthy of the legendary master.

There are two thin layers of black embedded in the red lacquer, and the interior and the base are also lacquered black.

1. See the mirror case illustrated in Wang and Zhu, 1989, no. 100.
11 Small circular box with pomme1 scroll design

Carved red lacquer with black layers (tixì); mark on base
D. 5 1/4 in. (13.4 cm); H. 2 1/8 in. (5.5 cm)
China, late Yuan to early Ming period, late 14th century

This box is probably very close in date to number 10 and may have been manufactured in the same area. The two thin black layers and their positioning in the thick red lacquer crust are similar in both boxes, as are the cutting and polishing of the pomme1 scrolls. Another box very much like this one is in the collection of the Palace Museum, Peking.¹

On the recessed base, which is lacquered black, the character qi (seven), probably a former owner's inventory number, is inscribed in red lacquer.

12. **Octagonal food box**

Carved black lacquer with red layer (tixi)
D. 8 7/8 in. (22.5 cm); H. 5 3/4 in. (13.2 cm)
China, early Ming period, late 14th–early 15th century

The pommel scroll pattern on this box is basically similar to that of number 9. There is a single layer of red in the black lacquer. What distinguishes the style of carving displayed here from what may be regarded as the standard Yuan style of the early fourteenth century (see nos. 6, 7) is the gentle curvature of the relief design. Instead of the usual rounded scrolls in high relief and deeply cut, narrow grooves that come to a point at the bottom, this box has scrolls that rise only gently and wide grooves with U-shaped troughs. The flatter relief carving is no longer a factor in the form of the object, instead functioning merely as surface decoration. Therefore the essential structure of the box is far more apparent than in earlier examples,
and the relatively thick bands on the sides of the box give a slightly clumsy look to an object otherwise lightly constructed, with thin walls. This type of tixi is generally assigned a Ming date, and indeed it does bear the same relationship to Yuan tixi that early Ming blue-and-white porcelain bears to its Yuan predecessor. However, it is quite possible that this style had its beginning in the fourteenth century, at the end of the Yuan period. In the Nanking Museum is a very similar box, much damaged and showing a thin core and fabric foundation, which was reportedly found at a Yuan site.

13 Hexagonal box with inverted corners

Carved black lacquer with red layers (tixi)
D. 7⅛ in. (18.3 cm); H. 4⅜ in. (11 cm)
China, early Ming period, late 14th–early 15th century

Technically and stylistically this box is so close to number 12 that it must date from the same period. It differs chiefly in having two red layers in the black lacquer.

The hollyhock (Chinese kui, sometimes translated as mallow) was one of the most common floral motifs in carved lacquer of the late fourteenth century (see no. 19). Dishes and boxes, such as this one, with foliated shapes that suggest the hollyhock flower were referred to as kui-shaped. This shape is not unique to vessels of the period, but it does seem to have enjoyed a high degree of popularity in the late fourteenth to early fifteenth century.

1. This term appears, for example, in the list of Chinese diplomatic gifts to Japan dated 1403. See Harry M. Garner, “The Export of Chinese Lacquer to Japan in the Yuan and Early Ming Dynasties,” *Archives of Asian Art*, no. 25 (1971/72), p. 25.
14 Incense box
Carved polychrome lacquer (tixi)
D. 4 in. (10 cm); H. 1 1/8 in. (3.6 cm)
China, Ming period, late 14th–late 16th century

This particular kind of tixi box, with a dramatic triple pomme1 scroll forming the lid and a band of compressed scrolls on the lower border, is a recognized Yuan type; the style of the cutting is correspondingly in keeping with early polychrome tixi work. There are eighteen color layers on this box, applied in a repeated sequence of green, yellow, black, and red, with red being the color of the top level. It is the green that creates a difficulty with the dating of this piece, because it is a color seen seldom, if at all, in early carved lacquer. Indeed, the early-seventeenth-century lacquer master Yang Ming asserted, “green was not [used in] old [tixi] work.” From his statement we may deduce that this box would not have been considered old in the early seventeenth century, and also that green was definitely being employed in tixi work by Yang Ming’s time. As it cannot be demonstrated with certainty that green was not used in early carved lacquer, a wide margin has been allowed in the dating of this box.

1. In the Xiushilu; see Wang, 1983, p. 131.
15 **Rectangular box with pommel scroll design**

Carved black lacquer with red layers (*tixi*)
L. 9¾ in. (24.2 cm); W. 4⅜ in. (11.7 cm); H. 2¾ in. (6.9 cm)
China, Ming period, 16th century or later

By the sixteenth century, the sculptural quality of *tixi* lacquer had greatly diminished. The composition of pommel scrolls on this box has lost its subtlety, and the scrolls are no longer in proportion to the dimensions of the object. The craftsman’s attention seems focused exclusively on the coloristic effect of the carved lacquer. On this box there are three red layers clearly visible in the groove, and the foundation layer of yellowish lacquer mixture also contributes to the color effect of the whole.
16  **Circular box with design of two mythical dragons and clouds**

Carved black lacquer  
D. 9 1/8 in. (24.5 cm); H. 3 in. (7.6 cm)  
China, late Song to Yuan period, late 13th–early 14th century

The *qi*-dragon, a salamander-like creature (distinct from the more traditional dragon form, which had a serpentine body, large head with long horns, and prominent snout), became a widespread motif in decorative arts of the thirteenth century. *Qi*-dragons can be seen on bronzes and jade carvings of this period, usually modeled in the round and serving as handles to vessels. On this box the *qi*-dragons among clouds are treated sculpturally, very much in the style of jade carving of the Song and Yuan periods. There is a yellow layer of lacquer close to the base of the carving and a red layer near the top. The top lacquer layer, above the red, is lustrous and translucent at the edges.

In addition to larger cracks which run through the entire lacquer layer, the surface of the lacquer is covered with a network of minute hair cracks such as are often found on thinly lacquered wares of the Song period. The brown lacquered interior of the box has sets of “snake belly” cracks of a kind usually seen on the lacquered surfaces of zithers (*qin*) of the Ming period and earlier. These parallel cracks, more or less equally spaced, occur at right angles to the grain of the wood and thus give an indication of the construction of the substrate. On the inside of the base it can be clearly seen that the wooden core was assembled by joining a smaller and a larger piece of wood with their grains...
perpendicular to each other, the standard method of construction for the base of a lacquer plate or box in the Yuan period.

A similar box is in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco and a fourteenth-century version is in the Hayashibara Art Museum in Okayama, Japan.
17  Circular box with decoration of camellias
Carved black lacquer
D. 4½ in. (10.5 cm)
China, late Song period, 13th century

This box, probably used for cosmetics or incense, has the shape and dimensions typical of such containers in the thirteenth century. The flattish lid is slightly domed and fits over a shallow bowl with nearly straight flaring sides. Large numbers of porcelain boxes of this shape and size were made in the Southern Song period and exported to every part of Southeast Asia.

The lacquer body is built on an orange-red ground and has a thin layer of red lacquer incorporated near the top, so that the pattern of camellias carved in relief appears with a red outline. As is true with all early carved lacquer, there is little overlapping of the forms—in this case, leaves and petals—and much of the ground is exposed. There are none of the incisions on leaves and petals to indicate veins that are found on carved lacquer of later periods.

The translucency of the top layer of lacquer above the red layer suggests that little or no pigment was added to the lacquer for the final coatings and that the brownish-black color is due to the natural aging of the lacquer.
18 *Square dish with decoration of two birds and camellias*

Carved black and brown lacquer

L. 7 1/8 in. (18 cm); W. 7 in. (17.7 cm)

China, Yuan period, first half of the 14th century

This shallow dish with a carving of two long-tailed birds in flight amidst camellias represents the halfway stage between the thirteenth-century carving style (see no. 17) and the fully developed “two-bird” dish of the late fourteenth century (no. 20). Here we see the beginning of a new approach to representation in the medium of carved lacquer. Translating pictorial devices such as foreshortening and overlapping into the language of relief carving and using fine incision to convey texture (by borrowing techniques used in *qiangjin*), the Yuan lacquer artist was able to create on a flat surface images that are nearly three-dimensional. No comparable exploration of three-dimensional representation in the plastic arts had occurred in China since perhaps the Warring States period (475–221 B.C.), and the development was by no means confined to lacquer carving. This radical change in artistic expression is testament to the creative energy of the Yuan artist. However, the rapid advance in a new direction must have been facilitated, in part, by the taking up of skills developed and preserved over centuries by artists working in other mediums such as jade and ivory.

As there is deep cutting into the lacquer over much of the surface, the thin red layer which serves as a guideline for the carving is now for the first time placed well below the surface and no longer plays any part in the coloristic effect of the carving. This is the case with all carved lacquer emerging from official workshops during the early Ming period.

Another new feature standard for fourteenth-century carved lacquers is the classical scroll known as a “fragrant grass” scroll on the back on the dish. It was rarely used after this century.

A predecessor of this dish, dated 1294 (or possibly 1234), is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.1 A circ-

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2. Tokugawa Art Museum and Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, 1984, no. 47; also illustrated in other catalogues.
Round dish with decoration of two birds and hollyhock

Carved red lacquer; signature and inscription on base (see Appendix)
D. 12 3/4 in. (32.5 cm)
China, Yuan to early Ming period, 14th century

This dish is difficult to date with precision. The clarity of its pictorial composition and the relatively large area of exposed ground suggest that it was made in the early part of the fourteenth century. On the other hand, the carving is executed with enormous confidence and panache and is at once more mannered and more showy than that on most two-bird dishes, making it unlikely that the dish belongs early in the sequence of carved Yuan lacquers.

Interestingly, the lacquer layer is comparatively thin on this piece, a condition that imposes difficulties on the carver striving to create foreshortened, three-dimensional forms. The lacquer, of excellent quality, has survived without developing small hair cracks. It seems that the artist attempted to avoid a problem common with carved lacquer of this type, the lifting of the carved layer from the foundation. While the connoisseur Cao Zhao, writing at the beginning of the Ming period, appears to have thought that such lifting was caused by “the red [lacquer being too] thin and not hard,” he was probably only half right. When the lacquer layer is thick, the deep, uneven cutting sets up very great mechanical stress in the lacquer; thus, by using a thinner layer of fine, hard lacquer and cutting completely through it in some areas, the maker of this dish may have hoped to minimize its warping. Unfortunately, however, although the hard lacquer resisted allover hairline cracking, there is a large crack at the lower left along the tail of the pheasant, and in some places the lacquer has lifted, revealing the foundation fabric and wooden core.

Despite its flaws, this dish is a brilliant piece of work and is among the most striking of all the examples of carved red lacquer surviving from this period. Most pieces of this type extant in Japan were included in an exhibition organized in 1984 by the Tokugawa Art Museum and the Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, among them a dish owned by the Tokugawa Art Museum which in style and carving technique is very similar to the Irving dish. The two dishes carry exactly the same incised signature of the famous lacquer artist Zhang Cheng on the left side of the base and the same inscription in red lacquer in the center of the base: Egawa tobo (Yingchuan dong fang in Chinese), presumably the mark of a previous owner in Japan. The dishes differ only in being decorated with different species of birds and plants, and might have been made at the same workshop and exported at the same time to Japan. They are of such high quality that it is even possible that they were produced in the workshop of the master himself. The late Yuan period, when Zhang Cheng is thought to have worked, is a plausible date for this dish, all things considered.

Finally, it may be noted that some examples of early carved red lacquer, among them this piece, show a conspicuous variation between deeper and lighter tones of red. This is most noticeable on the broad slanting surfaces and is due to the settling of the (vermilion)
pigment during the drying process. The settling is perhaps more prone to occur with “hard,” high-quality lacquer that has little in the way of additives apart from the pigment, and this technical problem may be partly responsible for the fact that red carved lacquer developed more slowly than black.

3. Ibid., no. 38.
20  *Round dish with decoration of two birds and flowers*

Carved black lacquer

D. 12 1/4 in. (31.4 cm)

China, Yuan to early Ming period, second half of the 14th century

This dish or tray belongs to a distinct group of carved lacquers that have come to be known as “two-bird” dishes. Invariably they are round, between 11 3/8 and 13 inches in diameter, and have on the back a classic scroll (referred to in Chinese literature as the “fragrant grass” scroll). The species of birds and flowers vary from dish to dish, but are limited in number. About twenty such dishes are known to exist in private collections in various parts of the world. They represent the culmination of a style of carving developed over a century, from the late Song period to the late Yuan and perhaps into the beginning of the Ming period. Numbers 18 and 19 are examples of an earlier stage in this development. The decoration on these classic two-bird dishes is a more complex version of the type of carving described in the entry for number 18, and unlike on the earlier examples, the foundation layer below the carved lacquer is not exposed.

Because of the complicated contours of these works and the great variation in thickness of the lacquer, the stresses that develop on the substrate over time are considerable. In spite of the special construction of the wooden base from two pieces of wood fitted together with their grains running at right angles in order to withstand stress in different directions, most of these dishes are warped, and usually there is some lifting of the lacquer layer. This dish is relatively well preserved, although the luster of the lacquer has diminished somewhat over the centuries.

21 Round dish with decoration of two birds

Carved red lacquer; mark on base
D. 12 3/4 in. (32.5 cm)
China, early Ming period, late 14th–early 15th century

Another classic “two-bird” dish, this is a red version of number 20 and is probably of a slightly later date. At the beginning of the Ming period the use of red lacquer for this type of carving increased and the “fragrant grass” on the back of the dish was sometimes replaced by a floral scroll, as in this case. The birds here are peacocks, shown among tree peonies.

An almost identical dish is in the British Museum¹ and another similar piece is in the Palace Museum, Peking.² The incised mark on the base of the dish: Da Ming Yongle nian zhi (Made in the Yongle reign of the Great Ming), is a guide to its dating but does not constitute proof. While very few carved lacquer pieces bearing this mark were made later than the reign of Yongle (1403–25), quite a number of them seem to belong to a slightly earlier period (see p. 31 for a discussion of early Ming reign marks on lacquer).

¹. Garner, 1979, pl. 45.
22. *Pair of small dishes with floral design*

Carved red lacquer
Each, d. 6 in. (15.2 cm)
China, early Ming period, late 14th–early 15th century

Carved on one of these dishes (a) are tree peonies with lotus flowers appearing behind them and on the outside a continuous band of peonies. Inside the ring foot the base is lacquered black. The other dish (b) displays gardenias overlapping roses and a band of gardenias on the outside. Its base was at some time relacquered orange-brown. A ribbed rim seems to be a common feature of dishes of this period. A black guideline layer is at the bottom of the red lacquer, just above the buff ground. The use of such a line became standard in fifteenth-century carving.

Two-level carving of the type seen on this pair of dishes apparently began in the Ming period in the late fourteenth century and continued through the fifteenth century. It is a more complex version of the fourteenth-century approach in which birds were superimposed on a floral background. Here the birds are replaced by a floral arrangement that is more prominently carved but also on a smaller scale, making it appear to be farther from the viewer. The style represents yet another attempt to create the illusion of depth and three-dimensionality by combining pictorial and sculptural techniques. It results in a composition of great complexity and visual interest whose interplay of two themes requires some effort to be apprehended by the viewer, like a musical fugue. With the invention of the two-level style the lacquer carver seems to have exhausted all the artistic possibilities of monochrome carved lacquer.

A larger dish in the Engaku-ji in Japan displays carving of the same type. It has a fourteenth-century–style classic scroll on its outside surface and may be slightly earlier in date than the Irving dishes.1 Another piece similar to the Engaku-ji dish is in the Lee family collection.2

A later version of this style, with three levels of carving representing the “three friends of winter” (bamboo, pine, and blossoming plum), is found on a fifteenth-century red lacquer box in the Philadelphia Museum of Art (see fig. 12, p. 33).3

23 Seven-lobed platter with scene of children at play

Carved red lacquer
D. 21\% in. (55.5 cm)
China, Yuan period, 14th century

This large dish belongs to the class of carved lacquer known as “narrative scenes with human figures” (renwu gushi), which, like the flower-and-bird type, had its beginning in the late Song period. The best-known early work in this class was the dish whose carving illustrated the “Pavilion of the drunken old man” (Zuiweng ting) described in an incidental writ-
The subject depicted on this platter, children at play in a garden, follows a Song tradition. The ladies’ dresses are in the style of the Song period, making it clear that the design derives from a Song original. This is also indicated by the figure in the lower right of a child dressed up as a gentleman at leisure, who is being helped to his feet by two other boys and followed by another holding a parasol. He sports a type of tall hat made fashionable in the Song period by Su Shi, the most admired poet-official of his generation and a figure much loved by Chinese poets and writers for centuries to come.
The carving of the platter, however, is very much in the high Yuan style, which began to mature only in the first half of the fourteenth century. The treatment of the floral border is similar to that of the flowers on number 18. The carving here shows the Yuan propensity to create three-dimensional images in the relief (with particular success in the area of the pavilion and lotus pond). Some objects depicted also indicate a Yuan date, such as the set of incense-burning utensils on the table at the lower left. A set of that type, consisting of an incense burner, an incense box, and a vase which can be used either for flowers or for holding incense-burning implements (tongs or chopsticks, spatulas), is often seen in woodblock prints of the Yuan period, and actual pieces of such sets have been found in Yuan burials.

The size of the dish also has some bearing on its dating; there are no known lacquer or ceramic dishes of this size from the Song period, but there are a great number of large porcelain dishes dating from the fourteenth century. The pattern of cracks on the back of the platter reveals that its wooden core is constructed, as are those of all other known fourteenth-century dishes, by joining a smaller piece to the main body of the substrate with the grains of the two pieces perpendicular. This has been confirmed by radiography.

The theme of children at play is expressive of the wish for offspring and the joy of having them, an idea reinforced by the presence of a pomegranate tree behind the large garden rock where children are playing hide-and-seek. The pomegranate fruit with its many seeds is frequently used as a symbol of progeny.

A smaller version of this dish, also seven-lobed and of a slightly later date, is in the Los Angeles Museum of Fine Arts.3

24 Lozenge-shaped dish

Carved red lacquer
L. 7 7/8 in. (20 cm); W. 5 3/8 in. (13.7 cm)
China, early Ming period, ca. 1400

With its scalloped lozenge shape and the standard “flowers of the four seasons” on its borders—tree peonies (spring) at upper right, pomegranate (summer) upper left, chrysanthemums (autumn) lower left, and camellias (winter) lower right—this dish is a classic example of early Ming carved red lacquer. There is a similar border on the back. Other characteristics of the period are the diaper pattern on the rim and the overlapping of pictorial elements to create an illusion of recession, as in the treatment of the building, including its interior.

Dishes of this type answer well to descriptions of the carved red lacquerware sent to Japan during the reign of Yongle (see p. 30), and some of them carry the mark of Yongle on the back, although they might have been made during the preceding reign. This dish is marked on the base with three red dots on one side and one red dot on the other; their significance is unknown.
25 Oval dish with foliated sides
Carved red lacquer
L. 9 1/4 in. (23.5 cm); w. 5 7/8 in. (15 cm)
China, early Ming period, late 14th century

This dish exhibits several features common on red lacquer of the beginning of the Ming period: an irregular oval shape, a ribbed rim, and a mixed floral border—in this case a continuous band of four different flowers—rather than the single flower scroll of the mid-fourteenth century. The quality of the lacquer and the pattern of cracks are similar to those of the “two-bird” dishes.

In the late fourteenth century, figures in a landscape were increasingly utilized as the central decoration in carved lacquerware. A Taoist scene is represented on this dish. Two immortals playing chess in the open air, probably on a mountain, are about to be approached by a man carrying a walking stick. The theme of immortals playing chess or some other board game has been a recurrent one in Chinese art and literature since the first century, although the appearance of the immortals changed over time. During the Ming period a short cape of leaves, such as that worn by the chess player with his back to the standing figure, was
the most common attire of immortals. This scene probably draws on an episode from a story like “Liu and Ruan entering the Tiantai Mountain,” which is illustrated on a carved bamboo incense holder of the late Ming period that also depicts immortals playing chess.1

The exposed foundation layer on the border is the usual reddish lacquer composition. In the landscape scene, the figures are placed on a red “ground diaper,” and the striated “air diaper,” which is cut below the level of the red lacquer, is an interesting greenish color. The accretion of dust on the finely carved surface makes it difficult to tell whether this lacquer layer was indeed green from the beginning; if it was, this is an early instance of the use of green pigment in carved lacquer.


26 Pair of circular dishes with figures in landscapes
Carved red and black lacquer; mark on base of b
Each, D. 6 in. (15.1 cm)
China, late Yuan to early Ming period, second half of the 14th century

This class of carved lacquer, with a pictorial scene in black lacquer in relief against a red lacquer ground made up of diaper patterns representing sky, water, and land, first appeared in the later part of the fourteenth century and continued through the Ming period. Attractive as these wares are, they were never as popular as carved red lacquerware, and although works of this type are often of very high quality, few, if any, seem to have come from official Ming workshops.

These paired dishes are among the earliest known examples of carved black-on-red lacquer and can be dated to the late fourteenth century by both their iconography and their style of carving, including the treatment of the rim, which is grooved on the inside. The scene on one dish (a) illustrates the first visit of Liu Bei and his two sworn brothers to the learned man Zhuge Liang. With the eventual help of Zhuge Liang, Liu Bei was to become the founder of one of the Three Kingdoms in the period following the collapse of the Han empire in the third century. The story of the Three Kingdoms, told in many versions, had become one of the most popular historical romances in China beginning in the late Song period, and one of its most famous episodes is the visit represented on this lacquer dish. The iconography of the image obviously derives from that of roughly contemporary woodblock illustrations, such as one on the title page of an edition of the story dated 1321–22 (fig. 14). In the center of the composition on the dish stands Liu Bei, in a posture of greeting; his brothers are to the right. An aide is handing the visiting card to a page boy at the door, and behind the door the seated figure of Zhuge Liang can be seen under an arch-shaped structure representing his thatched cottage. (The thatched cottage is usually depicted as dome-shaped, but in the print illustrated here the top of the dome is cut off, making the roof look more like an arch. It is just possible that the lacquer carver took as his model this very woodblock print.) A convention of Yuan illustrations of domestic scenes is the inclusion of a dog, usually a hound, which on the lacquer dish is seen in the foreground and in the woodblock print is half hidden behind the boy. A similar depiction of this visit appears on a fourteenth-century blue-and-white covered jar in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, providing further evidence of this
subject’s popularity in decorative arts of the Yuan period.\textsuperscript{1}

The scene on the second dish (b) is less easily identified. It could be another episode from the Three Kingdoms story or the illustration of a different popular legend of the period.

On the bottom of each dish a relief floral scroll on a red ground surrounds a recessed base. On the base of dish b the character ji, perhaps a name, is written in red lacquer. The draftsmanship and carving of the

pictorial scenes on these dishes are crude by the standards of the Yuan period; the dishes must have come from a provincial workshop still to be identified.

27 Circular box with figures in a garden

Carved red lacquer; mark on base
D. 8 3/4 in. (22.1 cm); H. 2 7/8 in. (7.3 cm)
China, early Ming period, reign of Yongle (1403–25)

Like number 24, this is a classic example of early Ming carved red lacquer. The central scene is of a garden in which two men, seated on garden stools, are enjoying the music one of them plays on the Chinese seven-string zither, qin. As was customary in the Ming period, incense is burned during the performance. The men are attended by two page boys; a third page, carrying a tray, is about to emerge from the building. On the sides of the box are carved the “flowers of the four seasons”: tree peony, pomegranate, chrysanthemum, and camellia.

The base of the box carries an incised mark: Da Ming Yongle nian zhi (Made in the Yongle reign of the Great Ming). That may well be the actual date, although the box could have been made ten or twenty years before the Yongle reign. During the reign of Xuande (1426–35) and subsequently, products of the official workshops were more likely to be decorated with imperial emblems like the dragon and phoenix.
28 Stand for a teabowl

Carved red lacquer
D. 8 1/4 in. (22.1 cm); H. 2 7/8 in. (7.3 cm)
China, early Ming period, reign of Yongle (1403–25)

This stand for a cup or bowl decorated with a phoenix and “foreign lotus” design is one of several almost identical pieces. By virtue of style and carving technique these pieces belong to a well-defined group of carved lacquer that must have been made for the imperial palace during the early reigns of the Ming Dynasty. A magnificent representative of the group is a table in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It has dragon-and-phoenix decoration and carries a mark of the reign of Xuande (1426–35). The teabowl stands all have Yongle marks, but they are so close to the table in every respect that they must have been made in the same workshop within a relatively short timespan.\(^1\) Technically, the works in this group come as near perfection as has ever been possible. Indeed, the history of carved lacquer in China after the Xuande period can be treated as the story of a long, gradual decline.

If proof is needed for connecting these teabowl stands to the imperial palace, it can be found in the example shown at the 1935–36 Chinese Art Exhibition held at the Royal Academy, London.\(^2\) In addition to the mark of Yongle on the foot, this stand carried an engraved and gilded inscription composed by the Qianlong emperor. By the time of the exhibition it had already been removed from the palace, but another one is still in the Palace Museum in Peking.\(^3\) There is also a stand with a Qianlong inscription in the Lee family collection,\(^4\) but it may be the one that was in the 1935–36 exhibition.

The phoenixes on these cup stands belong to two different “species” of the mythical bird as it was known in the Song period. The one with the fanned-out plumage is of the lian type, while the bird with the foliated tail is the female of the fenghuang type. The two were matched for the first time during the Yuan Dynasty, and their appearance on these teabowl stands is a carryover from that previous period.

This cup stand would have been used to hold a pottery drinking bowl. If the author of the 1935–36 exhibition catalogue entry was correct in interpreting the Qianlong inscription on that teabowl stand (see note 2), the Qing emperor seems to have thought it originally held a matching carved lacquer cup or bowl (such as no. 38).

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29  *Duster*

Carved red lacquer
L. (of handle) 11\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. (28.5 cm)
China, Ming period, late 15th–16th century

Carved in relief on the diaper or brocade ground of the handle is a decoration consisting of flowering plum (prunus), orchid, chrysanthemum, and bamboo. These plants, in this order, constitute another set of flora of the four seasons. (The set of four more commonly used in earlier periods is seen on numbers 24 and 27.) They are also known as the “four gentlemen” because they symbolize the valued traits of perseverance, modesty, purity, and nobility of spirit.

The carving has lost some of the sculptural qualities found in earlier work but is technically accomplished.
Writing brush handle and cover

Carved red lacquer
L. 8 7/8 in. (22.5 cm)
China, Ming period, late 16th century

The handle and cover of this brush are carved in the same style as the duster handle (no. 29) but have the decoration of Taoist figures in a landscape typical of the late Ming period. The Taoist immortals, interspersed among a phoenix, clouds, and flowers, include the figure of Zhang Qian sitting in a raft made out of an old tree trunk, one of the most popular images in the decorative arts of the late Ming period.
31 Foliated square dish with floral decoration

Carved red lacquer
L., w. 6 1/8 in. (16.2 cm)
China, Ming period (1368–1644)

This dish is representative of a class of carved lacquer of the mid-Ming period that has survived in relatively large numbers. All the examples display the same dull reddish-brown color, deep sharp cuts, and congested decorative pattern. The first two characteristics match well those described by late Ming authors as typifying carved lacquer from Yunnan Province in southwest China. In recent writing on lacquer, this group is generally regarded as Yunnan work. However, as has been pointed out repeatedly by Wang Shixiang, the Chinese authority on lacquer, the only known object of carved lacquer with the signature of a Yunnan artist is not at all in this style. Thus, the question of this group’s identity is still unresolved (but see p. 32 for a further discussion).

Many pieces in the group carry the same motifs as this dish, the “three friends of winter” (pine, bamboo, and flowering plum) and peony. Some of them are decorated with the additional motif of insects. At least two other dishes have not only the same motifs but exactly the same form and bamboo-shaped rims. They differ only in which of the “three friends” is given prominence. On this dish it is the plum, which stands out from a ground of bamboo and pine. In some ways it is as if the craftsman tried to reproduce the multilayer carving of the early Ming period (see no. 22) but had to compress the two or three layers into one, the result being a congested composition like the one here.

1. In the Palace Museum, Peking, there are at least a dozen. See Palace Museum, 1984, nos. 154–66. Some examples from Western collections are illustrated in Garner, 1979, pls. 72–76.
4. Garner, 1979, pl. 73; Lee, 1972, no. 98.
32. *Circular dish with decoration of dragon and characters*

Carved red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)

D. 14¼ in. (36.8 cm)

China, Ming period, reign of Jiajing (1522–67)

The dragon in the center of this heavily lacquered dish holds up the character *sheng*, which means “divine [or imperial] majesty.” The character stands for the emperor; flanking it are the characters *fu*, on the right, and *bi*, on the left, which both have the general meaning “aid” or “support” and are classical references to the emperor’s chief ministers, but here refer to the supporting dragon. At the cardinal points on the border, within circles above cosmic mountains, are four characters which read: *qiankun ruyi* (all is right in the universe). On the outside edge of the dish is a pattern similar to the inside border, with the characters: *fulu changchun* (good fortune and reward spring eternal). There are two sets of fine diaper ground patterns, one on the dark green (?) layer below the red lacquer of the surface and another at the lower level of red lacquer.

This dish is one of the finest products of the official workshops of the Jiajing era and was probably made during the early part of the reign, before Taoist symbols began to dominate the decoration of works of art produced for the court. On the base is an engraved and gilded mark reading: *Da Ming Jiajing nian zhi* (Made in the Jiajing reign of the Great Ming).

There is an exact copy of this design on a Qing carved red lacquer box of the Qianlong era (1736–95) in the Palace Museum in Peking.¹

¹ Palace Museum, 1985, no. 317.
Circular dish with dragon decoration

Carved polychrome lacquer (ticai); mark on base
D. 6½ in. (16.4 cm)
China, Ming period, reign of Jiajing (1522–67)

The lacquer pile above the foundation layer of this dish consists of three color layers, yellow, green, and red progressing from bottom to top. By carving through to varying depths in different areas, a polychrome decoration is achieved. Thus, in the floral scroll on the back of the dish, the red flowers and green leaves appear on a yellow ground. On the slanting edges of the cloud scrolls on the front, the whole spectrum of colors is revealed. Although this technique, which is called ticai and is only a variation of tixi, had been available to lacquer craftsmen for centuries, it did not become popular until the Jiajing reign, when its widespread use reflected a growing popular taste for colorful wares. The proliferation of porcelain with colored enamel decoration in the Jiajing and Wanli eras is well known.

Another characteristic of decorative arts of the Jiajing period is the abundant use of symbols with Taoist connections. In this dish, above the usual imperial dragon, is the character shou (longevity), the goal of Taoist adepts, written in an “organic” style in one continuous stroke. On either side of the character are the trigrams qian (three continuous lines) and kun (three interrupted lines) representing the pure essences of bipolar forces in the cosmic order, otherwise known as yang and yin. Here they are also symbolic stand-ins for the sun and moon. On the border is a scroll composed of cranes, the companions and vehicles of immortals, and lingzhi, the “fungus of immortality.”

On the base, in the center, is an engraved and gilded mark in bold characters reading downward: Da Ming Jiajing nian zhi (Made in the Jiajing reign of the Great Ming).

The quality of the carving is close to that of number 39, a typical piece of the Wanli reign (1573–1620).
34  *Octagonal dish with decoration of a shou character*

Carved red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 6 3/4 in. (17.1 cm)
China, Ming period, reign of Jiajing (1522–67)

On this dish is a rich array of imperial and Taoist emblems, as might be expected from the official workshop producing for an emperor obsessed with both court ritual and Taoism. The symbols are framed within a system of geometric panels which provide an overall order for the design while allowing each emblem to be seen on its own. Surrounding the large central character *shou* (longevity), which is written in simplified “seal script,” are eight nearly triangular *ruyi* heads; these are formalized cloud scrolls that by this time were also identified to a certain extent with the head of the *lingzhi*, the “fungus of immortality” that the Jiajing emperor so ardently sought. Interspersed between the *ruyi* heads are the Eight Treasures. On each facet of the cavetto is an imperial five-clawed dragon enclosed in a frame in the shape of a syce (silver ingot). The back of the dish carries eight identical depictions of flaming precious objects in a bowl, each carved on a yellow ground with an ogival frame. On the black base inside the decorated foot-ring is the engraved and gilded mark: *Da Ming Jiajing nian zhi* (Made in the Jiajing reign of the Great Ming).

Artistically this is one of the finest works of the Jiajing period. The geometric approach to surface design, a departure from the pictorial style of earlier carved lacquers, was well suited to the expression of vain wishes for the purpose of pleasing an emperor who had more desire than vision. Whereas earlier the attempt had been to create a three-dimensional effect in the representation of space and objects, here the carving is treated as a series of planes which are ingeniously exploited to give clarity to the design. In some areas the lacquer is carved down to the yellow ground, while in others the raised images stand out from red lacquer dipters. The surface of the images in relief are basically flat (see particularly the view of the outside edge), but the raised frames and the *shou* character are channeled to avoid broad flat areas and minimize the disparity of their scale to that of the finer lines. (The practice of channeling raised borders and frames, universal in the late Ming period, can be seen on carvings in various mediums and on wood furniture.) The quality of this dish’s lacquer is good and the workmanship excellent. Generally speaking, lacquer of the second half of the Ming period is not as lustrous as in the early Ming period, and the red color is not as strong and rich.

The dragons on the dish are all missing one of the five claws from each foot. This is quite a common phenomenon on lacquers and porcelains of the Jiajing and Wanli periods. The claws might have been removed when a palace piece was given by the emperor to a member of the nobility or a senior official and thus “downgraded.” A writer of the Wanli period recorded that pieces of lacquer were stolen from the palace and subsequently sold in the flea market in Peking after the dragons had been relieved of one of their five claws.1

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1. In Taoist iconography the Eight Treasures are usually the flaming pearl, cash, a double-lozenge (*fangsheng*), a pair of books, a scroll (painting), a stone chime, a pair of horns, and an artemisia leaf. On this dish, the scroll, stone chime, and artemisia leaf are replaced by a single horn, three flaming pearls, and a coral. Although Taoism is a native Chinese institution, much of its ritual and iconography are derived from Buddhism. For example, the very idea of the Eight Treasures is taken from Sino-Tibetan Buddhist art as exemplified by number 49, and the motif of the three flaming pearls or jewels is a direct borrowing (again see no. 49).
Circular dish with decoration of a shou character

Carved polychrome lacquer (ticai); mark on base
D. 6 1/8 in. (15.6 cm)
China, Ming period, reign of Jiajing (1522–67)

The character that fills the center of this dish is a more elaborate version of the one on number 34, and the technique is that of number 33. As on number 34, one of the five claws on each of the dragons’ feet has been removed. An interesting feature of this dish is the pattern incised on the yellow ground. Since the yellow foundation layer is of relatively soft composition, it would not have been possible to carve on it one of the very fine diaper patterns found on hard lacquer grounds (compare no. 34). The simple pattern used on this dish seems to have been derived from the background patterns on archaic or archaistic bronzes.

The boldly written mark, engraved and gilded on the red base, suggests a date late in the reign of Jiajing.
36 Square tray

Carved red and yellow lacquer
L., w. 10\(\frac{1}{2}\) in. (25.6 cm); H. 2\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. (5.4 cm)
China, Ming period, second half of the 16th century

This tray is of a standard type produced during the reigns of Jiajing and Wanli. A rectangular tray with similar borders and pictorial decoration is in the Tokyo National Museum.\(^1\) Several pieces also with borders of the same design and with dragons as the principal decoration are known, including one in the Palace Museum in Peking dated 1595.\(^2\) Another rectangular tray with dragons, also dated 1595, is in a Japanese collection.\(^3\)

The lacquer on the front of the tray is built up of a red layer over a yellow layer, and a two-color decoration is achieved by carving to varying depths to reach the red and yellow lacquer layers. There is a suggestion of a conscious imitation of the Yongle style in both the main decoration and the revived use of the “cloud collar” motif on the tray’s indented corners. That later Ming artists mimicked the Yongle style seems confirmed by a rectangular tray of the same type in the Palace Museum, Taipei, which has similar borders, a decoration of dragons, and a mark of Yongle on the back.\(^4\) The calligraphy style of this mark as well as the manner of its engraving and gilding are more typical of the Qing than the Ming period. It is likely that the tray in the Palace Museum in Taipei was a product of the late Ming period but was mistaken for an early Ming work when the mark was added in the Qing period. Like the Irving tray, this tray employs two lacquer layers of yellow and red, in this case with the yellow over the red. The piece must date from the same period as others of this group.

The relief carving of the tray shown here has a flatish surface on which the incised lines are of uniform width and evenly spaced, indicating that the same cutting tool was used for most of the lines. This is particularly evident on the petals of the floral scroll on the outside walls of the tray.

37 **Rectangular box with dragon decoration**

Carved polychrome lacquer (*ticai*)
L. 12 3/4 in. (32.5 cm); w. 8 in. (20.4 cm); h. 4 in. (10 cm)
China, Ming period, reign of Wanli (1573–1620)

Boxes of this type, with indented corners, became popular during the Wanli reign and remained so until the end of the Ming Dynasty. A number of such boxes in lacquer and porcelain are still extant, most of them highly decorated in polychrome. They were used principally as presentation boxes that held important documents or gifts. On this box the lacquer pile is made up of five color layers, green, red, yellow, green, and red in sequence from bottom to top, and the carving is similar in manner to that of number 33.

Although there is no reign mark on this box, its dating is fairly secure because there are a number of boxes that are exactly the same in construction, technique, and decorative design, all dated to the Wanli era by engraved and gilded marks on their bases. In particular, two boxes in the Palace Museum in Peking, of identical design and color scheme to the Irving box, are both dated to the year 1592.'

This box and the two Palace Museum boxes are in the style of official workshops in terms of both design and workmanship, but there are only four claws to the dragons’ feet on all three boxes. The boxes might have been made as gifts presented to lower orders of the nobility.

38  **Bowl with dragon decoration**

Carved red lacquer; mark on base  
D. 5 ⅛ in. (13.7 cm); H. 2 ⅞ in. (7.4 cm)  
China, Ming period, dated 1589

The dragon’s mane and the tufts of hair at the joints of its legs are coated with green lacquer, probably in imitation of carved polychrome lacquer (see no. 33).

The thickness of the lacquer, the five-clawed dragon, and the well-written mark on the base all point to the official workshop as the source for this bowl. The engraved and gilded mark reads: **Da Ming Wanli jichou nian zhi** (Made in the year of jichou in the reign of Wanli), dating the bowl to 1589. A number of carved lacquers from official workshops of the Jiajing and Wanli reigns are marked with the year of production. The Wanli pieces are mostly dated to the last decade of the sixteenth century.

However, as with all inscriptions on lacquer of the Ming period, these marks should be read with caution. A very similar bowl in yellow carved lacquer in the Palace Museum, Peking, has the date “**yichou year of Wanli**” inscribed in the same manner; however, there was no **yichou year** (corresponding to 1565 or
1625) in the reign of Wanli (1573–1620). As is observed in the catalogue entry for the Palace Museum piece, the shape of the bowl is typical of the Jiajing reign, but the carving is characteristic of Wanli’s time. The same can be said of the Irving Collection bowl. (See also the entry for number 28.)

1. Palace Museum, 1985, no. 244.

39 Circular dish with full-face dragon

Carved red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 6¼ in. (15.9 cm)
China, Ming period, reign of Wanli (1573–1620)

The frontal dragon made its first appearance in the middle of the sixteenth century and became the most common form of dragon in the decorative arts of the late Ming period, including ceremonial costumes, porcelain, and carvings in different materials.

The relative roughness of the carving on this object and the uneven yellow lacquer ground are signs of a decline in workmanship in the official workshops toward the end of the Wanli reign. The mark on the back reads: Da Ming Wanli nian zhi (Made in the Wanli reign of the Great Ming).
Circular incense box with design of lichees

Carved red lacquer
D. 3 1/8 in. (7.9 cm); H. 1 1/4 in. (3.7 cm)
China, late Ming period, late 16th–early 17th century

A curious development in the history of the art of carved lacquer was the incorporation of diaper patterns into pictorial decoration in the late fourteenth century. For landscape scenes, a convention was quickly established in which a certain family of diapers were used to represent sky and others to designate water and land (see no. 23). The land diapers resembled or were taken directly from patterns on late Song and Yuan textiles, particularly brocades, which were known as brocade-ground patterns. By the beginning of the fifteenth century at the latest, diaper patterns found their way into floral decoration. While great pains were taken to achieve a realistic depiction of flowers and plants, the flower’s corolla was sometimes represented by a brocade pattern or land-type diaper. In the sixteenth century diapers came into use as the background for nonrepresentational decoration (see no. 35). This seems a more logical use for purely geometric patterns (especially as a good model, at least superficially, for this system of two-tiered decoration existed in revered archaic bronzes, where the “thunder pattern” made up of repeating square spirals serves as background for the raised design of masks and bosses). In the late sixteenth century another curious combination occurred in which the surfaces of fruits, particularly the lichee, were decorated with land-type diapers. This box exemplifies that decorative method.

The borrowing by one artistic medium of forms and decorative motifs from another occurred frequently at this time, and as a result there appeared small boxes of jade and gilt bronze that are exact copies of lacquer boxes. These small boxes were used as incense containers, and the bronze ones were often made as part of an incense-burning set (such a set is shown on the table in no. 23). Lacquer incense boxes were popular in both China and Japan, and quite a few have survived to this day.

A number of incense boxes are heavy for their size, including this one, and may have metal substrates. The thick relacquering on the leaves of the lichee design (probably done in Japan) has rather obscured the original carving.

2. Ibid., fig. M.
Circular box with decoration of chrysanthemums and a praying mantis

Carved polychrome lacquer (tīcai)
D. 2 3/4 in. (7 cm); H. 1 1/8 in. (2.9 cm)
China, Ming period, 16th century

This type of polychrome carved lacquer was probably produced for domestic use and export in commercial workshops in southern China. Such objects have been preserved in some quantity in Japan, but few, if any, have survived in China.¹

Free of the heavy symbolism and hackneyed imagery that characterize decoration of official ware, this box is light and delicate in more ways than one. The box’s surprising lightness, in spite of its thick lacquer coating, indicates that the substrate is probably a thin wooden core. There are nine thin layers altogether of red, green, and yellow lacquer, with a red layer on top. The carver cut through to different levels to create the colorful composition of a praying mantis among chrysanthemums. On certain parts of the design, such as the petals and leaves, the carving was delicately done to reveal two or three colors and produce an effect of shading.

¹ In the collection of the Tokugawa Art Museum is an incense box of the same type and dimensions and also a cup stand decorated in the same technique. Both are illustrated in Chado Shiryōkan, 1989, nos. 45, 48.
Circular box depicting a child’s bath

Carved red lacquer
D. 2¼ in. (6.5 cm)
China, Ming period, late 16th—early 17th century

This incense box is an example of another type popular during the late Ming period. The theme of bathing a child is an old one in Chinese painting and is often employed in decorative arts of the Ming period. Here the three-figure composition is identical to that on a similar incense box in the Tokugawa Art Museum,1 but the sculptural treatment is closer to the carving on a box in the Palace Museum, Taipei.2 Recent repolishing of the lacquer surface of this box has revealed the original color of the lacquer but has given the surface an unnatural sheen and obscured the finer lines of the carving. The interior and the recessed base retain their natural warm brown color.

43 Circular box with design of a dragon in clouds

Carved red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 5 ⅛ in. (12.9 cm); H. 1 ⅞ in. (4.5 cm)
China, Qing period, reign of Qianlong (1736–95)

This box, with its dome-shaped cover in red carved lacquer over a buff ground, is a standard product of the palace workshops of the Qianlong reign. Probably it was seldom put to practical use; the carving has remained sharp and crisp, but the surface lacks the lustrous sheen that comes with constant handling over a period of time.

Incised and gilded on the black base is the mark: Da Qing Qianlong nian zhi (Made in the Qianlong reign of the Great Qing) and a description of the box: yunlong baohe (Cloud-and-dragon treasure box). The description probably corresponded to the entry for the box in the inventory of articles in the imperial household. Incised inscriptions of this type are a common feature of Qing imperial wares.

A mate to this cloud-and-dragon box is in the Palace Museum, Peking.¹

44  *Brush holder depicting scholars in a garden*

Carved red lacquer  
H. 6¼ in. (16.5 cm); D. 6¼ in. (17.1 cm)  
China, Qing period, 18th century

Palace workshops in the early Qing period were staffed with many recruits from the Jiangnan area, especially those skilled in the carving of ivory and of jade and other hard stones. They brought with them the styles and patterns prominent in the decorative arts of the Jiangnan region during the seventeenth century. The theme of the decoration on this brush holder is a gathering of scholars in a garden. Various elements of the scene are taken from a composition, popular with artists in the Jiangnan area in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, entitled “Elegant gathering in the West Garden.” The composition claimed an ancestry from the eleventh-century artist Li Gonglin, who was supposed to have recorded in a painting the gathering of literati and artists which took place in the year 1087 in the West Garden of the residence of Wang Shen, who was a son-in-law of the emperor Yingzong of the Song Dynasty.

The “elegance” of the scene on this brush holder is somewhat compromised by the addition of borders of shou (longevity) characters in two alternating versions arranged along the top and ruyi (wish-granting) cloud heads along the bottom. Such overt expressions of worldly wishes would have been anathema to the literati artists of the late Ming period, for whom the participants in the elegant gathering were people of the highest moral and artistic order.

The brocade-ground patterns representing air, water,
and land follow Ming convention, but the large scale of the waves and an awkwardness in the treatment of the land diaper betray the work of a secondary tradition.

45 Jue-shaped box
Carved red and green lacquer; mark on base
L. 5 1/6 in. (13 cm); w. 3 1/6 in. (9.1 cm); H. 1 1/4 in. (3.2 cm)
China, Qing period, reign of Qianlong (1736–45)

Much of Qing imperial art, especially from the reign of Qianlong, was inspired by archaism. The form of this box is ultimately derived from a type of jade pendant of the Han period (206 B.C.–A.D. 220), identified by some scholars as the jue, which consists of an oval ring with a pointed end and has dragons in openwork or high relief on both sides. Quite a few examples of this type of ancient jade ornament are in the Palace Museum in Taipei, not all of them authentically Han.† In adopting the jue form for this lacquer piece the artist sculpted the dragons so that their bodies seem to wind up over the top of the box. The dragons have been given archaic markings. The carving, including the green brocade ground, is executed with meticulous care.

On the flat base is engraved and gilded the mark: Qianlong nian zhi (Made in the Qianlong reign), written in regular script.

Carved lacquer vessels in imitation of archaic or archaistic bronzes are also known.‡ The decoration on the splayed foot of number 46 in this catalogue is an archaic bronze pattern.

Octagonal box with Taoist scene

Carved red lacquer
D. 11 in. (28 cm); H. 8½ in. (22 cm)
China, Qing period, reign of Qianlong (1736–95)

An octagonal box with a high, dome-shaped lid was usually fitted with a tray, with recesses for holding cups, which rested on a ledge at the mouth of the lower half of the box. The tray and cups are missing from this example.

The top of the box is decorated with a scene of a gathering of Taoist immortals, making the piece a most suitable container for serving wine at birthday banquets. On the sides are sixteen trapezoidal panels with flower-and-insect decoration. The splayed foot is embellished with a geometric pattern derived from decoration on archaic bronzes.

1. Two earlier boxes of this shape are known, both with basketry side panels. One in the Honolulu Academy of Arts, dated 1614 and complete with tray and six cups, is described and illustrated in Watt, 1985, no. 7; the other, in the Museum für Kunsthandwerk, Frankfurt, dated 1719 and with the tray but not the seven cups it held, is described and illustrated in Werner Speiser, Lackkunst in Ostasien (Baden-Baden: Holle Verlag, 1965), pp. 230–31.
47  Cabinet with scenes of figures in a landscape

Carved red lacquer with gilt bronze fittings
L. 14\(\frac{1}{4}\) in. (36 cm); w. 7\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. (20 cm); h. 13 in. (33 cm)
China, Qing period, reign of Qianlong (1736–95)

This standard piece of Qing palace furniture has the appearance of twin cabinets held together by a gilt bronze handle between the two head drawers. The two hinged doors are separated by a partition; each opens to two compartments with a middle drawer. The sides are decorated with six panels of figures in a landscape, and the tops of the two head drawers display scenes of deer in a landscape. As with all carved lacquer from Qianlong workshops, the carving is crisp and precise.

There is a similar cabinet in the collection of the Palace Museum in Peking.\(^1\)

48 Pedestaled dish with scalloped rim

Red and black lacquer with engraved-gold decoration (qiangjin)

D. 9 in. (23 cm); H. 2 in. (5.1 cm)

China, late Song to Yuan period, 13th century

The six-lobed scalloped edge of this dish corresponds exactly to the outline of a multi-tiered box, also decorated in the qiangjin (engraved-gold) technique, which was excavated from a Southern Song tomb in Wujin, Jiangsu Province. The raised lip along the rim is also a feature of Southern Song lacquer (see no. 1). The style of the engraving, combining broad grooves with finely incised lines which are unevenly spaced, is also in accordance with the technique of the Southern Song qiangjin lacquers found in Wujin.

The only surprising aspect of this dish is the main decoration in the center, which represents “lions playing with the brocade ball.” Four lions circle around a brocade ball in the center, each holding in its mouth a ribbon which issues from the ball. The rest of the space is filled with flowing ribbons and cloud motifs. While the “lion and brocade ball” was a motif universally popular in decorative arts of the mid-Ming period, it seems to have originated in the north during the Southern Song/Jin period. So far the only finds of qiangjin lacquer have been in the south, in Jiangsu Province. Nevertheless, whatever its place of manufacture, the dish surely dates back at least to the Yuan period, and a late Song date cannot be ruled out.

The borders are decorated with rows of leaf-shaped forms. The floral sprays on the outside of the dish resemble in the manner of their execution floral sprays on Southern Song qiangjin lacquer from Wujin.

A plain black lacquer dish of similar form is in the Lee family collection.

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2. While the motif is not seen on Song ceramics in southern China, it does appear on molded bricks in Jin territory in the north. See Wang Xiasheng, “Excavation of a Jin Dynasty Tomb with Wall Painting at Licungou, Changzhi County, Shanxi Province” (in Chinese), Kaogu, no. 7 (1965), pp. 352–456, fig. 4.

49 Sutra covers

Red lacquer with engraved-gold decoration (qiāngjin); inscription inside top cover
L. 28 ¼ in. (72.5 cm); W. 10 ¼ in. (26.7 cm); H. of each cover 1 ¾ in. (3 cm)
China, Ming period, ca. 1410

This pair of lacquered wooden boards was made as covers for the sutra Xianjie qianfoming jing— one of the 108 volumes of the bKa’-gyur (Ganjur in Chinese), the Tibetan Buddhist canon, which was printed in Peking in 1410 by order of the Ming emperor Chengzu. One set of the bKa’-gyur was presented by Chengzu to Kun-bkraš-pa, the abbot of the Sa-skya monastery in Tibet who visited the Chinese capital (then still in Nanking) in the years 1413–14. All the volumes in this set had covers with identical decoration in qiāngjin on the exterior and with the contents of the volume inscribed in qiāngjin inside the top cover. The entire set was preserved in the Sa-skya monastery from that time until the Cultural Revolution, when it was removed to the Potala temple. The decoration on this pair of covers is identical to that on the Sa-skya set, which now consists of 106 volumes.

The central motif on both boards is the triple flaming jewel (tīrathāna), which is flanked by four of the Eight (auspicious) Treasures. The treasures on the top board are the wheel of the law, Buddhist banner, double fish, and precious vase; on the bottom board are the parasol, conch, endless knot, and lotus flower. The treasures are framed and supported by a floral scroll. The outer borders are made up of lotus panels. At the ends of the boards on the vertical edges, floral scrolls issue from the mouth of an animal mask (kīrtimukha). Another pair of sutra covers with the same decoration is in a collection in Japan. Another set of the bKa’-gyur, presented to the Sera monastery in 1416 and of which 103 volumes are still preserved there, has covers with less elaborate but similar decoration (see note 3).

The significance of this pair of qiāngjin covers for lacquer history is manifold. They provide the earliest examples of official Ming-style qiāngjin work. A comparison with number 48 demonstrates the changes that took place in engraving technique during the hundred years between the making of the dish and the covers. The grooves in the earlier work are sharply cut by a straight-edged instrument that is freely used, as a pencil is in a sketch. The incisions on the sutra covers, however, are more evenly spaced and of even width; they appear to have been made by a channeling tool that produced a U-shaped groove.

The emperor Chengzu was known to have sent several ambassadors to Japan with gifts of silks and lacquer, both carved and qiāngjin. A number of extant pieces of carved lacquer correspond to descriptions in the gift lists which are preserved in Japan. However, hitherto no known example of qiāngjin lacquer has been identifiable as of the type sent to Japan. The recently recognized bKa’-gyur sutra covers now provide a clue as to the style and appearance of qiāngjin lacquer from the official workshops of the early fifteenth century.
The fact or at least assumption that the bKa’-’gyur was printed in Peking also raises the question whether there were lacquer workshops in Peking during the Yongle era, that is, the emperor Chengzü’s reign. Chinese tradition has it that official workshops were set up during the Yongle era in Peking, but this has been strongly disputed by some Western scholars. It seems reasonable to assume that the sutra covers were made in the place where the sutras were printed.

The color of the sutra covers also confirms the Ming predilection for the use of red, as opposed to black, lacquer.

As noted in the discussion of Ryukyuan lacquer, there appears to have been a time lag between the changeover of qiangjin technique in China and that in the Ryukyus. Fifteenth-century Ryukyuan qiangjin lacquer followed fourteenth-century Chinese motifs and techniques. It was not until the early sixteenth century that the Ryukyuan adopt the Ming style.

This pair of sutra covers is an extremely important example of Sino-Tibetan art of the Yongle era, whose impact on Chinese decorative arts was major and lasted for about a century following the reign of Yongle. A detailed discussion of this subject, however, is outside the scope of a catalogue of lacquer.

1. In Buddhist cosmology, time is divided into three eras (kalpa in Sanskrit): past, present, and future. During each era one thousand Buddhas are born. The sutra Xianjie qianfoming jing lists the names of the thousand Buddhas born in the xianjie (Bhadarakalpa in Sanskrit), the present era or “good era.”
Circular dish with dragon

Red lacquer with filled-in and engraved-gold decoration; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 6¼ in. (15.8 cm)
China, Ming period, dated 1595

Both the polish-reveal and inlay techniques of filled-in lacquer were employed in the decoration of this dish (see p. 34). After the color fields were in place and the surface polished, the outlines and details were engraved and gilded. Finely divided gold powder was used for the gilding; some of it was caught
in the fine scratch marks made during the polishing process by larger particles of tempering material in the lacquer (this can only be seen under magnification). Gilding with fine gold powder is much more durable than that done with gold foil, but it also uses more gold. The brilliant effect of the decoration on this dish, despite its trite design, can be attributed to the gilding’s excellent state of preservation.

Much filled-in lacquerware was made during the Wanli era, and a large quantity was produced in the year 1595. Both this dish and number 52 were made in that year. Two dishes in the Hong Kong Museum of Art which are very similar to this dish, one of them with an identical dragon, also bear the same year mark as this dish: *Da Ming Wanli yiwe i nian zhi* (Made in the yiwei year [1595] of the reign of Wanli of the Great Ming). 1

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51  **Rectangular tray with double dragon**

Polychrome lacquer with filled-in and engraved-gold decoration

L. 14¼ in. (37 cm); W. 6⅞ in. (15.7 cm)

China, Ming period, reign of Wanli (1573–1620)

This tray is decorated in the same technique as numbers 50 and 52. An interesting feature of this piece is the widely spaced series of cracks on both the top surface and the smooth base. Parallel cracks of the same kind, known as “snake-belly cracks,” are often seen on the undersides of lacquered zithers (*qin*) of the late Ming period. This may be an indication that the lacquer used for *tianqi* (filled-in) lacquer was similar in composition to that used for the *qin*. It is known that the lacquer used on the *qin* contains a substantial amount of temper in the form of powdered bone, horn, ash, sandstone, or ceramics (powdered deer’s antler was said to be best). The surface of *tianqi* lacquer, although highly polished, can be seen under magnification to have a high temper content, especially in small areas of inlay. It may have been employed that way because tempered lacquer sets more easily than untempered lacquer when in thicker layers or in the larger lumps used for inlay.

One use of this tray was to hold handscrolls (of painting or calligraphy). Both its form and its decoration are typical of the Wanli era.
52. *Octagonal box with tree dragon*

Red and yellow lacquer with filled-in and engraved-gold decoration; mark on base
D. 8¾ in. (22.3 cm); H. 4¾ in. (12.1 cm)
China, Ming period, dated 1595

This box is decorated in the same technique as number 50. The small independent units, for instance the wisps of clouds, are actual inlays, while the finer details of the larger and more complex elements, such as the tree dragon and the brocade ground, are done in the polish-reveal technique.

The pine tree, an emblem of longevity in the late Ming period, was often twisted into the character *shou* (longevity) written in one continuous stroke (see no. 33). However, to turn the pine tree into a dragon, as on this box, is to take this fanciful style one step
further. The transformation might have been inspired by the Taoist view that all living things can be regarded as an expression of “breath” or “life force.” A more practical explanation is the subtly expressed obsequious wish that the emperor (the dragon) might live as long as the pine tree.

This box carries the same mark on its base as number 50, also engraved and gilded.
53 Square box with dragon

Red lacquer with filled-in and engraved-gold decoration; mark on base (see Appendix)
L., w. 10 3/8 in. (25.7 cm); h. 4 3/8 in. (11.9 cm)
China, Ming period, dated 1610

The filled-in part of this box’s decoration is done almost entirely in the polish-reveal method and looks as if it has been painted on. Much of the gilding in the engraved lines is lost.

The mark on the base of this box reads: Da Ming Wanli gengxu nian zhi (Made in the gengxu year [1610] of the Wanli reign of the Great Ming). There is another square box of similar form dated 1601.1

Nonagonal tray with figures in a landscape

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 19 3/8 in. (49.2 cm)
China, Yuan period (1279–1368)

Decorated surfaces with odd-numbered sides are characteristic of Yuan decorative arts, perhaps reflecting the experimental spirit of the time. In addition to creating an unusual shape, the maker of this tray has chosen to position the pictorial decoration so that the bottom of the picture ends in a point. Because of a slight unevenness in the lengths of the sides, this bottom point is a little off center, a design quirk that breaks the rigidity and static feeling imposed by a polygonal frame and seems to allow the pictorial space to expand, or at least breathe.

The composition is separated into halves by a line of clouds or mist. Above, a group of older men are drinking in relaxed poses under a pine tree; below, two young officials of high rank arriving on horseback are followed by a standard bearer and a servant holding a brocade bag which might contain a bundle of scrolls or possibly a zither (incorrectly held). The convention of indicating arrival or transition by placing figures before a bridge had by this time been well established in Chinese illustrative painting on hanging scrolls. (The same convention is employed in number 66.) The party is preceded by two guards carrying halberds. At the upper right other processional banners are half-visible behind a hill, indicating the approach of more dignitaries.

In the upper scene, a recumbent deer on the left and a cranelike bird to the right of the two boys serving wine are signs that this part of the picture represents the Taoist paradise or perhaps a senior official’s retirement villa furnished with all the trappings that hint of immortality. Either way, the entire representation can be interpreted as an allegory of two aspects of human desire: for wealth and honor in this world (the lower scene) and for otium liberale in the eternal garden.

Technically, this tray is both comprehensive and representative. It displays almost every mannerism and artistic conceit of the Yuan decorative artist, from the obscuring mist occupying the center of the composition to the way in which the pine tree is depicted, from the complex designs on the figures’ clothing to the extraordinarily inventive and varied patterning of the petals in the floral scroll borders. All mother-of-pearl decoration of the subsequent three centuries was derived from the style illustrated here.
55 Octagonal dish with flowering plum and birds

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 11⅞ in. (29.5 cm)
China, Yuan to early Ming period, 14th century

The subject of prunus (flowering plum) and sparrow was popular in small-format paintings of the Southern Song period. In the mid-thirteenth century the artist Song Boren published a book of one hundred woodblock prints with accompanying poems, entitled Meihua xishen pu (Manual of plum-blossom likeness), which traces the life of a blossom from unopened bud to the last falling petal. Although meant to be appreciated as a work of art in itself, the manual became immensely popular for use by decorative artists and, reprinted many times, provided models for generations of artisans—including the one who designed this dish. Although not every blossom on the dish is derived from an image in the manual, some

correspondences are unmistakable; see the detail and figure 15.

The method of inlay on this dish was an early attempt to use the iridescence of the mollusk shells for naturalistic color effect. The same method was used on number 56, a work of a slightly later date.

It is not easy to assign a precise date to this dish. Its rather close conformity to standardized thirteenth-century representations of the plum blossom is not an absolute guide to the dating because it is not known how long it remained in fashion to follow the Meihua xishen pu. (It can certainly be said that by the late
Ming period, plum blossoms in the decorative arts had shed all traces of influences from the manual. One indication of an early date for the dish is the ring of star-shaped inlays at the inner edge of the cavetto. A border like this and also a related one of circular dots are seen on other Yuan mother-of-pearl lacquer pieces, as well as on Koryo sutra boxes (see fig. 33, pp. 307). The only element in the decoration that hints at the early Ming style is the border decoration of single chrysanthemum sprays.

1. On the Meihua xishen pu, see Maggie Rickford et al., Bones of Jade, Soul of Ice, exh. cat. (New Haven: Yale University Art Gallery, 1985), p. 28, figs. 3a, b, and no. 52a.

56 Rectangular tray with flowering plum and birds

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 24 3/8 in. (62 cm); W. 11 1/4 in. (30 cm)
China, Ming period, early 15th century

This tray is in every way like number 55, except that it is larger, rectangular in shape, and of a later date. Again, some of the blossoms are based directly on the Meihua xishen pu.
Square box with indented corners

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
L., w. 8 3/4 in. (20.6 cm); H. 6 3/4 in. (16.4 cm)
China, late Yuan to early Ming period, late 14th–early 15th century

The decoration of the top of this box is related to those of two other boxes; all three must have been derived from the same pattern book. The scenes on the two other boxes, nearly identical to each other, differ from the Irving box in having the forecourt with ladies of leisure and their pet dogs replaced by a more spacious fenced yard containing villagers holding farming tools, presumably about to set off to work in the fields, accompanied by their dog. There is no need to postulate that the pieces are of varying dates, since the differences between them do not result from progressive simplification of the same composition (as is the case with no. 58) but from the adaptation of parts of existing designs to serve the same pictorial purpose in different compositions. The decoration on the Irving box conjures up a very different atmosphere from
that on the other two boxes, but there is remarkably little internal inconsistency (as exists in no. 58) in any of the boxes, even though their compositions were assembled by taking components from different “originals.” Moreover, all three boxes have in common their treatment of inlay and of the architectural elements on the lids, where every panel and every column is decorated with a separate pattern. Pictorially the rustic scene on the two other boxes conforms more to the style of the Yuan period, but the Irving box retains elements of Yuan design and inlay technique and can be considered a work of the late Yuan to early Ming period.

1. The two boxes are in private collections; see Tokyo National Museum, 1981, no. 25; and Garner, 1979, pls. 162-64.
This tray is one of six mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquers in various museums with nearly identical designs. They were not necessarily made in the same workshop, but the same pattern must have been used by their makers. The scene is that of a gathering of literati to enjoy recreational pursuits such as painting and calligraphy, music, and Chinese chess (qì, also known in the West by the Japanese name go). However, on only one of the six pieces, the box in the Linden-Museum, Stuttgart, does the decoration give a clear depiction of all these activities; it is also only on this box that the postures of the figures and the relationships between them can readily be interpreted. Without the Stuttgart box, the decoration on the others is not always understandable. For example, on the Irving tray the two porters holding ceremonial fans at the gateway inexplicably look away from the approaching guests instead of welcoming them. On the Stuttgart box, the pair’s attention is temporarily attracted by a dancing crane behind the gate and a boy dancing in imitation of the crane. On the Irving Collection dish, however, the crane and the boy are absent, and the gatekeepers stare at the rocky cliff. This suggests that separate templates were used for different parts of the design, or that the craftsmen failed to notice what was happening in the picture that was the original model. There are also other abbreviations in the design on the Irving tray, and as a result the scene of a group of figures viewing a painting (see detail) is the only part of the composition in which the activity is clearly represented.

There is no doubt in this author’s mind that the Stuttgart box is a work of the fourteenth century. In addition to its main pictorial decoration being the most complete and coherent in this group, the box also displays all the characteristics of Yuan style and workmanship, such as a nine-sided shape (cf. no. 54), “cloud-collar” motifs on the shoulder, story scenes within ogival panels on the sides, and a band of circular dots along its foot-rim. It follows that the Irving tray, which carries an abbreviated version of a standard fourteenth-century decoration and retains some of the characteristics of the inlay work, but not the mannerisms, of Yuan design, is a work of the Ming period—perhaps dating well into the fifteenth century.
59  **Lozenge-shaped dish with border design of squirrels and grapes**

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay  
L. 11 1/4 in. (28.6 cm); w. 8 3/4 in. (21.6 cm)  
China, Ming period, 16th century  
Published: Arakawa, 1985 (see General Bibliography), no. 105.

This dish represents the mid-Ming style that began in the second half of the fifteenth century and lasted until the late sixteenth century in which extra-thin shell was used for inlay together with gold and silver foil (see no. 62). A clear understanding of the developmental stages of this style, which lasted for over a century, has still to be worked out.  
The main decoration on the dish is a garden scene with three musicians in a pavilion playing a bamboo pipe mouth organ (sheng), a zither (zheng), and what
look like clappers. Outside the pavilion is a group of three people of different ages, perhaps representing three generations. The boy in the group turns to pat a quadruped, the size of a dog but looking more like a cat. In the foreground a boy walks past the pavilion inelegantly holding a zither (qin) in a brocade wrapper. Taken as a whole the scene does not immediately make sense, and it is likely that the two groups of figures were taken from two different patterns (see discussion for no. 57).

The most interesting aspect of this dish is the border decoration of grapes and squirrels. This is one of the few motifs that was not a carryover from the Yuan period but made its first appearance in perhaps the early sixteenth century. The motif quickly became a favorite with lacquer artists of the Ryukyu Islands. Indeed, there are many striking parallels between the decoration on this dish and that on the Ryukyuan box (no. 162) in this catalogue, extending from the squirrel-and-grape motif to the treatment of the rocky borders of the garden paths. The parallels provide a clue to the origin of a distinct type of Ryukyuan lacquerware.
60  *Dish with foliated sides and figures in a landscape*

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay  
D. 10 1/2 in. (27 cm)  
China, Ming period, second half of the 16th century  
Published: Arakawa, 1985 (see General Bibliography), no. 47.

Like number 59, this dish is in the mid-Ming style and must fall between the middle of the fifteenth and the end of the sixteenth century. Its floral border retains characteristics of the fifteenth-century style. However, so many dishes of this type, and with the same border shape and decoration, carry central
pictorial designs that correspond to woodblock prints of the Wanli era (1573–1620) that this dish is most likely a work of the late sixteenth century.

Both the draftsmanship and the crafting of this dish are extraordinarily fine. Particularly impressive are the openwork cutting of the tree trunk and the dresses of the two elegantly costumed and coiffured ladies. Openwork cutting of the shell inlay may turn out to be one of the technical hallmarks of this period.
61 Circular box with scene of a departure

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 9 ¼ in. (23.2 cm); H. 3 ¾ in. (9.4 cm)
China, Ming period, late 16th–early 17th century

This finely worked box most likely belongs to the late Ming period. The treatment of the bamboo leaves and other foliage appears to have been directly influenced by woodblock prints, and decoration on the columns and panels of the building is kept to a minimum. The floral borders deliberately follow an
early Ming pattern but in style and treatment are still late Ming. Another archaizing characteristic of this box is the twisted (or plaited) metal wire around the circumference of the pictorial decoration and on the side borders, a feature seen far more often on products of the Ryukyu Islands than on Chinese wares of this period.

62. Fang-shaped vase

Bronze with gilding and black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay; mark on base
H. 5 3/8 in. (13.6 cm); L., w. 3 1/4 in. (8.3 cm)
China, Ming/Qing transitional period, mid-17th century

Towards the end of the Ming period in the first half of the seventeenth century there was a great fashion for bronze objects fashioned in archaic forms and inlaid with gold and silver wires. The most famous practitioner of this craft was an artist who signed his works Shishou (Old man of stone). He became so popular that nearly all pieces in the style produced during this period were “signed” with that name. Without
its lacquer decoration and with silver wire inlay, this vase would be a typical piece of shishou work.

Meanwhile, the fashion in mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer was to inlay extremely thin, highly iridescent shells (produced by boiling thick shells and separating the layers), together with gold and silver foil. Crushed metal foil and shell were used to represent the ground.

In this vase the two crafts are combined. On the lacquered base the mark: Yongshi zhibao (Treasure for ever), written in archaic script, is inlaid in mother-of-pearl. Such marks were made fashionable by rich houses which commissioned works with the private marks of the household. Marks of a similar nature are also found on porcelain of this period.

63 **Oval dish with design of antiquities**

Lacquer with mother-of-pearl and gold inlay; mark on base

L. 4 1/4 in. (12.1 cm); w. 3 3/4 in. (9.5 cm)

China, Qing period, Kangxi era (1662–1722)

This dish represents the final phase in the long history of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer. Technically it follows the class of lacquer typified by number 62. In this style, which began in the early Qing period, landscapes and figures gradually gave way to geometric patterns executed in inlay work of extreme fineness and precision. Occasionally there are representations of still lifes, such as the archaic vessels on this dish, and
floral borders. Some works are signed by their makers, but the majority of pieces of this type bear the "signature" of the most famous artist of this craft, Jiang Qianli. Little is known of the life and dates of Jiang Qianli, and there is even some uncertainty regarding his surname; the signature is usually just the given name, Qianli, and there are several surnames associated with him, all pronounced Jiang. His fame was such that a large number of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquers produced in the Ryukyus during the eighteenth century, some of which have nothing to do with the Jiang Qianli style, also bear the mark of Qianli (see no. 167).

The mark on the back of this dish is not that of the artist but another private mark like that on number 62. It reads: Yutang jiaoan (For delectation of the Jade Hall). The Jade Hall (yutang) is a classical reference to officials of the highest rank. The very rich (and very wicked) prime minister Yan Song (1480–1567) of the Jiajing era of the Ming period was said to have used the private mark Yutang jiaoan (Fine ware for the Jade Hall) on works of art commissioned for his household. In applying the Yutang mark to this dish the artist was implying that it is a work of very high quality.

1. For more illustrations of floral borders seen on this class of inlaid lacquer see Wei Songqing, "On a Pair of Bookshelves of the Ching Period" (in Chinese), Wenwu, no. 11 (1959), pp. 59–61.
2. See entry for number 167 and Lee, 1972, p. 205, pl. 140.

64 Square box

Carved red lacquer; gilt basketry panels
L., w. 5 1/2 in. (14.6 cm); H. 3 3/8 in. (9.1 cm)
China, late Ming period, early 17th century

Lacquerwares with basketry panels are usually decorated by oil painting or mother-of-pearl inlay. This is one of the rare examples with carved lacquer. The quality of the lacquer is not unlike that of number 42. The carving is executed with great care and a certain degree of rustic charm, especially evident in the treatment of the birds and the rock. The box is likely to be a product of Fujian Province, although the possibility of a Ryukyuan provenance cannot be dismissed (see pp. 335–36).

A lacquer box with basketry panels and of similar shape, in the Cleveland Museum of Art, is dated to the year 1609.

1. Watt, 1985, no. 29.
65 *Rectangular box with flower-and-bird decoration*

Black lacquer painted with lacquer and oil colors; basketry panels
L. 18¾ in. (46.7 cm); W. 12 in. (30.5 cm); H. 4¼ in. (11.3 cm)
China, late Ming period, late 16th–early 17th century

This is one of the most common forms of lacquer box with basketry panels (or, basket with lacquer panels), one that became very popular in south China in the late Ming period. A number of boxes of this type with similar dimensions are known.¹ They were used as presentation boxes for gifts and important documents, and for storage purposes.

The painting on the cover probably came from a pattern book, either hand-drawn or printed from wood blocks. Multi-block color printing began in China in the late sixteenth century. The painter of this box used nearly all the colors in lacquer and oil available to artists at the time.

¹. Watt, 1985, nos. 23–27.
66  Rectangular box with scene of a reception

Red lacquer painted with lacquer and oil colors; basketry panels; inscription on base (see Appendix)
L. 27 3/4 in. (70.5 cm); W. 10 3/4 in. (26 cm); H. 4 3/4 in. (10.8 cm)
China, late Ming to early Qing period, 17th century

In the seventeenth century, toward the end of the Ming period, elongated rectangular boxes with straight sides like this one became the more fashionable type of lacquer basketry container, replacing the earlier shapes represented by number 65.

The painted decoration on the top surface is done mostly in oil colors on the red lacquer and technically is very much like contemporary Ryukyuan work (see no. 174). Arranging the composition in a narrow vertical format poses no problem for the artist because the tall, narrow hanging scroll was a favored form of early-seventeenth-century artists. As on most boxes of this type, the scene represented is the arrival of guests at a grand reception. Seated in a building, the reception hall, at the upper right of the painting are the host and hostess. In front of the host is a member of the household about to receive a messenger dressed in pink, who approaches holding out in both hands the "calling card" of one of the guests. The guests themselves, shown in the lower part of the painting, are about to cross a stone bridge that would lead to the entrance of the house (not seen in the picture). Just inside the entrance, in the middle of the painting, is a group of musicians playing festive music behind silk curtains (detail). They wear Mongol-style hats, which, after the Yuan (Mongol) period, became part of the "uniform" of professional musicians and petty officers in government service. A group of children watch the scene from the veranda of the reception hall, and at the top of the painting, young women with fashionable coiffures can be seen on the upper story of the living quarters at the back of the house.

On the box's black lacquered base is an inscription written in gold lacquer: Minchuan Xiamen Zhang Wencan ban (Acquired by Zhang Wencan of Xiamen, Minchuan). Minchuan was probably a location in Fujian Province, where there were a number of manufacturing centers for lacquered basketry articles.
67 Rectangular box with story illustrations

Red lacquer with gold and oil colors; inscription inside lid
L. 19 1/4 in. (49.5 cm); W. 4 in. (10.2 cm); H. 2 3/4 in. (7.1 cm)
China, late Ming to early Qing period, late 16th–17th century

This box was probably a container for a scroll painting. The paintings that decorate it, enclosed within ogival panels, are done in gold outline (in place of the ink in a painting on paper) and completed with oil colors. The gold line was achieved by first painting on the lacquer base and then applying gold in the form of powder or thin foil.

The main decoration on the top of the box is a scene of a visit. A man in official costume, having dismounted, is talking to an old man seated in front of a house. Above this scene is a pair of cranes and below a pair of leaping golden carps about to be transformed into dragons. The paintings on the sides illustrate popular stories.

Written on the black lacquer inside the lid is an inscription containing a cyclical date: Renwu di bei. The year renwu corresponds to either 1582 or 1642.
Circular food box with dragons

Black and red lacquer painted with gold, lacquer, and oil colors
D. 22 3/4 in. (57.5 cm); H. 8 1/2 in. (21.7 cm)
China, Qing period, 18th–19th century

This box is of the type used to transport food in the Qing palace and was reportedly removed from the palace kitchen at the beginning of this century. The design on the lid, dragons and clouds surrounding a circular character shou (longevity), is also painted inside the box on a red ground. The painting technique used on the exterior of the box includes the use of raised lines, also seen on the so-called coromandel screens exported to the West in the eighteenth century.
69 *Tea chest*

Black lacquer with gold painting
L. 18 ¼ in. (46.7 cm); W. 12 in. (30.5 cm); H. 8 ⅛ in. (20.6 cm)
China, Qing period, late 18th century

Wares of this type, produced for export, represent the last flourish of Chinese lacquerwork in pre-modern times. By comparison with the products of palace workshops up to the reign of Qianlong (1736–96), the decorative technique is simple; however, it is done with skill and care, and the lacquer is of high quality. By the eighteenth century, although the palace workshops went on producing elaborate lacquerware by traditional methods inherited from Ming times, lacquer pieces made for popular domestic use were much simpler affairs. The most common methods of decoration were painting in gold and other colors, and mother-of-pearl inlay. Export wares were just a refined version of popular wares, often using patterns to suit Western taste. Lacquerwares like this tea chest were a major type of Chinese export to Europe and America from the middle of the eighteenth century, when Chinese trade was expanding, to the middle of the nineteenth century, when China’s economy went into rapid decline following the Opium Wars and periods of internal unrest.

The leaf-and-fruit motif on a diaper ground (an echo of the grape motif on Ming Chinese and Ryukyu lacquer?) was a popular decoration on export lacquer and can be found on such articles as sewing boxes and fans.¹ Lacquer tea chests containing one or more tea caddies of pewter or lead are found in many collections in this country.² This rather large chest holds six pewter caddies.

This box bears the coat of arms of Sir Alexander Hamilton who was the managing owner of eight ships at Canton between 1780 and 1801.

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Japan
Japanese Lacquer: *Makie* and *Negoro*

As China has given its name to porcelain, so use of the term “japanning” for varnish done in imitation of Oriental lacquer expresses the renown that Japanese lacquer has enjoyed ever since it was introduced into Europe in the late sixteenth century. Chests and coffers made durable by a coating of lacquer, generally lustrous black, and lavishly decorated with designs of sprinkled gold and silver and often inlaid mother-of-pearl, were the first Japanese objects to reach the West. Those lacquered items, similar to numbers 105 and 106 in this catalogue, were made for export and only dimly reflected the brilliance of the refined craft that had been evolving in Japan for nearly a millennium before the first pieces dazzled Europeans. By the nineteenth century, American parlors as well as European castles were being decorated with astonishingly intricate lacquerwares, which often as not were made just for that purpose.

Advances in the understanding of Japanese culture in Europe and America following the Second World War made possible a deeper, more comprehensive appreciation for Japan’s lacquer tradition. Such an appreciation informs the Irving Collection, which reflects a distinctively Japanese taste in its focus on undecorated *Negoro* lacquer and *makie* lacquer of the Muromachi and Momoyama periods. (Aspects of Japanese lacquer not addressed in this catalogue, including its development to the present day, receive comprehensive treatment in the work of Beatrix von Ragué; see Bibliography.)

The earliest Japanese piece in the Irving Collection, a twelfth-century sutra box of red and black lacquer (no. 70), is one of over twenty items in the collection of a lacquer type known as *Negoro*. Undecorated, sturdy *Negoro* utensils, originally made for serving communal meals and storing precious objects and sutras or for ritual offerings in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines, were little known in the West until recent decades (fig. 16). In Japan, however, lacquers known as *Negoro* have inspired nostalgic admiration since the seventeenth century, when the large monastic communities that created and used them began to give way before the increasingly commercial urban society of Edo Japan. Like the carefully fashioned utilitarian furnishings made in the communities of American Shakers, *Negoro* lacquers offer the satisfying pleasure of fine workmanship and durable, functional designs that evolved through long use. The structural strength and starkly simple beauty of *Negoro* grow out of a tradition of craftsmanship that is universally held in high regard; but it is a peculiarly Japanese aesthetic that has given rise to an appreciation of the objects’ worn and mottled surfaces, on which traces of the black base coat appear beneath the red lacquer.

Very different is *makie* or “sprinkled picture” lacquerwork, which, although no less refined than *Negoro* in its forms, also astonishes the eye with intricate gold and silver decoration. *Makie* is surely the most distinctive achievement of Japanese lacquerwork. It is the
medium of the majority of Japanese pieces in this collection, including the latest, a writing box and table decorated in gold and silver makie (no. 151). Made by a craftsman who died in 1926, the writing set demonstrates the continued vitality of a tradition of lacquer technique and design that has been maintained since its beginnings in Japan’s classical age, the Heian period (894–1185). A particular strength of the Irving Collection is its large number of objects from the brief but artistically fertile Momoyama period, some sixty years spanning the turn of the seventeenth century, when both technique and design were affected by the lavish taste of bold rulers unhampered by tradition. Haino Akio, whose insights inform the Japanese lacquer entries in this catalogue, discusses the diverse aspects of Momoyama lacquer in the essay following this one.

The origins of the lacquer craft in Japan are obscure. Although there is no conclusive archaeological evidence that it evolved independently in Japan, lacquer (urushi in Japanese) was used as early as the Neolithic age, during the early Jōmon era. At the Torihama shell mound in Fukui Prefecture, a red lacquered comb and wooden bowls with red and black lacquer that demonstrate the existence of a relatively evolved technique of mixing pigments were found with pottery dated to the fourth millennium B.C.E. Finds at over five hundred other Jōmon sites, mainly in eastern Japan, indicate that by the end of the Jōmon period (ca. 500 B.C.E.), lacquer was widely used to preserve and decorate items of personal adornment, such as hairpins, necklaces, and bracelets, as well as utilitarian objects like caskets and arrows.1

Despite the long history of lacquer in early Japan, lacquerwork as a highly refined craft appreciated for its aesthetic qualities developed under the influence of Korean and Chinese lacquers and craftsmen when they were introduced into Japan, accompanying the adoption of Buddhism, between the mid-sixth and the eighth centuries. On the mid-seventh-century Tamamushi Shrine in the Hōryū-ji temple, scenes from the former lives of the Buddha are painted on black lacquer in a style derived from sixth-century Chinese painting. The shrine’s ornamental gilt bronze openwork, inlaid with the iridescent wings of the tamamushi beetle, is of a Korean type. In the Shōsō-in repository at Tōdai-ji in Nara, objects owned by the emperor Shōmu (701–756), whose policies fostered the importation and assimilation of Tang culture, include some one hundred fifty lacquer articles—furniture, musical instruments, boxes, and vessels. These were ornamented with inlays of thin sheets of silver and gold, mother-of-pearl, and crystal, reflecting Tang Dynasty techniques and styles.2

**Makie**

*Makie* lacquer developed in the following period, between the ninth and the fourteenth centuries, when a distinctive Japanese culture evolved in relative isolation from continental influence. The word *makie* (sprinkled picture) appeared for the first time in the mid-ninth century in *Taketori Monogatari*, Japan’s earliest romance.

The technique of *makie* involves sprinkling gold or silver filings on a lacquer ground before it has completely hardened. Three basic types of sprinkling and finishing developed
over time. The earliest, most difficult, and most durable, used extensively during the Heian period, is *togidashi makie*, "polished sprinkled design." In this technique, several coats of black lacquer are applied over the decoration, then carefully polished with charcoal until the sprinkled design reappears flush with the background lacquer (fig. 17). In the simplest and most widely used technique, *hiramakie*, "flat sprinkled design," the decoration is covered with transparent lacquer, and though flat is thus slightly raised above the background layer (fig. 18). By the early fourteenth century a preference for naturalistic effects gave rise to *takamakie*, or sprinkling over forms that have been built up with lacquer and charcoal to achieve an effect of low relief, as in the richly three-dimensional rocks and mountains on the box in number 95 (see p. 150). Elaborate effects attained by a combination of all three techniques are frequently found in the pictorial designs of Muromachi period lacquers and in the conservative works of the Edo period such as number 124.

Within the basic *makie* techniques, varying textures achieved by different types of sprinkling are used to define forms and create a range of tonal values. In addition to the design motifs, *makie* is often used for background surfaces. The fine, light sprinkling preferred in the Heian period is called *heijin* and was used on the letter box in number 98, which preserves an early form and style of decoration. The look of solid metal, an effect created by
dense sprinkling with fine particles in a technique called *ikakeji*, was favored during the Kamakura period and can be seen on the poet’s robe and on the borders of the writing box in number 94. Grounds evenly textured with large, flat particles, descriptively termed *nashiji* or “pear-skin,” are common on Muromachi lacquers, such as the small box number 96. Another type of *nashiji* for which coarser filings are more densely sprinkled and covered with several coats of transparent lacquer often has a reddish tone, as in the rich background of the boxes in numbers 94 and 124. This technique is traditionally called “aventurine” in the West. *Nashiji* used to provide color and texture in certain parts of a design is called *e-nashiji* or pictorial *nashiji* (fig. 19).

There are various techniques for drawing in *makie*. Black lines can be reserved against the sprinkled surface, like those that delineate the veins of leaves on the basin in number 100—a difficult technique called *kakiwari* (fig. 18). More simply, lines can be scratched through the sprinkled surface to the background lacquer in a technique called “needle drawing” or *harigaki* (fig. 19), which was frequently used for the freely drawn designs of Kōdai-ji lacquers. In the highest quality work, fine lines detailing textile patterns, rippling water, or delicate floral motifs are drawn by sprinkling fine metal filings onto thin lines of wet lacquer brushed over *makie* already sprinkled and hardened. This method is called *tsukegaki* (fig. 20). It can be seen over *ikakeji* in the patterns of the poet’s robe and in the scattered shells on the border of number 94.

Since arduously produced *makie* lacquerwares have always been items of luxury, their basic forms reflect the priorities of upper-class life. Most important are the *suzuribako*, a box containing an inkstone, brushes, and other implements for writing (nos. 137, 140, 141, 143, 150, 151), and related items such as the *bundai*, a table for holding a writing box and
paper (nos. 97, 143, 151). Boxes for storing paper or sending letters are other common types. These objects demonstrate the extraordinary emphasis placed upon literary and calligraphic activity in Japanese culture. Other practical items were also made in decorated lacquer, such as the tebako, a large box for personal accessories which often contains smaller cosmetic boxes, and the matching water basin and ewer, like number 100 in this catalogue. Incense burners and their trays were also traditionally decorated in makie. Since these utensils of daily life were usually kept out on display in sparsely furnished rooms, they were fashioned and decorated with the utmost care (fig. 21).

The classic vocabulary of decorative motifs used in makie, more than its painstaking technique and conservative repertoire of forms, most tellingly reveals the cultural values underlying this quintessentially Japanese craft. The image of the poet Kakinomoto no Hitomaro (d. ca. 715) on the writing box in number 94 may be taken as emblematic of the primacy of poetic motifs in makie designs. A canon of imagery based on the landscape of Japan and the calendar of court life was established by the selection made in the early tenth century for Japan’s earliest imperial anthology of poetry, the Kokinshū,1 where Hitomaro is singled out as the patriarch-sage of Japanese poetry. Multilayered allusions to classic poems and romances underlie much traditional lacquer decoration. Certain natural images have dominated makie throughout its history: pines on desolate shores, mountain landscapes, chrysanthemums and other autumn grasses, and specific flowering trees, such as plum, cherry, and paulownia. They evoke associations rooted in the poetic imagery of the Kokinshū, which subsequent classic literature reworked again and again. The continued vitality of certain decorative themes thus reflects a literary tradition in which intimately observed seasonal manifestations of nature are used as metaphors for human emotion.
21. At the upper left in this bird’s-eye view of the empress’s apartments, a set of personal articles decorated in makie lacquer is prominently displayed on a matching stand. The four-lobed incense burner on the top shelf has a high openwork cover (partially visible) over which robes are placed for perfuming. A tekako (cosmetic box) rests on the bottom shelf. The large charcoal brazier in the center of the room is also decorated in makie with an overall chrysanthemum pattern. On the floor to the right of the raised tatami mat on which the empress sits, partially hidden by a curtain, is an open suzuribako (writing box) of makie lacquer. From Makura no sōshi emaki (The pillow book), section 6. Handscroll, ink on paper. Japan, early 14th century. Asano Collection, Tokyo
The motif of the chrysanthemum, which symbolizes a felicitous hope for long life, has figured prominently in lacquer decoration since the Heian period (794–1185). The notion that dew from the chrysanthemum is an elixir of youth relates to the Ninth Month observance of the annual ceremonies of the imperial court, established by the early Heian period, in which poems auguring longevity were recited to accompany the ceremonial drinking of chrysanthemum wine. That custom was adapted from the ancient Chinese practice of ascending a hill on the ninth day of the ninth month to drink the life-prolonging chrysanthemum wine. A sequence of thirteen poems in the autumn section of the Kokinshū (iv.268–280) attests to the importance of the chrysanthemum image in classical poetry. Lacquered furnishings and writing boxes depicted in Heian and Kamakura illustrated scrolls are often decorated with chrysanthemum patterns (fig. 21). 4

The cherry blossom, the chrysanthemum’s corollary opposite, suggests the ephemeral nature of life’s beauty. So celebrated in Japan as to be virtually synonymous with its culture, the soon-fallen cherry blossom is a symbol of both spring’s beauty and the evanescence of human life. The image of cherry blossoms scattered over rafts that float downstream on swiftly flowing waters, depicted on number 149, expresses the poignant notion of fleeting beauty that is one of the dominant themes in Japanese art and literature.

The paulownia (kiri), while not figuring as importantly in poetry as other flowering trees, was a motif long associated with the imperial court. Sei Shōnagon, a brilliant literary woman of the Heian court, offered an unforgettable appreciation of the paulownia’s manifold charms in Section 39 of her Pillow Book, “On Flowering Trees”:

The purple blossoms of the paulownia are also delightful. I confess that I do not like the appearance of its wide leaves when they open up… But I cannot speak of the paulownia as I do of the other trees; for this is where that grandiose and famous bird of China [the phoenix] makes its nest, and the idea fills me with awe. Besides, it is this tree that provides the wood for the zithers from which come so many beautiful sounds. How can I have used such a commonplace word as “delightful”? The paulownia is not delightful; it is magnificent. 5

Beginning in the fourteenth century, when Emperor Godaigo granted its use to Ashikaga Takauji, the flowering paulownia was an insignia bestowed on shoguns by the emperor. Hideyoshi was so pleased by this honor that the paulownia became one of the most prominent design motifs in Kōdai-ji lacquer of the Momoyama period (nos. 101, 104). Its use as an emblem of shogunal authority ended in 1611 when Ieyasu refused to accept it, perhaps to show his power over the imperial court, and adopted the hollyhock instead as his personal emblem (no. 124).

Literary imagery was especially prevalent in makie decoration of the Muromachi period, which often alluded to specific poems, places, or episodes celebrated in classic literature. This penchant for literary allusion gave way to a simpler taste emphasizing bold design that characterized the decoration of Kōdai-ji lacquers during the subsequent Momoyama period. Yet it is the traditional poetic associations clinging to certain motifs such as autumn
grasses in moonlight, pines on the shore, chrysanthemums, and cherry blossoms that account for their continued use in lacquer decoration. Certainly our appreciation of Japanese makie lacquer is deepened by an understanding of the many levels on which the designs of these wares evoked a response in their original users.

**Negoro**

The elemental, comforting pleasure of Negoro lacquer is well captured in an eighteenth-century haiku by the poet and painter Buson.⁶

> The wonder of red:  
> a bowl of steaming bean soup  
> on a Negoro tray

The poem, evoking a medley of red tones and textures, celebrates the familiar, sustaining warmth of a plain meal of nattōshiru, a hearty peasant soup made with fermented beans, served on a tray of corresponding simplicity and strength. The preference for food utensils lacquered red can be traced to ancient China and was adopted early in Japan. Perhaps magical life-sustaining properties were attributed to this bloodlike coloration, as is suggested by certain burials where bodies were covered with red and by reports of an ancient practice (of dubious effect) of eating cinnabar—the poisonous mercuric sulfide that is most often the pigment in red lacquer—to attain immortality.

The term Negoro designates a broad category of sturdy, functional pieces fashioned in wood and coated with red lacquer over black. Negoro is the name of a large temple complex in Wakayama, established in 1288 as headquarters of the Buddhist Shingi Shingon sect that flourished under Ashikaga patronage during the Muromachi period, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. During the three centuries of the temple’s existence before its destruction by Hideyoshi in 1585, countless lacquered pieces were made for everyday and ritual use by monks who numbered nearly six thousand at the height of the temple’s activity in the sixteenth century, when there were as many as two thousand sub-temples there. Today, only a footed basin inscribed with the name of one Shigemune of Negoro survives to document production there.⁷ Nevertheless the temple’s name has long been a generic term applied, often loosely, to undecorated red lacquer objects of practical use.

In his comprehensive study of the history and connoisseurship of Negoro lacquer, Kawada Sadamu of the Nara National Museum has defined the essential criteria for properly designating a lacquered object as Negoro and for assessing its aesthetic merit. Not strictly confined to the products or period of the Negoro temple, Negoro is a term that can be applied to utilitarian objects of the twelfth through the early seventeenth century that have survived precisely because of the functional effectiveness of their forms and the durability of their lacquer coating. They are made of carefully chosen wood, usually keyaki (zelkova) or hinoki (Japanese cypress), seasoned to prevent warping. Negoro ware is either hand-carved or worked
on a lathe. It was at times fashioned in one piece, but more often constructed by careful joinery. Most important in assessing the age and quality of Negoro is the strength and color of the red lacquer coating, which depends on the quality of the pigment and the skill with which it was mixed and applied. Cinnabar (purified crystals of mercuric sulfide) is readily available in Japan, but a high-quality cinnabar pigment that produced the desired pure red color was being imported from China as early as the Fujiwara period (898–1185). Red lacquer of lesser quality and later date is made from iron oxide and has a blackish tone. For the viscous lacquer to be smoothly applied it must be thinned in a precise proportion with paulownia oil.

By the early seventeenth century, the pure form and strength of these utilitarian wares were beginning to make them the object of aesthetic appreciation in Japan. According to a text of 1638, old Negoro bowls and trays were sold in various places as tea utensils; by the end of the Genroku era (1688–1703) an Osaka dealer could command a high price even for a damaged piece, appreciated nonetheless for the strength of its form. An early-nineteenth-century text mentions the existence of many pieces with inscriptions of the Tenshō era (1573–91) but states that none was made after that. The first scholarly treatment of Negoro lacquer was by the eminent antiquarian Kurokawa Mayori in his Kōgei Shiryō (Sources on crafts, 1878).

During the Meiji era (1868–1912), when Japan was hurtling into the modern age and Shinto shrines were being elevated under the imperial restoration, Buddhist temples, where simple red and black lacquered utensils had been in everyday use, were in grave decline. Lacquerware broadly defined as Negoro began to be far more widely admired. Its appeal has been not only in the functional perfection and purity of its form, refined through centuries of production, and the simple clarity of its red lacquer, but also in the traces of its long use, irregular patches of black underlacquer that appear beneath the worn red surface. The appreciation of time’s passing, the feeling for the poignant beauty of the ephemeral so deeply rooted in Japanese aesthetics and perpetuated in the tea ceremony, continues today to evoke an emotional and aesthetic response to old Negoro.

BARBARA BRENNA FORD

Notes

3. This collection of over eleven hundred waka, the first of the twenty-one anthologies compiled by imperial order, was completed about 920. Two English translations exist, McCullough, 1985, and Rodd, 1984.
6. Yosa no Buson (1716–1783); the haiku, from his Buson Isshū, is quoted in Kawada, 1985, p. 283.
The Momoyama Flowering:
Kōdai-ji and Namban Lacquer

When Columbus set out on the voyage that in 1492 carried him to the New World, one of his chief ambitions was to find the sea route to “Cipango, the land of gold,” which he had read about in The Travels of Marco Polo.

They have gold in great abundance, because it is found there in measureless quantities…. [The ruler of the island] has a very large palace entirely roofed with fine gold. Just as we roof our houses or churches with lead, so this palace is roofed with fine gold. And the value of it is almost beyond computation. Moreover all of the chambers, of which there are many, are likewise paved with fine gold to a depth of more than two fingers’ breadth. And the halls and the windows and every other part of the palace are likewise adorned with gold. All in all I can tell you that the palace is of such incalculable richness that any attempt to estimate its value would pass the bounds of the marvellous.¹

Cipango was, in fact, Japan. In Marco Polo’s time (1254–1324, during the Kamakura period) there did not, however, exist such an abundance of the valued metal in Japan as to justify calling it “the land of gold.” Two explanations can be offered for the rise of this legend about Japan. The first is based on the use of gold powder (sakin) by the Japanese in their dealings with the Chinese. The expenses of the Japanese envoys to Tang China as well as of the monks studying there were all paid for in gold powder, and in later trade transactions, Japanese paid Chinese merchants in gold and silver. In China, then, beginning in the Tang and Song periods, Japan was thought of as a land of gold.

The second explanation revolves around makie lacquerware, in which gold or silver is incorporated into the lacquer. The gifts brought to China by Japanese envoys and monks as well as the goods traded by Japanese merchants almost invariably included makie objects. In the Kamakura period, the principal type of makie combined the techniques of ikakeji, in which dense applications of gold powder followed by polishing produce a finish that looks much like gold, and raden, in which polished shell is cut into shapes and inlaid, creating a glowing effect. It might easily have been imagined that such objects came from a land where gold was abundant. Marco Polo’s story of the golden palace may have as its original point of reference the Buddhist temple buildings of the time, which were richly decorated with makie, raden, and gold leaf. Such temples are now best exemplified by the magnificent Konjikidō of Chūson-ji (fig. 22).² Although Marco Polo himself never went to Japan, he may very well have recorded stories that he heard from Chinese traders. It is unlikely that his account was a complete fabrication.
With *The Travels of Marco Polo* in mind, Columbus set out on his dangerous voyage in search of the Asian land of gold. After four sailings he succeeded in reaching, not Cipango, but America. In a sense, then, the legend of gold brought about Columbus’s discovery of America, and we might even enjoy the fanciful thought that because of *makie* the New World was introduced to Europe.

The first contact between Europeans and Japanese occurred in 1543, when a Portuguese ship washed up on Tanegashima, an island off the southern coast of Kyushu. (This event also marked the introduction into Japan of the musket, which subsequently changed the character of Japanese warfare.) Thus, roughly a half-century after Columbus landed in America, the Portuguese found themselves in the legendary land of Japan. Though not overflowing with gold as Europeans had long hoped, Japan did offer objects made radiant with gold: *makie* lacquerware.

The Portuguese arrived during a time of fierce battling among Japanese military clans. Those warriors who prevailed, beginning with the powerful hegemons Oda Nobunaga (1534–1582) and Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1537–1598), were accustomed to surrounding themselves with objects decorated in *makie* lacquer. Frequently even the pillars and beams of their rooms were covered with *makie*. The style of lacquer decoration that predominated in this period (the Momoyama, 1568–1615) is now known as Kōdai-ji *makie*, having taken its name in later times from Hideyoshi’s memorial shrine at the Kōdai-ji temple in Kyoto.
Captivated by the lacquerwork, the Europeans then in Japan commissioned *makie* objects to take home with them. This export lacquer, made beginning about 1580, is known as *namban* lacquerware. The term *namban*, meaning “southern barbarian,” was used by the Japanese in describing anything foreign.

The Irving Collection includes two chests representative of the lacquer types of the Momoyama period, one of Kōdai-ji *makie* and the other a *namban* lacquer. Through a discussion of these pieces I will examine *makie* lacquer of the beginning of the early modern period in Japan.

*Kōdai-ji Makie*

Kōdai-ji *makie*, the style of lacquer that completely dominated the Momoyama period, represents a high point in the history of *makie* in Japan. In the beginning of that period there was a great deal of construction, as warriors built themselves castles and mansions and sponsored new buildings at Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples. Many of the objects to be found in these new buildings, including stationery boxes, eating and drinking utensils, arms and armor, and other items for leisurely pursuits or daily use, were decorated with Kōdai-ji *makie*, as were the interiors of the buildings themselves. Some of these, for example the parts

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*23. Interior of the Mitamaya mortuary temple at Kōdai-ji, Kyoto, built in 1606 for Hideyoshi at his wife’s commission. The couple’s sculpted images are housed in the large decorated shrines that flank the dais. According to inscriptions inside the door to Hideyoshi’s shrine (at left), the *makie* lacquer decoration was done by artists of the Kōami school in 1596.*
of Hideyoshi’s Fushimi Castle used for his mausoleum at Kōdai-ji (fig. 23) and the main hall of the Tsukubusuma Shrine, can be seen today.

Kōdai-ji makie lacquers were produced by craftsmen belonging to workshops in Kyoto. An inscription on a door of Hideyoshi’s mortuary shrine in the Kōdai-ji Mitamaya that holds Hideyoshi’s statue tells us that it was executed by a member of the Kōami family. The Kōami descended from a makie master craftsman who served the eighth Muromachi shogun, Ashikaga Yoshimasa. At the time of the inscription, Chōsei (1519–1603), the sixth-generation head of the Kōami family, and Chōan (1569–1610), the seventh-generation head, were active. (According to the Kōami family record, the fifteen-year-old Chōan was taken before Hideyoshi by his father, Chōsei; there he created a makie design of a nightingale on an incense tray, and won praise from Hideyoshi.) Led by Chōsei and Chōan, Kyoto craftsmen worked to satisfy the prodigious demand for Kōdai-ji makie lacquer. It can be surmised that an organizational system was in place which enabled the various craftsmen to do their work with only limited direction from the master. The working methods were essential to the success of the system.

Kōdai-ji makie was produced in such great quantity that detailed underdrawings were almost never used. Instead a schematic outline was indicated in red, and then the craftsman freely and with great vigor produced his makie work. This may explain why there are many Kōdai-ji makie objects with similar overall designs. When executing makie on a large scale, as for architectural decoration, a number of craftsmen worked together as part of a workshop unit; as a result, different levels of skill may be noticed in a single work.

To satisfy the enormous demand for Kōdai-ji makie, the simplest of all makie methods, hiramakie or flat makie, was employed. In hiramakie a design is drawn with lacquer and then gold powder is sprinkled on the still-damp lacquer, bonding with it as it hardens. In the Kōdai-ji style, hiramakie is employed in conjunction with several other techniques, among them e-nashiji or “pear-skin,” used for pictorial elements of the decoration, and tsukegaki, kakiwari, and more frequently, harigaki, for linear elements (see preceding essay, pp. 155–57).

Simple designs were preferred. While during the previous Muromachi period the subjects of makie decoration had been taken primarily from classical literature, designs with profound themes of this sort were abandoned in Kōdai-ji makie of the Momoyama period. Nevertheless, the motif of autumn grasses seen so often in Kōdai-ji makie was based on the literary theme of the Four Seasons in earlier lacquer decoration (see nos. 101, 103). The same may be said of other subjects that appear on Kōdai-ji makie, such as cherry trees and wisteria.

Crests—compact, stylized designs—were often incorporated into makie decoration. Paulownia and chrysanthemum crests are the ones most often seen, but samurai family crests also appear. During the Momoyama period crests often functioned simply as part of the design, and there are even some examples of makie crests made to look worm-eaten (no. 104). In the Edo period that followed, however, the use of family crests was strictly regulated for political reasons.
Another common feature of Kōdai-ji *makie* is *katami-gawari*, a decorative scheme used at that time in textiles as well. With lacquer, the surface of the vessel was divided in two by a zigzag line. One side was given a speckled gold *nashi jii* ground, the other a ground of black lacquer, and then the design motifs were laid against the grounds (fig. 24).

One celebrated piece preserved at Kōdai-ji and designated an Important Cultural Property is the small chest with ten drawers (for storing poem books) decorated with designs of various autumn grasses. The characteristic technique of Kōdai-ji lacquer can be seen in the detail photograph of one of the drawers (figs. 25 a, 25 b).

In the Irving Collection there are several examples of Kōdai-ji *makie*, including numbers 101, 104, 128, and 130. Two Kōdai-ji-style pieces slightly later in date than the Momoyama period are numbers 122 and 129. One example from the collection worth examining in detail is an elegant rectangular chest containing three drawers (no. 112; see pp. 236–37). Scattered over its exterior surface are thirty-two hexagonal, stylized tortoiseshell patterns, each with a central floral motif (*hanabishi*). Three *makie* cranes adorn the three interior drawers. This bold design is executed in gold *hiramakie* on a black ground. The true meaning of the decoration is fully understood only when the lid is opened (fig. 26). The tortoise, represented by the patterns on the exterior, and the crane, depicted inside, together are a symbol of good fortune, a *kisshōmon*, because of their ancient association with the
Isle of the Immortals. Thus the decoration of the chest alludes to perennial youth and immortality.

To create visual interest each drawer has been made a different height, and each of the three cranes is executed in a different technique: the uppermost in *biramakie* and *kakiwari*, the middle one in *e-nashiji* and *tsukegaki*, and the lowest one in *biramakie* and *tsukegaki*. The gilt bronze fittings of the drawers are round, with a chrysanthemum flower on a *nanako* (raised-dot) ground, and are placed seemingly without regard for the design of the cranes. The fittings of the lid are carved with a paulownia crest and a floral scroll. This Kōdai-ji *makiie* chest, with its separate decorative systems whose interaction yields a formally pleasing effect, is an especially fine work.
Namban (Export) Lacquerware

It was mentioned above that Europeans began to arrive in Japan in the second half of the sixteenth century. Their principal goals were trade and the propagation of Christianity. In 1549 the Spanish Jesuit missionary Francis Xavier landed in Kagoshima in southern Kyushu,
initiating the missionary effort in Japan. Thereafter proselytizing activities spread throughout the country, and in 1577 a Jesuit church, commonly called the Nanban-ji, was built in Kyoto. By the 1580s there are said to have been about two hundred churches throughout Japan, some seventy-five missionaries, and over two hundred thousand believers, indicating a surprisingly successful rate of proselytism.

The missionaries in Kyoto were much taken with Kōdai-ji *maki* lacquer, which they had ample opportunity to view in warriors’ residences, and they commissioned the making of ceremonial objects for their own use. Surviving examples include ciboria to hold the host; shrines that held religious paintings (most of the paintings were brought from Europe); stands for misals or Bibles; and bowls for holy water. These object types are all obviously European in origin and were reproduced according to the missionaries’ direction. Jesuit missionaries had the Christian insignia IHS prominently incorporated into the decoration of their religious furnishings. The overall decorative schemes were based on the Japanese floral themes of Kōdai-ji *maki*, while along the edges, Western geometric patterns and a design known as a *namban* scroll were often drawn. As with Kōdai-ji *maki*, these designs were executed in *hiramakie*. The *namban* wares differed from Kōdai-ji *maki* in that they additionally employed the conspicuously dazzling technique of mother-of-pearl inlay.

Merchants of the Dutch East India Company were also exposed to Kōdai-ji wares during their frequent visits to Japan. They commissioned Japanese lacquer makers to produce marketable goods for sale back in Europe. These objects too were Western in form but were decorated with Japanese designs in Japanese techniques. Among the surviving examples of objects that were sent to Europe are small chests with drawers and coffers, various types of decorative boxes, square liquor bottles, and tankards. According to the still-extant records of merchants who ordered these objects from the Kyoto workshops, coffee cups, dishes, and pots (pitchers?) were also commissioned; perhaps some of these wares will be recovered in the future. In addition to the flowers and birds of Japan, the *maki* designs include depictions of animals that were clearly derived from Western prints, such as peacocks, lions, tigers, and other wild beasts. Even letters of the Roman alphabet were introduced into the designs of some objects. According to a letter written in 1617 by Will Adams, about fifty craftsmen were employed day and night making lacquer in just one of the Kyoto shops that supplied the European trade. The European merchants had free access to the Kyoto workshops and so were able to explain directly to the craftsmen how they wanted their orders to be carried out.

At present about one thousand items can confidently be identified as *namban* lacquerware. Pieces with Christian themes were first recognized in Japan only about a half-century ago, in 1938, when Yoshino Tomio discovered a ciborium decorated in *maki* with a grape design and a Jesuit monogram at Tōkei-ji in Kamakura. Tōkei-ji is well known as a temple that was revived by Hideyoshi’s granddaughter Tenshūni, became a Buddhist convent under the auspices of the Edo government, and functioned as a refuge for wives fleeing their husbands.
That such a temple should have harbored a Christian object, despite strict prohibitions against Christianity throughout the Edo period, is quite surprising.

After this discovery another ciborium was found to have been preserved in the collection of the Mito Tokugawa family. In 1968 a shrine containing a painting of Christ on the cross was brought back to Japan and designated an Important Cultural Property because of its supposed rarity; at the time it was not yet known how large a number of these Christian
objects had been exported. In fact, discoveries over the past twenty years of similar pieces of namban export lacquer from the beginning of the Momoyama period have yielded examples that outshine the 1968 find.

The Irving Collection contains two namban lacquer objects, a coffer with a domed lid (no. 106) and a medium-sized portable cabinet with nine drawers (no. 105; pp. 226–27). The decoration of the latter, in gold biramakie and raden, features a variety of motifs of flowers and birds. On the face of the door, cherry blossoms and three flying birds appear. The top of the chest carries a design of chrysanthemum and two flying birds; on the right side are bush clover, mandarin orange, camellia, and two flying birds; and on the left, maple trees and mandarin orange accompanying the two birds. The drawers inside are covered with blossoming cherry, mandarin orange, and Chinese bellflower. Less elaborate ornament is found on the inside of the drop front and the back of the chest, which are decorated with a simple allover design of clematis vine (fig. 27). As is typical with such chests, a Western-style geometric pattern frames the motifs and a namban floral scroll adorns the edges. The door
fittings are silver rather than the usual gilt bronze and are worked with the design of a gourd (fig. 28). A telling distinction between Japanese and Western metalwork can be observed in a comparison of the upper portion of the fitting attached to the top of the box—the original Japanese work—with the lock plate, a later Western replacement. The chest has small round iron feet and probably was used as a portable cabinet.

The flower-and-bird designs on this piece are arranged in unusual combinations unrelated to traditional schemes with seasonal connotations, and the disposition of motifs on the drawers is haphazard. Perhaps the tremendous demand for goods and the resulting large-scale production of a great number of similar items did not allow much time for the individual treatment of each piece. There was probably no limit to the European appetite for these eye-catching lacquerwares from the Far East, Western-type objects dressed in the Japanese garb of makie and raden.

During the Momoyama period, a brief era but one of intense activity, international trade flourished and the arts developed with brilliance. In the Edo period that followed, the government, as part of an anti-Christian campaign, sharply curtailed the level of exchange with Europeans. Nevertheless, a restricted trade was carried on with the Dutch through the single port of Deshima, a man-made island in Nagasaki Harbor. Export wares continued to be made; quite different from the Momoyama-period pieces, these were executed in takamakie (relief makie) on a black lacquer ground. Japan’s isolation lasted for three hundred years, but in Europe the demand for makie did not wane.

HAINO AKIO
Translated by Andrew Watsky

Notes

6. Ibid., pls. 124, 125.
**Sutra tray**

*Negoro* ware, red and black lacquer  
L. 15 ½ in. (40 cm); w. 12 ¼ in. (30.8 cm)  
Japan, Heian period, 12th century

Long use of this finely made rectangular box as a container for sutras is indicated by the shadowy imprint of ten scrolls on its bright red lacquer interior. The number thirty-six, written in red on black lacquer on one side of the box, designates its place in a large set, such as the one with sixty similar trays, kept in three lacquer *karabitsu* chests, that hold six hundred scrolls of the *Daibannya-kyō* (Greater sutra of the perfection of wisdom) dedicated to the deities of the Kasuga Shrine in 1407.¹

The tray shown here is made of very thin wood strengthened by a fabric layer (visible on the damaged edge) under a heavy lacquer coating, a meticulous construction that suggests a twelfth-century date. The lacquer surface, hard and of particularly high quality, is rich in the subtle modulations of color brought about by the passage of time that are prized in *Negoro* lacquers.

This tray is the oldest Japanese lacquer piece in the Irving Collection. Inscriptions on the box and wrapper in which it has long been kept identify it as a sutra box from the Köfuku-ji temple in Nara. Many lavish sets of sutras were dedicated to shrines and temples during the Fujiwara period (898–1185). At the Nanatsu-dera temple in Nagoya a set of one thousand scrolls containing the entire canon of Buddhist scripture, copied in 1175, is kept in boxes similar to this, stacked in thirty-one *karabitsu* chests.²

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Large chest with legs (karabitsu)

Negoro ware, red lacquer; inscription and date on base (see Appendix)
L. 22 3/8 in. (56.2 cm); W. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm); H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 1422

The karabitsu, literally “Chinese chest,” is a rectangular, lidded chest raised on four or, as in this case, six legs attached to the outside. Although its name implies a foreign origin, no prototype has survived in China, and the origin of both the name and the type is obscure. The karabitsu has been used since the Nara period (710–94) for the storage of precious objects in Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples and by noble families. This elegant and functional form effectively protects its contents from the humid climate of Japan and is well suited for display in sparsely furnished architectural interiors.

Early examples are lacquered black and decorated, such as the eleventh-century karabitsu decorated with inlaid mother-of-pearl phoenix medallions in the Tokyo National Museum. An undecorated red lacquer karabitsu is recorded to have been made in 1040 to hold the sacred mirror, one of three sacred objects in the imperial regalia, and is depicted in the opening scene of one scroll illustrating “The Transfer of the Imperial Family to Taira Kiyoumori’s Mansion at Roku-hara” from the late-thirteenth-century Heiji monogatari enaki. (See also fig. 30, p. 204.) The chest is shown with cords wrapped around the body to secure the lid and others looped through the holes in the legs so that it could be carried suspended from a pole. Sacred objects related to the Kasuga Shrine kept by the priest Myoe Shoin (1173–1272) at the Kozan-ji temple have been preserved there in a small red lacquered karabitsu since 1289. The twelve sets of personal accessories in makie-decorated tekako boxes that were dedicated between 1384 and 1390 to the twelve shrines at the Shinto complex Kumano Hayatama Taisha, as a lavish joint offering from the emperor, the shogun Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, and several daimyo, were also kept in large red lacquered karabitsu. Three red lacquered karabitsu at the Kofuku-ji temple in Nara preserve a complete set of the Daihannya-kyo that was dedicated to the Kasuga Shrine in 1407.

The chest in the Irving Collection follows in this tradition, according to the inscription in red lacquer on the black lacquered base, which gives the name of an unidentified temple, Ryugein, and the date Oei 29 (1422). The chest’s carefully seasoned wood sides, coated with thick, pure red lacquer, meet in beveled edges which are lacquered black, and the black accent is echoed on the slightly splayed legs. Attached on the outside, the legs are protected with plain gilt bronze fittings top and bottom. Unlike the examples at Kozan-ji and Kumano Hayatama Taisha, which held precious objects and have metal fittings for locks, this chest had its lid secured by thick silk cords tied through rings attached to the sides, like those at Kofuku-ji. The rings are attached to round, gilt plates decorated with a chased design of confronting cranes. This type of metal fitting is more common to sutra boxes, a use that in this case can also be surmised from the Buddhist temple named in the inscription. Cords used to carry the box ran through the oval holes that pierced the legs near the top, which represent a refinement of the earliest, square-cut type. The proportions of this chest and its shorter, wider legs give it a more solid appearance than earlier examples. Of a deeper red than the chests in the Kumano Hayatama Taisha, this chest, despite damage to the lacquer on its lid, is a prime example of Negoro of the Muromachi period.

1. Von Raguen, 1976, p. 34.
4. Ibid., pl. 388.
5. Ibid., pl. 386. See also catalogue number 70, n. 1.
72 Incense box with design of tree peonies

*Kamakurabori* ware, red and black lacquer

D. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm); H. 1½ in. (3.2 cm)

Japan, Muromachi period, 16th century

With its large central tree peony flower framed by a leafy stalk, branches with buds, and other blossoms seeming to burst the bounds of the circular rim, this red lacquered box exhibits the bold design that characterized Japanese adaptations of early Ming carved lacquer, called *Kamakurabori* or Kamakura carving.¹ Chinese carved lacquers of the fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries first came to Japan with the Chinese monks who, welcomed by Japan’s military leaders, founded the network of Zen temples that came to play a dominant role in the assimilation of Chinese art and learning by the Japanese. Chinese carved lacquers were highly prized during the early Muromachi period. In 1407, fifty pieces—twenty round dishes and thirty incense boxes—were sent to the third Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimitsu (1358–1408), from the court of the Yongle emperor.² There is no doubt that Japanese lacquer makers produced creditable versions of the painstakingly produced carved lacquers, but these have not yet been satisfactorily identified among the pieces preserved in Zen temples as Chinese treasures. Soon the laborious practice of carving a design into a thick multilayered base of lacquer was abandoned in favor of carving the design directly into the wood form. It was then coated with red lacquer, often over an undercoating of black, as in *Negoro*. These works have traditionally been identified as *Kamakurabori*, a type of carved and lacquered work that according to a now discredited legend began in the Kamakura period, when Kōen (1207–ca. 1283), grandson of the sculptor Unkei, made imitations of Chinese carved lacquer for the Hokke-dō at Tōdai-ji in Nara. Several references in the chronicle *Sanetaka kōki* (by Sanjōnishī Sanetaka, 1455–1537) to carved lacquer trays and an incense box as “things of Kamakura” probably more accurately reflect the date of the flowering of *Kamakurabori*, in the Muromachi period.³

A round box like this one, with a cover meeting the base halfway down the sides, is the form most preva-

lent in *Kamakurabori*. Such boxes were used to hold incense and were placed before the Buddhist altar. They are based on the classic type of early-fifteenth-century Ming carved lacquer box (see no. 27), several of which have been preserved in Japanese Zen temples.⁴ The earliest surviving example of *Kamakurabori* is an incense box of the early fifteenth century preserved in the Kyoto Zen temple Nanzen-ji. It is similar to this piece in shape, size, and motif, and closely imitates a Ming prototype of the Yongle period (1403–24).

The decoration on the sides of the box shown here is a simplified cloud pattern derived from yet another style of carved lacquer, the so-called *guri* pattern of stylized scrolls of “sword-pommel” shape (see, for example, no. 6). Compared to the earliest *Kamakurabori* example, this piece, which freely combines Chinese design elements from different sources, reveals the emergence of a distinctive wood-carving tradition with its own aesthetic. The sharply cut forms and linear patterns of the peony are set against a relatively open ground which is carved with a grid of tiny squares, a reference to the complex diaper patterns of Ming lacquers.⁵ Despite a formal relationship to Chinese carved lacquers, little interest is manifested here in achieving the smoothly curved outlines and naturalistic representation of the Chinese prototype. The appeal of this box lies rather in its bold simplification of forms and the sharp chisel work that characterizes lacquers in the *Kamakurabori* tradition, which is still practiced today.

1. A box with a similar design in the Kanazawa Prefectural Museum is reproduced in Haino, 1977, pl. 13.
4. A box with the inscription *Made in the Yongle era* (1403–24) in the Nezu Museum of Art, Tokyo, is a good example of this type. It is well reproduced in Tokugawa Art Museum and Nezu Institute of Fine Arts, 1984, pl. 89. Another is in the Metropolitan Museum (1974.269.5ab).
5. Von Ragus, 1976, pl. 75.
73 Incense box in the shape of a chrysanthemum blossom

Dry lacquer, red over black
D. 3¼ in. (8.8 cm)
Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

Unlike the large Kamakurabori incense box number 72, which was employed in communal ceremonies, a box of this size would have held powdered incense for individual use and could have been kept in a sleeve. The well-worn surface, with much of the black underlayer exposed beneath the red lacquer, has the patina of age and use so venerated in Negoro. The box has no wood core and is made of lacquer applied to paper that was previously shaped on a carved mold, a dry lacquer technique known as Ikkanbari. Such boxes, favored for use in the tea ceremony, are thought to have been introduced by a Chinese émigré, Hirai Ikkan (1578–1657), who came to Japan during the Kan’ei era (1624–43). Ikkanbari continued to be made by fifteen generations of his descendants. The last Hirai Ikkan died in 1981.¹

74 Stand for a teabowl (temmoku-dai)

Negoro ware, red lacquer
D. 6¼ in. (15.5 cm); H. 3¾ in. (9.5 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

This graceful form, a hollow bowl separated from the low, flared ring foot by a gently scalloped six-lobed collar, is based on that of Chinese lacquered cup stands used to hold ceramic bowls for tea. Such pieces are called temmoku-dai, stands for prized temmoku teabowls. Lacquer cup stands in plain black and red were brought to Japan along with the practices of drinking tea in order to sustain health and observing long periods of meditation in Zen monasteries, probably by Eisai (1141–1215), who promoted both tea drinking and Zen in Japan. (Today at Kennin-ji, the temple he founded in Kyoto, his birthday is observed in a special ceremony that re-creates the original style of tea service as practiced in the
Muromachi period. Four principal guests and their eight companions are served Song-style thick tea in *temmoku* bowls set in lacquered stands and presented to each guest from a large tray.\(^2\)

Several cup stands of highly prized Chinese Ming-period carved red lacquer are treasured among the famous tea utensils of Japan. One with a Yongle reign mark is in the Irving Collection (no. 28). By the fourteenth century such practice was not confined to Zen monasteries; several *temmoku* cups in lacquered stands placed on a ring-footed tray are depicted in a busy scene of food preparation in the *Boki ekotoba*, painted in 1351 (fig. 16, p. 155, and fig. 29, p. 184).\(^3\) By the fifteenth century the custom of serving tea in this way was widespread. In the fifteenth-century version of the illustrated scroll *Fukutomi zōshi*, the new wealth of its comic hero Hidetaka, which was won through his peculiar, noisome skill, is signaled by his newly furnished home in which a tray set with a tea whisk and two *temmoku* bowls on red lacquered stands is prominently displayed on a shelf.\(^4\) The teabowl stands continued in use throughout the Muromachi period, as can be seen in the painting of a party for viewing cherry blossoms on the mid-sixteenth-century screens, *Pastimes of the Twelve Months*, in the Tokyo National Museum.\(^5\) By the Momoyama period, taste among tea masters had turned from the small, footed *temmoku* bowls toward the simple, sturdy forms of Korean and Japanese-style bowls, and widespread use of these elegant lacquer stands consequently declined. They continued to be prized throughout the Edo period for a formal style of tea, practiced among the *daimyō*, which favored the use of precious Chinese-style utensils.

This example follows the classic early-Ming form with a six-lobed rim, and is a type that could well have been made at Negoro but was surely produced in other areas as well. It fills the criteria for *Negoro* lacquer, having a light body, carefully carved and lathed, strong, bright red lacquer, and a lovely patina in the areas where wiping wore the surface thin and revealed the black undercoat. Damaged edges repaired long ago in gold lacquer also attest to the piece’s lengthy history of appreciation and use.

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1. These are brown-black glazed Jian ware teabowls of Fujian Province, named for the Zen Buddhist center at Tian Mu Shan (in Japanese, Temmokutan) in Zhejiang Province, where they were used for tea. These highly prized imported wares inspired a Japanese *temmoku* ware made at Seto.


3. The *Boki ekotoba* is the illustrated biography of Kakunyo, a patriarch of the Pure Land sect of Buddhism. The scene is in the final section of the fifth scroll; see Komatsu Shigemi, 1985, p. 46; and Kawada, 1983, pl. 417.


75 Ritual wash basin

Negoro ware, red lacquer and exposed keyaki wood
D. 13 in. (33 cm); H. 5 3/4 in. (14.6 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 16th century

This round, three-legged basin is lacquered red inside and out except for a wide band of richly grained wood around the outside, between two raised rims that recall the metal or wood strips used to bind wooden buckets or barrels. This type of basin is one of the most important forms of Negoro lacquer. Many such vessels, known as fusatsu darai, have survived. Unlike a number of Negoro forms that also had secular use, this water basin had a specific ritual function in a Buddhist communal ceremony of expiation known as fusatsu-e, held on the fifteenth of the month, in which the monks washed their hands as part of their ritual self-purification. This basin is nearly identical to one preserved at the Rokuji-ji in Ibaragi Prefecture, a temple affiliated with the Negoro temple, with a lacquer inscription on its base stating that it was
made by Shigemune of the Negoro temple; it was one of a pair owned by the Rokujijō-ji temple at the time of the third abbot, Ehan (d. 1544),¹ and is the only extant piece of Negoro definitely made at the temple. The earliest known fusatsu darai, which was inscribed with the name of the monk Gyōun of the Hōō-ji in 1352,² demonstrates that the form of these basins was remarkably consistent, in keeping with their ritual nature. The Rokujijō-ji and Irving examples, made some two centuries later than the fourteenth-century example, differ from it only in the black-accented rims and ridges on the circumference and, most tellingly, in the form of the scrolls flanking each leg. These are heavier and of looser contour, and have lost the crisp heart shapes (a shape called “eye of the wild boar” in Japanese) defined by the carving of the fourteenth-century piece.

¹. Discussed and illustrated in Kawada, 1985, pl. 169, p. 348.  
². Ibid., pl. 170.

76 Round tray on ring foot

Negoro ware, red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)  
D. 16 3/8 in. (41.6 cm)  
Japan, Muromachi period, first half of the 15th century

Large round trays were used for the serving of communal meals in temples. With its high ring foot, this one is of a type that held several individual cups of tea, set in lacquered stands like number 74. Four teacups in lacquered stands, placed on a tray resembling this one in size and shape, are depicted in the Boki ekotoba, the illustrated biography of Kakunyo, priest of the Pure Land sect, which was painted in 1351 (fig. 29).³ The pleasing proportions of this sturdy yet gracefully curved shape, with a rounded edge on the outside of the rim, reflect skilled lathework and the perfection of functional form achieved by refinement over many years of manufacture and use. The patches of black that interrupt the smooth red lacquer surface are the prized marks of natural wear resulting from long use.

³. See number 74, n. 3.

29. Round Negoro trays hold food ready for serving and teabowls in lacquered stands. Detail, Boki ekotoba, scroll 5, Japan, 1351. Nishi Hongan-ji, Kyoto (see also fig. 16, p. 135)
77 Round tray on three feet

Nagoro ware, red lacquer
D. 14¼ in. (37.2 cm); H. 5⅜ in. (13.4 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

Although similar to the previous tray in size and lathework, with a comparable sharply defined transition between flat bottom and curving sides and fine rounded rim, this tray has a lighter feeling because of its thinner body and the scalloped carving of the three-legged base. A base of this type is unusual on a shallow round tray. Black lacquer worn through the red lacquer skin in areas where the tray has been handled and wiped accentuates the contours.
78 Round tray

Negoro ware, red lacquer
D. 15 in. (38.2 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

Refinement in the design of functional objects in the course of many years of production is evident in this tray’s easily handled, light-bodied shape, with gracefully curving sides ending in a softly flared lip. It rests on a recessed base. The tray was worked on a lathe from a single piece of wood. A somewhat smaller tray of the same shape has an inscription indicating that it belonged to a set of fifty such, used for fruit in a Zen refectory.1

1. Kawada, 1985, pl. 92, pp. 75, 344.
79 Tray with scalloped rim

Negoro ware, red lacquer
D. 14¼ in. (37.2 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

Song-period Chinese lacquers with lobed rims may have influenced the design of this shallow tray. Like the tray number 78 it has a recessed base and is carved from a single piece of wood.
Round scalloped tray with three feet

Negoro ware, red and black lacquer
D. 14¾ in. (36.8 cm); H. 6 in. (15.2 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period (1362–1568)

The petal-shaped rim of this tray and the openwork carving on a base with scalloped feet reflect the taste for Chinese forms that flourished during the Muromachi period.

Dishes with six, nine, or ten petals are known in Chinese lacquer and ceramics of the Song and Yuan periods. The openwork of this tray’s band is based on the classic floral scroll, interspersed with double trefoils of the type that appear in the interstices between guri or pommel scrolls in Chinese carved lacquer of the Yuan period (see no. 6). Black lacquer bands border the central section and accentuate the lobed shape of the rim.
81 Pouring vessel with handle

Negoro ware, red lacquer and exposed wood; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 6 in. (15.2 cm); H. 6 1/2 in. (16.5 cm); L. 1 1/2 in. (38.2 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period (1392–1568)

This cylindrical spouted vessel rests on three small feet whose trilobed form is based on the Chinese “cloud collar” motif. A strong, simple scroll at the base of the long, gently curved handle is the single harmonious embellishment on this elegantly functional object. The body of the vessel was hollowed on a lathe. Its recessed bands at top and bottom are lacquered red and set off the lovely grain of the keyaki wood surface, which has been left uncolored. The base, feet, spout, and handle were fashioned separately. The particular care given to the shape of the slightly pointed spout and of the sturdy yet subtly curved handle exemplifies the balancing of practical and aesthetic factors that is so appreciated in Negoro lacquers. A pouring vessel such as this was used for serving soup.
82 Ewer for hot water (yutō)

Negoro ware, red lacquer
D. 10¼ in. (26 cm); H. 14½ in. (37 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

Horizontal raised bands, worked into the surface of this cylindrical wooden vessel on a lathe, not only emphasize the ewer’s sturdy, capacious form but also make it easier to handle when it is filled with water. The elegantly curving spout and large trilobate handle are, similarly, functional elements whose shapes have been refined in order to achieve an aesthetically harmonious whole. The form is adapted from that of an iron or bronze kettle. Ewers like this were used in Zen temple meals.
83 Covered rice server

Negoro ware, red and black lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 11 3/8 in. (30.2 cm); H. 6 3/8 in. (15.5 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

 Bands of red and black lacquer emphasize the smoothly curved form of this capacious rice server. Both aesthetic refinement and skilled lathe work are evident in the carefully defined concentric surfaces of the lid, with sides, shoulder, and top surfaces sharply articulated. The rounded black lacquered rims where the lip of the vessel and the lid meet are functional refinements that aid in the handling of the dish and emphasize its horizontal banding. This type of round covered rice server with alternating bands of black and red lacquer, called “toy top stripe” (komashima) or “snake-eye,” continues to be made, and is especially prized for use in the meal served prior to a formal tea service.¹

In red lacquer on the base are a stylized pine, the auspicious character kichi, and the character for the number 8.

¹ Kawada, 1985, p. 328.
84  Round tray

Negoro ware, red and black lacquer
Inscription on base: Tōdai-ji
D. 12 7/8 in. (32.7 cm)
Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

The underside and curved rim of this tray with a low, wide ring foot are lacquered a glossy black that contrasts beautifully with the red surface. Inscribed in red lacquer on its black underside is the name of the Tōdai-ji temple. Such trays are familiarly known as Hinomaru-bon (rising-sun trays) after their resemblance to the Japanese national flag. They are used in the two-week Shuni-e ritual of purification performed annually by selected monks at the Hokkedō hall at Tōdai-ji in Nara to mark the beginning of the Buddhist liturgical calendar and to invoke peace and prosperity for the nation. The ceremony is popularly known as Omizutori for its climactic ritual after midnight of the twelfth night, in which water drawn from a purified well is offered to the temple’s main deity, the eleven-headed Kannon. Monks enter the temple waving torches in a spectacular rite of cleansing by fire. One of Japan’s most beloved festivals, the ceremony has roots in ancient India and has been performed since the mid-eighth century during the second month of the lunar calendar, which falls in March. The original timing of the ritual is reflected in the more familiar name of the Hokkedō, Nigatsudō or Hall of the Second Month.

The purifying austerities undertaken by a select group of monks during the previous weeks when they
are cloistered include the eating of one daily meal, which is prepared on separate stoves and served on special utensils. Red and black lacquered bowls and trays in three sizes (this is an example of the smallest size of tray) are used for this ceremonial meal consisting of rice, soup, and vegetables, served in a manner that had already been established by the Kamakura period. The trays, made in the same form to the present day, preserve the ancient preference for having the inside of eating utensils lacquered red. They are frequently replaced, and those, like this one, no longer in use at the temple are treasured for use in the meal accompanying the tea ceremony. This tray’s glossy surface and its method of construction, with a fully rounded rim made separately and then attached, suggest an Edo-period date.

The earliest dated example of this type, with an inscription stating that it was one of twenty-six used at the Nigatsudō in 1298, has a straight rather than a rounded rim. It is still kept at Tōdai-ji and has been designated an Important Cultural Property.¹

85 Round bowl
Negoro ware, red and black lacquer; inscription in lacquer on base
D. 12\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. (32.6 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 1580

This type of capacious, sturdy bowl is the basic form of lacquered food utensil. Similar bowls are illustrated in narrative scrolls as early as the late-twelfth-century Shigisan engi (The flying granary), in which one such bowl is shown prominently displayed among other serving pieces on a shelf in the granary owner's house.¹ Many Negoro bowls survive and are generally classified in two categories: those on a ring foot, like this one, and those with attached legs, like number 88.

The inscription on the base of this bowl names an unidentified temple and gives the date as the eighth year of the Tenshō era (1580), making this the only bowl datable to the period before the destruction of
the Negoro temple in 1585. The contrast between a red lacquered inside and a dark lacquer exterior is consistent with the oldest bowls, such as those seen in the twelfth-century scrolls. Although the outside lacquer is brownish in color, it may originally have been black. The lacquer was applied directly to the carved wood form. The foot of the bowl is higher than those on examples in Kamakura-period paintings, but is relatively low compared to Momoyama examples (nos. 86, 87). The simple form seen here, with its flat rim refined by a threadline ridge along the outside, is the culmination of a long development of the basic functional form.

1. Illustrated in Kawada, 1985, pl. 410.
86 Deep bowl on a high ring foot

Negoro ware, red lacquer
D. 15 3/4 in. (40 cm); H. 6 in. (15.3 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

In comparison with the bowl dated 1580 (no. 85), which adheres to the strong, simply carved forms of the Kamakura and Muromachi periods, this large food serving bowl, with more bulbous curves and a gracefully flared lip, reflects the taste for bold grandeur of the Momoyama period. The high, slightly angled ring foot that acts as a pedestal also facilitates handling of this imposing vessel.
87 **High-footed bowl**

*Negoro* ware, red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)
D. 14¼ in. (37.5 cm); H. 7½ in. (18.7 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

The development toward bolder design and even more skilled lathe work, evident from a comparison of numbers 85 and 86, is even more apparent in this food bowl. Its high foot functions almost completely as a pedestal, lending a grand elegance to the graciously curved vessel with its gently flared lip. The image of a blossoming plum tree stamped in black lacquer on the base was probably the mark of the bowl’s owner.
Food serving bowl with three scalloped feet

Negoro ware, red lacquer; mark on base (see Appendix)

D. 16 3/8 in. (43 cm)

Japan, Muromachi period, 16th century

Expert lathe work is evident in the tautly curved profile and fully rounded rim at the lip of this vessel, the largest of the Negoro bowls in the Irving Collection. The thick, lustrous red lacquer is largely intact but has turned brown on the interior from long use as a serving dish. Three “cat’s paw” feet, lacquered black in beautiful contrast to the dominant red, are enclosed within a circular band meticulously carved with scalloped forms and the negative heart shapes called “wild boar’s eye” that are common decorative elements in metalwork fittings for the closures of sutra boxes and chests.
89  Square serving tray with angled corners

Negoro ware, red lacquer; red lacquer mark on base (see Appendix)
L., w. 14¾ in. (36.7 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th–16th century

This flat, straight-sided tray with chamfered corners has the classic shape of a serving tray on which utensils for the basic meal of rice, soup, and vegetables are placed. The form is thought to derive from that of ceremonial offering trays made of pieced Japanese cypress (hinoki). Excavations at the Heijo Palace in Nara attest to the use of such trays by the eighth century, and an illustration in the Gakizōshi (Scroll of hungry ghosts), a late-twelfth-century narrative scroll, shows unfinished cypress trays of this shape used along with tall red and black lacquered tray tables at an aristocratic banquet.’ This basic form, oshiki in Japanese, remains in use to the present day.

Lacquered examples are normally red or red with black on the exterior. The functional and aesthetically pleasing refinement of the form achieved by softening the corners with rounded indentations or, as in this case, a flat, smoothly finished chamfer, developed over centuries of use. Most surviving examples are trays that were used in Buddhist temples and Shinto shrines.
The earliest dated lacquered example, known by the inscription on its base to have been used at the Great Buddha Hall at Tōdai-ji in 1262, has the simple but vigorous shape, retained in the piece shown here, that is considered a classic Japanese form. Other surviving examples are a tray with smaller chamfers, dated 1457, in the Masumida Shrine in Aichi Prefecture, and another in a Japanese private collection, which according to its inscription of 1524 belonged to a set of twenty used in a Buddhist temple. The example here, like those, was crafted from several pieces of wood and lacquered red over an underlayer of black lacquer that emerges from beneath the worn red surface, attesting to the long use of this sturdy, functional, and aesthetically refined tray.

1. The first section of the Scroll of Hungry Ghosts from the Kawamoto Collection, now in the Tokyo National Museum, is illustrated in Kawada, 1985, pl. 413.

90 Table tray

Negoro ware, red lacquer
L., w. 15 in. (38.1 cm); H. 14½ in (37.1 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, early 17th century

Like the square, flat-bottomed oshiki tray with chamfered corners (see no. 89) to which this bold and elegant form is related, the table tray, or tsurigasane, is a traditional Japanese form that for centuries has been in both ceremonial and quotidian use. In the mid-fourteenth-century illustrated scroll Boki ekotoba, square table trays with perforated sides are shown being carried from the kitchen, stacked with bowls and plates ready for serving. In the main room monks eat their meals seated before two such trays, one larger than the other.1 Table trays nearly identical in form to this example but unlacquered, with a high base, square and chamfer-cornered like the table top and perforated on three sides with a cut-out “sacred jewel” design, are pictured in the fifteenth-century scroll Shuhanron ekotoba.2 This type is popularly called sambō (three directions) for the perforations on all sides but one, which is placed toward the sitter. A variant, cut out on all four sides, is called shibō (four directions). These practical yet elegant forms are also used as offering tables on which rice is presented before a Shinto shrine.

This is a large, skillfully fashioned and finished example. Its form is marked by the refinements of a smoothly carved rim at the base of the table and beveled carving on the jewel-shaped cutouts on three sides. A thick, smooth layer of bright red lacquer covers the whole.

1. Illustrated in Kawada, 1985, pl. 417.
2. Illustrated ibid., pl. 418.
91 Pair of sake vessels

Negoro ware, red lacquer; square red lacquer mark on base (see Appendix)

H. 14 3/8 in. (35.9 cm)

Japan, Muromachi period, late 16th century

The bold profile of these vessels for sake is marked by a sharply articulated transition at the widest point between the convexity of the top and the concave curve of the tall, trumpet-shaped lower body. This form developed in Japanese lacquerware and was derived from the shape of the narrow-spouted “plum branch” vases of Song China that had been treasured and copied in Japan since the Heian period. First adopted in Koseto ware pottery, the form was called heishi in Japanese and was used not as a vase but as a sake vessel, primarily in court and in Shinto ceremonies. In the Kamakura period, lacquered wooden vessels in red or sometimes black lacquer with rounded, bulging shoulders followed the ceramic tradition. The form of the pair shown here, however, seems to have developed later and is peculiar to lacquer. These vessels are each constructed of two pieces hollowed on a lathe, and joined, not at the sharply defined shoulder, but at the midpoint of the flaring body. Since these bottles were intended to be used for offering sake in Shinto ceremonies and not as practical containers, the body is only partially hollowed out.
92 Pair of sake caskets

Negoro ware, red lacquer
L. 15¼ in. (38.6 cm); W. 4¾ in. (12.5 cm); H. 20 in. (50.8 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, 16th–17th century

In addition to the round, wide-shouldered heishi (see no. 91) there is another traditional type of sake container for both secular and Shinto usage, the sashidaru. The striking form of these rectangular caskets, raised on straight feet and with a narrow cylindrical spout at top center, seems ill suited for pouring. However, the vessel is easily portable when suspended by cords from the two rings attached on top and can thus be
carried in Shinto processions or taken on secular pleasure outings (see fig. 30).

The form seems to have developed during the Muromachi period. A pair of containers with off-center spouts appears in the late-sixteenth-century screen Maple Viewing at Takao by Kano Hideyori, in the Tokyo National Museum.¹ The earliest dated pair, inscribed in 1519, are considerably smaller than these (12 in. high) and have the top and base of their stoppers carved in chrysanthemum shapes.² The impressive size and strongly rectilinear form of the containers shown here, along with their bright red lacquer coating, suggest a later date.


30. In this detail from an illustrated scroll, two tall sake caskets stand outside a house alongside an open karabitsu chest and other provisions being taken on a journey. Tales of a Strange Marriage, attributed to Ukita Ikkei. Japan, 19th century. Color on paper, h. 11 ¼ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1957 (57.156.7)
93 *Pair of candlesticks*

*Negoro* ware, red lacquer
H. 16½ in. (42 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, 16th century

These tall candlesticks are notable because candlesticks are rare among *Negoro* lacquers. Fine lathework articulates the powerful curves of the base, which may reflect Western influence, and the bamboo motif on the stem. The pair was probably placed before a Buddhist altar.
Writing box with image of Kakinomoto Hitomaro

Gold and silver makie on lacquer; lead rim
L. 9 5/6 in. (24.5 cm); w. 9 5/6 in. (23.1 cm); H. 2 in. (5.1 cm)
Japan, Muromachi to Momoyama period, 16th century

The patriarch of Japanese poetry, Kakinomoto Hitomaro (d. ca. 715), is represented on the cover of this large and meticulously decorated writing box. This type of box (suzuribako) is the most important of the Japanese lacquerware forms. It contains the stone (suzuri) on which ink is ground and mixed with water to the proper consistency. A carefully designed water dropper is usually set in above the stone, and in some cases, a writing brush and other implements, such as a paper knife and awl for puncturing paper, are included. Since the Muromachi period, the decoration of such boxes has characteristically utilized motifs derived from classic literature. Hitomaro is the principal poet represented in Japan’s first anthology of poetry, the Man’yōshū, compiled by the end of the eighth century. He has been revered since the early tenth century, when he was extolled as “Sage of Poetry” in the preface to the first and most influential imperial anthology of poetry, the Kokinshū. This carefully arranged compilation of eleven hundred eleven poems set the vocabulary of images of all subsequent court poetry and also the motifs of traditional design. (See fig. 16, p. 155 for another depiction of Hitomaro.)

The classic image of the poet is presented here. His intensely visionary expression as he gazes over his shoulder in concentrated thought, the horizontal pose leaning on a wooden armrest with left hand atop a raised knee, the courtier’s garb consisting of a robe patterned with large floral medallions (a design originally reserved for members of the court) over voluminous silk trousers tied at the ankle, and the crumpled cap that intensifies the impression of mental absorption are essential elements of an iconography that had been developed by the thirteenth century. This image is said to be based on the poet’s appearance in a dream to Fujiwara no Kanefusa (1004–1069), whose own struggles with poetry had driven him to a dejected obsession with Hitomaro. It evokes not only the strenuous effort of poetic creativity but also the one poem that became inextricably linked with Hitomaro, whose leaning body and backward gaze seem to fix on a faraway vista associated with him through centuries of poetic tradition and evoked by the depiction on the interior of the box.

This scene is described in the poem attributed to Hitomaro and singled out in the preface to the Kokinshū by Ki no Tsurayuki (ca. 872–945) as one of the great poems of ancient times²:

Honobono to
Akashi no ura no
asagiri ni
shimagakure yuku
fune o shi zo omou

Dimly through morning mists over Akashi Bay my longings trace the ships as they vanish beyond the island
(Kokinshū IX.409)

This lament is visualized inside the box, in a landscape that becomes a continuous composition when the cover is set open to the right of the bottom tray. Beyond the pine-clad islands in the foreground, boats in full sail disappear across the waves. Horizontal bands of densely sprinkled gold filings create the illusion of a misty morning light against the darker, more sparsely sprinkled surface, while even finer sprinkling suggests light sparkling on the waves. Gorgeous effects are further developed by the tiny squares of cut gold and silver placed along the shore and on the tree trunks to suggest texture and vegetation. The rocks, shoreline, tree trunks, and fan-shaped clusters of pine needles are executed in raised lacquer (takamakie) of varying
thickesses, their depressed outlines sprinkled in a silvery metallic powder. Gold and silver sheet inlay was used for the sails and the top surface of the foreground rock.

The virtuosity of the lacquerer, thus lavished on the interior where it can be enjoyed only by the user of the box, is also displayed on the cover. Here the highly modeled and detailed figure of the poet is in bold contrast to the flat dark background, itself subtly enlivened by the sprinkled gold filings embedded in several layers of lacquer and polished to produce an effect of richly varied colors of gold. The poet’s armrest, thickly built up of a mixture of lacquer and charcoal, was sprinkled with a metallic powder composed of tin and lead (now darkened), and its wood grain was defined by lines of sprinkled gold. The box is carefully constructed. The flat decorated surface of the lid is framed by beveled edges cut off at the corners and covered with a narrow band of dense gold sprinkling (ikakeji) on which freely drawn shells and seaweed are scattered. The band extends down over the corners, further emphasizing the contour of the box.

Decoration with a literary basis, in effect amounting to the visual counterpart to a well-loved poem, and an emphasis on takamakie decoration with a full array of embellishment using both sprinkled and inlay techniques are characteristic of lacquer boxes of the Muromachi period, such as a group believed to have been owned by Yoshimasa (1435–1490), the eighth Ashikaga shogun. In size, technique, and subject matter this box conforms to the pattern of these lacquers of the second half of the fifteenth century (called the Higashiyama era after Yoshimasa’s residence), which set the traditional style of the officially sponsored Kōami school. But both the bold design on the cover, with its large figure whose robes spill over the framing band, and the explicit, literal poetic imagery on the interior differ in feeling from the more restrained decoration of fifteenth-century lacquers.

An ink inscription pasted on the wooden box in which this work has been kept names the lacquer artist as Kōami Chōsei (Nagakyo) (1529–1603), the sixth-generation head of the Kōami line of lacquerers who were in service to the shoguns from the time of
Ashikaga Yoshimasa to the end of the Edo period. The design is attributed to Tosa Mitsunobu (1434–1525), the illustrious painter in the classic style who was also in service to the Ashikaga shoguns; he is named in Kōami-ke densho (Records of the Kōami family) as an artist who provided underdrawings for lacquer decoration. The supposition that the design is based on a drawing by Mitsunobu is reasonable, since such materials, like the elaborate techniques displayed here, were handed down through the generations of the Kōami school. Although no definitely documented work by Chōsei is known, the attribution of this lacquer piece to him also deserves consideration. Its conspicuous technical virtuosity and literally illustrative decoration, distinct from the elegant restraint of Higashiyama lacquers, seem consonant with the taste of the turbulent second half of the sixteenth century, the age in which Nobunaga (1534–1582), the shogun whom Chōsei served, came to power.


2. The poem is a waka, the standard form of Japanese verse, made up of thirty-one syllables in five lines of 5, 7, 5, 7, 7.

3. See the excellent discussion of these pieces in von Ragué, 1976, pp. 112–21.


95 **Box for books with landscape decoration**

Gold and silver makie on black lacquer

L. 10¼ in. (26 cm); W. 7¼ in. (18.4 cm); H. 1⅞ in. (4.8 cm)

Japan, Muromachi period, 16th century

The silhouettes of pine, cypress, blossoming plum, and camellia trees enliven a mountain landscape containing a waterfall and temple buildings that is set diagonally against the smooth black surface of this richly decorated box. In the indeterminate distance at the upper right, another mountain peak is swathed in clouds rendered in sprinkled gold of varying densities and embellished with cut pieces of gold and silver to create an ethereal effect of evanescent light. The lacquer decoration, of nearly unimaginable intricacy, continues from the top over the beveled edges to the sides of the lid and, carefully matched, on down the outside of the base of the box, so that the representation remains uninterrupted whether the box is open or closed. The most complex work is seen in the foreground landscape, where a full range of makie techniques is displayed. On the smooth mountain forms, carefully built up to contrast with the glossy black ground, fine gold is so densely sprinkled that it appears solid. Cut pieces of silver and gold are scattered over the hills and the shore. Fine lines of sprinkled silver highlight the river cascade, and the splashing water becomes blossoms floating atop the rippling waves rendered in closely spaced raised lines of sprinkled gold. Carefully worked gold pieces, some raised and some sunken, are inlaid to represent small rocks. (See detail, p. 150.)

In style and technique this box is similar to a writing box in the Suntory Art Museum, Tokyo, decorated with a view of Ogurayama, the mountain on the
northern bank of the Ōi River in western Kyoto and a famous site with specific poetic associations (a meisho) that figures importantly in the Kokinshū. That box is considered a sixteenth-century work of the Igarashi school, one of the major schools of lacquer makers that developed in the Muromachi period. Both boxes display the contrasting use of raised and polished makié, lively detail in the landscape, and an evocative mood created by starkly silhouetted hills and trees against a limitless black void.

Although the landscape details on the Irving Collection box cannot be definitively identified with a specific poem, the decoration, like most of the images on Muromachi lacquers, may well be linked to the diction of classical poetry. A poem by Lady Ise on the subject of plum trees blossoming near a stream, which appears in Spring Poems, Book One of the Kokinshū, evokes the image realized here of petals on a stream:

*Toshi o hete*  
*hana no kagami to*  
*naru mizu wa*  
*chirikakaru o ya*  
*kumoru to iramu*

Is it called clouded  
when petals dust its surface  
this stream that becomes  
a mirror for plum blossoms  
year after departing year?

More conspicuous is the motif of the waterfall, the cascade of white jewels (taki no shiratama) that is another resonant poetic image; it figures, for example, in the verses composed at Nunobiki Falls, a meisho located on the upper Ikuta River in Kobe, by Ariwara no Yukihiro and his brother Narihira (Kokinshū XVII.922, 923):

*Kokichirse*  
taki no shiratama  
hiroioike  
yo no uki toki no  
namida ni zo karu*

I will gather up  
the transparent beads scattered  
by the waterfall  
and borrow them when sadness  
has consumed my store of tears

—Ariwara no Yukihiro

*Nukimidaru*  
*bitokoso arurashi*  
*shiratama no*  
*ma naku no chiru ka*  
sode no sebaki ni

There must be a man  
unstringing them at the top—  
those transparent beads  
scattering incessantly  
Alas for my narrow sleeves

—Ariwara no Narihira

Narihira’s poem, the more famous of the two since it is also included in another early Heian collection, Tales of Ise, may be the source of the decorative motif, making Nunobiki the spot envisioned so sumptuously on this box, although the identification must remain speculative.

The box’s interior is lacquered in plain nashiji except for the clump of autumn grasses in hiramakie that disguises a round filled hole in the lower right corner as a full moon. This clever addition was made at a later date when the piece was converted to a writing box, and is done in the simple hiramakie technique. Originally this extravagantly decorated box held books, which could be pushed up through the hole in the base. Such a lavish container might well have held a copy of the Kokinshū, which in the Muromachi period was transmitted through secretly edited copies that constituted a prized certification of the owner’s privileged knowledge.

2. Kokinshū 1.44; McCullough translation, 1985, p. 22.
96 Box for tooth-black with design of Suma no ura (Suma Bay)

Gold makié lacquer
L. 3½ in. (7.8 cm); W. 2½ in. (5.3 cm); H. 1½ in. (3.5 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th century

On the gently curving surface of this small rectangular box appears a combination of motifs referring to the beach at Suma in modern Kobe, a site of exile that has been associated with lovelorn nostalgia in Japanese poetry since the early Heian period (794–898). On the desolate shore among windblown pines and scattered shells is an abandoned bucket used for gathering the briny seaweed that was burned to produce salt in thatched huts such as the one pictured here. In “Suma,” the pivotal chapter in the early-eleventh-century *Tale of Genji*, Genji arrives at this beach, his sorrow couched in language that alludes to an earlier exiled courtier-poet, Ariwara no Yukihiro (?819–?893). Yukihiro’s poem in the *Kokinshū* (xviii.962) set the mood of desolate longing ever after associated with the place:

*Wakuraba ni
tou hito araba
suma no ura ni
moshio taretsutsu
wabu to kotae yo*

If by any chance
someone should ask after me
answer that I pine
weeping as salt seaweed drips
on the beaches of Suma
In the Muromachi period, the legend of Yukihiro’s exile and his romance with two salt-gatherers, the sisters Murasame and Matsukaze, who pined for him long after his return to the capital, became the basis of a Noh play by Zeami (1363–1443), *Matsukaze*. The name, which means “wind in the pines,” evokes images of the landscape as well as the sighs of the unfortunate waiting lovers. In the play the ghost of Matsukaze dances in a frenzy of longing, embracing the wind-tossed pine as her departed lover. The pines and shells on this box, homonymous with waiting (*matsu*) and meeting (*kai*), together with the abandoned bucket and the salt-makers’ hut, unmistakably allude to this tradition of poetic nostalgia.

This box, treasured for use as a container for incense in the tea ceremony, is of a type originally used to hold the iron filings with which aristocratic women blackened their teeth. It was part of a set of cosmetic accessories contained in a *tebako* box (see nos. 99, 101, 103). The shape of this box, with lead-rimmed top and bottom meeting at the sides, rounded corners, and gently curved top surface rising from an indented ledge, evolved as early as the Kamakura period (1185–1333). However, the specific literary content of the decoration and the preference shown for employing a raised lacquer technique for the major motifs—such as the foreground rock with its inlay of squares of cut gold and silver—are typical of Muromachi lacquerwork. So prized are boxes of this type for use in the tea ceremony that they survived apart from their original sets, and many more were skillfully reproduced in the Meiji period (1868–1912).

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The *bundai*, a low table with a rectangular top and four cuspatel legs, was used to hold paper and a box for writing implements (*suzuribako*). The earliest known form of the *bundai* is seen in the *Boki ekotoba*, an illustrated narrative of 1351, in the depiction of a poetry meeting; it is set before a hanging scroll with the image of the revered poet Kakinomoto Hitomaro (see fig. 16, p. 155). The *bundai* shown there is undecorated, with shorter, less elegantly articulated legs than later examples, but has the same rims at the short edges seen later. The form that subsequently evolved in the Muromachi period remained standard. In Muromachi times a matching *suzuribako* to be set atop the table was often made, and after the seventeenth century, a matching set consisting of a table, a *suzuribako*, and a box for writing paper became customary.

In this early *bundai* with its motif of a waterfall and geese, the sparse decoration, concentrated on the left side, is in keeping with the function of the piece as a table as well as with the pictorial conventions that developed in fifteenth-century Japan in response to the appreciation for Chinese ink painting that had spread from Zen temples throughout the upper levels of society. A precipitous, rocky cliff, with jutting pines and a waterfall that cascades down to patterned arcs of foam at its base, dominates the left side. It is dramatically set against the flat black lacquer surface and is framed below by the stylized form of a cloud, an undecorated area reserved against the gold- and silver-sprinkled rocks. Fine undulating lines of flat sprinkled gold subtly carry the motif of calm water along the lower edge of the table surface until it is picked up in a delightful coda at the lower right, where two geese
float on gold waves near a half-submerged rock. Raised lacquer, sprinkled with a mixture of coarse gold and silver and inlaid with cut squares of gold and silver, imparts a rich texture to the rocks. The painterly quality of the trees and water is achieved by the fine sprinkling of gold on lacquer lines painted directly on the surface. The geese are rendered in densely sprinkled gold against the black lacquer ground, with feathers indicated by fine lines reserved against the gold. The effective contrast between raised and flat gold decoration, the evocative empty space of the black surface, and the pictorial style, reminiscent of the bird-and-flower paintings on decorated sliding doors by Kano Motonobu (1476–1559), point to a date for this *bundai* in the first half of the sixteenth century.

1. In scroll 5; Komatsu Shigemi, 1980, p. 47.
A clump of chrysanthemums growing naturalistically from a ground of densely sprinkled gold fills the curved top surface of this small letter box, establishing the vertical position in which the box would be placed before the recipient. On the long sides of the overlapping lid, other sprays of dew-laden autumn flowers—chrysanthemum, miscanthus, and bush clover—fan out from the center and are matched on the base, so that the design continues uninterrupted past the trilobed arch framing a gilt bronze...
chrysanthemum knob. Smaller sprays of bush clover fill the shorter sides. A band of gold, articulating the narrow ledge at the juncture of the sides with the curved top, frames the field and emphasizes the rounded contours of the box. Although some of the gold sprinkling on the raised blossoms and leaves has been worn away, still apparent is the pleasing harmony of subtly varied sprinkling techniques used to differentiate colors and textures among the leaves and blossoms. The contrast between the floral motifs and the black background is softened by a faint overall sprinkling of fine gold particles in the lacquer ground.

The shape of the box preserves a refined form that evolved from the Heian to the Kamakura period and became standard thereafter. Characteristic are the rounded corners, curved top, and overlapping lid with a narrow rim at the bottom edge, cut out to frame a knob which held a silk cord to be tied over the top. The restrained opulence of the decoration differs from the simple, vigorous élán of Momoyama design and is also distinct from ornate, conventional Edo-period decoration, suggesting a date in the Muromachi period.

99  Box for personal accessories (tebako) illustrating the Kikujidō

Gold togidashi makie on black lacquer
L. 14 1/4 in. (36.2 cm); W. 10 1/2 in. (27.6 cm); H. 7 in. (17.9 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 15th century

The tebako, a large box for personal accessories which sometimes includes a tray and smaller boxes for combs, mirrors, and other items, developed as a form of lacquerware in the Heian period and continued throughout the Edo period, when it played an important part in the elaborate ensembles of lacquered furnishings made for trousseaux. The earliest surviving example, from the twelfth century, has an overlapping lid with rounded corners and a lead rim like this example; by the Kamakura period, a flush-fitting lid had also become standard. The togidashi technique used here, in which the gold particles are evenly sprinkled on wet lacquer and then successive layers of lacquer are applied and polished until the gold decoration reappears, is a conservative method characteristic of Heian and Kamakura lacquer. Typical of the Muromachi period, however, is the elegant decoration consisting of large chrysanthemum plants bent over a stream bank, a more pictorial presentation than the boldly patterned ornament found on Kamakura lacquers. In its spacious, two-dimensional clarity, with single-layered blossoms which are perfect circles whether seen from front or back and are set in a space defined by a simple ground plane, this box is similar to lacquer boxes dedicated to the Hayatama Shrine in 1390,
although those show a more elaborate combination of relief and inlaid decoration.

The decoration on this **tebako** refers to the Noh play *Kikujidō*. The key element is the bamboo ladle shown resting on a rock in the stream on the box's lid. The play is based on an ancient Chinese legend well known in Muromachi times. It recounts the discovery of *Kikujidō* (the “Chrysanthemum Youth”), a young man living in a hut surrounded by chrysanthemums, by an emissary of the Wei Dynasty emperor Wen Di (Cao Pei, 187–226), who is searching for the source of the healing waters that flow out of the Li-xian mountains. The youth had been a favorite of Mu Wang, fifth emperor of the Western Zhou Dynasty (ca. 1050–771 B.C.), and describes how he incurred the envy of his rivals, who conspired to have him banished. He came to the mountains, bringing a couplet from the *Lotus Sutra* which the emperor had given
him with the instruction to recite it daily. In order not to forget it, he wrote the verse on a chrysanthemum leaf. The beautiful youth has been unaware of the lapsed centuries, and now realizes that he was freed from old age and sickness after he unwittingly drank from the stream into which dew from the chrysanthemum had fallen. In praise and wonder, he scoops up some of the miraculous water in honor of Mu Wang and offers it as a gift to the Wei emperor, who is thus able to enjoy an illustrious long life.

This apocryphal tale, with its anachronistic Buddhist elements, was one of many Chinese legends through which Japanese of the Muromachi period envisioned their own lives. The play’s celebration of longevity in reference to the glory of ancient emperors, and by association, the Japanese emperor, is characteristic of the tendency in Noh and in other Muromachi arts to incorporate the themes and forms of an idealized classic past, both of Heian Japan and of China. The earliest datable instance of the Kikujidō theme’s use as an auspicious motif in lacquer decora-

1. von Ragüé, 1976, pl. 27.

100 Basin and ewer with paulownia decoration

Gold hiramakie on black lacquer with gilt bronze fittings
Basin: D. (without handles) 12³/₄ in. (32.1 cm); H. 6 in. (15.2 cm). Ewer: H. 6³/₄ in. (16.5 cm)
Japan, Muromachi period, 16th century

This set, a washing basin with four “horn-shaped” handles (tsunodarai) and a water ewer without a handle (hazō), is designed to be carried by two people. The basin could be set in a stand, as depicted in an early-fifteenth-century illustration of Sei Shōnagon’s Makura no sōshi, but for actual use it was placed directly on the floor as shown in other illustrations of the late Kamakura period. When not in use, the ewer would be set inside the basin.

The paulownia branch that decorates the ewer and the sides and interior of the basin has the same large scale and two-dimensionality that characterize the chrysanthemums on the tebako number 99. However, the motif of a broken-off branch, as well as the vigorous naturalism of the drawing, link the set more closely to the sixteenth-century decoration of the Shōshinden hall at Daikaku-ji temple. The lacquered architectural elements in that building are thought to be originally
from Hideyoshi’s Jurakudai palace, which was completed in 1587 and is considered a prime example of early Momoyama architecture. The technique displayed on this basin and ewer is a relatively thick *hiramakie* in which the gold filings are sprinkled directly on the design drawn in lacquer, with lines meticulously reserved against the black lacquer ground (*kakiuvari*) and without color variation in the gold. The shapes are elegant and less globular and robust than works in the fully developed Kōdai-ji style, such as a set in the Suntory Art Museum in Tokyo with the characteristic scattered paulownia crests of Kōdai-ji lacquer (and see nos. 101, 104). The technique, the shapes, and the similarity of the drawing to that of Muromachi works all suggest that this set is a work of the mid-sixteenth century. The Chinese bellflower motif on the gilt bronze knob of the ewer is popularly associated with Akechi Mitsuhide (1526–1582), whose fatal attack on the shogun Oda Nobunaga offered Hideyoshi the opportunity to seize power for himself.


### 101 Box for personal accessories (tebako) with decoration of autumn grasses

**Gold makié on black lacquer**

L. 11½ in. (28.2 cm); W. 8 13/16 in. (22.4 cm); H. 8 5/8 in. (22.5 cm)

Japan, Momoyama period, ca. 1600

A profusion of freely drawn autumn grasses—principally chrysanthemum, miscanthus, and bush clover—fills the curved surface on the lid of this capacious box (see frontispiece). Scattered across the naturalistic depiction of wildflowers are five stylized paulownia crests that echo the larger ones adorning the sides. Very different from the quietly restrained flat gold decoration on the Muromachi *tebako* (no. 99) is the coloristic variety achieved here by different sprinkling techniques, which heighten the exuberance of the drawing and enhance its naturalism through effects of shading and texture. Reddish tones are achieved by sparsely sprinkling the gold filings on the lacquer ground. The effect, likened to a pear skin, is used to introduce color and shading in specific areas (*e-nashiji*). These contrast with areas rendered in solid gold, such as the leaves, where the veins are either scratched through to the black ground (*barigaki*) or added by sprinkling gold onto lines drawn in lacquer (*tsukegaki*). The combination of stylized crests with freely rendered autumn grasses is typical of lacquerwork associated with the Kōdai-ji temple in Kyoto (1605/6)—particularly the doors of Hideyoshi’s shrine, which were made in 1596 for his Fushimi castle and later incorporated into the mausoleum—and also characterizes personal items such as this box.¹

102. *Melon-shaped incense burner with decoration of paulownia*

Gold *hiramakie* on black lacquer

D. 4 ⅝ in. (11.1 cm); H. 3 ⅞ in. (9 cm)

Japan, Momoyama period, ca. 1600

The form of this small incense burner, traditional for the Muromachi period, is related to an earlier, larger type of incense burner with a tall basket-weave cover over which robes were placed for perfuming. (One such is in a set of matched lacquer illustrated in figure 21, p. 158.) Here, a large scroll of paulownia leaves spreads freely over the lobed surface. A variety of gold-sprinkling techniques provide colorful contrasts between the reddish tones of *nashi* on which gold lines are sprinkled, the denser sprinkling on the leaves, and the very thick sprinkling creating the solid texture of the upright blossoms. Both the motif and the style of this piece link it to Kōdai-ji lacquers of the late sixteenth century.

103 “Red-cornered” box (sumiaka)
Gold *makiie* and silver foil inlay on black lacquer; red lacquer over coarse cloth
L. 13 in. (33 cm); w. 11 in. (28 cm); H. 10 1/4 in. (26 cm)
Japan, Momoyama—early Edo period, 17th century

The exuberant design decorating this exceptionally large *sumiaka* box, a large flowering chrysanthemum plant combined with scattered medallions of stylized cranes, is similar in feeling to the powerful designs of Kōdai-ji lacquers such as number 101. Indeed, the preference shown in the sixteenth and early seventeenth
centuries for Kōdai-ji-type lacquers with bold, colorful effects may have fostered the popularity of this kind of box. Typically, on both the box and its deeply overlapping cover, scalloped or heart-shaped areas covered with red-lacquered cloth in imitation of metal fittings are reserved against the black or gold lacquer. The type had developed by the fourteenth century; one without makie decoration and properly tied with a red silk cord is prominently displayed on a shelf in the interior of an abbot’s quarters depicted in the narrative scroll Boki ekotoba, painted in 1351. The earliest surviving examples, however, are from the sixteenth century. By the early Edo period, the sumiaka box had become one of the standard lacquer shapes comprising the lavish sets of lacquer furnishings presented at daimyō weddings. A sumiaka box dated 1613 in the Sugau Ishibe Shrine resembles the Irving piece in both the shape of its red cutout areas and the design of scattered chrysanthemum and paulownia medallions.

The example shown here, with its vibrant composition of windblown chrysanthemum and the subtle variations among its crane medallions (which are not rigidly uniform as family crests were required to be), retains the vigorous freedom of Momoyama design, suggesting that it dates to the early seventeenth century. The silver inlay and silver makie that give variation to the leaves further enrich the play of colors and textures that makes the sumiaka box such an appealing form.

1. Boki ekotoba, scroll 2, section 1, in Komatsu Shigemi, 1980, p. 16.
2. Several such magnificent sets have been exhibited in recent years outside Japan. See Shimizu Yoshiaki, 1988, nos. 227, 228; and Royal Academy of Arts, 1981–82, no. 160.

10.4 Clothing tray with decoration of paulownia and nine-orb crests

Gold makie on black lacquer

L. 22 3/8 in. (56.2 cm); W. 21 3/8 in. (53.7 cm); H. 4 in. (10.1 cm)

Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

This is a particularly large midarebako, or shallow box without a lid used to hold clothing ready for wearing. Such a box was usually kept on a shelf of the lacquered cabinet that was one of the traditional furnishings in living quarters. The form of the midarebako suggests a box cover, and perhaps it derived from the practice of using box lids to present gifts of clothing. This piece is decorated inside, outside, and on the underside with the paulownia motif associated with Toyotomi Hideyoshi and the nine-orb crest used by the Hosokawa family in the Momoyama period. The highly colorful effect created by the varying densities of gold sprinkling is characteristic of Kōdai-ji lacquer. Various textures within the leaves and flowers are achieved by different types of sprinkling, gold lines drawn on black, evenly sprinkled gold, and the reddish nashiji in the leaves.
Portable cabinet with nine drawers in namban style

Gold makie and mother-of-pearl inlay on black lacquer; silver fittings
L. 10 3/4 in. (27 cm); W. 10 3/4 in. (26 cm); H. 10 3/4 in. (26 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, 16th century

As is explained in the preceding essay by Haino Akio, during the second half of the sixteenth century Japanese lacquer makers produced goods for European tastes in a style known as namban (literally, “southern barbarian”), the term then used to describe anything foreign. This type of cabinet, with a fall-front panel and small drawers surrounding a larger central compartment decorated with an architectural-style arch, is, among the several forms made for export, the earliest known. It was modeled after the European vargueno, or writing desk. This one is unusual for its small size, intricate decoration, and silver metalwork. Bands of geometric designs in mother-of-pearl—stripes, triangles, and checkered borders—reflect Moorish and Gujarati contributions to this hybrid style and accentuate the contours and divisions, framing the bird-and-flower decorations executed in inlay and gold hiramakie (see also pp. 170–72 and figs. 27, 28).

106  Coffer in namban style

Gold makie and mother-of-pearl inlay on black lacquer; gilt bronze fittings
L. 14 in. (35.6 cm); W. 7 ¾ in. (19.7 cm); H. 8 ½ in. (22.5 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, 1600–1630

The domed coffer is a European form that was adapted by Japanese lacquerers for export ware from the late sixteenth century until about 1680. In this example, mother-of-pearl inlay enriches the makie bird-and-flower decoration, frames the square panels, and outlines the shape of the box with bands of triangles and a broad central band in a Chinese-coin pattern. This decoration, in a hybrid style combining Chinese, Japanese, and Moorish elements, catered to the taste of Portuguese and Spanish traders and prevailed until about 1620. Although this piece incorporates many of the floral motifs seen on the cabinet number 105, here they are more crudely drawn, larger, and more pictorial. The Chinese landscape on the domed cover signals a transition to a later type of decoration: by the 1640s, when all foreign trade was prohibited except that with the Netherlands and China, a different decorative style would develop featuring
pictorial landscapes in addition to bird-and-flower motifs, executed almost entirely in makie (mother-of-pearl was rarely used after 1640). Elsewhere on the coffer, traditional Japanese floral designs predominate: on the front are chrysanthemums in a stream and autumn grasses (including the Chinese bellflower); on one end a camellia; and on the other autumn grasses—Chinese bellflowers and flowering clover. Although lacquers made for Japanese use are fully decorated throughout, on namban lacquers the less conspicuous surfaces such as backs and interiors are more simply treated. Here the coin pattern of the central band is reduced to a simple grid in back and the floral decoration to a scroll of clematis without blossom.

107 Five-tiered food box with striped decoration and Chinese figures
Gold and silver makie and mother-of-pearl inlay on black lacquer
L. 8¼ in. (21 cm); W. 7⅜ in. (19.5 cm); H. 10¾ in. (27 cm)
Japan, Momoyama—early Edo period, 16th–17th century

This set of five stacked, nearly square food trays, whose heights increase subtly and progressively from the top tray to the bottom one, exemplifies a characteristic Japanese form. It is decorated with a rich variety of exotic motifs favored during the Momoyama and early Edo periods, when trade with Portuguese and Spanish merchants introduced new styles and decorative elements. The design is unified by a pattern of horizontal bands made up of thin alternating stripes and stylized floral scrolls in mother-of-pearl and gold and silver makie. This pattern may be related to striped textiles of Southeast Asian origin that were brought to Japan by foreign traders in the sixteenth century. On the lid, a picture of Chinese sages and their attendant beneath a pine tree is bordered by a wide band of stylized lotus scroll. Although in the Momoyama period items for domestic use sometimes incorporated the geometric designs and rich mother-of-pearl inlay used primarily on lacquers made for export, the pictorial design on this box’s lid and the variety of floral scrolls are unusual features.
Tray for incense burner and utensils

Gold hiramakie and inlay of mother-of-pearl and tinfoil on black lacquer
L. 13 in. (33 cm); w. 9 in. (22.8 cm); H. 1 ½ in. (3.8 cm)
Japan, early Edo period, early 17th century

This rectangular tray has rounded everted corners on its broad upturned rim and stands on four low bracket feet. It represents the standard form of a tray used for utensils for incense, an item frequently included in the trousseau set. This piece is more freely decorated than most examples; its bold design of crabs in dewy grass is similar to a design of fans scattered over dewy grasses decorating a tray in a Japanese collection that is a well-known example of Kōdai-ji ware.¹ The crab motif, like those of seagrass and shells, appears frequently in designs of textiles and lacquer during the early seventeenth century. Here the grasses are executed in the technique of hiramakie, with e-nashijii used for color effect, as in Kōdai-ji wares; however, the conspicuous use of inlay—mother-of-pearl for one crab, tin for the other crab and several of the large droplets—reflects a new interest in texture that characterizes the early-seventeenth-century works of Hon’ami Köetsu (1558–1637).

¹. Von Ragué, 1976, pl. 119.
109  **Box for personal accessories with design of shells and seaweed**

Gold *hiramakie* with *nashiji* on black lacquer
L. 10¼ in. (26 cm); w. 8½ in. (22 cm); H. 6½ in. (16.5 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

This *tebako*’s decoration of profusely scattered shells tangled in seaweed is rendered by the simple technique of sprinkling gold filings of various densities on designs drawn directly on the lacquer surface (*hiramakie*) and scratching linear details through the gold to the lacquer ground. This method was used to create the vigorous, colorful Kōdai-ji lacquers of the Momoyama period, and undoubtedly expedited the production of the great quantities of lacquer furnishings and architectural decoration commissioned by military leaders of that age. Appreciated for its colorful effects and naturalistic drawing, the Kōdai-ji style continued in use well into the Edo period. The design on this box, however, lacks the spacious scale of the Momoyama-period works, and the motif it presents came into wide use in the seventeenth century.
110  Box of five trays with decoration of crabs and waves

Gold makie on black lacquer
L. 12 1/4 in. (31.8 cm); W. 6 in. (15.2 cm); H. 6 3/4 in. (17.1 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

The deeply overlapping cover of this set of stacked rectangular boxes is decorated with large curling waves and lines of crabs that encircle the form with a playful disregard for the box’s carefully articulated contours. The curving lines of evenly sprinkled fine gold particles set off shimmering whorls of lightly sprinkled nashiji, a marvelous visualization of foaming water dissipating in the sunshine that also gives diversity to
the surface design. Variation in the texture of the crab shells is achieved by a similar combination of sprinkling techniques. The stacked inner trays are unified by a composition that similarly spreads over the entire surface, a design of aquatic plants depicted in detail: the sharp three-leaved water plantain (omodaka), diamond-shaped water chestnut (bishi), and a type of swamp hollyhock (aoi).

This box might have been used for painting materials. The interiors of the two lowest trays are lacquered red and divided into compartments: two long sections perhaps for brushes and inkstone in the bottom tray, and three equal sections for pigments in the next. Such new forms, decorated with an imaginative combination of motifs that had rarely been used in lacquerwork, were developed during the seventeenth century, when the artistic and literary traditions formerly restricted to the aristocracy became accessible to the prosperous citizenry of Kyoto.
**III Box for stationery with decoration of deer and butterflies**

Gold *makie* and inlay of mother-of-pearl and tin foil on black lacquer
L. 17 ¼ in. (45 cm); W. 12 ¼ in. (31.2 cm); H. 6 ¼ in. (17.3 cm)
Japan, late Momoyama–early Edo period, early 17th century

The lively herd of long-eared deer on this box, their eager, surprised expressions more recognizably human than animal, display the fresh sensibility of Momoyama design. Depicted amid overscaled spring flowers, a clump of dandelions and large hare’s-foot ferns, these deer depart from the earlier, traditional poetic imagery of deer crying in autumn that informed later Rimpa decoration with the theme of deer in autumn grasses (see nos. 136, 137). The technique of inlaid mother-of-pearl used here for the deers’ antlers
and butterfly wings was dormant in Japanese lacquer throughout the Muromachi period and was absent even from the flamboyant decoration of sixteenth-century lacquer in the Kōdai-ji style. It reflects exotic, perhaps Korean, influences that were incorporated into Japanese lacquerwork as a result of the foreign trade that thrived during the Momoyama era. The fresh naïveté of the drawing and the profusion of butterflies around the sides also reveal the influence of Korean lacquers, which were among the eagerly sought goods brought to Japan through flourishing ports such as Sakai, near Osaka.
112  Cabinet with decoration of stylized tortoiseshell patterns

Gold makie on black lacquer; gilt bronze handle, lock, and hinges
L. 14¼ in. (36 cm); W. 9¼ in. (24.2 cm); H. 14¼ in. (36.2 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

This chest, discussed in detail in the preceding essay by Haino Akio, is of a type designed for traveling and often referred to as a “medicine chest.” Behind its removable door are three interior drawers decorated with flying cranes (see fig. 26, p. 169). The design thus combines the auspicious symbols of the crane and the tortoise, a pair of motifs associated in Chinese lore with the legendary mountain of the immortals, known in Japanese as Horaisan, which has played a part in Japanese decorative art since the Nara period. Hexagonal stylized tortoiseshell patterns were often applied to lacquered furnishings of the Heian and Kamakura periods, but the bold size and scattered placement of elements on this box are in keeping with the taste of the Momoyama period and are found on ceramics and textiles of the period as well.

113  Basket-weave box with paulownia decoration

Lacquered bamboo basketry and gold leaf
L. 8½ in. (22 cm); W. 8¼ in. (21 cm); H. 2½ in. (5.5 cm)
Japan, early Edo period, 1600–1615

Lacquered bamboo basketry, known as rantai shikki, was produced in Japan as early as the late Jōmon period (1000–250 B.C.).1 Fine woven bamboo, easily shaped into round-cornered forms such as this flat box, is valued for its lightness and resiliency and when lacquered is an attractive, durable material. The design of large stylized paulownia leaves scattered over the top and sides of this box is applied in gold leaf, with the veins painted in black lacquer.

During the Keichō period (1596–1615), the early years of the Tokugawa peace, nostalgia for the classic past made the paulownia, which had been favored by the aristocracy of the Heian and Kamakura periods, a popular decorative motif. The paulownia had long been
associated with the court; in the fourteenth century, when Emperor Godaigo gave the privilege of using it to Ashikaga Takauji, it became a traditional insignia bestowed by the emperor on the shoguns. Later, Hideyoshi was so pleased to receive this honor that the motif became one of the most frequently employed designs on Kōdai-ji lacquer of the Momoyama period. Its use as an emblem of shogunal authority ended in 1611, when Ieyasu, to show his power over the court, refused to accept the motif, instead adopting the hollyhock as his personal emblem. On this example, the stylized trefoils with three upright stalks are scattered in an elegantly random pattern that is purely decorative and has no suggestion of emblematic significance.

1. Late Jōmon sites mainly in Tohoku but also in Hokkaido and central Japan contained such items. See Kuraku Yoshiyuki, “Origins of the Use of Urushi in Japan and Its Development,” in Urushi Study Group, 1988, p. 46.
Drum body (kotsuzumi) with decoration of chestnuts

Gold hiramakie on black lacquer
L. 9 7/8 in. (25 cm); D. 4 in. (10 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, early 17th century

Lacquer decoration customarily embellishes the wood core of the hourglass-shaped hand drum (tsuzumi), which is played by striking horsehide heads lashed onto the ends with hemp cord. Although related to larger continental drums introduced into Japan in the Nara period (629–94), which are placed on the floor or suspended from the neck and struck with wooden sticks, the hand drum is held over the left shoulder and played with the right hand and evolved in Japan with the popular sarugaku and shirabyōshi dances of the Kamakura period (1185–1333). It became one of the most important musical instruments for the traditional dramatic forms of Noh and Kabuki, while continuing to be used in popular entertainment until the end of the Edo period. Generally of cherry or zelkova wood, these drums are made in two sizes: the kotsuzumi, a small drum about ten inches long with a smooth round central section, and the slightly larger ōtsuzumi, about eleven inches long, which has a ring carved around the center of its shaft. They are much appreciated for their beautiful gold makie decoration.

The variations in color and texture that make the decoration of this drum so appealing are achieved by contrasting differing techniques of hiramakie. Some forms are of solidly sprinkled gold, while the chestnuts are rendered by sparsely sprinkling larger flakes over brown lacquer, then texturing them with gold burrs. The lacquerwork of this piece, similar in motif and technique to that of the rice server number 128, is related to the early-seventeenth-century Kōdai-ji style.
Drum body (kotsuzumi) with decoration of autumn grasses

Gold makie on black lacquer
L. 10 in. (25.2 cm); D. 4 in. (10 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

On this drum body the autumn vegetation that was the favored motif for Kôdai-ji wares is beautifully rendered in a variety of sprinkling techniques to create rich color and texture in the gold lacquer. The gold is densely sprinkled onto the shiny black lacquer surface in solid, flat shapes, or sparsely sprinkled in larger flakes to impart a contrasting reddish tone to some of the leaves and blossoms (e-nashiji). Veins of the leaves and edges of petals are either scratched through to the black ground (harigaki) or added in thin lines of lacquer sprinkled to make a slightly raised outline (tsukegaki). On the inside of the cone is an indecipherable stylized signature of the owner or perhaps the maker of this drum.
116 **Drum body** (kotsuzumi) *with decoration of hydrangea*

Gold *makie* on black lacquer
L. 10 in. (25.2 cm); D. 4 in. (10 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 18th century

The richly decorative effect of these large forms against the shiny black lacquer ground results from the painstaking application of several techniques: sprinkling gold powder on slightly raised lacquer (*usu-takamakie*), reserving some lines against the black (*kakiwari*), and adding outlines of sprinkled lacquer for some of the veins and individual small flowers of the larger blossoms (*tsukegaki*). This meticulous technique is characteristic of the mid-Edo period, a time when the hydrangea was a popular decorative motif. The flower continues to be favored for the decoration of musical instruments because its changing hue symbolizes a quality prized in music (by the same token, it is not a recommended motif for association with affairs of the heart).
117 Large drum body (ōsuzumi) with decoration of willow and waterwheel

Gold makié on black lacquer
L. 11 1/8 in. (28.3 cm); D. 4 1/8 in. (11.4 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

A waterwheel, willows, and a stone-filled basketry weir are motifs that have long been associated with the famous bridge at Uji, southeast of Kyoto, which figures repeatedly in Japanese literature and art. The bridge and its guardian spirit appear as poetic motifs in Heian-period waka; Uji is the setting for the final chapters of The Tale of Genji; and a poem about the waterwheel at Uji Bridge is in the Kamakura-period anthology Fubokushibō (ca. 1310). The wheel is shown transferring water from the river to the rice fields in the fourteenth-century illustrated narrative Ishiyamadera-engi. In the early seventeenth century, a stylized depiction of the Uji Bridge flanked by willows and a waterwheel became an important decorative motif on screen paintings. The bridge and willows appear on a Kōdai-ji-style lacquer stationery box of the same period in the Metropolitan Museum.2

On the drum core shown here, the rushing water of the river is represented by the same stylized pattern of overlapping waves made of fine parallel lines as that used on the Momoyama and early Edo screens. The bridge does not appear on this drum core, but the association of the motifs was so well known by the Edo period that an allusion to the famous poetic tradition was unmistakable. The makié is done entirely in the simple hiramakié technique.


118 Large drum body (ōsuzumi) with decoration of war fans

Gold makié on black lacquer
L. 11 1/8 in. (28.3 cm); D. 4 1/8 in. (11.4 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

The most elaborately decorated of the five drum cores in the collection is this large one with a design of scattered fans of the Chinese type, used by military commanders to direct their troops in battle. Here they function as fields for meticulous lacquerwork in flat hiramakié, sprinkling in low relief on contrasting fields of solid gold, and pear-skin sprinkling. Various seasonal motifs appear on the twelve fans: paulownia, a squirrel and grapes, a nightingale on a plum branch, geese in reeds, a swallow in a willow, bush clover, miscanthus grass, camellia, iris, a tiger in bamboo, a banana palm, and a mandarin duck in reeds.
A design of scattered cosmetic brushes is rendered on these stirrups in low-relief gold *makie* against a warm gold *nashiji* ground. Now-darkened sheets of cut silver foil add to the sumptuousness of the decoration. Cut out of the shaft of each buckle are playful umbrella shapes. Although these motifs cannot be related directly to the warrior’s craft, the decoration of armor and horse trappings belongs to an ancient tradition of making splendid the raiment in which Japanese heroes go to battle. Descriptions of twelfth-century battles in the *Tale of the Heike*, which, recited through the succeeding centuries, provided the mythic roots of the samurai ethos, include vivid descriptions of the opulent armor, swords, and saddles in which the valiant either conquered or met their deaths. When this warrior class became the *daimyō* administrators of the Tokugawa rule, their accoutrements grew even more resplendent. These stirrups must have been part of a set; a saddle and stirrups of the same design are now in the Tokyo National Museum.
120 Saddle with design of emblematic flowers

Gold *makiie* on black lacquer, over wood; inscription and mark

L. 15 3/5 in. (39 cm); H. 13 in. (33 cm)

Japan: saddle, Muromachi period, 1491; relacquered with decoration, Edo period, 17th century

Identical floral motifs in flat-sprinkled *makiie* cover the outer surface of this saddle in a pattern reminiscent of Chinese brocade. The central floral designs on both front and back are subtly distinguished by being executed in the more elaborate, raised technique of *takamakie*. An inscription on the base of the saddle contains a date corresponding to 1491, but the decoration is in keeping with the taste of a later age.

Saddles and stirrups have been lacquered and decorated in Japan since the Heian period (794–1185),
when delicate floral motifs of mother-of-pearl were inlaid on the two saddles owned by the Eisei Bunko in Tokyo, both now designated national treasures.¹ By the Momoyama period the resplendent accoutrements of a military lord included a saddle and stirrups of matching design, the most notable example being the set that was owned by Hideyoshi (1537–1598) and is now in the Tokyo National Museum. It was adorned with large supple reeds executed in ornate gold takamakie on black lacquer after a design attributed to Kano Eitoku (1543–1590); inscriptions on the saddle indicate that it was made in 1445 but decorated more than a century later, in 1577.² The saddle in the Irving Collection, of similar form and size, is another piece of fifteenth-century equipage that probably was decorated in the early seventeenth century. Other such examples are also known. Apparently the light, well-made saddles that saw actual use in the turbulent battles of the Muromachi period were treasured in later times and were decorated then to match the taste of the new age of samurai glory, which extended from the late sixteenth century to the end of the Edo period. After 1635, when the shogunate mandated a system in which daimyō rotated in attendance at the capital, the daimyō traveled regularly between their home provinces and the capital at Edo in elaborate processions and commissioned the ornate decoration of a great many items for display, such as this saddle.

121 Sword case with decoration of clematis vine (tachitsutsu)

Gold makié with inlaid mother-of-pearl and silver foil
L. 43 in. (109.2 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

A naturalistic design of meandering vines of blossoming clematis, executed in gold biramakie with silver accents, is smartly met on the diagonal by the geometric grid of small gold and black squares that decorate the long tapered end of this sword case. The swords of daimyō were carried in cases like this by paired attendants in their retinues. After 1635, when periodic attendance in the shogun’s capital at Edo was required of daimyō on a regular basis, vast processions of daimyō traveling between their home provinces and the capital were resplendent with items like this. Silver foil in cut shapes (kanagai) used to accent the centers of the blossoms has disintegrated, producing a dendritic wreath around the shapes. Thin mother-of-pearl inlay representing the backs of leaves, no longer perfectly intact, adds tonal variety to the design.

Although the clematis is a motif that was employed in Kōdai-ji wares of the Momoyama period, the use of inlay of shell and cut foil to produce an elegant effect is more in keeping with the taste of the later seventeenth century.
Traveling comb box (tabikushige)

Gold makie on black lacquer
L. 11 1/6 in. (28.2 cm); W. 8 1/4 in. (22.3 cm); H. 8 7/8 in. (22.5 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period, early 17th century

Meandering clematis vines fill contrasting diagonal fields of black and gold lacquer on this elaborately constructed box, which has everted curved corners and small drawers in one side and in the back. Gilt fittings for drawer pulls and cord rings in the shape of Chinese bellflowers function in the design as scattered medallions. Both the clematis and the bold zigzag divisions of the surface are elements associated with Kōdai-ji lacquers. The box’s compact construction and the floral design are characteristic of works of the early Edo period that perpetuated the Kōdai-ji style.
Cover for a round casket with daimyō crest of hawk feathers

Gold makie on black lacquer
D. 14¾ in. (37.8 cm)
Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

This elaborately decorated cover, with peony scrolls surrounding an emblematic motif of hawk feathers, now serves as the lid to a box containing a large mirror of the Kamakura period. Its decoration is inappropriate for such a function; it is more likely that the lid was part of the sumptuous equipment used
during the Edo period by a daimyō making mandated journeys to and from the capital in service to the shogun. The whorl of eight hawk feathers is a crest used by the Inoue family of Mikawa who were among the closest retainers of the Tokugawa family. 1 This object was probably the cover of a three-legged casket (bokai) for transporting food, a type that had been in use since the Heian period. During the Edo period bokai were often included in the large matched sets of lacquer furnishings made as wedding gifts to display a family’s status. In this case the lacquerwork is relatively simple, and aesthetically pleasing perhaps for that very reason. The decoration is executed in hiramakie, with textural effects achieved on the feathers and blossoms by the tsukegaki technique of painting lines of lacquer on top of the flat gold, then sprinkling the lines again. The veins of leaves are drawn by scratching through the gold sprinkled area to the black ground.


12.4 **Box for personal accessories (tebako) with decoration based on a poem from the Shinkokinshū**

by Kōami Chōjū (Nagashige) (1599–1651)

Gold and silver makie with silver studs

L. 11 in. (28 cm); W. 7⅜ in. (18 cm); H. 8¼ in. (21 cm)

Japan, Edo period, ca. 1633

In 1633 this sumptuous tebako accompanied Kamehime, the seven-year-old adopted daughter of the third Tokugawa shogun, Iemitsu, to Kanazawa when she was married to Maeda Mitsutaka, fourth-generation head of that important branch of the Tokugawa family. Specially made for this event, the box was fashioned of the most precious materials and in the most intricate techniques known to the lacquer maker’s craft. It was part of a set of lacquer objects, probably comprising over fifty articles of personal use displayed on three cabinets, that were the main furnishings of a daimyō household. Seven of the ten other pieces known to survive from this set are kept in the Tokugawa Museum in Nagoya: a table for a writing box, a document box, a tray for an incense burner, and several small cosmetic boxes, both square and rectangular, that would have been kept in larger boxes such as this one. Two more small boxes are in private collections, and a large box for clothing is in the Idemitsu Museum, Tokyo. 1

Common to all the pieces is the decorative scheme of a landscape dominated by dew-laden chrysanthemums bent over a flowing mountain stream. The scene fills the top surface of this tebako’s lid and is repeated with minor variations around its four sides. Scattered around the box over the background of densely sprinkled gold flakes are seven crests with the insignia of the Tokugawa family, a whorl of three hollyhock leaves in a circular border. The motif is repeated in the carefully worked silver fittings that once held silk cords to secure the lid. Chrysanthemums by a stream is an ancient image, used on the large Muromachi-period box number 99 to allude to the legend of Kikujidō and the elixir of youth created by dew from the chrysanthemums falling into the stream. The auspicious connotations of dew-laden chrysanthemums are made more explicit on this later box by the poem that is hidden within the landscape, a type of elegant visual acrostic known as ashide-e (reed-style picture). Calligraphic pictograms, part writing and part rebus, have been an
aristocratic delight since the eleventh century, and place
this decoration in the tradition of classic court art.

On the cover, beginning at the upper left and scat-
tered down the distant crags of the mountain, are the
opening words of a famous poem by Fujiwara Shunzei
(1114–1204), composed as a felicitation offering a wish
for long life (a): 

In the instant that an immortal’s sleeve brushes
white dew from the fragrant chrysanthemum, a
thousand years pass.

The robe lying on the stream bank at the lower left
serves as the word sode, or sleeve, that closes the first
line, while the central image of the poem, “white dew
on the fragrant chrysanthemum,” is visualized in the
profuse blossoms of varied textures and tones of gold-
and silver-sprinkled lacquer, studded with dewdrops
of silver. The third line begins with the character cut
from a thick sheet of silver that is camouflaged within
the rock at the lower right, and continues down over
the narrow end of the box in the gold character em-
bedded in the rock at the right (b). Just to the left,
hidden behind the largest clump of blossoms, is an open fan adorned with a pine, itself an auspicious motif that represents longevity and, in folk belief, cleansing from defilement, evoking the verb “brush away.” The closing phrase of the poem begins with the two gold and silver characters for a thousand years that appear on the distant mountain to the left of one long side of the box (c) and continues over the remaining two sides to end with the large gold grass-script calligraphy that hovers over the scene on the opposite long side (d, e).

The poem was written in 1190 to adorn a screen prepared for the wedding of the Emperor Gotoba (r. 1184–98) and was immortalized by its inclusion in
the *Shinkokinshū*, the imperial poetry anthology commissioned by the retired emperor in 1201. No verse could provide a more appropriate decorative theme for the trousseau of the granddaughter of Ieyasu, the farsighted founder of the shogunate that was to secure rule until the mid-nineteenth century. Kamehime’s splendid dowry clearly signifies, by its deliberate appropriation of Japan’s ancient court tradition, the authority and legitimacy of the Tokugawa family.

In this the Tokugawa followed the precedent of the Ashikaga shoguns, who were the first of Japan’s military rulers to adopt the courtly arts that had been shunned by the earliest military rulers in the Kamakura period. The Kōami family of lacquer artists employed by the Tokugawa shoguns traced its lineage to the Muromachi period, when its ancestors had been retained by the Ashikaga shoguns. Chōjū (1599–1651), head of the Kōami family in its tenth generation, spent the greater part of his career, the years 1620–49, on such important commissions as sets of lacquer for the dowries of Tokugawa brides or for the coronations of emperors controlled by the Tokugawa. For these projects he surely referred to ancient precedent. One of his sources was the record of twenty-one prized writing boxes made by earlier Kōami masters, some of which were undoubtedly known to him, at least in drawings. One of these, decorated with the same poetic motif, “White dew on chrysanthemums,” as the Kamehime dowry, is mentioned as belonging to the eighth Ashikaga shogun, Yoshimasa.

The earliest and finest complete trousseau of lacquer items to survive is Chōjū’s masterwork, the set known as “Hatsune” (The first song of the warbler) for its decorative theme based on the chapter of that name in *The Tale of Genji*, and thought to augur marital happiness. The set was begun in 1637 on the birth of Chiyohime, Iemitsu’s eldest daughter, and was complete nearly three years later in 1639 when the child bride was married to the fourteen-year-old Tokugawa Mitsutomo (1625–1700). As Lord of Owari he was titular head of the most powerful branch of the shogun’s family. The set is now preserved in the Tokugawa Art Museum in Nagoya.3

Except for the absence of coral inlay, Kamehime’s dowry is identical in technique and style to the Hatsune set, which was done seven years later for her sister Chiyohime (who, though younger, was the actual child of Iemitsu and thus ranked as his eldest). On both sets, a densely sprinkled gold “pear-skin” surface sets off forms built up in lacquer and sprinkled so densely with fine gold as to appear solid. Copious shading in sprinkled silver and details of foliage and flowing water executed in finely drawn lines add naturalistic detail, while brilliant effects of light and shade are achieved with tiny square inlays of cut gold and silver. Koike Tomio’s recent documentation of the Kamehime dowry, the earliest known of Chōjū’s major commissions, and its appearance in this American collection make an important contribution to our knowledge of seventeenth-century lacquer.

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1. Koike Tomio of the Tokugawa Art Museum has published his study of these pieces in *Kinke sōshi* (see Koike, 1988); it is the source for information presented here.  
125 Sake ewer (hisage) with decoration of chrysanthemums on a stream bank

Gold and silver makie lacquer
H. 6 3/8 in. (16.2 cm); D. 6 3/8 in. (16.8 cm); L. 8 3/4 in. (22 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 17th century

The auspicious motif of chrysanthemums by a stream, discussed in relation to the two tebako numbers 99 and 124, is felicitously used on this sake server, where it augurs the longevity to be attained by drinking the dew from the blossoms that bend over the stream and, as implied by the decoration, the contents of the vessel. The plants follow the circular form of the lid, bending around the gilt-bronze knob, which is worked in the shape of a chrysanthemum bud set on an overturned blossom. On the body of the server,
the stream banks where the chrysanthemums grow surround the spout, making the sake appear to flow out of the stream that has received the elixir of chrysanthemum dew. A number of techniques, meticulously applied, were used for this decoration. Over the warm red-gold nashiji surface, leaves, blossoms, stream banks, and flowing water are rendered in fine sprinkled gold, with silver makie accents creating shading and textures. The fronts and backs of leaves and blossoms are differentiated: petals and veins are rendered in raised lines of sprinkled gold (tsukegaki) on the multilayered front views, while the undersides are painstakingly depicted by reserving black lines against the gold sprinkled areas (kakiuwari). A scroll pattern derived from the simplified floral scrolls of namban lacquers appears on the handle.

The bisage, a traditional container for serving sake, is a round tripod vessel with a flat bottom and lid, a large semicircular handle, and a flat-topped spout. Its form is derived from that of the cast-iron kettles in which sake is heated.

126 Bird cage

Gold and silver makie on black lacquer, dyed wood, and silk netting
D. 11¼ in. (28.6 cm); H. 13¼ in. (33.6 cm)
Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

The luxuriousness of daimyō household furnishings did not often surpass the exquisite artistry seen on this small bird cage, a cylindrical form resting on three curved legs and decorated in silver and gold in the full range of makie technique. Clouds are sprinkled and polished up to be flush with the black lacquer surface (togidashi makie); rocks, trees, mountains, and cranes are executed in slightly raised lacquer with accents of inlaid cut gold and silver; dense gold sprinkling gives solidity to the architectural forms. The motifs on the bird cage, rooted in ancient and noble Japanese poetic imagery, are examples of the revival, in the conservative daimyō culture of the Edo period, of the literary imagery that prevailed in lacquer decoration of the Muromachi period. The decorative motifs include cranes flying over a reedy sandbar washed by the billowing tide, floating poem strips, and carriage wheels left to soak by the shore. The combination of these elements, which appears in Muromachi and Momoyama lacquer decoration, makes a pictorial reference to a poem from the Manyōshū that is singled out in Ki no Tsurayuki’s famous preface to the Kokinshū as an outstanding work of ancient times.

Waka no ura ni
shio michikureba
kata o nami
ashibe o sashite
tazu nakiwataru

At Wakanoura
when the tide rushes in
waves fill the lagoon
sending cranes crying
toward shoreline reeds
– Manyōshū 919

Wakanoura is an inlet at Wakayama on the Kii Peninsula, and its name, which can be understood as “bay of poetry,” has made it a meisho, one of the places celebrated in Japanese poetry. In this design, the floating
poem strips for waka allude to the place and the poems it has inspired. Another indirect reference to the site and to the original poem is the view of half-submerged wheels, katawaguruma. They recall the lagoon, called Kata o nami, which also can be read as the third line of the poem, “waves fill the lagoon.” The cranes flying toward the reeds complete the visual realization of the classic poem and provide a fitting decoration for a songbird’s cage. On the other side of the cage is a landscape with a Shinto shrine approachable through a torii gate and up a long set of steps from the base of the hill. It may depict the nearby Tamazushima Shrine, another place famous in poetry ever since the Kokinshū established a vocabulary of images for subsequent poems and works of art:

Wata no hara
yosekuru nami no
shibashiba no
mimaku no hoshiki
tamatsushima ka mo

As from the broad sea
waves come rolling in toward shore
over and over
so would I gaze, time after time
on fair Tamatsu Island
—Kokinshū XVII.912

1. Rodd, 1984, p. 43.
127 Three nesting bowls (mitsuwan)

Red and black lacquer with applied silver and gold foil
Largest bowl, d. 4 3/4 in. (12.2 cm)
Japan, Momoyama period (1568–1615)

A set made up of three bowls that are progressively larger and have proportionately higher feet is used to hold the soup, rice, and vegetables constituting the standard Japanese meal. Over many years the forms of these everyday items have been refined so that the bowls nest perfectly and can be used in a variety of ways, a small bowl sometimes serving as a cover for the next larger one. They are usually lacquered red on the inside and black on the exterior, which is painted with simple floral and cloud motifs in red lacquer and embellished with gold leaf, often cut in geometric shapes.

This simple and appealing type of decorated lacquerware seems to have first been made in the province of Mutsu in northeastern Honshu, where the bowls were a local product sponsored by the Nambu daimyō family, whose family crest may have inspired the stylized
cranes stenciled in silver on the sides of the set shown here. The type probably developed during the late Muromachi and Momoyama periods, when daimyō in several areas sponsored the production of new varieties of wares. The rustic charm of these sets of bowls has been especially prized since the Meiji period. A romantic legend apocryphally attributes their origin to an earlier age, that of Fujiwara no Hidehira (1096–1187), whose family established a brilliant provincial capital at Hiraizumi, also in the northeastern provinces, at the end of the twelfth century. The glory of this family is best represented by its temple at Chūson-ji, which is lavishly embellished with lacquer and gold leaf (see fig. 22, p. 164). Hidehira is also known and loved as the protector of the ill-fated hero Yoshitsune, who sought refuge in that temple from his brother Yoritomo, the first Kamakura shogun. Bowls of this type are often called Hidehira-ewan, a designation that, while historically untenable, conveys well the aura of ancient romance that is part of the provincial charm of these gold leaf–embellished lacquers.

128 Rice server with decoration of autumn fruit on the branch

Gold makie on black lacquer
D. 8 3/8 in. (22 cm); H. 6 1/4 in. (15.9 cm)
Japan, early Edo period, first half of the 17th century

This rice server, with its elegant, simple form emphasized by black lacquer and its harmonious design of assorted fruits and nuts depicted naturalistically on the branch, eloquently attests to the Japanese aesthetic focus on the utensils of everyday life. The capacious yet compact form rises from a high, slightly everted foot to a gently curving lid that complements the smooth profile of the vessel. Occupying the circular field of the lid is a chestnut branch, one of its three burrs bursting to reveal the ripe fruit. Color and texture are pleasingly varied: warm reddish areas of sparse gold sprinkling (e-nashiji) on reddish brown lacquer contrast with areas of flat gold achieved by denser sprinkling. Veins and outlines are rendered by sprinkling on freely drawn lacquer lines or by scratching through to the black lacquer ground. The black ground, its lacquer thinly applied, has with time taken on a warm brownish motting. Around the outside, six other branches, each a motif of autumn bounty, are freely arranged: a ripening grapevine; small nubby longan fruits; persimmons, one ripe in solid gold, another
whose harder green form is described by light sprinkling; peaches; loquat; and pear. The simplicity of the flat technique used here, compared with layered and polished traditional *maki-e*, made possible the expansive and gracefully drawn design. The technique, style, and vessel type of this example, as well as the grapevine motif, are rooted in the class of luxury ware created in the late sixteenth century and generically termed Kōdai-ji ware. This piece, made a generation later in the early seventeenth century, exemplifies the more elegant and refined quality of the Edo-period wares that incorporated the motifs and styles of Kōdai-ji lacquer.
Cylindrical stack of food boxes with decoration of autumn fruits

Gold hiramakie and e-nashiji on black lacquer
D. 5 1/8 in. (13.7 cm); H. 8 1/4 in. (22.2 cm)
Japan, early Edo period, 17th century

This narrow cylindrical form made up of three stacked boxes and an overlapping cover with a curved border is a food utensil of a type developed in the early seventeenth century. It is typical of a range of new forms that emerged with the advent of prosperity under Tokugawa rule, when the luxury of lacquered utensils became available to others besides the aristocracy. Known as kashiki in Japanese, this type of container was used to hold sweets, a function echoed in the decoration. A chestnut branch on the top is surrounded by a basketwork-patterned border and is followed by a profusion of other fruits depicted in large scale around the sides of the stack of boxes: pomegranates, persimmons, and melons.

The style of the freely drawn hiramakie, with its colorful contrasts of flat gold and warmer e-nashiji, is derived from Kōdai-ji wares.
130 Cylindrical food box with decoration of morning glories

Gold biramakie on black lacquer
D. 5 ¾ in. (13.3 cm); H. 4 ½ in. (10.5 cm)
Japan, early Edo period, 17th century

This box is actually the cover and bottom vessel of a tall stacked cylindrical set like the three-layered one of number 129. As on that example, the motif —here, a dew-laden morning-glory vine—is rendered in simple biramakie with no covering layer of lacquer. Nashiji sprinkling is employed as a ground on the curving border of the lid and as color in the leaves and flowers. These techniques are among the simplified means used to vivid effect in Kōdai-ji—style lacquers that continued to be popular among the Kyoto chōnin, or townsmen class, well into the seventeenth century.
131 Pair of sake bottles with grapevine decoration

Gold and silver makie on black lacquer
H. 8 1/2 in. (21.4 cm)
Japan, Edo period, second half of the 17th century

Across the black surface of these ovoid high-necked bottles, lustrous from successive polishings, a meandering grapevine is applied in the biramakie technique. Slight variations among the gold leaves are achieved by the use of contrasting techniques for drawing the veins: either applied lines of sprinkled lacquer, or lines scratched through to the black ground. A few small clusters of grapes are rendered in silver makie. The technique and freedom of the drawing are reminiscent of Momoyama Kōdai-ji-style lacquers, but the restrained sumptuousness of this decoration is characteristic of the taste of the later seventeenth century.
Picnic set with decoration of chrysanthemums and autumn grasses

Cabinet, gold and silver makie on red lacquer; boxes, gold makie and black lacquer on red lacquer; Kyoto-ware sake bottle, glazed stoneware with enamels
L. 10 1/4 in. (26 cm); W. 5 1/2 in. (14 cm); H. 9 in. (23 cm)
Japan, Edo period, late 17th century

Harmoniously combined autumn motifs decorate the three different parts of this picnic ensemble. The cabinet is decorated with sprays of blossoming chrysanthemum in gold and silver makie against a warm “pear-skin” ground of large, irregularly sprinkled gold flakes. Petals are outlined in raised lines of gold sprinkled lacquer (tsukegaki). The stack of three round food boxes (which are lacquered red on their interiors) has a large unifying spray of chrysanthemum and grasses applied in gold leaf over the fine horizontal grooving of its dark red surface. The chrysanthemum motif is repeated in colorful enamel on the characteristic crackled white glaze of the Kyoto-ware sake bottle, or tokuri. The taste for color and for the inventive combination of textures displayed in this ensemble reflects the pleasure-loving spirit of the Genroku era (1688–1704).
133 Five-tiered picnic box with decoration of wild pinks

Gold *makie*, inlaid mother-of-pearl, and applied silver on black lacquer
L. 9¼ in. (23.5 cm); w. 8¼ in. (21.5 cm); H. 13 in. (33 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 18th century

Like the writing box number 134, this large tiered box is of a shape that developed during the Edo period and is decorated in a style that combines gorgeous effects with delicate naturalism. The lively arrangement of the pinks, growing in clumps placed asymmetrically around the sides and over the top, is emphasized by the crossing diagonals of the thin mother-of-pearl supports that move the eye upward
from the horizontal lines of gold signifying the ground. Dewdrops glistening in moonlight are rendered by small hemispheres of silvery metal profusely scattered over the plants. The flowers, in flat sprinkled gold with mother-of-pearl accents, are in dazzling contrast to the shiny black lacquer, creating an effect that might be associated with the taste of the Genroku era (1688–1704). Although in this case the subject, pinks in the moonlight, does not suggest any direct poetic source, it is part of the canon of poetic themes established in the Heian period that underlies the corpus of traditional design motifs. The nadeshiko, or pink, flowering in late summer and early fall, was numbered among the seven grasses of autumn. Part of the pleasure of using a box such as this might have been the delight of recalling well-known literary classics, like the twenty-sixth chapter in The Tale of Genji, “Tokonatsu”; the title is another name for this simple blossom and is used as a metaphor for the tale’s heroine, Tamakazura, a beauty raised in the provinces. Many of the images in Genji were drawn from earlier poetry, like this love poem in the Kokinshû (XIV.695):

\begin{quote}
Ana koishi
ima mo mi te shi ga
yamagatsu no
kakibô ni sakeru
Yamato nadeshiko
\end{quote}

Ah, if I might see
without an instant’s delay
the flower I yearn for—
a wild pink of Yamato
blooming by a mountain fence!


### Box for Writing Paper with Drawer for Inkstone and Brushes

Gold and silver makie and applied silver foil on black lacquer

- L. 9\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. (23.5 cm); W. 5\(\frac{3}{8}\) in. (14.8 cm); H. 5\(\frac{3}{4}\) in. (14.6 cm)
- Japan, Edo period, 18th century

This compact shape, combining the functions of an inkstone box and a box for stationery, is a practical form that developed during the Edo period as the use of lacquered boxes spread beyond the aristocracy into the urban classes. The work displays a sophisticated unity of form and decoration, with its decoration of a field of autumn grasses in moonlight applied as though the sides and top of the box were a single plane. A large clump of wild grasses, bush clover and miscanthus, rises over the sides toward a moon of cut foil on the top. Lines of gold makie, suggesting the ground and the clouds that pass over the full moon, wrap around the sides and continue over the beveled edges and cut-off corners. There is astonishing delicacy as well as naturalism in the lacquerwork. The edges of the grasses and wild flowers are touched with all-but-indiscernible bits of silvery foil or powder to produce the effect of bright moonlight on an autumn field.
135 **Rectangular box with decoration of scattered fans**

Gold and silver *makie* with mother-of-pearl inlay

l. 8¼ in. (21 cm); w. 4¾ in. (12.1 cm); H. 5½ in. (14 cm)

Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

This type of box does not belong to the traditional repertoire of forms that evolved for specific uses among the aristocracy of nobles and *daimyō*, but rather exemplifies one of various new types that were produced for the increasingly affluent merchant class during the Edo period. Its ornamentation of scattered fans is a classic design motif, known in lacquerwork of the Kamakura period, that became a popular decorative theme in Edo-period screens, textiles, ceramics, and lacquer. The large fans arranged over the surface of the box with bold disregard for the confines of its edges are decorated in mother-of-pearl and slightly raised lacquer. The fans carry a variety of motifs: on the box’s top, the irregular combination of plum blossoms and autumn grasses; on one end, rocks and ferns; on the other (visible in the photograph), wisteria. The two fans on the front are decorated with butterflies in mother-of-pearl, chrysanthemums, and clematis vine. On the back is a fan with a Chinese floral scroll and an emblematic plum blossom, famous as the crest of the Maeda family but here used simply as a design.

Sure, supple brushstrokes depict a group of three deer, shown in profile, on a sheet of paper marked at lower right with the oval intaglio seal Kōrin. The seal is known from other sketches preserved by the artist’s descendants in the Konishi family. An inscription in gold at the lower left of the scroll painting identifies the drawing mounted on it as a shita-e, or preparatory drawing for a makie lacquer, by Kōrin.

The scroll was painted by Suzuki Kiitsu, whose teacher Sakai Hōitsu (1771–1828) was responsible for a nineteenth-century revival of the Rimpā artistic tradition.

Although Rimpā means “school of Kōrin,” the tradition began in the early Edo period with the work of Hon’ami Köetsu (1558–1637), who provided aesthetic inspiration to a number of artists and craftsmen who worked and lived with him in Takagamine in northeastern Kyoto, on land given to him in 1615 by Tokugawa Ieyasu. Köetsu’s life there was devoted to fostering a renaissance of the classic arts of the Heian period, in lacquer as well as in calligraphy and painting. Two generations later this artistic movement grew into a decorative tradition embodied in the painting and textile and lacquer designs of Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716) and the calligraphy, painting, and ceramics of his brother Kenzan (1663–1743). A century later, Sakai Hōitsu (1771–1828) and his followers further advanced this tradition in their own paintings and in publications through which many of Kōrin’s designs for lacquer and textiles were made available to a wide circle of craftsmen, who carried on the legacy.

This scroll, like the box number 137, well represents the Rimpā tradition of perpetuating classic designs. Its composite image, combining the drawing of deer with a painting of flowering bush clover, was created a century after Kōrin’s death by one of his
most eminent artistic heirs. The practice of mounting a drawing on a background painting is characteristic of the Rimpa school, perhaps based on the custom dating from Heian times of pasting decorated poem pages on a screen. The decorative arrangement of poem pages or painted fans on a painted background became particularly fashionable in the mid-Edo period. The motifs of deer and bush clover had been paired in classic poetry since the Heian period and were commonly combined in works of the Rimpa school.

Kiitsu entered Hōitsu’s studio in 1813, two years before Hōitsu commemorated the centenary of Korin’s death by publishing a collection, One Hundred Works by Korin. This composite painting is likely to date from the second decade of the nineteenth century.

137 Writing box with decoration of six deer in autumn grasses

Gold maki-e with mother-of-pearl and lead inlay on black lacquer
L. 9 in. (22.9 cm); W. 8½ in. (21.6 cm); H. 4 in. (10.2 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 19th century

On the domed cover of this writing box, six deer are arranged in poses of great variety and rendered in emphatically contrasting textures. When the box is opened, its interior and that of the cover are unified in a single design of bush clover and miscanthus against a curving stream. This decoration exemplifies
the innovative approach to classical motifs developed in Rimpa, the school of Korin, that flourished throughout the Edo period. Motifs of autumn grasses and of deer have been paired in Japanese poetry and design since the Heian period. This image of a stream is reminiscent of one of Korin’s best-known works, the set of screens with red and white plum trees flanking a wide curving stream in the MOA Museum in Atami.¹ The strongly rectilinear forms of the bronze water dropper and the inkstone, typical of Rimpa suzuribako, provide an effective foil for the dominant curves of the box’s shape and decoration. The format of the interior, with the inkstone and water dropper set in at the left and a groove for the paper knife at the far right, is another distinctive feature of Rimpa lacquers.

Container for sweets with poem and decoration of blossoming plum

by Hara Yōyūsai (1772–1845)
Gold *maki-e* and mother-of-pearl inlay on black lacquer; inscription on base in gold *maki-e*
D. 7 3/4 in. (19.1 cm); H. 3 3/4 in. (9.8 cm)
Japan, Edo period, first half of the 19th century

Blossoming plum branches encircle this round box with a flattened top, a form suggestive of a plum bud about to open. A five-character couplet, a Chinese verse form, is inlaid in mother-of-pearl on the top. The verse alludes to the plum as the welcome harbinger of spring, loved for bursting forth while all else lies dormant:

Myriad trees are frozen, on the verge of breaking.  
A solitary root warms, and by itself quickens with life.¹

The source of the poem has not been identified; it may have been composed by the artist Kenzan (1663–1743). Yōyūsai’s inscription on the base, in the same thick gold *maki-e* that defines the branches, records that the design is after Kōrin and the calligraphy by Kenzan. The lacquer maker Hara Yōyūsai lived in Edo and is said to have utilized underdrawings of Kōrin’s designs that he received from Sakai Hōitsu (see nos. 136, 137). Although he is generally thought to have worked almost exclusively in *maki-e*, his skill with inlaid mother-of-pearl, a characteristic technique of Rimpa lacquers, is amply evident on this box.² There is an almost identical box in the collection of the Yamato Bunkakan in Nara.³

1. Translated by Hiroshi Onishi.  
3. Shōkkō, Yamato Bunkakan Shōzōhin zuhan mokuroku (Lacquer wares from the Yamato Bunkakan Collection), no. 3 (Nara, 1975), cat. no. 28.
139 Handwarmer with decoration of plum blossoms

Gold and silver makie on black lacquer, bronze openwork cover
D. 7¾ in. (19.4 cm); H. 6¼ in. (17.3 cm)
Japan, Edo period, 18th century

The plum, which appears before winter has passed, bringing an early promise of spring, is a potent image of hope and warmth in Japanese tradition. It is the theme of an ornamentation well matched to both the form and function of this sturdy handwarmer. Strong vertical spears of blossoming plum branches rise over the slightly curved surface of the sides, the large round forms of the buds and blossoms complemented by those in the heavy openwork cover. Plum branches, sharply angular in nature, have been rendered here as straight, round-ended forms, and fragile plum blossoms have been given solidity. Such stylization is characteristic of Rimpa design and is particularly related to the style of Kenzan.
Box for writing implements with design of ancient coins

Gold and mixed metal *makie* with inlaid mother-of-pearl, on black lacquer

L. 9 in. (23 cm); W. 8 1/2 in. (21.8 cm); H. 2 5/8 in. (6.8 cm)

Japan, Edo period, 18th century

A circle of old Chinese and Japanese coins of copper and iron adorns the convex, round-cornered cover of this *suzuribako*. The coins' differing metals and states of wear are suggested by various types of *makie*—densely sprinkled fine gold and silver, larger, sparsely sprinkled *nashiji*—and inlaid mother-of-pearl. The motif is continued on the inner tray for implements, where three coins appear, and is combined, surprisingly, with that of three bejeweled and gift-bearing *apsaras*, depicted inside the cover. *Apsaras*, the celes-
atial creatures in Buddhism’s Six Realms of Existence, are the familiar attendants to the Buddha Amida in his descent to welcome a believer to the Western Paradise. These apsaras are as carefully detailed as the coins in a variety of sprinkling techniques, with repainted lips and a fine mosaic of mother-of-pearl inlay accenting their jewels and swirling scarves.

The paradoxical combination of subjects on this box, to be enjoyed privately when it is opened for use, might be a droll suggestion that money is the key to paradise—recalling the well-known proverb “The judgment of hell is determined by money” (Jigoku no sata wa kane shidai) that reflects the brash, pragmatic wit of merchant townsmen in the urban centers of Edo, Kyoto, and Osaka after the Genroku era (1668–1704). Although these purveyors of necessities and luxury goods who thrived in service to the samurai class were ranked below samurai, farmers, and artisans in the Confucian social system that was the basis of Tokugawa rule, they prospered with the stabilization of a monetary economy. A relish for hidden extravagance, fostered by the possession of wealth that at times aroused the alarm and animosity of the ruling samurai class, is reflected in both the design of this unusual writing box and the sophisticated technique applied to its every detail.
141 Writing box with design of praying mantis

by Ogawa Haritsu (Ritsuō, 1663–1747)
Lacquer, enamel, pottery, and bone on wood; signature in makie and ceramic seal
L. 8½ in. (21.7 cm); w. 8¼ in. (22.2 cm); H. 1¼ in. (4.7 cm)
Japan, Edo period (1615–1867)

The white, intricately carved form of a praying mantis, set against the dark wood surface of this writing box, arrests the observer in a full stare as it pauses in its progress among the runners of a strawberry geranium growing in a hanging shell. This plant is called yukinoshita (under the snow) in Japanese because in summer its thick leaves with their red undersides appear to lie beneath a delicate shower of small
white blossoms growing on tall upright stems. A common plant, it was valued for medicinal purposes. Its charms are unsung in classical poetry, but it appears in haiku from the eighteenth century onward.

This image of a moment of common experience is intricately crafted of diverse materials: the mantis is carved bone, the shell is enameled and lacquered pottery, the foliage is lacquer colored with cinnabar, pewter, and gold. The decoration is set against a dark surface of cedar which has been rubbed with a bamboo brush to raise the grain and create an aged, worn appearance. There is an effect of contrasting elegance when the lid is removed to reveal a glossy black lacquer surface sprinkled with large flakes of gold and containing the single image of a bean plant growing in an antique Chinese bronze. Strong geometric forms are carefully balanced, with the tray for writing implements arranged to the right of a large inkstone and a circular water dropper whose simple decoration in cloisonné enamel augments the exotic Chinese flavor of the design.

Striking textural effects achieved, as here, by the combination of unusual materials characterize the inventive lacquer style of Ogawa Haritsu. Such work became famous as Ritsuō saiku (Ritsuō work), a term that emphasizes this artist’s distinct manner. On the underside of the lid in gold sprinkled lacquer is the signature: Muchū-an Ritsuō followed by a green ceramic seal reading: Kan. These were names Haritsu used in his mature phase, probably from his mid-fifties onward. Beginning in 1721, when he was sixty-one, he worked under the patronage of the daimyō Tsugaru Nobuhisa (1669–1746). His original style and his motifs in the Chinese literati taste, such as the bronze on this box, as well as his characteristic simulations in lacquer of old Chinese ink sticks and other scholars’ paraphernalia, must have impressed this cultivated lord, for whom Haritsu served as both artist and artistic adviser. The studio name Muchū-an (“Amid dreams”) is a Chinese-style sobriquet reflecting the fascination with Chinese antiquities in literati circles of the eighteenth century that fostered the antiquarian taste given
expression in this box. The name may emulate Setchū-an (“Amid snow”), the studio name of Hattori Ransetsu (1654–1707), Haritsu’s close friend and a fellow pupil of the great master of haiku poetry Matsuo Bashō (1644–1694).

The art name Ritsūō, or “Old man in a torn bamboo hat,” which Haritsu adopted about 1712, when he was forty-nine, has inspired several colorful, probably apocryphal anecdotes. One suggests that it refers to his profligate, impoverished youth, when, estranged from his samurai family in Ise, he wandered in the northern mountains of Kiso. Whatever the vicissitudes of his early life, he settled in Edo and married the daughter of his haiku teacher, Fukuda Rogen (1630–1691). Sometime in the 1680s he entered Bashō’s circle and became friends with his two leading disciples, Hattori Ransetsu and Takanai Kikaku (1661–1707). Haritsu’s haiku are included in the Zoku minashiguri, an anthology of haiku by Bashō and his leading disciples edited by Kikaku in 1687, and his is one of the haiku linked with Bashō’s most famous verse: “The ancient pond—A frog jumps in: The sound of the water.” After the deaths of Ransetsu and Kikaku in 1707, Haritsu seems to have turned to lacquer work and painting. However, the art name Ritsūō suggests an attitude more akin to that of the haiku poet: the poet/artist wandering in total dedication to his art, unconcerned with luxury or personal appearance.

Although the meticulously detailed craft in Haritsu’s lacquerwork might seem unrelated to the abbreviated poetic form of haiku, there are interesting parallels. Like haiku poets who turned away from the restricted, elegant vocabulary of court poetry to express emotion and experience by uncommon juxtapositions of new images of everyday life, Haritsu developed a new approach to the craft of lacquer both in imagery and in technique. His favored motifs, such as the Chinese bronze in this piece and the ink sticks, brushes, and other treasured implements of the scholar, must have seemed exotic in the context of other lacquerwork, but were closely related to the prevailing preoccupation with Chinese learning that was invigorating eighteenth-century intellectual life. The contrast between motifs and styles on the inside and outside, which would be experienced by the user of this box, is akin to the parallelism of Chinese poetry, while the arresting cover image might be likened to the fresh imagery and insights from the everyday that were celebrated in haiku poetry.

1. Noted by Haino, 1990, p. 44. The English translation of the haiku is from Keene, 1976, p. 88.
2. The same cover motif was used on a nineteenth-century box in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (14.40.8:8), Bequest of Benjamin Altman.
this bevel-edged box—an agate vase holding chrysanthemums of thick mother-of-pearl, a plum branch rendered in lacquer and coral, and a mother-of-pearl jardiniere with potted orchids of lacquer and an eroded rock carved from soft stone—also recalls the gorgeous effect of “one hundred precious materials inlay” on late Ming and Ching furniture. In a further, though meaningless, feat of artifice, the mottled lacquer is dripped over the matte lacquer sides of the box’s base to give an incongruous effect of ash glaze on pottery. The interiors of both box and lid are lacquered in sharply contrasting shiny black and show geese, meticulously modeled in dense gold sprinkling on raised lacquer (takamakie), flying down to a reedy sandbar executed in gold and silver makie. The rims of the base and lid are sprinkled with a dark silvery powder in imitation of the metal rims that from the Heian period onward often protect the edges of lacquer boxes.

Although both the use of Chinese themes and the combining of various materials for the cover decoration typify the style of Haritsu (see no. 141), whose signature appears inside the lid, the emphasis on an almost playful use of lacquer to simulate exotic materials and the complex composition in exquisitely detailed takamakie are more characteristic of lacquerwork of the nineteenth century, when Haritsu was widely copied. Shibata Zeshin (1817–1891), who copied Haritsu’s works and adapted his style to his own inventive lacquers, was in part responsible for the high regard in which Haritsu was held in both Japan and Europe. It has been pointed out by Haino Akio that in Samuel Bing’s Le Japon artistique, an influential series published in three languages from 1888 to 1891, Haritsu is accorded a standing, along with Hokusai and Kōrin, as one of the great artists of Japan.¹ The author goes so far as to call Haritsu the Benvenuto Cellini of Japan, an assessment that reflects the continuing appreciation for and production of works in the style of Ritsuo in the late nineteenth century. Although it is difficult to locate this box securely in time, its design and its eclectic technique suggest a nineteenth-century date.

143 Writing set with table, inkstone box, and poem card box

Red, brown, and black lacquer
Signature on each: Zeshin
Table: L. 23³/₄ in. (59 cm); w. 13³/₄ in. (33.7 cm); H. 4³/₈ in. (12.4 cm). Inkstone box: L. 9 in. (22.9 cm); w. 5½ in. (14 cm); H. 2³/₄ in. (5.7 cm). Poem card box: L. 15³/₈ in. (40.3 cm); w. 3³/₄ in. (9.6 cm); H. 1³/₄ in. (4.5 cm)

Japan, Meiji period (1868–1912)

Shibata Zeshin’s multifaceted career as lacquer artist, painter, and promoter of Japanese lacquer art at the international expositions in Vienna (1873), Philadelphia (1876), and Paris (1899) spanned a tumultuous period during which Japanese culture was drastically transformed. In the second half of the nineteenth century the feudal system under the Tokugawa shogunate collapsed, precipitated by the arrival of the American commodore Matthew Perry in 1853, and Japan was opened to the Western world. Zeshin’s art brilliantly typifies the full flowering, under the imperial restoration, of the urban culture that had been developing for the preceding two centuries.

Zeshin began his artistic training at eleven, when in 1817 he was apprenticed to Koma Kansai II (1766–1835), the tenth-generation head of one of the several families of lacquerers who served the shogunate. Diligent and talented, he acquired prodigious technical expertise. He went on to cultivate his art through the study of painting in 1822 under Suzuki Nanrei, who
writing implements and paper set on a matching table. The stylist shapes—elongated, with softly beveled edges and rounded corners—and the brilliant vermilion color belie the apparent realism and rusticity of the surfaces, on which lacquer is applied to simulate the texture of a bamboo stalk with smooth striations and rough areas at the horizontal nodes, complete with incipient branches. The long poem card box is even arched as if it were a natural form. This playful and technically astonishing artifice is carried even further on the table (bundai), a form traditionally decorated in makie since the Muromachi period (see no. 97). Here the linear grain is retained and the simulation goes so far as to include the flat “planing” of the protruding nodes, which would have “interfered” with its use as a table. The traditional rounded moldings of lacquered wood at the table ends are made to resemble thin bamboo stalks. A column of black lacquer ants files across the table top, a counterpart to the cricket and snails that rest on the “bamboo” surfaces of the inkstone box and poem card case. The underside of the table and the interiors of the boxes are decorated with showy, large gold flakes densely applied on black lacquer (gyôbu nashiji), incongruously contrasting with the rustic theme of the exterior decoration.

144 **Stacked food boxes** (jūbako)

by Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891)
Black and brown lacquer with gold *maki-e* and mother-of-pearl and pewter inlay
Incised signature: *Zeshin*
L. 9¾ in. (24.4 cm); w. 9¾ in. (23.8 cm); H. 16¼ in. (41.9 cm)
Japan, late Edo or Meiji period, 19th century

This five-tray food box, with its decoration of plovers over waves on which float boats laden with rice, displays important aspects of Zeshin’s lacquer art. That he assimilated from Rimpa lacquers (see no. 136) the ability to combine forms and materials is evident in the bold composition continuing over the four sides of this box and its gorgeous range of surface textures: from lustrous smooth brown, black, and rough pewter-finish lacquer for the boats to iridescent mother-of-pearl inlay for the plovers and raised gold-sprinkled lacquer for the sheaves of rice. The subtle contrast between the matte, mottled black of the stormy sky and the reflective lined patterns of the waves emerges from Zeshin’s familiarity with the hundreds of lacquer textures developed for sword sheaths (*sayamuri*) and formerly restricted to use by the samurai class.

The combed pattern seen here in the waves displays one of Zeshin’s most famous achievements, his revival of *seigaiha-muri*, the “blue wave” lacquer technique particularly prized for sword sheaths and said to have been lost with the death of its inventor, the Genroku lacquerer Seigai Kanshichi (ca. 1680–1705). In 1845 the merchant Matsumoto Heijirō requested a sword sheath decorated in *seigaiha-muri*. For six years Zeshin studied old examples and with his pupil Ikeda Taishin developed the technique of applying lacquer thickened to a paste with egg white or clay, then combing in the fine-line pattern with a stiff bamboo brush. He employed the technique often on *inro* and writing boxes, but rarely to such effect as on this piece.

An extra lid makes it possible to use this set of five trays, lacquered red inside as is customary for food boxes, in various combinations. Subtle and masterly innovations in both technique and form within the conservative tradition of lacquerwork, as seen on this piece, are characteristic of Zeshin’s mature work.

1. Link, 1979, nos. 52, 61.
145  Tray with decoration of autumn grasses and moon

t by Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891)
Gold and silver makie on colored lacquer; signature at lower right
L. 19½ in. (48.7 cm); W. 13½ in. (34.2 cm); H. 1½ in. (3 cm)
Japan, Meiji period (1868–1912)

On this shallow tray with thick, gently rounded sides, a subtle harmony of rounded forms, tones, and textures makes up an evocative moonlit landscape. Against the dark green-brown sky, the pale orb of a full moon of matte parchment-color lacquer rises beyond a gently sloping hill made substantial by the rough mottling of its black lacquer surface. Echoing the curves of moon and hillside are slender grasses, raised lines of gold and black lacquer bent with the weight of silver dewdrops. Sounds of evening are suggested by the crisp forms of two crickets of polished black lacquer which stand out effectively against their dark surroundings. In this work Zeshin has admirably translated into the medium of lacquer the lyric naturalism and nocturnal imagery that characterize late Edo painting of the Shijō school, a tradition in which he was trained. Zeshin’s penchant for transforming lacquer shapes traditionally reserved for daimyō use into modern forms suited to the taste and usage of Edo townsmen is exemplified in this tray meant for clothing, a sophisticated version of a midarebako (see no. 104).
146 *Smoking set*

by Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891)
Pipe: iron, gold, silver, lacquered wood; pipe case: gold *makie* on black lacquer; tobacco case: dyed cotton with leather backing, silk cord, staghorn netsuke
Incised signature: *Zeshin*
Pipe case, l. 7¾ in. (19.6 cm)
Japan, late Edo period, 19th century

Shibata Zeshin, whose finely incised signature appears on the back of this pipe case, may have coordinated as well the choice of textile, metalwork, and carved netsuke for the sophisticated ensemble, which is in the mode of the eighteenth-century urban dandy. The two-part sheath of highly polished black lacquer
carries a makié decoration of an uprooted sprig of the delicate but hardy wood sorrel, a summer wildflower with tiny bright yellow blossoms, here rendered with the minute observation of a botanical drawing. Its leaves, in nature variegated red and green, are represented by means of fine gold sprinkling in gradations from pure brilliant gold to a rough-textured rust color. Delicate yellow blossoms are expressed in pure gold; for the pods the color and texture are varied once again. The finely weighted and exquisitely ornamented pipe, with a gold decoration of oak leaves on its iron-necked bowl and a gold mouthpiece, has a wooden stem lacquered in imitation of tortoiseshell. The staghorn netsuke is carved to represent leaves and blossoms of the paulownia tree. Although oak, sorrel, and paulownia all served in many stylized variants as samurai family crests, the gorgeous yet naturalistic treatment of the motifs seen here is in keeping with the sensibilities of the prosperous townspeople of the Edo period. The leather tobacco pouch is covered in a brightly dyed cotton called sarasa, prized since Momoyama times as an exotic import from Southeast Asia. Its finely wrought metal clasp in the shape of a snail is, like the pipe, a subtle combination of gold, silver, and a gray-colored alloy of copper and silver.

147  Miniature intro with design of faggot-boats on waves
by Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891) after an original by Hon’ami Kōetsu
Gold makié with mother-of-pearl inlay on black lacquer; netsuke of hardwood with cloisonné
Signature on bottom: Zeshin
w. 1 ¼ in. (3.8 cm); H. 1 ⅛ in. (4.8 cm)
Japan, 19th century

Intro, the small segmented boxes used to carry medicine that were worn suspended from a man’s obi secured by a decorative toggle or netsuke, became an important item of apparel during the Edo period. This miniature example by Zeshin is a copy of one attributed to Hon’ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), replicating even the gold lacquer repair on the mother-of-pearl boat of the original. Among the old lacquers that Zeshin studied to enable him to revive and refine traditional techniques, those of the Rimpa school were particularly important (see nos. 136–139). Gōke Tadaomi, a leading Japanese scholar of Zeshin, names as many as fifteen known copies by Zeshin of Rimpa lacquers, including three with the design motif used on this intro. Like most of the motifs in Rimpa design, the figure of boats laden with firewood floating downstream is drawn from a classic poetic image, in this case one strongly connected with Uji, the area south of Kyoto that was the setting for the final chapters of The Tale of Genji. The image conveyed the unsettled emotions and remote atmosphere associated in Heian literature with the area (famous as the site of the country villa of Fujiwara Yorimichi [992–1074], who converted the villa to the Byōdō-in temple in 1052). Boats on the Uji River invariably carry these associations in The Tale of Genji, as for instance in Chapter 45, “The Lady at the Bridge” (Hashibime), where Kaoru broods on his sad affair with the princess Oigimi, who was brought up in that remote area.

Strange battered little boats, piled high with brush and wattles, made their way up and down the river, each boatman pursuing his own sad, small livelihood at the uncertain mercy of the waters. “It is the same with all of us,” thought Kaoru to himself. “Am I to boast that I am safe from the flood, calm and secure in a jeweled mansion?”

In Chapter 47, “Trefoil Knots” (Agemaki), Nakano-
kimi’s uncertainty about the fidelity of Niou, Genji’s grandson, is reflected in the scene:

As dawn began to come over the sky, he opened a side door and invited her out. The layers of mist delighted him even more than in a familiar setting. As always, the little faggot boats rowed out into the mists, leaving faint white traces behind them.³

Murasaki’s audience understood the allusion to the poem in the eighth-century Manyōshū: “And to what are we to liken this life of ours? To white in the wake of the boat rowing out at dawn.”⁴ In Chapter 51, “Ukifune” (“A Boat Upon the Waters”), the faggot-boat on the waves of “this wild river” at Uji is an essential component of the setting, and with its overtones of unsettled emotions is used to express the fragile intimacy between Kaoru and Ukifune:

He went to the veranda railing and sat gazing at the new moon. They were both lost in thoughts, he of the past, of days and people now gone, she of the future and her growing troubles. The scene was perfection: the hills were veiled in a mist, and crested herons had gathered at a point along the frozen strand. Far down the river, where the Uji bridge cut its dim arc, faggot-laden boats were weaving in and out... Even had he been with someone for whom he cared nothing, the air of Uji would have brought on strange feelings of intimacy.⁵

Although the metaphoric connotations of the wave-tossed faggot-boat may have grown vague by Zeshin’s time, the image was a familiar tradition. This intro, so small that it was perhaps never meant to be used, exemplifies the renewed appreciation for Japan’s classic art that flourished after the initial turmoil of the Meiji restoration, fostered by Western interest and the founding in the 1870s of national museums in Tokyo, Kyoto, and Nara.

3. Ibid., p. 846.
4. Ibid., p. 846, note.
5. Ibid., p. 989.
EAST ASIAN LACQUER
Late in his career, Zeshin brought his technical virtuosity to bear on purely decorative pictorial forms such as the framed lacquer plaques that took prizes at international expositions in Vienna (1873), Paris (1899), and Philadelphia (1876). By about 1872 he had mastered the difficult technique of painting on silk or paper with lacquer, a highly viscous material, to create hanging scrolls, screens, and sliding panels.

This small hanging scroll is one of Zeshin’s finest lacquer paintings. His signature notes his age and the name of his studio, Taiyūkyo ( Dwelling across from willows), at his home in Asakusa, near a bank of willows along the Sumida River at Yanagibashi (Willow bridge). In this work he treats a well-loved theme in Edo-period painting, the precipitous path in the mountains of Shu in China’s Szechuan Province. Here the Tang emperor Ming Huang fled with his ill-fated concubine Yang Guifei, who was killed en route by his angry troops, after the rebellion led by An Lushan in 755. Although this theme was often chosen by artists of the Shijō school in which Zeshin was trained, in this painting he adapted the monumental Northern Song manner practiced by Tani Bunchō (1763–1840), the most influential painter in Edo during Zeshin’s formative years. Unlike the tight vertical compositions of Buson and of Goshun and his Shijō-school followers, this painting features a plank bridge meandering horizontally up and over the cascading river that cuts a deep gorge through the precipitous rocky mountains. In the hazy distance at the far left the gates and rooftops of the city of Chengdu, painted in fine detail, add a peaceful narrative coda to the sweeping scene of rugged mountains. Zeshin’s ability to combine meticulous detail and forceful kinetic brushwork even in the difficult medium of lacquer was highly celebrated.
149 *Tray with decoration of cherry blossoms and floating rafts*

Gold and silver *makie* on black lacquer

L. 14¼ in. (36.2 cm); w. 9 in. (22.7 cm); h. 2¼ in. (5.6 cm)

Japan, Meiji period (1868–1912)

So celebrated in Japan as to be virtually synonymous with Japanese culture, the cherry blossom is a deep-rooted image symbolic of the beauty and transience of human life. Its sudden flowering, followed all too soon by the scattering of its fragile blossoms, matches the aesthetic of poignance well expressed by the poet and essayist Kenkō in his *Tsurezuregusa* (Essays in idleness, 1330–31):

Are we to look at cherry blossoms only in full bloom, the moon only when it is cloudless?... Branches about to blossom, or gardens strewn with faded flowers are worthier of our admiration. ... In all things, it is the beginnings and ends that are interesting.

Kenkō’s musings on the life of man and on nature reflect his study of Buddhism and classical poetry, and have been prized in subsequent centuries as a classic aesthetic statement. He preferred the simple blossoms of the *yamasakura* or mountain cherry, which flowers at the same time that it comes into leaf, to the richer beauty of the double-blossomed cherry. One essay begins,

The trees I should like for my house are pine and cherry. Five-needled pines will do. As for cherry blossoms, the single-petaled variety is preferable. The double-cherry trees formerly grew only at the capital in Nara, but lately they seem to have become common everywhere.

*Yamasakura* covers the hillsides in some areas and its blossoms fall into swift-flowing streams, inspiring an image that appears in poetry of the sixteenth century. The motif of scattered cherry blossoms and rafts of logs floating downstream to the lumberyards of the capital reflects an aesthetic preference for natural simplicity and stresses the contrast between movement and stillness, the brief blossoming of the cherry and its swift passing, that evokes an awareness of life’s evanescence—perhaps the dominant theme in Japanese art and literature. In lacquer decoration the motif appears most notably on the steps of the altar of the Mitamaya at Kōdai-ji in Kyoto, Hideyoshi’s mausoleum, which was commissioned by his wife in 1606 and which incorporates lacquer decoration made in 1596 for his castle at Fushimi. The subject became a familiar decorative motif on lacquer, ceramics, metalwork, and textiles during the Edo period.

The shape of this deep, rectangular, lobed tray is not part of the traditional repertoire of lacquer forms. Two slightly recessed areas that are integrated into the design of the rafts suggest a special usage. Haino Akio suggests that the piece is based on the traditional form of a tray for an incense box and burner, such as number 108, and that the two recessed spaces held those two utensils. He also notes the refinement of the design’s deliberate contrast between the stillness inside the tray and the wave-tossed blossoms on the outside. Characteristics that suggest a date for this object after the Edo period are the innovative approach to a traditional motif and form; a keen attention to naturalistic detail in the meticulous gold and silver *hiramakie*, as in the contrasting textures of the fragile blossoms and the rough log surfaces; and the exploration of textural effects in the matte lacquer simulation of a traditional metal rim.

2. Ibid., p. 123.
3. Von Ragüé, 1976, pl. 121.
150 Writing box with matching poem card box

Gold and silver makie with colored lacquers and silver inlay on black lacquer
Writing box: L. 9 7/8 in. (25.5 cm); W. 6 3/8 in. (16.2 cm); H. 1 1/4 in. (4.5 cm). Poem card box: L. 9 3/4 in. (23.9 cm); W. 2 3/8 in. (6.7 cm); H. 7/8 in. (1.6 cm)
Japan, Meiji period, 19th century

Adorning this matched set of boxes is a rich profusion of traditional autumn motifs, treated in very fine detail and combining the rich effects of sprinkled gold and silver with meticulous, subtle color variations. Overall, the decoration demonstrates the fascination with technical finesse characteristic of Meiji lacquerwork. Butterflies articulated in red, green, and yellow lacquer abound amid an assortment of autumn grasses: two types of chrysanthemum, one with broad reddish petals and another with spidery petals; miscanthus (susuki) in gold makie accented by inlaid silver dewdrops; flowering clover (hagi) with delicate gold blossoms and multicolored leaves; Chinese bellflower (kikyō) rendered in varied hues of green and silvery blue; valerian or maidenflower (omniaeshi), its tiny flowers detailed in meticulously applied dots of silver powder; and tiny hemp agrimony (fujibakama).
151 Writing box and matching table with decoration of pines at Takasago

by Yukio Setsuyū (d. 1926)

Gold makié lacquer with gold and silver inlay and silver fittings

Signature and seal on both pieces: Setsuyū

Writing box: L. 9 3/4 in. (24.8 cm); W. 9 in. (22.9 cm); H. 2 in. (5.1 cm). Table: L. 24 in. (61 cm); W. 14 1/2 in. (36.8 cm); H. 4 7/8 in. (12.4 cm)

Japan, Meiji period (1868–1912)

This sumptuous writing box with matching table (bundai) demonstrates well the high quality of the stylistically conservative lacquers done in the Meiji era. The classical poetic motifs depicted on Muromachi lacquers constitute a legacy that continued to be drawn upon throughout the Edo period for the sets of lacquer furnishings presented at marriage to members of the daimyō class, and is evident here. The superlative technique and perpetuation of traditional forms and motifs apparent in this ensemble are characteristic of the conservative work of those Meiji lacquer artists who worked independently of the Imperial Academy of Art in Tokyo headed by Shibata Zeshin during the late Meiji era. The seal and signature Setsuyū on both pieces is probably that of Yukio Setsuyū, who was trained as a traditional lacquer maker in Kanazawa, a thriving center of lacquer production throughout the Edo period. Setsuyū came to Tokyo and established an important studio there.

The dominant motif of ancient pine trees on a moonlit shore, which appears on the table, is echoed in the stand of pines on a beach that decorates the cover of
the writing box. When the box is opened, the seaside theme continues with a vista of cranes flying over a reed-filled shore. The water dropper in the form of a silver boat in full sail provides a gorgeous accent. These assembled motifs depict the quintessential scenery of the Japanese coast and recall the earliest poetic images, which expressed human emotions in terms of familiar natural beauty (see no. 94). On the handles of the writing implements—brushes, paper knife, awl, and holder for an ink stick—are cranes flying with branches of pine in their beaks, a symbol auguring longevity that has been important in Japanese decorative arts since the Heian period.¹

Like many of the motifs from nature that appear in Japanese lacquer, the decorations on this set evoke a literary tradition: they recall the twin pines of Takasago and Sumiyoshi. This ancient theme is first sounded in the preface to the Kokinshū, where the noble origins of poetry are said to reside in men of old having found
“comfort in composing poems in which they... thought of growing old in the company of the Takasago and Suminno [Sumiyoshi] pines....” The allusion is to the poems in which these sites serve as metaphors for longevity, based on an ancient legend that identified the twin pines of Sumiyoshi and Takasago as an old couple symbolizing the felicity of longevity and conjugal fidelity. In the Muromachi period, a legend of the spirit of the Sumiyoshi pine crossing the sea and mountain nightly to visit his beloved wife on the beach of Takasago Bay was taken as the source for the Noh play Takasago by Zeami (1363–1443), which is performed to this day to celebrate auspicious occasions. The poetry spoken by its chorus forms part of the traditional Japanese wedding ceremony.

Famous since the Edo period was an ancient site within the precincts of the Takasago shrine where the roots of a red and a black pine were naturally entwined so that they grew together as one. The red pine survived until 1931. The old tree represented on the bundai, supported by many staves and surrounded by the straw rope that designates it as sacred, represents this well-known symbol of conjugal happiness. This writing set is likely to have been made as a wedding gift, following the custom of the Edo period.

1. Its earliest known appearance is on a small kannazukuri chest preserved at the Itsukushima Shrine, Miyajima. According to von Ragué, “This motif which first occurs in the Heian period is the Japanese adaptation of the phoenix biting on a neck ornament and the birds with flowering twigs in their bills—both used in China as early as the T’ang period. The ‘pine-chewing crane’ is a purely Japanese motif. The pine twigs originally indicated that the crane comes from the Hōraizan, the legendary mountain of immortality; they are, like the crane itself, symbols of longevity” (1976, pp. 54–55).
Korea
Lacquer of Korea

The history of lacquerware in Korea goes back at least two thousand years. However, as with China, all the lacquer objects dating from prehistoric times to the eleventh century have been obtained from archaeological excavations and are not in good states of preservation. Moreover, of the few reasonably well preserved lacquer pieces from the Koryŏ and early Chosŏn periods (about the tenth to the sixteenth century), the great majority are no longer in the country. At present fewer than fifteen pieces of Koryŏ lacquer are known to have survived above ground; most are in Japanese collections, and those in Western museums all came from Japan. These works have been the object of intermittent attention from Japanese and Western scholars over the past forty years, but basic questions remain on matters of dating and stylistic development. As to the early Chosŏn group, the material is so widely scattered and the criteria for dating, in spite of preliminary efforts by a number of scholars, are so vague that it has not yet been possible to define the group, let alone make a count of it.

This paucity of material is largely attributable to the fragility of lacquer objects and, to a certain extent, to wars and raids by foreign powers, notably the one launched from Japan by Hideyoshi in the late sixteenth century. It is not the case, however, that all the early Korean lacquers in Japan arrived in the form of loot or war booty. The Japanese preserved not only Korean works but also nearly all the extant Chinese lacquer dating from the fourteenth century and earlier. Most of these pieces arrived as gifts or as items of trade, and others were brought back to Japan by Buddhist monks and lay visitors.

Lacquers of the middle to late Chosŏn period are plentiful and there is little difficulty attached to their identification and dating.

The earliest known Korean lacquer comes from the Bronze Age site at Taho-ri in Úich'ang County, South Kyŏngsang Province, which is dated to the first century B.C. Some of the finds were exhibited at the National Folklore Museum in Seoul in 1989. They consist of writing-brush holders and food containers, such as dishes with pedestals, comparable in shape to examples of early Korean pottery. These pieces are plainly lacquered in black and are unlike the nearly contemporary lacquerware imported from Han China.

The Chinese imports have been excavated in some quantity from sites near P'yŏngyang where the Han empire established the Lolang (in Korean, Nangnang) prefecture. Han lacquers found in the Lolang tombs generally date from the first or second century A.D. and were products of the government-run lacquer workshops in Guanghan and Shu prefectures.
in present-day Sichuan Province. These were richly decorated wares with multiple layers of lacquer, painting in colored lacquer, and often, gilt bronze rims and handles, and were among the most luxurious products of the official workshops that serviced the Chinese imperial court and its outposts throughout the empire as well as the aristocracy. The painted designs on Han lacquer were to influence, to some degree, the decorations painted in red on black lacquer in the Old Silla period during the fifth and sixth centuries.²

Another type of decorated lacquer of the Three Kingdoms period has been found in the sixth-century tomb of King Munyông of Paekche. In the tomb were wooden pillows and footrests decorated with lacquer painting and with thin strips of gold attached to the lacquer surface which form hexagonal patterns. On the footrest for the king, gold rosettes were placed in the interstices and at the intersections of the gold strips.³ The decoration of lacquer with gold foil or thin sheets of gold might have been the result of diplomatic and trade contacts with the Southern Dynasties of China, the capitals of which were situated in Jiankang (present-day Nanking or Nanjing). Recent excavations of Han tombs in the Yangzhou (Yangzhou) area, especially those of the family of Prince Guangling, have uncovered a number of lacquer objects decorated with thin gold sheets cut in the form of birds and animals.⁴ However, the styles of the gold decoration on Chinese and on Korean wares differ considerably.

Most of the material for the study of lacquerware of the Unified Silla period (668–918) is in the finds from Anap-chi, the site of a Unified Silla palace.⁵ The lacquerware is of two main types: plainly lacquered tableware, and lacquered objects made for ceremonial and religious use, with thin gold and silver cutouts inlaid on the lacquer surface. This technique is known in China as pingtuo and is presumed to have originated in Tang China. Some bronze mirrors excavated in China from Tang sites and others preserved in Japan in the Shōsō-in in Nara are decorated in this technique. Mirrors found at Unified Silla sites with pingtuo decoration are so close to Chinese examples that it is impossible to tell the difference by inspection. There are also Tang and Unified Silla mirrors decorated with mother-of-pearl inlay, a related technique; in their case, differences may be discerned after detailed study.⁶

During the Koryō period and in all subsequent times, the dominant type of decoration on Korean lacquer was mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay. The combined use of mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell is apparently peculiar to Korean lacquer (see fig. 32), although it must be pointed out that the combination of mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell (sometimes over gold leaf) inlaid into hardwood is seen on a number of musical instruments, all probably of Chinese origin and dating from about the eighth century, in the Shōsō-in in Japan.⁷ Elsewhere in Asia, mother-of-pearl has usually been used alone.

The identification of Koryō lacquerware came after the publication in 1912 in the Catalogue of the Prince of Yi Household Museum of several badly damaged lacquer pieces recovered from tombs of the Koryō period.⁸ These finds have enabled scholars to identify a number of lacquer pieces in Japanese and Western collections as products of the Koryō period.⁹ The most recent enumeration of extant Koryō lacquers outside Korea was made in 1978 by Okada Jō, who counted thirteen pieces altogether which he divided chronologically into
four groups dating from the twelfth through the fourteenth century. This tally and system of dating have been generally accepted in later writings, with the addition of one more piece, a rod or handle (of a duster?) now in the collection of the National Museum of Korea.

In Okada’s classification there is only one piece in group A, a relatively small sutra box in the Tokyo National Museum which is dated to the mid-twelfth century (fig. 31). Group B, of the later twelfth and first half of the thirteenth century, contains six pieces, including the handle in the National Museum of Korea. The small box in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 32) exemplifies this type. Group C, dated to the second half of the thirteenth century, consists of six sutra boxes all similar in shape, dimensions, and style of decoration, of which the sutra box in the British Museum is representative (fig. 33). In group D there is again only one piece, another sutra box of shape and dimensions slightly different from those of group C. Its decoration, although similar to that of group C, is judged to be a later development dating it to the fourteenth century.

It should be pointed out that in a study of Koryō sutra boxes, Hayashi Susumu has proposed dates a century later for both Okada’s group A and his group C. Hayashi’s dating is based on a comparison of the patterns on the mother-of-pearl inlay sutra boxes with patterns in illustrated Buddhist manuscripts that are securely dated by inscriptions. His arguments, which appear sound, deserve greater attention from students of Korean lacquer.

As to the boxes of group B, a recent study has proposed a date of the tenth century, as
opposed to the generally accepted twelfth-century dating. The tenth century is certainly a plausible date for a cosmetic box of this type (fig. 32). In the essay on Chinese lacquer in this catalogue I suggested that the mother-of-pearl inlaid “flower-shaped flat box” sent by the Japanese monk Chōnen (in Chinese, Diaoran) to the Chinese court in the year 988 might well be a Korean piece. In any case, it must be admitted that absolute dating of Koryŏ lacquer cannot be achieved at the present time.

The identification of the group A sutra box as Korean is secure because the floral pattern of its mother-of-pearl inlay closely resembles the slip inlay decoration on Koryŏ celadon porcelains, as has been demonstrated by Nakagawa Sensaku. This floral pattern ultimately derives from textile patterns of earlier periods.

The flat boxes with lobed sides that constitute most of group B, including the Metropolitan Museum box, can also be firmly identified as Koryŏ, since they conform not only in shape but also in mode of decoration to the type of the excavated Koryŏ lacquers, and were copied in Koryŏ celadon. Technically, several characteristics of this group are worthy of note. Mother-of-pearl is used in combination with tortoiseshell, the latter always being inlaid over red and yellow pigments. The mother-of-pearl, although precisely cut into small pieces, is of the “thick” or “hard” variety that has a peculiar sheen but produces no iridescent effect; nor is it decorated by incised designs on the surface.

Group C, consisting of sutra boxes (fig. 33), is characterized by the use of iridescent shells (probably haliotis shells) which are decorated with finely incised designs in a style and technique very close to Chinese mother-of-pearl inlay of the Yuan period (see the border
design in no. 54). Tortoiseshell is not used in these objects. In addition to the tightly wound “chrysanthemum” scrolls which form the main decoration, there are “peony” scrolls lining the borders which also recall Chinese work, being very similar to the peony scrolls on Yuan mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer. The only feature of group C that connects it with group B is the use of metal wire (of silver or a copper alloy) for the stems of the scrolls. There are significant technical differences between groups B and C; therefore no compelling reason exists for assigning priority of date to either group, as dissimilarities can be accounted for by postulating two different schools of workmanship. One of them exerted a strong influence on contemporary Chinese work—or vice versa. Indeed, the relationship of this group (C) of
Koryō ware to Chinese mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer of the late Sung to Yuan period is one of the crucial questions that must be answered before further progress can be made in the study of Koryō lacquer.

The sole piece in group D is likely to be a later version of the group C works and can only be discussed when queries relating to that group have been clarified.

There exist a number of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer pieces which seem to be later versions of the Koryō type. As with the preceding Koryō work, the main decoration consists of small-leaf scrolls, but now the scrolls are less tightly coiled and the medallion-shaped flowers, usually identified as chrysanthemums, are larger in relation to the whole. The vine scroll is rendered in thin strips of shell rather than with metal wire. Pieces of this type, dated to the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries (that is to say, the transitional period between Koryō and Chosŏn), are illustrated and discussed by Kawada Sadamu.¹⁶

Another type with some claims to a date in the late Koryō or early Chosŏn period is represented in this catalogue by two splendid examples, numbers 152 and 153. Although the details of the floral patterns on these two pieces differ, the general structure of the scrolls and the shapes of the leaves are so close that the two patterns can be regarded as variants of the same style. It is also striking that both pieces incorporate an ogival shape and that the quality of their mother-of-pearl and lacquer is similar. The relationship of these objects to the accepted groups of Koryō lacquer is discussed in their catalogue entries.

Yet another group, identified by the motif of lotus scrolls and birds, may also have a late Koryō date or may represent one of the earliest types of lacquer produced in the Chosŏn period.¹⁷ This motif does not seem to have continued into the later periods, however. The group will not be discussed here, since it bears no direct relation to any piece in the present collection, but the subject deserves close attention in a general study of Korean lacquer.

Unlike the survival of an earlier style, the beginning of a new decorative lacquer style in the early Chosŏn period is not easy to trace. Although works that might date to the fifteenth or early sixteenth century have been pointed out by various authors,¹⁸ there is not yet any clear formulation of stylistic criteria for dating lacquer of the early to middle Chosŏn periods.

In this catalogue a case is made for dating entry number 154 to the fifteenth century (for the full discussion see pp. 317–19). This box, it is proposed, is representative of an early Chosŏn type which was to influence considerably the decoration of later Korean lacquer. The work is not unconnected with the Koryō style, but it incorporates a number of new elements. Some of these new features are derived from what might be called the international decorative style of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries as seen on Chinese mother-of-pearl lacquer and blue-and-white porcelain, while others are native Korean innovations, such as the crackled pattern on the shells representing leaves and petals and the use of circular dots as space fillers. It is possible to derive a general scheme for the dating of fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Korean lacquer from the evolution of this new decorative style. In later periods both the flowers and the leaves take simpler forms, and instead of several different types of flowers growing from the same scroll vine (a characteristic of the early Chosŏn style), only one type appears, usually the peony (or lotus). At the same time the
14. Set of desk and writing box, and large box in which they are kept. Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay. Desk, l. 13¼ in.; writing box, l. 9¾ in.; box, l. 15⅛ in. Korea, Choson period, 16th century. Tokyo National Museum
scrolling vine becomes more regular and geometric in character. It seems that by the beginning of the seventeenth century the form of the flowers had changed from a closed to an open type, as exemplified by number 155. The seventeenth century also saw a return of the use of metal wire to represent the stem of the scroll (see nos. 156 and 157).

This proposed scheme of development harmonizes well with the dating of a small assemblage of Chosŏn lacquers in the Tokyo National Museum, objects that have received a great deal of attention because of their provenance and the fact that they can be dated with some certainty to the sixteenth century—or possibly earlier, although this is not likely.¹⁹ The group consists of a small desk and a writing box (for inkstone, brush, and accessories) which are both kept in a large rectangular box of the type usually used as a garment container (fig. 34). This lacquerware originally belonged to the house of Ōuchi, a daimyō family (feudal Japanese aristocracy) that ruled over the far western part of Honshu in Japan from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century. Because the form and construction of the desk and writing box are Japanese but the decoration is in a Korean/Chinese style, it is surmised that the writing set was commissioned by Ōuchi Yoshitaka (1507–1551) from Korean craftsmen. The set and also the large Korean-style garment box can thus be taken as reliable exemplars of mid-sixteenth-century Korean decorated lacquer. When the garment box is compared with the earlier box in the Irving Collection, number 154, it is seen that while the general decorative scheme has been retained it is now more loosely organized, and the flowers and leaves have taken on a simpler outline.

The Ōuchi writing set poses another problem for historians of Korean lacquer. It is plain that the decoration on both the desk and the writing box was derived from Chinese decorative painting. Whether this was a result of the personal taste of Ōuchi Yoshitaka, who was known to be partial to Chinese art and culture, or was another instance of a Sinicized style within the Korean lacquer tradition in the Chosŏn period—as opposed to the Ōuchi clothing box, which is in pure Korean style—is difficult to ascertain at the present stage of study. We do know that pictorial designs, including landscapes, aquatic scenes, and flower-and-bird compositions, are common among the lacquerwares of the late Chosŏn period. However, these late examples are simplified compositions with abbreviated images. Whether the Ōuchi writing set represents the early phase of this type of decoration is still to be determined.

The later development of the pictorial style in Korean lacquer decoration took place along the lines of folk painting, with objects and symbols of good omen increasingly emphasized. Then, in the nineteenth century, a type of lacquerware emerged that was to be one of the glories of Korean art. It is well represented by number 158. Ingeniously using different natural materials for decorative effect and approaching the subject matter with energy, the Korean artist created a brilliant decorative style which is a fitting climax to the long tradition of lacquer making in Korea. Its strength and vitality recall the vigorous spirit of early Korean art of the pre-Koryŏ era.

JAMES C. Y. WATT
Notes

2. For examples of Old Silla lacquer see ibid., pls. 24–31.
4. Some examples of this type of Han lacquer are illustrated in Wang and Zhu, 1989 (see Chinese Bibliography), pls. 52, 53, 56. Excavation reports mostly appeared in Weneu during the 1980s.
7. See Treasures of the Shôô-in: The North Section (in English and Japanese) (Tokyo, 1987), pls. 1–8, particularly pls. 7–8, the biwa lute.
8. The Prince of Yi Household Museum is the predecessor of the present-day National Museum of Korea. The photographs of the pieces are reproduced in Yoshino Tomio, “Kôrai no raden ki” (Korean nacre inlay works of the Koryô period), Bijutsu kenkyû, no. 175 (May 1954), pp. 1–13, pls. 1–5; English summary, pp. 1–2.
9. Koryô lacquers in Japanese collections were first identified in 1954 by Yoshino Tomio (ibid.). Two years later Jan Fontein added to the list several items in American and European collections; see Jan Fontein, “Notes on Korean Lacquer,” Bulletin van vereeniging van vrienden der Aziatische kunst, 3rd ser., no. 6 (September 1956).
15. Nakagawa Sensaku, “Kôrai raden to seiji zokan no monyo ni tsuite” (Korean designs found on Koryô nacre inlays and clay-inlaid celadons), Bijutsu kenkyû, no. 175 (May 1954), pp. 14–21; English summary, pp. 2–4.
17. See Garner, 1979 (see Chinese Bibliography), pls. 175–77.
152 *Ogival tray with floral scroll*

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 17 3/8 in. (44.1 cm); w. 12 in. (30.4 cm)
Korea, late Koryo to early Choson period, 14th–15th century

The shape of this tray, conventionally termed "ogival" in Western art-historical writing on the decorative arts of Asia, is commonly seen on celadons of the Koryo period. The mother-of-pearl scroll flower is a simplified version of flowers in border decorations on Koryo sutra boxes such as the one in the British Museum (fig. 33, p. 307). The inlaid three-pointed leaves are of a type that can be seen in iron underglaze decoration on many Koryo celadons, nearly always combined, interestingly, with an even more simplified version of the same flower in white slip inlay. On the outside wall of the tray, the same scroll with identical leaves is matched with chrysanthemum-like flowers.

The stem of this tray’s scroll is also executed in mother-of-pearl inlay (rather than wire), displaying what is generally considered to be a characteristic of the early Choson period. The piece may be one of the earliest examples of this type of inlay work.

A similar tray is in the collection of the Tokyo National Museum.²

1. See, for example, Chông Yang-mo et al., *Koryo ch’ongja myöngp’um tükbyöälön* (Koryo celadon masterpieces), exh. cat. (Seoul: National Museum of Korea, 1989), nos. 193, 219, others.
2. Kawada and Takahashi, 1986, pl. 16.
153 Table with floral scroll

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl and silver wire inlay
L. 16⅞ in. (42.3 cm); w. 12⅞ in. (32.8 cm); H. 15¼ in. (38.7 cm)
Korea, late Koryo to early Choson period, 14th-15th century

As noted in the previous entry, the ogival shape is often seen on celadon porcelain of the Koryo period. The three-pointed leaves of the scroll on this table are also characteristic of Koryo decoration. The interesting aspect of the floral scroll seen here is the form of the flower, a “half-flower” made up of three heart-shaped petals arranged in a semicircle.

The stem of the floral scroll is of fine twisted brass wire. Thus it differs from earlier examples of Koryo lacquer, such as the small cosmetic box in the Metropolitan Museum (fig. 32, p. 306), where the stem of the floral scroll is of flat brass wire, and twisted wire is used only on the borders. In later Choson pieces, twisted wires are invariably used for the stems of floral
scrolls (see nos. 156–57), but the wires are much thicker.

At least one other table is known which has decoration identical in design to this one’s and which is done in the same technique.¹

¹ Kawada and Takahashi, 1986, pl. 17.
Stationery box
Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 14¼ in. (36.5 cm); w. 3¼ in. (9 cm)
Korea, Chosón period, 15th century
Published: Kawada and Takahashi, 1986, no. 25.

It was noted in the preceding essay that this box represents the beginning of a new style of decoration in Korean lacquer in the early Chosón period. Sophistication and a high degree of subtlety characterize its design as well as the technique of its manufacture, and various stylistic features constitute a change from earlier periods. A single floral scroll is distributed over the entire decorated surface, its linear quality newly de-emphasized. Also minimized is the disparity between the sizes of the main elements attached to the scroll vine; thus, the three different types of flowers and the acanthus-type leaf are all roughly the same size. Because the stem of the scroll is, like the rest of the inlay, of mother-of-pearl, it has a softer appearance than the metal wire stems of the Koryŏ period. The scrolling stem imparts movement and rhythm to a design that otherwise might be too perfectly balanced. That rhythm is transmitted to the acanthus leaves, whose wavy tips point in the general direction of the movement of the stem. The smaller, “swept back” leaves, familiar from Koryŏ lacquers, here serve as space fillers, as do the circular discs of various sizes distributed over the spaces unoccupied by the scroll.

Apart from the use on this box of thin strips of mother-of-pearl to form the stem, its most noteworthy technical innovation is in the handling of the larger pieces of mother-of-pearl inlay. Three approaches are evident. With the first, small pieces are assembled to form a larger unit, for instance the center of the open flower (a). Second is the incision of details on a larger piece, as seen in the peony, where incised lines define the flower’s inner budlike core and the two petals that enclose it (b). Both techniques were known earlier and are found in the Koryŏ group of lacquer sutra boxes (see fig. 33, p. 307). Totally new, however, is the technique of enhancing the texture of larger pieces of shell by creating a pattern of cracks on them before inlay.

The crackled pattern can be seen on the acanthus leaf, the peony, and the tightly closed flower (c). Aesthetically this pattern of “accidental cracks” is perhaps akin to the crazing on thick celadon glazes. How the crackling of the mother-of-pearl was achieved is not known; indeed, the author knows of no publication where this technique is discussed.

The key to determining the date of this style lies in the organization of the decoration as well as in the individual motifs. It is noteworthy that three different types of flowers grow on the same scrolling vine; that the vine covers the entire surface; and that the larger leaves are of the acanthus type, with its characteristic curled-back ends. The only concurrence of all these elements in the decorative arts of East Asia took place in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. We see scrolls bearing similarly mixed flower types on Chinese mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquers of the late fourteenth century of which the large box in the Idemitsu Museum of Arts provides an example (fig. 35). The motif is related to the “flowers of the four seasons” decoration found on carved lacquer of the early fifteenth century (see nos. 24, 25). Mixed floral scrolls are also commonly seen on Chinese blue-and-white porcelain of the early fifteenth century.

The acanthus leaf, a motif well known on Chinese blue-and-white porcelain of the Yuan and early Ming


37. Vase with peony decoration. Punch’ŏng ware, h. 15 in. Korea, Chosŏn period, 15th century. Hoam Museum, Yongin, Korea
periods, is also seen on Korean work; it appears in simplified form on Korean blue-and-white porcelain of the fifteenth century (fig. 36).

In considering the treatment of the peony flower we are on firm ground, because this is the most prominent decorative motif on a class of Korean ceramics of the fifteenth century known as punch’ong ware. The correspondence between the peony forms on the ceramics and those on the inlaid lacquer is almost exact (fig. 37).

It seems reasonable to conclude, therefore, that the box in the Irving Collection dates from the fifteenth century. We should observe that the motif that dominates this box’s design, the acanthus-type leaf with a complex outline, does not recur in Korean lacquer of later periods.

The interior of this box is coated—uncharacteristically—with multiple layers of lacquer, an indication that considerable care was lavished on its production. On the exterior the box is strengthened by a number of bronze brackets with raised rosette ends which serve both decorative and protective purposes.
155 Clothing box with peony scrolls

Lacquer with mother-of-pearl and tortoishell inlay
L. 31 3/8 in. (79 cm); W. 18 1/2 in. (46 cm); H. 8 3/8 in. (21.2 cm)
Korea, Chosŏn period, 16th–17th century

This clothing box, plainly finished with a thin coating of lacquer on the inside, is lavishly decorated on its exterior with formal peony scrolls bounded by bands of standardized geometric designs. The motifs are executed in mother-of-pearl inlaid in black lacquer, with tortoishell inlay as well applied inside the border. The stem of the peony scroll is made of mother-of-pearl; a twisted metal wire is used solely to provide a second line just inside the border and seems to appear as a matter of convention rather than for technical or decorative reasons.

The treatment of the peony flower, with its separate core and outer petals, follows the fifteenth-century model (see no. 154). The enclosure of the decoration on the top of the box within an ogival frame, the variation of the peony blossoms in size and direction, and the spread of the scroll design over the entire surface (rather than arranged in a series of parallel linear scrolls as in number 157) all indicate that the box was made relatively early in the Chosŏn period. Stylistically it is instructively compared with the clothing box in the Tokyo National Museum datable to the sixteenth century (fig. 34, bottom, p. 309).
Cosmetic box

Lacquer with mother-of-pearl and tortoiseshell inlay

L. 12 3/8 in. (32 cm); w. 7 3/8 in. (19.4 cm); h. 10 3/8 in. (25.8 cm)

Korea, Chosón period, 18th century

Published: Arakawa, 1985 (see General Bibliography), no. 173; Kawada and Takahashi, 1986, no. 29.

A number of boxes nearly identical to this one in dimensions and decoration are known. The inside of the box is lined with red satin; the black lacquer exterior is decorated with mother-of-pearl inlaid in the form of simple floral scrolls and formal borders. Twisted metal wires make up the stems of the scrolls and frame the different zones of decoration. Several of the circular discs of tortoiseshell inlay
on the top surface, apparently lost, have been replaced by mother-of-pearl. In boxes of this type, metal foil (probably gold) is applied underneath the tortoise-shell discs. A notable feature of this box and of others of its type is the incorporation of gold powder sprinkled on the lacquer. The sprinkled gold only appears in patches, however, probably because most of it was rubbed off when the surface was polished down after the mother-of-pearl and tortoise-shell were inlaid. This infelicity suggests that the boxes represent an early stage in the development in Korean lacquer of the difficult technique of combining mother-of-pearl inlay with sprinkled gold decoration. In later pieces displaying the same combination, for example number 158, this defect is no longer evident.

Although boxes of this type were obviously the standard production of a particular period, it is not easy to place the work within the sequence of development of lacquer decoration during the Chosŏn period. For example, it is difficult to decide whether the open form of the peony blossoms is dictated by the style of the period (as is the case with no. 157) or by the decision not to use relatively large pieces of uncut shell for inlay. On the whole, this type of Chosŏn lacquer, in which mother-of-pearl inlay is sparse and bronze wire is employed as a decorative element, seems chronologically to belong between numbers 155 and 157.

157 Stationery box with floral scrolls

Lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 2 2/3 in. (57 cm); W. 15 in. (38 cm); H. 5 5/8 in. (13.6 cm)
Korea, Chosŏn period, 18th century

The lid of this box is decorated with mother-of-pearl on black lacquer which contrasts with the red-lacquered articulated base with four curved legs. The decoration on the top of the box is highly schematized; although the stems of its scrolls are interconnected, visually the design consists of three nearly identical floral scrolls parallel to each other. The peony flower is in open form with separated petals and represents a later stage in the evolution of this motif. The effect of the relatively large areas of solid mother-of-pearl is modulated by the use of cracked pieces for the inlay; the cracking adds visual interest and enhances the brilliance of the iridescence.

The wooden core of this box is fairly thick (more than ¼ in.), so there is no need for metal wire to strengthen the structure of the box, as is often supposed to be the case. The lavish use of bronze wires—for the stems of the floral scrolls and along the edges of the top and sides—is purely decorative. The doubling (and tripling) of wires in certain parts of the scrolls, creating a stem for the large flowers and leaves that is strong but not solid, is a particularly successful decorative device. The color, texture, and linearity of the wires contrast sharply with the rest of the inlay and provide relief from what otherwise might be the overwhelming effect of so much mother-of-pearl.

The inside of the box is painted with a thin coating of black lacquer.
Clothing box with decoration of dragons

Lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, tortoiseshell, and sharkskin
L. 33 ⅝ in. (86 cm); w. 15 ⅛ in. (40 cm); H. 7⅛ in. (19 cm)
Korea, Chosón period, 19th century

Both artistically and technically, this box exemplifies what is best in late Korean art. It displays the complete mastery of standard techniques developed over centuries and a keen awareness of the physical properties and decorative values of familiar materials, all of which are exploited for dramatic effect. The use of mother-of-pearl in a crackled pattern combined with tortoiseshell and sharkskin creates a rich texture which is enhanced by sprinkled gold on the lacquer ground and the lattice of the foundation fabric, visible through the translucent tortoiseshell. A thick, twisted metal wire delineates the main outlines of the forms and marks the boundaries of fields of different textures. There is not any part of the entire decorated surface of this large box that lacks visual interest, even when examined in detail (see p. 300).

The ingenious employment of natural shells and skin to represent the different parts of a dragon creates an eerily realistic body for the mythical animal. The vitality of the box’s two dragons, whose writhing bodies disappear over and emerge out of all the edges and corners, completely overpowers the formal geometric shape of the box and brings the inanimate object almost to life.
Ryukyu Islands
Lacquer of the Ryukyu Islands

The history of the Ryukyu Islands at the time when they were known as the Kingdom of the Ryukyus is written in their lacquer. The growth and decline of the lacquer industry parallel those of the kingdom, which began perhaps sometime in the fourteenth century and ended in 1872. The close political and cultural relationship that the Ryukyus maintained with China during the Ming Dynasty found expression in the manufacturing technique, form, and decoration of Ryukyuan lacquer prevalent until the end of the seventeenth century. Later ties to Japan, beginning in the early seventeenth century, account for the manufacture of many articles for Japanese use and countless minor modifications in the design and form of the wares in favor of Japanese taste. Trade contacts with Korea and Southeast Asia from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century also left indelible traces, evident in certain aspects of lacquer production in the Ryukyus. Yet throughout this continual process of adaptation and imitation there emerge qualities of inventiveness and conscientious workmanship that are uniquely Ryukyuan and recognizable in the objects catalogued here.

The Ryukyus are a chain of islands that lie in an arc running northeast to southwest between Kyushu, in southern Japan, and Taiwan. For most of their recorded history, which began in the fourteenth century, these islands constituted an independent kingdom ruled by a succession of monarchies whose capitals were on the main island of Okinawa. The kingdom developed close political and cultural ties with China at the beginning of the Ming Dynasty in the late fourteenth century, but these weakened considerably after the Manchus established the Qing Dynasty in 1644. However, a relationship with China continued down to the time of the islands’ formal annexation by Japan in 1872, when they became the Ryukyu shō of Japan. In 1879 their name was changed to Okinawa Prefecture, a status and designation that have remained to this day, with the exception of a period following the Second World War, from 1945 to 1972, when the territory was administered by the Okinawa government under United States occupation. All the Ryukyu lacquers in this catalogue date from the time of the Kingdom of the Ryukyus. Stylistically and technically they form a distinct group within the greater tradition of lacquer making in East Asia, as has been recognized by Japanese scholars, and thus they constitute a separate section in this catalogue.

Like all island cultures in the western Pacific, the Ryukyus were involved in sea trade early on, but the state did not become an active participant until the fourteenth century. Indeed, the social and political development of the inhabitants of the archipelago as a nation was inextricably tied up with its trade history. The reasons the Ryukyuans did not engage in active sea trade at an earlier date may lie in the poor natural resources of the islands (unlike, for example, the Spice Islands of Indonesia) and their location off the main route of the
east-west trade between the China coast and the Middle East which began in the second century B.C. or earlier. The same is true of the island of Taiwan, which was also relatively obscure to the outside world in early historical times. As late as the thirteenth century there was confusion in Chinese literature as to whether the name Ryukyu (Liuqiu in Chinese) referred to Taiwan or the archipelago to its northeast. It was probably during that century that the Ryukyuans began to practice sea trade between the maritime countries of East and Southeast Asia.

By the late fourteenth century the Ryukyus had established themselves as a full member of the community of nations in East Asia. (At the time there were three Ryukyuan kingdoms, all with a capital in Okinawa, which maintained a certain degree of overlordship in the smaller islands; later, in the early fifteenth century, the Kingdom of Chūzan was to unify the country under its rule.) When the first emperor of the Ming Dynasty ascended the throne after the ousting of the Mongols from China in 1368, he immediately sent emissaries to overseas countries as far as India to proclaim the new dynasty and the new ruler of China. One of the first countries to respond to this diplomatic overture was the Ryukyus, and in the fifth year of Hongwu (1372) in the reign of the Ming emperor, the first “tribute” mission was sent from the Kingdom of Chūzan on Okinawa to the Ming court in Nanjing. It marked the beginning of a series of continual and frequent missions to China bringing tribute and trade and resulted in a rapid Sinicizing of the Ryukyus.

In addition to sending tributes of local products, mainly horses and sulphur, and receiving porcelains and iron utensils in return, the Ryukyu kingdoms sent young men and women to attend state schools in China. Impressed by the Ryukyuans’ fervor for Chinese culture, in the year 1392 the Ming emperor ordered “thirty-six families of shipbuilders” from the province of Fujian to settle in Okinawa. According to the Chinese history the Ming shi, this was “to facilitate the travel of tribute bearers.” However, the immigration of these families of craftsmen brought about an infusion of skills and knowledge that went beyond shipbuilding. The Ryukyuan history, Kyūyō, records that as a result of the coming of the Chinese immigrants, Chinese music was performed in Ryukyu for the first time, standards of propriety were instituted, and learning flourished.

The use of lacquer as an adhesive for waterproofing was then an essential part of the craft of shipbuilding, and, given the high cultural level of the craftsman families, we may surmise that the craft of making lacquerware was transmitted to the Ryukyus at that time if not before. Indeed, one of the most striking aspects of much Ryukyuan lacquer is its strong adherence to fourteenth-century Chinese techniques and styles, even in much later periods. The logical conclusion is that lacquer manufacturing was introduced from China in the fourteenth century and that the Ryukyuan lacquer tradition is rooted in the developments of that time.

Thus, while the use of twisted metal wires diminished rapidly in Chinese mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer after the fourteenth century, it is still evident in Ryukyuan lacquer of the eighteenth century (see no. 167). The incorporation of twisted wires and of apparently early
pictorial styles of inlay sometimes cause later Ryukyuan mother-of-pearl lacquers to be mistakenly identified as fourteenth-century Chinese work. The technique for engraved-gold lacquer popular in the Yuan period in China—in which straight-edged tools and possibly a type of chisel with a V-shaped cutting edge were employed for incising the design before gilding—was maintained in the Ryukyus until at least the sixteenth century. Only toward the end of that century did the Ryukyuans adopt the later Chinese technique, developed during the reign of Yongle (1403–24), in which the incised line is of uniform width and probably the product of a channeling tool with a U-shaped cutting edge (see nos. 49 and 159).

It is not proposed to discuss here the origins of all the design elements in Ryukyuan lacquer, but one interesting instance can be mentioned. On certain pieces of engraved-gold Ryukyuan lacquer there is a peony-crest which Tokugawa Yoshinobu has pointed out is a characteristic feature of early Ryukyuan work. A good example appears on the top surface of a footed tray in engraved-gold lacquer from the collection of Toyotomi Hideyoshi (d. 1598), now in the Kōdai-ji (fig. 38). This type of floral whorl is a popular motif in the art and architectural decoration of fourteenth-century China; one example appears on the Juyong Gate north of Peking, on the way to the present Great Wall, which was built in the mid-fourteenth century (see fig. 13, p. 43). The same motif can be seen on jade carving of the Yuan period and in the decoration of fourteenth-century blue-and-white porcelain.

Perhaps the single work that best illustrates the close adherence of late Ryukyuan lacquer to fourteenth-century Chinese design is the set of boxes now in the collection of the Sackler Art Gallery in Washington, D.C. (fig. 39). This set of thirteen black lacquer boxes is decorated in mother-of-pearl inlay. The various Chinese diaper patterns are all taken from

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fourteenth-century Chinese brocades. The image on the lid on top of the stacked boxes, that of a flowering plum branch and a crescent moon, is another typical Yuan design such as is often seen on ceramics of the period and is also carved and gilded inside the lid of an ivory box in the Irving Collection (fig. 40). A cover that fits over the entire set of thirteen boxes is decorated in engraved gold on red lacquer with incising techniques characteristic of the Yuan period. This assemblage may well be taken as a representative example of Yuan lacquer, and indeed it has been published as such.6

However, the bases of six of the smaller boxes are marked in engraved gold with the archaic Chinese character tian (heaven). According to a study by Mr. Tokugawa, this character is one of the marks that identifies lacquer made for the Ryukyuan Chüzan monarchy in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.7 To the present author, what finally confirms the later dating for this set of boxes is the decoration on the shoulder of the lid of the large box and on the stand for the whole set. The technique used is crushed-shell inlay, a very popular type of mother-of-pearl inlay work of the late sixteenth century which certainly is
not found on fourteenth-century Chinese ware. The continuing controversy over the dating and provenance of this piece highlights some of the difficulties associated with the study of Ryukyuan lacquer. The controversy would disappear, however, if the thesis were accepted that a wholesale transfer of Chinese lacquering techniques to the Ryukyus took place in the late fourteenth century and that these techniques remained the foundation of Ryukyuan lacquerwork for centuries afterward.

The only major class of lacquerware that was popular in China in the period from the fourteenth to the sixteenth century but was not produced in the Ryukyus is carved lacquer. The reason may be that this type of lacquer was not made in China’s Fujian Province, which had the greatest contact with the Ryukyus, or the explanation may lie in technical and economic factors. Carved lacquer production was an elaborate and time-consuming process, requiring not only a high degree of manual skill, which the Ryukyuans certainly possessed, but also a great deal of empirical knowledge of the properties and behavior of lacquer—or, rather, of different types of lacquer mixtures, since the lacquer making up the numerous
layers was not all of the same purity, nor was it all prepared by the same process. Moreover, lacquer carving requires special skills and training. In the eighteenth century, when carved lacquer was first produced in the Qing palace workshops, the carving was done by craftsmen skilled in the carving of bamboo and ivory, which present special difficulties akin to those of lacquer carving (see p. 37).

In the sixteenth century the Chinese fashion for producing polychrome lacquerware spread to the Ryukyus. However, those types of polychrome lacquerware that depend on carving thick lacquer layers (ticai, see no. 33, and “filled-in” lacquer, see nos. 50–53) were, again, not adopted; only the techniques of painting with colored lacquers and oil colors were taken on. These new techniques were often combined with the traditional craft of engraved gold (by this time rarely used in China), creating a style that was distinctly Ryukyuan. The finest examples of this type of Ryukyuan lacquer, now in the Tokugawa Art Museum in Nagoya, are a group of covered cups and bowls and footed trays, probably from a set of tableware. They were known to be in the possession of Tokugawa Ieyasu and therefore must predate 1616, the year of his death. A later example, in the Irving Collection, is number 159 in this catalogue.

Another type of lacquerware that came into vogue in both China and the Ryukyus in the late sixteenth century is lacquered basketry (see nos. 170, 171). Fine baskets woven of thin strips of bamboo have a long history in southern China, going back to early historic times if not into prehistory. Also from early on, lacquer was used to coat the rims and line the interiors of basketry containers. In the late sixteenth century the application of painted decoration to the lacquered surfaces transformed the baskets into works of art and articles of luxury available to a household of ordinary means. To increase the value and attractiveness of lacquered baskets, the decorated areas were gradually enlarged. Thus a type of lacquer object evolved in both China and the Ryukyus for which basketry was not necessarily any longer the main substrate, but which incorporated exposed basketry, used to decorative effect, on its sides. Number 171 is a true lacquered basket, illustrating the continuance of the earlier type; number 170 exemplifies the later type.

By this time, Ryukyuan lacquerers had managed to produce a sort of imitation carved lacquer, not by carving down a solid layer of lacquer but by lacquering over a relief decoration built up with a putty which was often a mixture of lacquer, pigment, and ground-up whetstone. The lacquer putty could also be molded before it was applied to the surface to be decorated. The relief decoration could be carved with finer details before the final lacquer coating was applied, in this way approximating the appearance of carved lacquer. This type of lacquer, easier to produce than carved lacquer, was known in China by the names duizhu (piled-up red) and duicai (piled-up colors), from which come the present-day Japanese terms tsuishu and tsuisai, and was also referred to as “false carved lacquer.” It appears that no true carved lacquer was made in the Ryukyus at any time—although this statement will have to be confirmed by a physical examination of the cores of several known Ryukyuan objects traditionally classified as “carved lacquer.”

This type of raised lacquer decoration was being produced by the beginning of the
seventeenth century if not earlier, as is evidenced by one of the objects presented to the Japanese monk Taichū Shōnin by the Ryukyuan king Shō Nei in 1611, after the Shimazu clan of Satsuma had invaded the Ryukyus and carried Shō Nei off to Kyushu (Japan) along with the palace treasures. The object is a small incense box decorated in tsuishu technique and still preserved in the Dannō Hōrin-ji temple in Kyoto. Several incense boxes in the Irving Collection are in the same style and technique and may well date to the same period (nos. 172a, b, c).

After the Shimazu invasion (1609), the northern Ryukyu Islands, including the Amami Islands, were annexed to the Satsuma fiefdom; however, King Shō Nei was allowed to return to Okinawa, and the remainder of the Kingdom of the Ryukyus became a tributary vassal of the Shimazu clan. In the history of Ryukyu lacquer, 1620, the year of Shō Nei’s death, can be regarded as a watershed. After this time the formal design and decorative motifs of Ryukyuan lacquer exhibited considerable modification in the direction of Japanese taste and usage. Nevertheless, because of the predilection of the Japanese daimyō families for “Chinese objects,” the Ryukyuan lacquer presented as tribute to these Japanese military lords also retains much of its earlier Chinese character. The stationery box number 163 and table number 178 display signs of the eclecticism arising from this state of affairs.

The dating of Ryukyu lacquer from the early seventeenth century onward is on much firmer ground, as a number of pieces survive which were presented to Japanese temples and daimyō families and can serve as standards for comparison. These pieces were enumerated in Mr. Tokugawa’s masterly study of Ryukyu lacquer, published in 1977, which has corrected many former misconceptions about Ryukyu lacquer and put the investigation of the subject on a solid basis. His work is perfectly complimented by Arakawa Hirokazu’s technical studies, which trace the origins of different classes of lacquer by referring to extant objects in the Ryukyus, historical records, and the author’s own expert knowledge of lacquering techniques.11

Most of the types of lacquerware just discussed continued to be made through the seventeenth century, with an increase in the proportion of lacquer having painted decoration. Ryukyuan and Chinese painted lacquer involve three basic techniques: painting with colored lacquer (no. 176); litharge painting using oil-based colors, for pigments that do not mix homogeneously with lacquer (no. 174); and gold painting (no. 177). In gold “painting” the surface or line to be painted is first primed with an adhesive lacquer mixture (known as jinjiao, “gold foot,” possibly a corruption of “gold glue”) and then the gold is applied, either in the form of gold leaf or as powdered or finely divided gold dusted on the surface with a cotton wad. Gold is sometimes applied over areas where the surface has been raised, probably by many coatings of lacquer, in emulation of Japanese gold lacquer work (makie). Lacquer painting, litharge painting, and gold painting are often used in combination (see nos. 171, 175).

In both China and the Ryukyus, painted decoration is commonly employed when basketry is incorporated into the object. Occasionally mother-of-pearl inlay is used on basketry lacquer (no. 170). Only rarely are other types of lacquer decoration found in combination
with basketry, as they are, for example, on number 64. This piece is probably Chinese, but
the possibility that it is Ryukyuian cannot be dismissed—in which case the question arises
whether the relief lacquer decoration is true carved lacquer, or not.

In the early seventeenth century a further refinement was made in the mother-of-pearl
inlay technique in China (see no. 62). It involves the use of very thin mother-of-pearl, which
is obtained by boiling thick mollusk shells and peeling off the thin layers. It is recorded that a
Ryukyuian named Ōmitake Hyōbu learned the method of shell-boiling in Hangzhou in the
year 1690 and brought the technique back to the Ryukyus.\(^12\) The extreme thinness of the
mother-of-pearl makes its iridescence more brilliant, and the color effect is sometimes fur-
ther enhanced by placing gold or silver foil underneath the shell. An additional effect of
shading is achieved by sprinkling gold or silver flakes and/or crushed thin shells on the
lacquer surface. Numbers 167 and 168 exemplify this type of thin mother-of-pearl inlay.
While the hexagonal tiered box (no. 167) is a standard Ryukyuian form, the round covered
box (no. 168) is too close to Chinese models to claim without dispute a Ryukyuian provenance.

Although artistically the eighteenth century was perhaps not the finest period for Ryukyuian
lacquer, technically the tradition remained strong in the Ryukyus at a time when Chinese
lacquer, except for the production of official workshops, was in a phase of decline. Lacquers
of every type continued to be made in the Ryukyus, among them the large dishes with
dragons in mother-of-pearl inlay (no. 169) that were sent as tribute to the Qing emperors
(see. p. 10) and used by the Ryukyuian court.

The organization and techniques of Ryukyuian lacquer production in later periods are
extremely well documented in the Ryūkyū shikki kō (A study of Ryukyuian lacquer) com-
plied by Ishizawa Hyōgo and published in 1888. Ishizawa was on the staff of General Fukuhara,
who had been appointed governor of the prefecture of Okinawa in 1887. The book is one of
the results of a survey ordered by the governor on the arts and crafts of the islands, particu-
larly lacquer, which at the time was still the chief industry of the prefecture. Ishizawa had
full access to the archives and documents of functioning workshops, complete with drawings
of designs going back to the early eighteenth century. The historical account he presented is
accurate for the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but contains some misinformation
on the earlier periods, as has been pointed out by Japanese scholars in recent years. Ishizawa’s
book is divided into five sections according to techniques of manufacture. It is noteworthy
that in the eighteenth century mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer remained the dominant type of
lacquer produced in the Ryukyus, while the demand for painted lacquer (except for gold
painting) diminished rapidly after its vogue in the seventeenth century.

The story of Ryukyuian lacquer constitutes a remarkable chapter in the history of the
arts of East Asia. A late beginner, this branch of art quickly acquired sophisticated manu-
facturing techniques and took over from Yuan China a rich decorative vocabulary (itself the
result of a confluence of several cultures), adapting these resources to its own use. In the
period from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century, Ryukyuian lacquers demonstrated a ca-
pacity to absorb the best of international fashion in lacquer art while maintaining in their
finest work a quality inferior to none. The old traditions continued until the end of the nineteenth century, but with greatly increased commercial production the quality declined, and such elaborate techniques as mother-of-pearl inlay and engraved gold were only employed in the government-controlled workshops. New forms and decorative designs, most utilizing a vivid red ground, began to appear in the early decades of this century. In the aftermath of the devastation of the island of Okinawa during the Second World War there has been a vigorous revival of the modern lacquer-making industry, which has grown especially strong since the islands reverted to Japan in 1972.

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Notes


3. The Chinese chronicle the Ming shi (juan 323) gives the year as 1396, but according to the Ryukyuans histories Kyūyō and Chūzanshū the event took place in 1392. The term “shipbuilder” requires a word of elucidation. Under Mongol rule during the Yuan Dynasty, all Chinese craftsmen were registered by their respective trades, such as shipbuilding, weaving, or ink making. However, the identification of the trade or skill practiced by a family was not always accurate, since at the beginning of Mongol rule some families claimed craftsman status to avoid persecution. This system of registration was not revoked during the Ming Dynasty, and in the early Ming period all registered craftsmen were required to report to official workshops at regular intervals for corvée duty of a length and frequency that varied depending on the trade. However, a craftsman often had skills beyond that for which he was registered (or, no skill at all). Although the status of craftsmen effectively barred the holder from civil service, some “craftsmen” were well educated and a few achieved relatively high rankings in the civil service after their registered status had been repealed by special dispensation from the emperor.


5. In Arakawa and Tokugawa, 1977, pp. 88–96, pl. 23, fig. 15.


10. Arakawa and Tokugawa, 1977, pl. 357.

11. Arakawa and Tokugawa, 1977; see also note 4 above.

12. Ibid., p. 177.
Rectangular writing box with decoration of clouds and cranes

Red lacquer with engraved gold and litharge painting
L. 14¼ in. (35.9 cm); w. 4½ in. (12.4 cm); H. 3¼ in. (8 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th century

The combination of engraved gold and litharge painting techniques is characteristically Ryukyuan. The decoration on the cover of this box is executed in engraved gold on red lacquer. Cranes and clouds adorn the top and floral sprays the sides, all on a coin-pattern brocade ground. Parts of the clouds, cranes, and flowers are overpainted in oil colors, although much of this overpainting has faded or worn off. The inside of the box is also lacquered red, with gilding on the rim, and the inside of the lid is black. The black base has four low feet at the corners.

The cranes-and-clouds motif has Taoist overtones and was popular on decorative arts in China during the second half of the sixteenth century. The design as employed on this box closely follows Chinese models.
160 Food box

Black lacquer with engraved-gold decoration
w. 9½ in. (24.5 cm); h. 14½ in. (36 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 18th century

The facets of this octagonal black lacquer food box are used as individual fields for decoration in the age-old engraved-gold technique. The designs range from floral motifs to landscapes and sometimes are a curious combination of the two.
161 Octagonal incense box

Red lacquer with raised-gold and litharge painting and engraved-gold decoration

w. 4 in. (10.1 cm); h. 1 in. (2.5 cm)

Ryukyu Islands, 17th century

Octagonal shapes are common among Ryukyuan lacquers. This small box, probably one of a set of containers for incense or aromatics, is decorated on the top with raised-gold and litharge painting. Where the gold has rubbed off, the raised lacquer surface reveals a dull red color. The use of a dull red lacquer mixture as the ground for gold lacquer was a standard practice in China in the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The design of the garden scene also owes something to a woodblock print in painting manuals popular in China at the time. The engraved gold on the border of the lid and on the sides is a continuation of a style and technique used in the Ryukyus since at least the fifteenth century.

The interior of the box is lacquered black and the rims are gold. There are three patches of repairs on the lid, presumably where raised-gold lacquer representing rocks had flaked off.
162  *Box with decoration of grapevine and a garden scene*

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay

L. 8⅜ in. (22.2 cm); w. 6⅜ in. (16.8 cm); H. 5⅛ in. (14.6 cm)

Ryukyu Islands, 16th–17th century

Published: Arakawa, 1985 (see General Bibliography), p. 82, no. 95.

The mother-of-pearl inlay decoration of scrolling grapevines and tendrils extends over the lid and halfway down the sides of this box. Below is a garden scene with stone embankments and garden rocks crowded with all manner of flora and animal life, such as snails and frogs. A lone cat stares up at the grape-
the same type of metal catch. The Tokyo box is decorated with flower-and-bird patterns in qiangjin and has traditionally been attributed to fifteenth- or sixteenth-century China. This attribution has been challenged by Sir Harry Garner, in whose opinion the Tokyo box is Ryukyuan and of the fifteenth century.1 If Garner is right about the Tokyo box there is a further reason to ascribe a relatively early date to this box.


vine, perhaps looking for the squirrels that normally inhabit vine scrolls in Ming Chinese and Ryukyuan decoration (see no. 163). In this case a single squirrel is lurking on the far side of the box.

The shape of the box is pleasantly rounded. The sagging of its top and sides has caused the lacquer surface to crack both outside and inside. The rounded corners and the sagging suggest that the material of the substrate is leather. There is a low foot-rim which may be of wood. The interior is lacquered red.

This box is usually assigned to the seventeenth or eighteenth century, but both the style of the decoration and the relative thickness of the mother-of-pearl suggest an earlier date.

In the Tokyo National Museum is a lacquer cosmetic box similar in shape to this box and fitted with
163 Stationery box with decoration of grapes and squirrels

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay and gold painting
L. 17¾ in. (45 cm); W. 14¾ in. (37.1 cm); H. 4¾ in. (12.1 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th century

Although the squirrel-and-grapevine motif was common in decorative painting of China and Japan during the sixteenth century, its origin, at least to the present author, remains obscure. The design is often found on Ryukyu lacquer of the seventeenth century, especially on mother-of-pearl pieces (see no. 162). Here the squirrels and grapes are of mother-of-pearl inlay and the vine and tendrils are done in gold painting.

Box lids with recessed sides (see no. 166) are peculiar to Ryukyuan lacquerware of later periods. The inspiration for them might have come from Japan, but with Japanese boxes the sides of the lid are usually recessed to accommodate metal rings on the sides of the box bottom (see no. 98). A number of boxes of the same type as this piece, with the same wavy edges and showing similar decorative motifs and technique, are known; one of the best examples is in the Detroit Institute of Arts.
164 Cabinet with decoration of butterflies

Lacquer with painted decoration and mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 16 1/2 in. (41.8 cm); w. 10 1/2 in. (26.3 cm); H. 20 1/8 in. (51 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 18th century

The form of this elegant cabinet and especially that of its feet shows Japanese influence, as does the decorative use of thick shells applied on the surface of the lacquer. The irregular pieces of mother-of-pearl are embedded in thick layers of lacquer with raised black and gold lacquer painting depicting butterflies.

In the back of the cabinet is an opening in the shape of a Buddhist swastika. It is covered on the inside with a thin silk gauze brocaded in flat gold with floral patterns. This may be an indication that the cabinet was used to house Buddhist sutras or religious paraphernalia.

Another Ryukyuan piece in the Detroit Institute of Arts, a tray with a decoration of cranes, is in the same technique and has the same color scheme.
165  Circular box with floral decoration

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 4½ in. (11 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 16th–17th century

A missing leaf of the mother-of-pearl peony spray on the flat central area of this box’s lid has been carefully replaced in litharge painting, a sign that the piece was already a treasured object at a time when litharge painting was commonly used for lacquer decoration. The decoration on the sides, consisting of floral scrolls in reserved panels against a brocade diaper ground, is similar to that on Chinese mother-of-pearl lacquer of the same period.

The box has a low foot-ring decorated with small round discs of mother-of-pearl. The lacquer inside the box is a lustrous black, but that on the exterior has discolored to a dark brown.
166 Seal box with decoration of hunters on horseback

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay and raised-gold painting
L., w. 6 1/8 in. (15.5 cm); H. 4 3/8 in. (11.1 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th–18th century

The four corners of the lid extend down to the base of this box, enabling the lid to be used separately as a small stand. The decoration is in mother-of-pearl inlay with outlines in raised-gold painting (gold powder on raised lacquer). The mother-of-pearl pieces have been carefully selected to use to advantage the violet/
pink and blue/green colorations of the mollusk shell so that the horses contrast with the hats and garments of the riders. The color variations are most marked when the top of the lid is viewed at a 45-degree angle. On the sides of the box are scattered depictions of various “Buddhist treasures” (see entry for no. 49), as well as butterflies and floral motifs. The inside is lacquered red and the edges gold (the worn gold now mostly replaced by litharge yellow).

The riders who constitute the main motif are Mongols on a hunt, a subject that provides yet another example of the mobility of artistic themes in Asia. The painting of hunting scenes began in China in the Yuan period (or possibly earlier, in the northern states of Liao and Jin founded by nomadic peoples), and survived as a class of decorative painting into the Ming period. There is no lack of paintings on this subject attributed to professional artists of the sixteenth century. During that century the pictorial theme could have been transmitted to the Ryukyus.
167 Set of hexagonal stacked boxes

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay; mark on base
w. 5⅞ in. (14.2 cm); h. 6⅞ in. (17.5 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 18th century

This set of boxes represents a well-known type of Ryukyuan lacquer. Similar sets are in the Omine Kaoru Art Museum in Okinawa, the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, and the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. It well exemplifies the technique of inlaying ultra-thin mother-of-pearl obtained by the
shell-boiling method (see p. 336). The thin shells are brilliantly iridescent, and coloration and shading effects are also achieved by the use of minutely crushed shells. The twisted metal wire along the edges is the survival of an early technique dating from at least the fourteenth century in China (and perhaps even earlier in Korea) which in China had by this time been long abandoned.

The decoration on the lid, a scene of a moonlit feast, is probably derived from a popular theme in Chinese decorative painting of the late Ming and Qing periods, the illustration of the Tang poet Li Bo’s preface “Feast at Taoli Yuan on a Night in Spring.” The bottom of each box is decorated on both sides with a floral spray. In addition to their decorative value, these floral sprays provide a clue to the proper stacking of the boxes, the motif on the outside of the base of each box being identical to that inside the base of the box below. On the underside of the base of the bottom box, which is fitted with a low foot-rim, is a mark inlaid in mother-of-pearl: Qianli. This is a reference to Jiang Qianli, a legendary Chinese lacquer artist famous for his mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer employing minute pieces of shell. Little is known of his life or his exact dates, but he probably lived and worked in the early Qing period, the second half of the seventeenth century. Of the Chinese pieces bearing his “signature,” none has been confirmed as being by the hand of the master himself. The fact that quite a number of Ryukyuan pieces carry his name is further testimony to Jiang Qianli’s fame.

In the sheer quality of its lacquer and workmanship, Ryukyuan mother-of-pearl lacquerwork of the early eighteenth century must be counted as one of the supreme achievements of the lacquer artists of the Ryukyus.

1. For examples of Chinese “Qianli” lacquer, see Tokyo National Museum, 1981 (in Chinese Bibliography), nos. 102–3, where these and related pieces are discussed in an essay by Nishioka Yasuhiro.
168 Round food box with design of a Chinese landscape

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 16 in. (40.6 cm); H. 6 in. (15.2 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, early 18th century

This is another fine example of lacquer inlaid with ultra-thin mother-of-pearl of the type popular in China and the Ryukus in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Whereas the other example in this catalogue, number 167, is clearly Ryukyuan, this box is of a type almost indistinguishable from Chinese lacquer of the Kangxi period (1661–1722). The details in the Chinese landscape scene are all impeccable, and the floral designs on the sides are done with great artistry. The fine brocade-diaper ground that occupies the space between the floral panels on the sides of the box recalls the style of Jiang Qianli (see again no. 167), whose work seems greatly to have influenced the lacquer art of the Ryukus.
169 *Tray with decoration of dragons*

Lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay
D. 26⅞ in. (68.2 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, late 18th century

Large lacquer trays of this type were used by the Ryukyuan court in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and were also sent as "tribute" to the court of the emperor of China. There are examples of this type of double-dragon dish in the Palace Museum in Peking (see p. 10) and the Liaoning Provincial Museum in Shenyang. The latter must have come from the old Manchu palace in Shenyang.

The quality of the lacquer is very fine, as is usually the case with eighteenth-century Ryukyuan wares, and the thin mother-of-pearl inlay has remained remarkably firmly set.
170 *Presentation box with figures in a landscape*

Black lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay and red-lacquered basketry panels
L. 16½ in. (41.9 cm); w. 10½ in. (27.1 cm); H. 4¼ in. (10.8 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th–18th century

By the late sixteenth century, lacquered baskets had evolved into lacquered vessels constructed mainly of wood, with basketry panels as decoration. Lacquerware of this type was often richly decorated either with painting or, as in the present case, with mother-of-pearl inlay. The most common article of this type of ware was the presentation box, used for delivering gifts or important documents. Often the decoration on the top surface of such a box refers to this function. The scene on this box probably depicts an exchange of gifts. An elderly man, accompanied by a youth carrying a broom, receives a messenger bearing an object that cannot be identified. Another elderly man is at the gate directing another youth, who holds the same kind of object, toward the first group. (See detail, p. 326.) The rustic nature of the setting is suggested by the wooden fence and the way the gateway is constructed, while the formal clothing of the messenger and the reception party imply that the occasion has ceremonial importance.

This box exhibits all the characteristics of later Ryukyuan lacquer work, including the use of thin shells...
for inlay, the fine metal wire along the edge of the top surface, and the raised border enclosing the basketry panels, which are lacquered red. The wooden foundation of the base shows through the thin layer of lacquer; the base is reinforced by two crossbars of wood, as is common with presentation boxes, which often have to bear some weight.
Footed tray with figures in a landscape

Basketry and red lacquer with gold and litharge painting
L. 16⅜ in. (41.2 cm); W. 10⅝ in. (25.7 cm); H. 7 in. (17.8 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th century

Fine basketry woven with thinly sliced bamboo strips has a long history in southern China. Basketry vessels were often lacquered on the top and along the rim to enhance their usefulness and durability. In the late Ming period the lacquered surfaces of basketry vessels were decorated by painting (and also sometimes mother-of-pearl inlay), thus transforming them from everyday utensils to what for the ordinary household were luxury objects, intended for use on ceremonial and festive occasions (no. 170). The production of lacquered baskets became quite an industry in the coastal provinces and especially in Fujian, whence the
fashion for these wares was transmitted to the Ryukyus. Ryukyu products of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries were so close to those made by the Chinese, exhibiting the same lacquering techniques and decorative patterns, that it is often extremely difficult to distinguish between the two.

On the top of this tray a landscape is pictured in which an official arriving on horseback is greeted at the end of a bridge by two prostrate village elders (note the walking staff beside one of the figures) who offer gifts and drink. Two flag-carrying foot guards have already passed, and the official is followed by two mounted guards bearing banners. In the foreground on the left, two figures in the dress of gentry converse, apparently oblivious to the activities close by. Gentlemen with civil service degrees were not required to kneel before local magistrates.

The central decoration is painted in gold and oil colors. The border decorations are in gold and black on a red lacquer ground. On the foot-rim is a decorative motif of blossoms and waves, ultimately of Central Asian origin, which in Chinese decorative arts of the seventeenth century was often employed as a border pattern in a simplified form such as this.
Three round incense boxes

Ryukyu Islands, 17th century

(a) Raised polychrome lacquer
D. 4 1/4 in. (10.7 cm); H. 2 in. (5 cm)

The first of these boxes (a) is an excellent example of the raised polychrome lacquer (tsuisai) technique, practiced in the Ryukyus since the seventeenth century (described on p. 334), which aims to produce approximately the effect of Chinese carved lacquer. That aim is underscored by the treatment of the ground with a simplified diaper pattern which, like the diapers on Chinese carved lacquers, is derived from Chinese brocade of the Ming period (see no. 24).

The top of the box is decorated with a raised design coated in polychrome lacquer. It depicts a man in traveling clothes riding on a mule, followed by a servant who carries an umbrella and luggage on the two ends of a pole. That the man on the mule is a scholar is signaled by his luggage, which includes a bookcase and a qin (a seven-string zither, the classical instrument favored by the literati) carried on the front end of the pole, and a bag from which the handle of a sword protrudes on the rear end of the pole. The qin suggests the scholar’s refinement; the sword, that he is no effete pedant but a man cultivated in the military arts, which he will use in defense of justice and, if
called upon, of his country. Images such as this one first appeared in late Ming literati painting and by the mid-seventeenth century had become favorite motifs of decorative painting. They persisted well into the nineteenth century, not only in China but in all areas where Chinese woodblock prints of the late Ming and early Qing periods were used as models.

The sides of the box are decorated with raised designs of bamboo and peony sprays.

*b* Raised polychrome lacquer
D. 4½ in. (10.5 cm); H. 2 in. (5 cm)

Virtually identical to *a* in size and technique, this box differs only in the decoration on the lid, where a writhing dragon has replaced the traveling scholar.
This box is similar to a and b in size and technique, but unlike them has curved, sloping sides and lacquer of a single color.

The decoration on top depicts a horseman in a flying gallop. He wears a sword and has a bow slung on his outstretched left arm. The motifs on the sides are similar to those on the other boxes except that floral elements have been added to the bamboo leaves on the sides of the lid.

Details of the lid decoration, such as the horse’s mane and the veins of the leaves, are painted in black lacquer with a fine brush rather than being incised, as is usually the case with this technique.
173 *Square tray with flower-and-bird decoration*

Raised and polychrome lacquer
L., w. 12 1/4 in. (31.1 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 18th century

This tray demonstrates well the technical eclecticism of Ryukyuan lacquer. The main decoration, a phoenix and a peony, is in the raised lacquer technique. However, there is reason to believe that the high relief design was built up on the surface of the tray rather than molded and applied, as is the case on the three previous boxes (no. 172). The lacquer mixture used for the raised design contracted unevenly during the drying process, creating areas of slight undulation. Details of the bird and the plant are indicated by boldly executed incised lines, not unlike cuts in the early engraved-gold technique. This decoration is certainly a Ryukyuan invention.

The border decoration on each of the four sides consists of a mythical creature—a *qilin* (kylin)—executed in green and gold lacquer, with coins and “Buddhist treasures” and framed in a panel. On the red ground a brocade diaper pattern is painted in gold.

The back of the tray, surprisingly poorly finished, has a rough coating of black lacquer that was applied with a stiff brush.
174 Dish with decoration of birds and flowers

Lacquer with lacquer, litharge, and gold painting
D. 11 in. (28 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 17th century
Published: Arakawa and Tokugawa, 1977, no. 292.

The inside of this dish is decorated with a scene of flowers and two birds, one in flight, executed in red, green, and gold lacquer and litharge colors on a buff litharge (oil color) painted ground. It provides another example of Ryukyuan inventiveness: usually painting is done in litharge and the ground is of lacquer. Where the gold has worn off the dish, the brown lacquer (or oil color) base is revealed. The flower-and-bird design is derived from Chinese woodblock prints of the early seventeenth century.

The back of the dish is lacquered in brilliant dark red sprinkled with gold flakes; the recessed base is black.
175  *Square tray with figures in a landscape*

Lacquer with lacquer, litharge, and gold painting

L., w. 13 1/4 in. (33.7 cm)

Ryukyu Islands, 17th–18th century

Like number 174, this tray is decorated in lacquer and litharge colors on a litharge-painted ground, with highlights and shading in gold. The central scene is a landscape with figures within a border of trefoils and triangles. The tray’s cavetto edge is painted with floral sprays (orchids?), and on its outside are leafy bunches rendered in gold lacquer on a dark green ground. The four angled feet at the corners are decorated in gold on red. The base is lacquered black.

The scene is undoubtedly meant to be Chinese, and the work shows many parallels, both technical and stylistic, to seventeenth-century Chinese litharge-painted lacquer. However, idiosyncrasies in the drawing make this piece unmistakably Ryukyuan. One of the most notable Ryukyuan features is the schematic treatment of the distant trees, with parallel branches pointing upward.
176  *Square tray with floral decoration*

Polychrome lacquer painting; brass fittings
L., w. 13 3/4 in. (34 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 18th century
Published: Arakawa and Tokugawa, 1977, no. 320.

The tray’s central decoration is composed of camellia and plum blossoms, both harbingers of spring, but it is surrounded by a border of what appear to be maple leaves in full autumn color.

This piece is rather unusual in that its color painting is done in the full range of lacquer colors, without the addition of gold or oil colors. The well-constructed wooden tray is fitted with brass corners and brackets on the sides. The ends of the brass brackets, which are in the shape of plum blossoms, are covered with a coating of brown lacquer.
177  Table with decoration of a landscape

Red lacquer with gold painting and mother-of-pearl inlay
L. 19¼ in. (49.5 cm); w. 11½ in. (29 cm); H. 10¼ in. (26.8 cm)
Ryukyu Islands, 19th century

The four legs of this table are anchored to a rectangular frame below, making the object quite sturdy. The entire piece is decorated in gold painting on a red lacquer ground, with highlighted motifs, such as houses and human figures, of mother-of-pearl. On the top of the table a fantastic landscape is depicted. Two figures are seated on a flat piece of ground which is connected by bridges to rocky islands out in the sea. The intricate “cloud-collar” forms at the tops of the four legs carry gold-painted trees and human figures. On the bottom frame is a curious band of ornamentation consisting of what appear to be rabbits running along a peacock feather scroll.
178  *Food stand with decoration of figures in a landscape*

Lacquer with gold and litharge painting  
L., w. 14¼ in. (37.5 cm); H. 6½ in. (16.2 cm)  
Ryukyu Islands, 18th–19th century

The decoration on this food stand is in muddy green and yellow oil color on a brown lacquer ground, with extensive, almost excessive, use of raised gold lines. The figures in the landscape and certain parts of the building are painted in brighter colors of red, green, and yellow. Both the pictorial style and the palette of the decoration recall those of Japanese Satsuma porcelain. (But note the typically Ryukyuan treatment of the distant trees in the upper right-hand corner of the landscape.) Although in form and decoration the work may not be a great success, the quality of its workmanship remains high.

The base is reinforced by a wooden crossbar and the entire back is coated with a thin layer of lacquer through which the wood beneath is clearly visible.
Appendix of Marks

Marks are shown approximately true size and are identified by catalogue number.
Glossary

bundai  A low table, originally used in Japan as a reading stand or writing table. It later evolved into an item of ornamental furniture used to hold the writing box.

chōnin  Townsmen; frequently, the wealthy financiers and wholesale merchants who formed the hub of Japan's national economic life in premodern times. In the system of social classes under the Tokugawa shogunate (1603—1867) made up of shi (samurai), no (farmers), ko (artisans), and shō (merchants), chōnin were either artisans or merchants.

Chōsei  The Japanese lacquer artist Kōami Nagakiyo (1529—1603), the sixth-generation head of the Kōami line of lacquerers in service to the shogun Nobunaga (1534—1582).

daimyō  A large landholder, lord of a province, or military lord in feudal Japan.

emaki  Japanese illustrated narrative handscroll with a long, horizontal format, drawn on joined sheets of paper or silk.

e-nashiji  See nashiji.

“filled-in”  Decoration in which lacquer is inlaid with lacquer of another color; in Chinese, tianqi. There are two methods of filled-in decoration: one involves carving the hardened lacquer and inlaying lumps of other colors; the other is called “polish-reveal” (q.v.).

“flowers of the four seasons”  A popular floral combination in Chinese decorative design; the flowers are peony for spring, pomegranate for summer, chrysanthemum for autumn, and camellia for winter.

guri  The Japanese name for the pomme1 scroll pattern (q.v.). Also used as a synonym for toki (q.v.).

haiku  A seventeen-syllable Japanese poem made up of three parts having 5, 7, and 5 syllables, and containing a word or phrase suggestive of a season. Matsuo Bashō (1644—1694) brought this verse form to maturity.

hanbō  A container for serving rice.

harigaki  Needle-engraved lacquer design. The technique is used to draw lines, such as those depicting veins of a leaf, by scratching through wet gold or silver lacquer to the hardened lacquer background beneath with a needle-pointed stick of bamboo or willow.

Haritsu  See Ritsuō.

Hideyoshi  Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536—1598), the military and political leader who succeeded in uniting Japan and bringing an end to the turbulence of the Warring States era.

hiramakie  A decorative lacquer technique in which a design is sprinkled in gold or silver powder over half-dry lacquer. After drying, the decorated areas are usually coated with transparent lacquer and later polished.

Hitomaro  See p. 206.

hokai  A portable food container.

ikakeji  A type of decoration in which gold or silver powder is densely sprinkled over the lacquered ground, giving the look of solid metal.

inrō  A small, compartmentalized container used for medicines and other small objects. The compartments are held together by a cord closed by a bead (ojime), and the top of the cord runs through a carved toggle (netsuke) by which the inrō is hung from the sash (obi).

kakiwari  A technique in which design motifs are executed in makie but linear detail is left in reserve and shows as contrasting black lines.

kanagai  A decorative technique in which gold, silver, or tin foil cut into shapes is applied to the lacquer surface.

karabitsu  A lidded rectangular chest, which stands on legs attached on the outside; literally, “Chinese chest.”

katami-gawari  Originally, a type of costume design in which the right and left halves of the garment were made from cloth of differing patterns or colors. A similar scheme was often applied to Kōdai-ji lacquerware: a zigzag line divides the object on the diagonal into gold-ground and black-ground areas.

Kenzan  Ogata Kenzan (1663—1743), a younger brother of Kōrin and a Rimpa potter and painter.

keyaki  The zelkova tree, a source of hardwood often used for Negoro lacquer objects.
Kikujidō  The “Chrysanthemum Youth,” a subject of legend and pictorial art. Once an attendant in the service of the Emperor Mu of the Zhou Dynasty, he was later punished and exiled to Li Prefecture in Nanyang, where he drank dew from the leaves of chrysanthemums and thus obtained eternal youth.

Kōami school  The Kōami, a family of official makie artists, served generations of shoguns and other prestigious families from the Muromachi to the Edo period.

Kōdai-ji makie  A type of makie lacquerware decoration which originated for use on architecture and objects that were made for Toyotomi Hideyoshi (1536–1598) and his wife, Lady Kōdai-in, and kept in their mausoleum at the Kōdai-ji temple in Kyoto. It commonly features designs of flowering autumn grasses executed in simple makie techniques such as hiramakie, hagakari, and e-nashiji.

Kōetsu  Hon'ami Kōetsu (1558–1637), one of the greatest artists of early 17th-century Japan, worked in diverse mediums; in lacquer he created bold designs, introducing inlays of new materials such as lead and pewter.

Kokinshū  Kokin Wakashū; a collection of Japanese vernacular poems compiled circa 905, in the Heian period, by order of Emperor Daigo (r. 897–930). It is composed of twenty volumes containing some 1100 poems, most of which are tanka, short poems of 31 syllables.

Kōrin  Ogata Kōrin (1658–1716), one of the most celebrated Rimpa artists of the Edo period, influenced the early 19th-century painters Hōitsu and Kititsu. He frequently painted designs on ceramics made by his brother Kenzan.

Kotsuzumi  A small hand drum.

Makie  The general term for lacquer decoration in which gold or silver powder is sprinkled on still-damp lacquer.

Manyōshū  The oldest surviving anthology of Japanese poetry, presumably compiled by Otomo no Yakamochi (718–785) during the Nara period. Its twenty volumes contain over 4500 poems composed in the years 347–759 by writers of all classes.

Meisho  A pictorial motif based on a place famous in Japanese literature. In the Heian period, paintings of meisho were frequently accompanied by poems (waka).

Midarebako  A shallow box without a lid, used to hold clothing.

Mituoseng  See litharge painting.

Nagakiyo  See Chōsei.

Nambar lacquer  Lacquerware with makie decoration produced for a European taste under the influence of the Portuguese and Spanish who came to Japan at the beginning of the early modern period.

Nashiji  A lacquer technique that produces a reddish, speckled surface, also called “pear-skin,” by the sprinkling of especially fine, flat metal flakes over the half-dry lacquered base. When used in specific areas of a pictorial design it is called e-nashiji.

Negoro lacquer  A type of functional, undecorated ware generally coated with red lacquer over black. Originally, such wares were made for the use of monks at the Negoro temple.

Ôtsuzumi  A large hand drum.

“polish-reveal”  A variety of “filled-in” lacquer decoration, called moxian in Chinese. Thick lacquer is applied repeatedly in certain areas to build up a design; then the ground is filled with lacquer of a different color and the entire surface is polished down to reveal the color variations.

Pommel scroll  A symmetrical pattern consisting of two confronting spirals linked by an arc, often the principal design motif of tsume lacquer. The shape resembles that of ancient sword pommels.

Qiang  Literally, “engraved gold.” A decorative technique in which an adhesive of lacquer is applied to fine lines incised on the lacquer surface, and gold foil or powdered gold is pressed into the grooves.

Raden  The Japanese term for mother-of-pearl inlay.

Rimpa  An artistic movement that began in early 17th-century Japan with a revival of the classic arts of the Heian period, and developed into a long-lived decorative tradition. Kōetsu, Kōrin, Kenzan, and Hōitsu were among the artists associated with the Rimpa school.

Ritsū  Ogawa Haritsu (1663–1747), also known as Ritsuū, was an innovative Japanese lacquerer, painter, and potter. His lacquer works are distinguished by the frequent use of rough wood for the ground, decorated with a new range of materials, and by the imitation in raised lacquer of textures such as those of bronze or pottery.

Shōsō-in  The wooden storehouse at the temple of Todai-ji in Nara, which was an imperial repository. It contains several thousand objects of art from the 8th century.
sumiaka  “Red-cornered box”; a type of covered box the four corners of which are coated with red lacquer in the shape of metal fittings.

suzuribako  A writing box containing an inkstone and usually a water dropper, writing brush, and other implements. It is the most important of the Japanese lacquerware forms.

takamakie  A makie technique in which motifs are built up in relief with a mixture of lacquer and powder, then finished with makie.

tebako  A small ornamental box for toiletries; a cosmetic box.

tianqi  The general Chinese term for lacquer decorated with lacquer inlay, or “filled-in” lacquer.

ticai  Literally, “carved colors.” Carved polychrome lacquer in which the lacquer is built up of layers of different colors and the depth of the carving is varied so that separate parts of the design appear in contrasting colors.

tixi  Lacquer built up of layers of two or more contrasting colors and carved, creating a marbled effect along the sides of the cut edges; also called carved marbled lacquer. The designs are usually based on the pommel scroll motif (q.v.). See also guri.

togidashi makie  A decorative lacquer technique in which gold or silver powder is sprinkled over areas of half-dry lacquer and then covered with additional lacquer. After drying, the surface is polished with a piece of charcoal to re-expose the design. Most makie lacquerware of the Heian period employed this technique.

tsuisai  The Japanese term for imitation carved polychrome lacquer. It is produced by lacquering over a relief decoration built up with putty. The Chinese name is duicai (piled-up colors).

tsukegaki  A decorative lacquer technique that produces narrow raised lines, used to draw elements such as waves of water or the veins of leaves. The lines are painted on the surface in lacquer, and gold or silver filings are sprinkled over them while they are still wet.


waka  A Japanese poem; the generic term for the indigenous poem type traditional from ancient times, as opposed to Chinese-style poems. Since the Heian period, waka has generally been synonymous with tanaka, a form with a 7-7-7-7 syllable pattern.

yutō  A vessel with a pouring spout, used for hot water or sake.

Zeshin  Shibata Zeshin (1807–1891), a 19th-century lacquerer and also a painter and printmaker of the Shijō school. He was particularly skillful at painting with lacquer on paper or silk.
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**Korea**


Ryukyu Islands


# Index

Note:
References to illustrations and their captions and descriptive material are in italics.

Adams, Will, 170
aesthetics of lacquer, 3, 153, 161
Anap-chi site (Korea), 304
animal motifs
Chinese, 16, 113–15, 133–14
Japanese, 235–36, 269–71
Ryukyuan, 142–45, 349–50
apsaras, 275–76
Arakawa Hirokazu, 335
archaism, Chinese, 98–99, 110–12, 137–40
architectural settings
Chinese, 39, 79, 84–85, 120–30
Japanese, 256–57
Ariwara no Namihira, 210
Ariwara no Yoshikata, 210, 212–15
armor, lacquered, 6–7, 15
ash, 2, 48
ashibe-e (reed-style picture), 250–54
Ashikaga Takauji, 159, 238
Ashikaga Yoshimasa, 166, 208–9, 254
Ashikaga Yoshimitsu, 179, 179
Asukaem Isso, 283
avanturine technique. See: nashiji
Ba State lacquer, 15–18
Bao Liang, 55
basketry, lacquered
Chinese, 8, 36, 112n, 141–43
Chinese or Ryukyuan, 140, 333–36
Japanese, 237–38
Ryukyuan, 8, 334, 335–36, 337–60
Beijing. See Peking
binding agent, lacquer as, 15, 330
Bing, Samuel, 280
bird cage, Japanese, 235–57
bird motifs
Chinese, 16, 28, 30, 66–73, 126–28, 140, 141
Japanese, 213–14, 280, 284–85
Ryukyu, 164–65
black and brown lacquer, 66–67, 279–81, 284–85
black lacquer
Korean, 103, 305, 312–25
black-on-red lacquer, 81–83
“blue wave” lacquer technique, 284–85
boats, on Japanese lacquer, 284–85, 288–89, 292–93, 298
Bokkei ekotoba, 135, 182, 184, 200, 215, 224
bowl stand. See cup or bowl stand
boxes
Chinese
Ming, 103
Tang to Song, 21, 22
Japanese
Momoyama period, 196–97, 238–58
Maromachi period, 194–95, 198
Ryukyuan, 314
bowl stand. See cup or bowl stand
boxes
Chinese
jade and gilt bronze copies, 105
Ming, 32–33, 33, 57–61, 84–85, 102, 105–7, 121–23, 137–38, 140–41
Ming to Qing, 142–45
Qing, 92, 108, 110–12, 146–47, 149
Song, 23, 64–68
Song to Yuan, 26, 62–63
Southern Song to Jin, 24
Western Han, 6
Yuan, 26, 44–45, 49, 50, 58
Yuan to Ming, 129–30
Chinese or Ryukyuan, 343, 343–45
Gujarati lacquer, 9, 10
Japanese, 156–57
Edo to Meiji period, 284–85
Momoyama period, 248
Momoyama to Edo period, 223–24, 229, 234–35
Maromachi period, 178–79, 209–13, 216–18
See also writing boxes
Korean
Choson period, 316–17, 320–25
Koryo period, 305–8, 307
Ryukyuan, 331–33, 332, 335, 338–45, 348–55, 357–58, 361–63
bridges
on Chinese lacquer, 124–25, 142–43
on Japanese lacquer, 242–43, 290–91
on Ryukyuan lacquer, 368–69
brocade-ground patterns, 29, 105, 109–10, 334–55
Bronze Age lacquer, 15, 103
brown lacquer, 367, 370–71
Buddhism
Onizukatori ritual, 191–94
ritual wash basin, 183–84
Korean lacquer and, 305–6, 305, 307
lacquer gifts to temples of, 9, 10
Ryukyu lacquer and, 349–50, 364
Ryukyu swastika cabinet, 346–47
Tibetan, sutra covers for, 116–18
Zen, 179, 181, 182, 188, 191, 213
bandai. See tables—Japanese
Buson, 159, 291
cabinets
Chinese, 113
Japanese
Edo period, 264
namhan makie, 171–73, 171, 172, 226–27
Ryukyu, 346–47
See also chests
chandels, Japanese, 205
Cao Zhao, 68
carve and inlay (loukan) lacquer, 34
carved lacquer (diaqil), 6–7, 26–28, 48–49, 66–113
with basketry panels, 140
“carved colors” (tictai), 27, 94–95, 98–99, 102, 106
gifts to Japan of, 179
gouge substituted for knife in, 34
lifting problem in, 68
“marbled” (guri/titi), 27, 29, 30, 46–47, 49–61
mid-Ming, 32–14, 33, 90–91
not produced in Ryukyus, 333–34, 335
characters in lacquerware
Chinese, 92–99, 109–10, 146–47
Japanese, 192
charcoal brazier, Japanese, 158
Chengdu (Sichuan Province), 290–91
ancient lacquer from, 18, 19
Chengdu, Emperor (Ming Dynasty). See Yongle emperor
chests
Chinese, 148–49
Japanese
karibitsu, 175, 176–77, 204, 299n
Kodai-ji, 167, 168, 169, 236–37
See also cabinets
Children at Play (painting), 24, 25
children-at-play theme, 29, 76–78
children-in-bath theme, 107
China, 15–149
blue-and-white porcelain of, 317–19, 331
development of lacquer as art form in, 3–7
gifts of lacquer from, 9–10, 30, 117, 179
imperial patronage of lacquer in, 8, 9
Ryukyu “tribute” lacquer to, 10, 330, 336, 336
Ch’oe Ch’i-won, 388
Chonin (Diaooran), 24, 306

Santo Motofu, 20
Toson Motofu, 159, 160, 164, 165, 166, 220, 224–25, 236, 246, 292, 303, 331
trade lacquer (export lacquer), 10–11
Chinese, 29–30, 57, 148–49
Japanese, 10, 133, 169–73, 171, 172, 226–29
traces
Chinese
Ming, 100–101, 120, 128, 131–32
Yuan, 124–25
Japanese
Edo period, 191–94, 230, 232–33
Edo to Meiji period, 284–85
Heian period, 174–75
Meiji period, 286, 292–93
Momoyama period, 224–25
Momoyama to Edo period, 229
Muromachi period, 184–89, 199–200
Korean, Koryó to Chosóén period, 312–13
Ryukyuans, 334, 346, 356, 357–60, 364, 365, 367
“tribute” lacquer, 10, 22, 310, 335, 336, 356
trigrams, 94–95
Tsugaru Nobuhisa, 278
tsugazase, 200–201
tsuzuri. See: daizai
tsuishu. See: daizai
tsukegaki, 156, 157, 206–8, 220–21, 240, 249–50, 255–6, 264
Tsukubusuma Shrine, 166
tsunanadai, 218–20
Tsuruzewaga, 292
turbo cornutus, 24
turbo marmoratus, 24
turquoise inlay, 15
two-bird dishes, 30, 70–73
Unified Silla lacquer, 304
metal foil inlay in, 7
wooden substrates for, 21–22
Unkei, 179
urushi, 154
urushi-buro, 2
urushiol, 1
varnish, 153
vases
Chinese, Ming to Qing, 138–39
Korean, Chosóén period, 318, 319
Von Ragoé, Beatrix, 153
Wang Shen, 109
Wang Shixiang, 90
Wang Zhen, 12
Wang Zu, 28, 32
Wang emperor (Ming Dynasty), 34, 35, 95, 96, 101, 102–4, 119–23, 135–36
war fans, decoration of, 243–45
Warring States lacquer, 8, 15–18, 17
ceramic bases and ewer, Japanese, 218–20
weddings, Japanese, 214, 299
troussures for, 250–54
Wen, Emperor (Han Dynasty), 18
Wen Di, Emperor (Wei Dynasty), 237–18
Wenzhou (Zhejiang Province), Song lacquer from
Western Han lacquer, 6. See also Han lacquer
Western Zhou lacquer, 15
to “wild boar’s eye,” 184, 198
willow-bending department, 22
wool, box for serving, 132
woodblock prints, 81–83, 145, 162, 365
of Meihua xiaoxian pu, 222–28
mother-of-pearl lacquer and, 36, 137
multi-block color printing from, 141
writing boxes
Japanese (suzuribako), 156, 158, 213, 285
content of, 206
Edo period, 270–71, 275–81
Meiji period, 154, 282–83, 294–99
Muromachi period, 209–10
Murayama no Momoyama period, 206–9
Korean, 509, 510
Ryukyuans, 338
See also stationery boxes
writing brush handles and covers
Ming, 89
Song to Yuan, 46–47
writing brush holder, Qing, 109–10
writing cabinet, nanban makie, 171–73, 171, 172, 230–27
Wu, Emperor (Han Dynasty), 18
Wujin (Jiangsu Province), 114
Waxue Zayuan (Muguku Sogen), 27
Xavier, Francis, 169
Xiangzhou (Hupei Province), 32
Xinyang tomb (Henan Province), 16, 17
xipi. See filled-in lacquer
Xitang (Jiaxing District, Zhejiang Province), 32, 33
Xuishi lu (Manual for lacquer manufacture), 34, 40
Xiangia, 22
Xizong, Emperor (Tang Dynasty), 38
Xu Jing, 24
Xuan emperor (Ming Dynasty), 30–32, 35, 84
Xuanzong, Emperor (Ming Huang, Tang Dynasty), 21, 388, 291
Yang Guifei, 291
Yang Mao, 10, 32, 34–35
Yang Ming, 60
Yan Song, 140
yellow lacquer
Chinese, 23, 28, 47, 60, 61, 95, 98, 100–102,
104, 106
Japanese, 294–95
Yingzong, Emperor (Ming Dynasty), 32
Yingzong, Emperor (Song Dynasty), 109
yinjiao, 8
yinshi, 2
yin-yang, 94–95
Yongle emperor (Emperor Chengzu, Ming Dynasty), 10, 28, 30, 31, 32, 72, 79, 84,
86, 101, 179, 182, 331
sutra covers of, 116–18
Yunzheng emperor (Qing Dynasty), 37
Yoritomo, 259
Yoshida Soi, 283
Yoshino Tomio, 170
Yoshitsune, 219
Yuyang zao, 18
Yuan lacquer, 28–30, 43–56, 62–63, 66–71,
76–78, 81–83, 114–15, 331
commercial production of, 8, 10
floral medallion used in, 43, 331, 333
mother-of-pearl, 24, 124–10, 106–7
two “species” of phoenix matched in, 86
Yukio Setsuyu, 296–99
Yunnan school of lacquer, 32–33, 396, 48–49,
90
Yuyongjian, 35, 39
Zeami, 213, 299
Zhang Cheng, 10, 12, 32, 34, 35–35, 68
Zhang Degang, 34
Zhang Qian, 89
Zhao Rugua, 10
Zhejiang Province
Ming lacquer from, 10, 32, 33
Song lacquer from, 13
Zen Buddhist center in, 182
Zhou Wei, 27
Zhou Yu, 47
Zhu Qian, 40
Zhu Jian (Records of foreigners), 10
Zhuge Liang, 81–83
zithers, 16, 17, 62, 84–85, 120, 133–34, 159,
161–62
Zoku minashiguri, 279
Zuowen ting (“Pavilion of the Drunken Old Man”), 76