

East and West in Japanese Export Lacquerware: Some Problem Pieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum

The Victoria and Albert Museum (hereafter referred to as V&A) houses a small, but extremely important, group of seventeenth century Japanese export lacquerware, a number of which have been referred to by Oliver Impey in this publication. In addition, in 1997 the V&A was fortunate to acquire at auction an extremely small, high quality export lacquer chest (colour plate III.4) which posed many intriguing questions that were not immediately answerable. What makes it particularly interesting, moreover, is that it is of a type and size never seen before in a Japanese context, while its function initially remained uncertain.

In an attempt to answer some of these questions, it is necessary first to examine the chest in the overall context of Japanese lacquerware. A comparison with some of the key pieces of export lacquerware shows that it, too, belongs to the group of objects produced between approximately 1630 and 1640, referred to as the 'high quality' group. These were of a far higher standard of workmanship than earlier export pieces, which were produced up until the 1620s and termed *namban* ('southern barbarian'). In particular, the chest bears many points of similarity to the van Diemen¹ and Buys² boxes, as well as the Mazarin³ and Lawrence⁴ chests. The main characteristics shared by lacquerwork of this high quality group are the use of geometric borders, ogival cartouches and subject matter that alludes to the *Genji monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji'), in complex and expensive lacquer techniques, such as *takamakie* ('high sprinkled picture'), often combined with gold and silver inlay.

Up until around the 1640s, Japanese export lacquerware was characterised by designs that covered virtually the entire surface area of an object, a feature rarely encountered on examples for the domestic market. In addition, areas of decoration were surrounded by geometric borders or shaped cartouches. A thin strip of gold foil encloses the main designs on all four sides of the small chest, followed by thicker zigzag borders. By contrast, the rim of the lid is edged with a key-fret pattern in thin slivers of mother-of-pearl shell on a black lacquer ground (colour plate III.5). Although both zigzag and key-fret borders are commonly found on earlier examples of *namban* lacquerware, a key-fret border executed in an identical manner is also found as the outer border on all four sides and lid of the Mazarin chest (fig. 4).

Among the high quality group of export lacquerware, the most important areas of decoration were frequently surrounded by highly ornate cartouches, which were themselves one of the distinguishing characteristics of the group. The focal point of the small chest, for example, is a design of buildings in a landscape set within an ogival cartouche on the slightly domed lid (colour plate III.5). It was, in addition, common practice for such cartouches to be set against a repetitive ground pattern, in this case a *shokkō-kin* diaper pattern in gold on black lacquer. In such cases, the ornate cartouche served to distinguish and separate the strongly contrasting geometric ground from the main area of decoration, a distinction that was further emphasised by outlining the cartouche in gold foil. Although there are numerous examples of this stylistic feature, that which occurs on what

would have been the flat top of the Buys box is especially worthy of comparison (fig. 1).

Another feature of the small chest also has close parallels with other examples of the high quality group of export lacquerware. The two semi-circular end panels of the lid are each decorated with a flower head among scrolling leaves in gold *hiramakie* ('low sprinkled picture') on black lacquer (colour plate III.3). An almost identical scrolling design also forms the borders immediately surrounding the name panel of the van Diemen (fig. 2) and Buys boxes. A similar, but more ornate scroll that incorporates other flower heads and motifs embellished with mother-of-pearl shell and gold foil, also forms the main borders on the exterior of the van Diemen box and Mazarin chest (fig. 4).

Another characteristic of high quality export lacquerware is that a high proportion is decorated with figural scenes that allude to the *Genji monogatari* ('The Tale of Genji'), the great classic of Japanese literature, written by Murasaki Shikibu around 1000 AD. This massive work follows the life of Prince Genji, recounting his numerous romantic associations with women of different backgrounds. Since Europeans did not reach Japan until 1543, comparatively little was known about Japan in the West in the early seventeenth century. The use of scenes from the *Genji monogatari* to decorate lacquerwork intended for this market was, therefore, somewhat curious. Lacquerware for the home market rarely portrayed figures as contemporary custom dictated that explicit narrative be avoided. In its place, the depiction of a few key elements from a particular event or chapter was sufficient to trigger the necessary association for any educated Japanese. Presumably Japanese craftsmen were equally ignorant of their Western customer and assumed they had a basic knowledge of the story but needed greater visual prompts. For this reason, normal convention was flouted in the decoration of export lacquerware and a few key figures from the novel were depicted in an appropriate setting. An understanding of the story was, in fact, of no importance whatsoever. What appealed to these foreign clients were figures in completely different dress and settings that came to embody the exoticism associated with Japan and the East.

Since it has already been suggested that the small chest shares many features in common with the high quality group of export lacquerwork, it would seem highly probable that it, too, is decorated with scenes from the *Genji monogatari*. However, the small size of the chest inevitably involves the simplification of a design to its barest components so that an association with a particular chapter or event is neither straightforward nor always possible. Only two of the five chest panels portray figures; although those on one side (colour plate III.3) are dressed in court attire, their allusion to a particular chapter is not precisely clear.⁵ The figures on the chest front (colour plate III.4) possibly allude, in an abbreviated form, to *Nowaki* ('The Typhoon'), chapter 28, when women were sent to put out insect cages and search for stray flowers untouched by the storm. References to this chapter are also found on several other items of lacquerware



Fig. 1. Buys box (detail of what was the exterior of the lid), scene from chapter 1 *Genji monogatari*, on a *hanabishi* ('stylised flowers') ground, gold and silver *hiramakie* and *takamakie*, with gold foil on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, 1636–1639; 34.4 x 45.7 cm; Elton Hall, Peterborough, Proby Collection

from this group, namely the front panels of the Mazarin (fig. 4) and Lawrence (fig. 6) chests, as well as what remains of the front panel (fig. 5) of a third chest, which will be discussed in greater detail later.

Apart from *Genji*-related scenes, other subjects portrayed on high quality export lacquerware were distinctive palatial buildings, often with a complex of interconnecting verandahs, bridges and gateways (colour plate III.5). One cannot help drawing a comparison between such a design within the ogival cartouche on the lid of the small chest and the top and inside of the lid of the Mazarin chest, which depicts palace buildings in their surrounding landscape within extremely elaborate cartouches formed by phoenixes and dragons.

But what was particularly intriguing about this small lacquer chest was its function, which was not immediately apparent. Export lacquerware is almost entirely composed of shapes or forms that had some practical function in a Western context, particularly the chest or coffer. In addition there were a small number of rare items, such as pipe cases or ruff boxes, which were the result of special commissions rather than regular trade goods.

Fig. 2. Van Diemen box (interior of lid), inscribed Maria van Diemen, gold *hiramakie* with gold foil on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c.1636–1639; 48.0 x 26.7 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, W.49–1916



The chest which forms the main subject of this paper so far, is quite remarkable on account of its exceedingly small size (8 x 15.3 x 7.2 cm) and the fact that it is neither a flat-topped nor a domed chest, but a cross between the two. It is essentially a chest with an overhanging lid that also rises to a gentle curve. Such a form would appear to be quite unique in lacquer or any other medium in Japan during the early seventeenth century.

The auction catalogue⁶ in which the chest was offered for sale noted that it had almost exactly the same height to width proportions as another high quality piece of export lacquerware, namely the Lawrence chest. It also suggested that, on the basis of this information, it could have been a scaled-down model of the Lawrence and very similar Mazarin chests, a sample to whet the appetite of Dutch officials and traders. This hypothesis, however, does not stand up to investigation. On the basis of shape alone, the small chest is fundamentally different, for it does not have a flat-topped lid. In addition, if the chest were intended as a sample or model to demonstrate the workshop's skills to the full, one would expect it to be of the highest quality. Even allowing for its size, the detail could have been much richer, particularly in the use of inlays; one such example is represented by the drawer sides of the contemporary export casket in the V&A.⁷ Yet another possible function for the chest is that it could have been intended as a gift from Japanese to Dutch officials to smooth along complex negotiations in the purchase of the expensive larger chests.

It would seem far more likely, however, that a clue to its function lies in its distinctive shape and size. An examination of contemporary Dutch objects reveals unmistakable similarities with the chest to wedding caskets that were popular during the seventeenth century (fig. 3).⁸ It was customary for such caskets to be filled with gold coins and offered by a man to his intended as a marriage token. Although the Dutch prototypes are generally deeper in form than the small lacquer chest, with a more pronounced dome to the lid, this is nevertheless combined with the unmistakable overhanging rim which is balanced by the base. The slight differences in form, together with the addition of a handle and feet, are acceptable when considering that Japanese craftsmen were working in a form unknown to them.

Wedding caskets were usually made of engraved silver as costly items in their own right. The fact that one such wedding casket was made of lacquer suggests that this, too, was considered a treasured medium. As there appear to be no other examples of lacquerwork in this form, it is highly likely that the small chest was specially commissioned either in Japan, Holland or by an official in the Dutch East Indies. On account of their quality, size and obvious cost of manufacture, the Mazarin and Lawrence chests must have been the result of a specific order. To these commissions must also be added at least three additional examples that were inscribed with Western names, namely the van Diemen and Buys boxes, as well as that of a box inscribed with the monogram 'F.C'.⁹ These initials may well refer to François Caron, a highly successful individual who was initially made deputy Opperhoofd of the Dutch trading post at Hirado in 1633 and Opperhoofd in 1639. More particularly, the inside of the lid of the van Diemen box was inscribed with the name of Maria van Diemen, wife of Anton van Diemen, Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies from 1636–45 (fig. 2). Similarly the Buys box was also inscribed Pieterella Buys, wife of Philips Lucasz, who was appointed Director-General, second-in-command to van Diemen, around 1635. Indeed it is on the basis of this biographical information that these boxes, and the

whole group, may be loosely dated. It is highly probable that the small chest may have been made as the casket for the wedding of a high-ranking official, either that of Anton van Diemen in 1630 or, more probably, that of Philips Lucasz in 1634, during a two year return to the Netherlands. It is even possible that Lucasz returned to Holland with the explicit purpose of marriage and that he commissioned the casket prior to 1634 in anticipation of the event. Alternatively, a third party, such as François Caron, may even have commissioned it as a gift to his superior, Lucasz, to present to his wife.

Since a wedding casket was made of a costly material and was something of a status symbol, it was invariably utilised after a couple's betrothal, but probably for a slightly different function. Since most caskets were fitted with a lock, they were frequently used to store valuable items, especially rings, but also jewellery and gold coins.¹⁰ This is well illustrated in a Dutch still life painting, *Allegory of Vanity*, by Paulus Moreelse, dated 1627 (colour plate III.2).¹¹ This portrays the lid of a small lacquer box open to reveal several ornate rings on a base covered in a red fabric, possibly velvet. As far as it is possible to be certain from the scale of the painting, shadow on the red lining of the lid's interior suggests that it was also domed, in keeping with a wedding casket. It is also worth noting that the V&A's small chest has a ledge running round the lower interior. The fact that the box in Moreelse's painting is fitted with a raised block to hold the rings possibly suggests a function for this ledge. Or was it simply designed to hold a removable tray, now missing?

The box portrayed in Moreelse's painting appears black covered with gold decoration, suggesting lacquerwork. The style of decoration, however, does not appear altogether typical of contemporary Japanese export lacquerwork. Since attempts to imitate Japanese lacquerware, termed japanning, could be observed during the first two decades of the seventeenth century in France, Italy, England, Denmark and Holland, it is possible that Moreelse's box was one such example. A surviving object of particular relevance in this context, datable to the first half of the seventeenth century, is a Dutch coffer, decorated with birds, flowers and scrollwork.¹² Although the overall form is that of a wedding casket, the dimensions of the coffer are slightly larger (22.5 x 25 x 17.5 cm).

Fig. 3. Wedding casket, engraved silver, Dutch; second half seventeenth century (mark crowned O); 8.4 x 8 x 5.1 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, M.113–1923



The question of whether Moreelse's box was an example of jpanning, Japanese lacquerware or was even produced in one of the areas serving the trading posts of the Dutch East India Company, has implications regarding the V&A's small lacquer chest. If Japanese, it probably represents the earliest portrayal of Japanese export lacquerware in a European painting and indicates the high esteem such work was accorded. It would also suggest, however, that the small chest was not the only one of its type to have been made, though it is the only one to have survived. If, on the other hand, the box in Moreelse's painting represents an example of jpanning, this is nonetheless of considerable historical importance. It provides further evidence for the function of the V&A's chest, as a wedding casket and a box for rings. The scale of the box in the painting, however, is such that any conclusive judgement as to its place of manufacture is simply not possible.

I would now like to turn my attention to another different, but not unrelated, piece in the collection of the V&A, a composite object which has posed some interesting questions as to its original form. Japanese lacquerwork first reached Europe around 1560 and, being quite unlike anything seen before was enormously popular. The trees capable of producing lacquer were not native to Europe, while the knowledge of obtaining and working with the sap was simply not available. It not only became impossible to keep up with the demand for items decorated with this lustrous black and gold material, but prices also rose dramatically as a result. In time, the Dutch also began to find Japanese lacquerware too expensive and no more orders appeared in the books of the Dutch East India Company after 1693. Since examples of Japanese lacquerware could not be replaced at will, they became even more treasured, and worn or damaged objects could have relatively intact panels removed and reused. At a later date, furniture manufacturers and collectors felt no compunc-

tion at ordering the cutting of seventeenth century lacquerware from their original form. This was often for no reason other than to incorporate them into a piece of furniture of the latest fashion. The object under discussion, a French Boulle-work cabinet of early nineteenth-century date, is one such example, making use of three Japanese export lacquer panels around which the cabinet was designed. For conservation reasons, the cabinet has recently been dismantled, allowing an excellent opportunity for close examination of all constituent parts. It is immediately evident that the panels were cut from larger pieces; the compositions bear no apparent relation to where they were cut, while the details of the designs go right to the edges of the panels. The borders were then covered with black pigment, over which Boulle marquetry was placed.

Of the three lacquer panels that comprise the Boulle-work cabinet, one is larger than the others, while the remaining two are of equal size. In addition, one cannot help noticing the striking similarities between the largest panel (fig. 5) and the front of the Mazarin (fig. 4) and Lawrence (fig. 6) chests. Formerly in the collection of Sir Trevor Lawrence, the Lawrence chest was subsequently sold in 1916 and again in 1941 from Llantarnam Abbey near Cwmbran, Gwent, Wales, after which it completely disappeared. However, information concerning the chest may be obtained from the book of Sir Trevor Lawrence's collection privately published in 1895, which had, as its frontispiece, a black and white illustration of the chest. A comparison between the photograph and the Mazarin chest suggests that they were made in the same workshop. Both are large, flat-topped chests, sumptuously decorated with scenes from the *Genji monogatari*, with similar borders and large, ornate lock-plates. Calculations based on the photograph of the Lawrence chest, moreover, suggest that it was probably larger than the Mazarin chest.

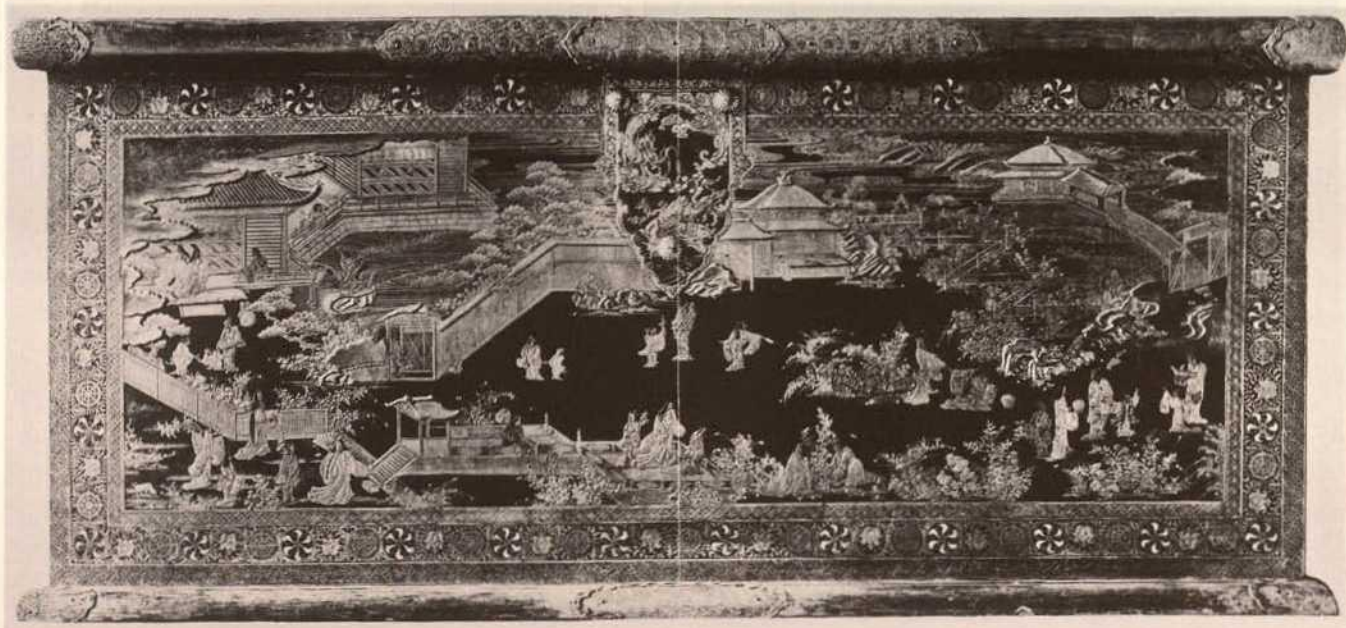
Fig. 4. Mazarin chest, gold, silver and black *hiramakie* and *takamakie*, gold, silver and mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c.1640; 56.5 x 100.3 x 63.5 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, 412-1882





Fig. 5. Panel, gold, silver and black *hiramakie* and *takamakie*, gold and mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c. 1640; 53 x 44 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1084–1882

Fig. 6. Lawrence chest, scene from chapter 1 *Genji monogatari*, gold, silver and black *hiramakie* and *takamakie*, gold, silver and mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c. 1640



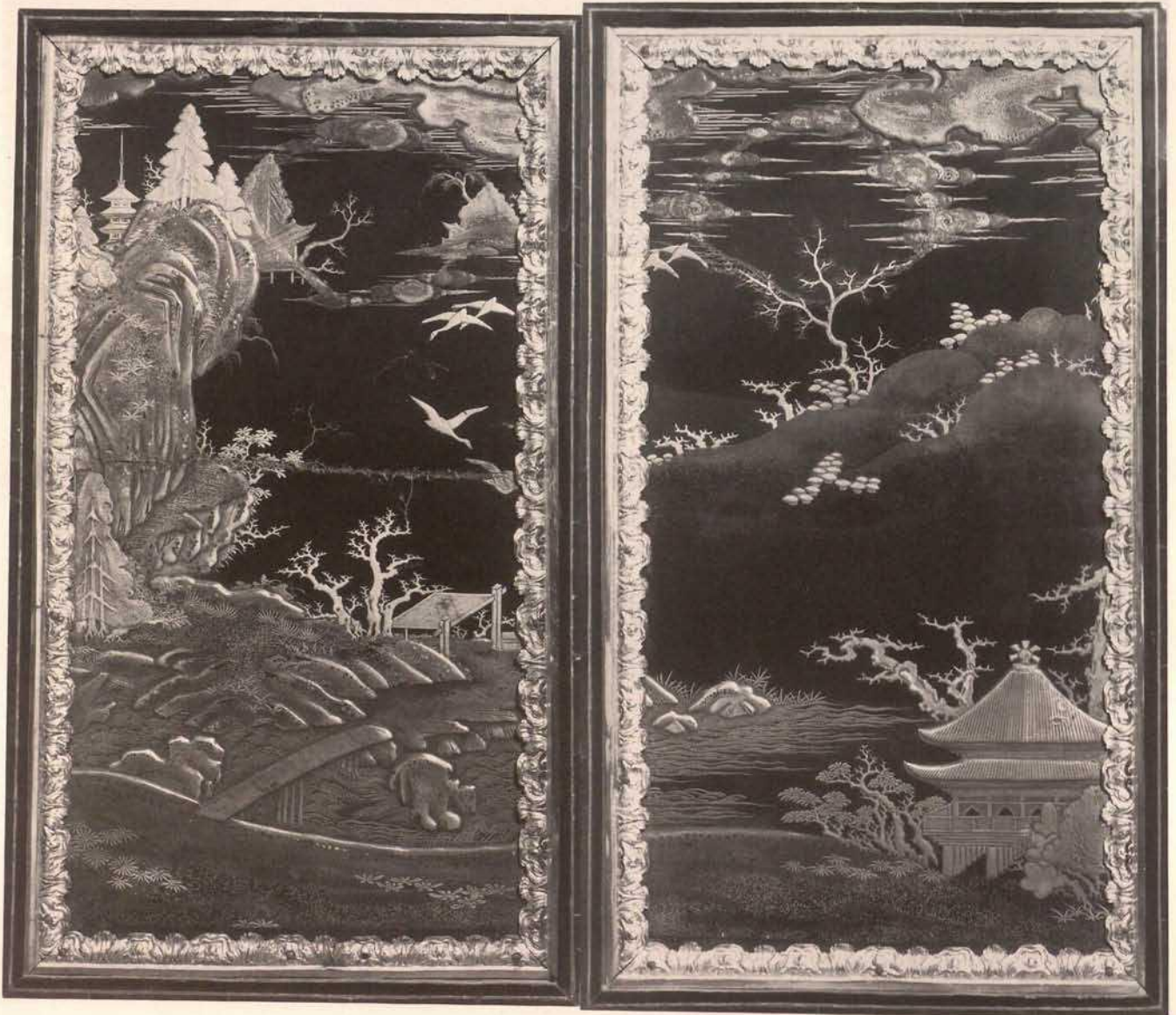
A stylistic comparison between the front of the Mazarin and Lawrence chests and the main panel of the Boulle-work cabinet, moreover, suggests that it, too, may also have derived from a third large chest similar to the other two. Among other important characteristics, all three are united by decoration from the *Genji monogatari*. The front of the Mazarin chest is unusual in that it depicts not a single episode but a number of different scenes from various chapters of the novel, including the aforementioned chapter 28 (*Nowaki* or 'The Typhoon') in the bottom left-hand corner. The front of the Lawrence chest, however, depicts women and girls among flowers and plants in a garden setting. This alludes to a single event, referred to in chapter 28, where females were sent to put out insect cages and search for stray flowers untouched by the storm. The main panel of the Boulle-work cabinet reveals striking similarities in composition to the front of the Lawrence chest, particularly to the bottom left-hand corner. Taking into account the respective sizes of the Lawrence and Mazarin chests, it is possible to suggest that the panel of the Boulle-work cabinet represents the left-hand side of a front of a

third large chest. This would seem to be confirmed by the size of the panel itself; another panel of equal size, together with room for a large lock-plate, would roughly equal another chest of similar size.

It is also interesting to note that, whereas the materials and techniques of execution of the Lawrence and Mazarin chests are exceptional, those of the cut panel are less striking. If one were to imagine the constraints of time and money that the manufacture of two such chests would place on a workshop, it is easy to see how corners might be cut during the making of a third. It is even possible to see imperfections and signs of haste in the execution of its decoration. An examination of the open gateway in the bottom right corner of the cut panel, for example, reveals that the small roof is supported by poles and door panels to the front, but that it is unsupported to the rear, making it appear imbalanced.

It is also worth noting that the back of the main panel has been pared down to its pine base and bears an interesting inscription, roughly written in black ink. It reads 'Carter the bloke wants you

Fig. 7. Pair of panels, gold and silver *hiramakie* and *takamakie* on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c.1640; 43 x 24.7 cm each; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1084-1882



go at once keep ?rate'. The cabinet was very probably one and the same that was purchased from the Stowe sale of 1848 by Charles Cope for £37 12 shillings. It was restored some time later, possibly by the Carter whose name is mentioned. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the expression 'bloke', meaning man or fellow, came into usage around 1851. The London Post Office Directory of 1872, moreover, lists a Thomas Arnold Carter, upholsterer, at 277, Euston Road, near Euston Square, the address given in the Stowe catalogue for Charles Cope.¹³

Fig. 8. Mazarin chest (side), gold, silver and black *hiramakie* and *takamakie*, gold, silver and mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer ground, Japanese for the Western market, c.1640; 56.5 x 63.5 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, 412–1882



And what about the other two lacquer panels (fig. 7) of the Boulle-work cabinet? If one places them side by side, it is evident that the design continues from one panel to the other, such as the birds flying from one to the other, together with the shoreline in the very bottom of both compositions. It is evident, therefore, that the two panels were originally one larger panel, which was cut in two about a vertical axis. Bearing in mind the size and weight of the Mazarin chest, extremely robust handles with secure fixings were necessary to lift it. As a result, each side panel has a large handle with two fixing points (fig. 8). Each of the smaller panels of the Boulle-work cabinet has an oval repair that corresponds to the fixing point of one side of such a handle. The two panels together probably represent one side panel of a larger chest, though additionally trimmed down each side. Furthermore, before the original side panel was cut into two, the handle would need to be removed. This would leave two damaged, oval areas in panels that were otherwise in good condition. This problem was evidently overcome by filling the areas with material of comparable size and colour, and painting over details of the design at the joins so that they corresponded. As these areas of repair were undoubtedly inserted in Europe, one would expect them to be examples of japanning. However, an examination of the reverse of one of the panels throws up some unexpected information. The original panel was pared down on the back to its original pine body, leaving the lacquer decoration on the front untouched. The back of the oval inset is covered with *nashiji* ('pear-skin ground'), one of the most quintessential of Japanese lacquer techniques (fig. 9). This is unequivocal proof of Japanese, rather than European, manufacture for the repairs. Since the front of the inset is covered with black lacquer, two small pieces were evidently taken from an object, possibly already damaged, that was lacquered black on the outside and *nashiji* on the inside, a typical Japanese combination. These were then inserted into the damaged areas to produce a most satisfactory solution to the problem.

It is tempting to suggest that the two smaller panels of the Boulle-work cabinet originally formed one side panel of a chest, possibly the same chest from which the larger main panel also derived. It must be noted, however, that there is a difference in quality between the side and front panels. Is this, however, an acceptable discrepancy for panels belonging to one object? It is in-

Fig. 9. Panel (reverse; cf. fig. 7), pine wood, *nashiji* lacquer insert, Japanese for the Western market, c.1640; 43 x 24.7 cm; Victoria and Albert Museum, 1084–1882



interesting to note that the same inconsistency may also be observed on the Mazarin chest. In the case of low chests, the focal point of decoration was invariably the top and front, with less attention being paid to the sides. The fact that the back panel of the Mazarin chest is striking in design but far inferior in terms of materials and techniques, was undoubtedly due to the fact that the back was often placed against a wall and was not immediately visible. Probably for the same reasons mentioned earlier, the two smaller panels are also not of the same quality as those of the Mazarin chest. It is also possible, of course that the panels are from a chest or chests altogether unconnected with the Lawrence and Mazarin chests. I think, however, that the similarities, particularly those of subject matter and composition, are more than mere coincidence. If one may propose that all three panels originally belonged to a third chest, similar to the Mazarin and Lawrence chests but of slightly inferior quality, it

is interesting to speculate what might have happened to the other pieces of the chest, namely the top, back, other front half and the other side. Were they already worn or damaged before the chest was cut up, or were they so mutilated in the process as to be beyond recognition today and untraceable?

My paper has been concerned with 'problem pieces' of Japanese export lacquerware in the collection of the V&A. Although the state of our knowledge on the subject has greatly increased in recent years, there still remain many tantalising questions to which we shall probably never have satisfactory or conclusive answers. On the basis of a newly-discovered object that has only recently been added to the V&A's collection, and one that has been in the Museum's collection for over one hundred years, it has been instructive to re-examine a group of objects that share important key characteristics, namely the high quality group of export lacquerware.

Notes

- 1 Museum inventory number W.49-1916, V&A.
- 2 Elton Hall, Peterborough. Although the box was originally thought to have been of identical form to the van Diemen box, it was subsequently dismantled in 1803 for William Beckford, and reused to adorn a pair of secretaires.
- 3 Museum inventory number 412-1882, V&A.
- 4 Present whereabouts unknown.
- 5 See HUTT March 1998, pp. 6-7, for a fuller discussion.
- 6 Sale of Export Art of China and Japan, Christie's, London, Monday, 7 April 1997, lot 171, p. 176.
- 7 Museum inventory number 628-1868, V&A.
- 8 I am indebted to Christiaan Jörg for bringing these to my attention.
- 9 See ESKENAZI 1986, cat. no. 56.
- 10 The practice of keeping jewellery and coins in ornate lacquered boxes of East Asian origin other than wedding caskets is reflected in various still lifes of the seventeenth century. One such example is a painting by Jan Brueghel the Elder, dated 1618, in the *Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts*, Brussels, museum inventory number 5013, and illustrated in SEGAL 1989, fig. 6.3.
- 11 Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.
- 12 Illustrated in HUTT March 1999, p. 23, fig. 4.
- 13 See forthcoming V&A publication, C. SARGENTSON et al., *French Furniture 1640-1790 in the Victoria and Albert Museum*.

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- Fig. 1: Elton Hall, Peterborough, Proby Collection
 Figs. 2-5, 7-9: Victoria and Albert Museum, London
 Fig. 6: Catalogue of the Sir Trevor Lawrence collection, 1895, frontispiece
 Colour plate III.2: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge
 Colour plate III.3-5: Victoria and Albert Museum, London