

Japanese Export Lacquer for the Dutch Market

The Dutch-Japanese relationship, which started in 1600 and will celebrate its 400-year anniversary in 2000, was for a long time based on mutual profits. In particular after 1641, when the Dutch were the only Europeans left to trade with Japan and had settled on the fan-shaped artificial island of Decima in the bay of Nagasaki, the Dutch East India Company (VOC) became a provider for the Japanese of exclusive Western commodities, of Indian silk and chintzes, of spices and woods and, probably most important, of information on the West. In turn, the Dutch were keen to buy Japanese copper, silver and gold, camphor and articles of lesser importance such as porcelain and lacquer.¹

Already in the early 17th century, the Dutch and the English regarded Japanese lacquer as far superior to Chinese lacquer, its quality justifying its higher price. The records of the VOC also tell us that even in this early period the Dutch ordered special objects. In 1613, for instance, 2 small caskets, 6 lacquer cups and 12 saucers were sent to Holland. Hendrik Brouwer, Head of the VOC settlement in Japan, commented on this shipment of lacquer as follows: 'This stuff is very expensive but it is exceptionally beautiful and the process to make it is very protracted as I have seen by experience. One can put water in it without it receiving any damage. Suchlike cups and saucers have never before been made in Japan'.²

Japanese export lacquer had already been made to order for the Portuguese and the style of this *namban* lacquer, with its lavish use of pearlshell, is well-known.³ This contribution will concentrate on the Dutch orders, by the VOC as well as by private individuals, and how these orders gradually changed the shapes and decorations of Japanese export lacquer.

The first Company's shipment of lacquer from Japan arrived in the Netherlands in 1610.⁴ More lacquer arrived in the years thereafter, presumably all of it pieces in the *namban* style. In the beginning, the directors had high expectations of these exotic luxuries, but unfortunately lacquer proved difficult to sell at auction.⁵ It is not mentioned why, but it is likely the imported lacquer was too expensive. This is also indicated by the fact that even at that early date Dutch imitations of lacquer were already being made, for instance by Willem Kick in Amsterdam. His work must have been of high quality, because in 1612 a lacquered chest of his hand was given by the States General to the Sultan of Turkey, together with pieces of real Oriental lacquer.⁶

In the 17th century communications were slow between Holland and Japan and therefore it took some time before the merchants in Japan were informed of the negative results of the auctions. They ceased buying lacquer for the Company in 1616.⁷ However, they may not have done so privately, and much *namban* lacquer in old Dutch collections must have arrived as the result of this private trade.

It took some time before the Company resumed interest in lacquer, but when in 1634 orders went out to Japan to buy cabinets and domed coffers of all kinds⁸, this must have been a reaction to a growing popularity of lacquer in Holland where it had been supplied by private trade. Dutch inventories from this period,

too, prove that lacquer was appreciated in upper-class circles. For instance, nine pieces specified as 'Japanese' lacquer are mentioned in 1632 in the inventory of Noordeinde Palace, home of the Dutch Stadholder, such as 'a small square cabinet from Japan decorated with pearlshell and gilt scrollwork' or 'two small Japanese tables inlaid with pearl-shell and gilded' and even 'two Japanese salts' of which no examples are known today, but it is to be hoped they will once be found in the attic of some country house.⁹

As can be expected lacquer was also prominently displayed in Batavia. The 1627 inventory of the bankrupted Gilles Venant, a former Company's merchant, mentions no less than 20 pieces of Japanese lacquer, including a lacquered bed, several cabinets and coffers and, most extraordinary in these protestant surroundings, a lacquered shrine.¹⁰

The Company resumed its trade in lacquer with full energy and was now willing to spend substantial sums of money to its acquisition. In 1635, for instance, no less than 233 boxes filled with a variety of lacquer were bought for a total of 4442 tael or 13.882 florins. Apart from coffers, chests and cabinets we also find backgammon boards, dishes with jugs and shaving bowls.¹¹

These new Company orders resulted in a change of shapes and decorations; in fact, I think the Company actively stimulated the shift from the *namban* to the 'pictorial' style. For why would a commercial body like the VOC resume trade in lacquer, if it was not for wares of a new style? They would not think of importing the old *namban* wares, because these did not sell well in the Netherlands. New items were wanted, a new style was promoted and in the late 1630s and in the 1640s the new assortment of 'pictorial' lacquer emerged due to this Dutch demand.

Prominent on the shipping lists are the *comptoirs*, the two-door cabinets that developed from the front-fall cabinet in the mid 1630s, exactly the period when the Company resumed her trade in lacquer. These *comptoirs* had a multi-purpose function, from travel chest to a miniature cabinet of curiosities. According to 17th century inventories and some rare paintings they had a prominent place in the interior and must have enhanced the status of the owner (see p. 49, colour plate VI.1).

On decorations, too, the growing interest of the Dutch for lacquer had its impact. The *namban* style with its lavish use of pearlshell, intricate geometric borders and abstracted motifs of foliage and animals apparently did not appeal to the Dutch taste. Most of the 17th century lacquer made for the Dutch is decorated in the 'pictorial style' as described by Oliver Impey in his contribution, a style which developed rather quickly in the 30s and 40s and reached its maturity in the early 50s, coinciding with the Dutch trade monopoly in Japan.

But why did it develop that way? Why was this particular style promoted by the Dutch? Maybe one should look at the art that was produced in the Netherlands to see the basic elements of the preferences of the Dutch buyers. This is best illustrated from seventeenth-century Dutch paintings. Better than anything else these show that it was the depiction and suggestion of reality in

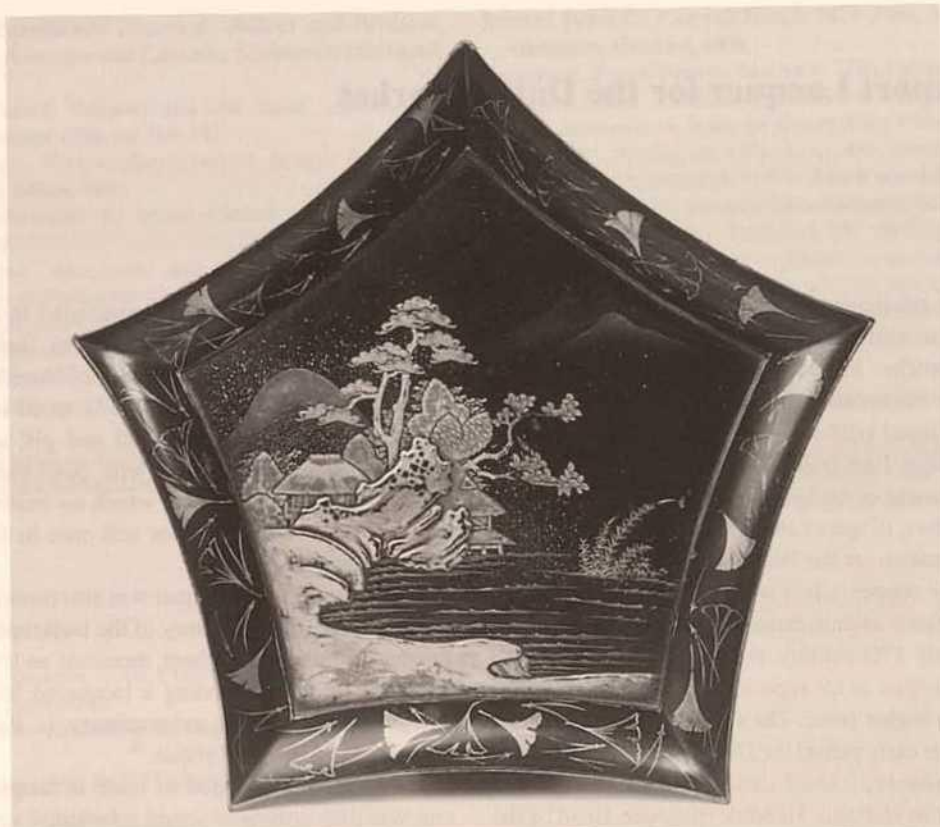


Fig. 1. Pentagonal saucer, Japanese lacquer decorated in the 'pictorial' style with a landscape. On the border ginkgo leaves. Early 18th century, diameter 32.7 cm. Ex Welbeck Abbey collection. Groninger Museum, Groningen

its many appearances that captured the interest of Dutch burghers. This fondness for recognisable and realistic scenes was also mirrored in the things the Dutch wanted from the Far East. It is very remarkable that Chinese 'transitional' porcelain of the 1630s and 40s, too, is an example of this taste: it shows elaborate depictions of landscapes, detailed figural scenes and very naturalistic flowers, plants and animals.¹² Japanese lacquer, too, should depict similar realistic decorations, preserving, of course, its exotic and mysterious Far Eastern charm. It certainly is no coincidence that Chinese porcelain and Japanese lacquer both decorated in naturalistic styles were developed for the Dutch market at the same time, and had such immediate success.

I think this is the reason why during the 1630s and 40s the *namban* style faded away and made place for the 'pictorial' style. First, the geometric *namban* borders became thinner, cartouches became larger, Oriental human figures made their entry. By the mid 17th century border designs function only as small frames for the scene, or have disappeared at all, leaving the whole surface as a ground for the Japanese scene. This ground itself changed as well: it became a large, shiny black surface, like a canvas, on which the decoration was painted in gold and silver. This really was the thing the wealthy Dutchmen liked: a rich and contrasting surface, a detailed exotic decoration, elaborate craftsmanship, in short, an object fit for kings and noblemen which he, just a Dutch burgher, could afford. Lacquer as one of the means to enhance the new Dutch identity and status. Of course, the Dutch would not be the Dutch if they had not hag-gled over prices again and again when ordering lacquer in Japan, because paying too much was against their nature, even for such exclusive lacquer.¹³

It is interesting to see how the 'pictorial' style on export wares reached the heights of the Van Diemen and the Buys boxes already so early. In their contributions Oliver Impey and Julia Hutt discuss this style, which I think became so sought-after because the Dutch liked its naturalistic character so much. Also the taste of one man, François Caron, a merchant who served the Company in Japan with intervals from 1619 until 1641, might have

Fig. 2. A Japanese lacquer bowl and its model of Japanese kakiemon porcelain, both decorated with a flower spray. Both c. 1700, both diameter 13.5 cm. Count of Schönborn collection. Weissenstein Castle, Pommersfelden



stimulated the shift in export style and most probably it was him who had a hand in sending the Van Diemen and Buys boxes to Batavia.¹⁴ To please the Dutch client and comply with his taste, Japanese lacquer makers might first have tried-out their traditional Japanese style of detailed representations for this new market and did their utmost to please the barbarian customers. Soon, however, when it became clear that the Dutch were not willing to pay for this extremely delicate work, they shifted to less elaborate, but still high-class work which pleased the Dutch as well. However, for private orders, the best work in the Van Diemen box style could be revived, like the 'FC' box, which was probably ordered by or for François Caron himself, when he was head of the factory in 1639 and 1640.¹⁵

The 'pictorial' style had its heyday in the second half of the 17th century, but when the Company ceased orders around 1700 things changed again. By the way, it is interesting to note that at the same time the VOC also stopped buying Chinese and Japanese porcelain for the Netherlands, so apparently it economised on luxury merchandise at that time.¹⁶ Private trade, however, continued, in porcelain as well as in lacquer, but for both articles the assortment changed. The grand and expensive lacquer cabinets and coffers were largely replaced by objects for daily use, such as bowls, dishes, saucers, tea and coffee ware (fig. 1). Middleclass people, too, could afford these items now, and due to large private imports such Japanese lacquer became more common and less status-like. Some of these new lacquer items do even closely resemble Japanese porcelain shapes, as is illustrated by a lacquered bowl and its Arita counterpart from the Count of Schönborn collection (fig. 2).

This private trade in lacquer is not documented, and we have to deal with the objects themselves to get an idea of the assortment and decorations. Apparently the 'pictorial' style with its raised details was continued, but the lacquer is of less quality. New Western shapes, such as knife boxes are introduced (colour plate VI.2), but all export lacquer is decorated in Japanese style. It really is surprising that Western motifs do not occur at all in this phase, quite contrary to the growing popularity of such motifs on 18th century Chinese and Japanese porcelain. Again, this change in lacquer production was caused by Dutch preferences and shifting ideas on the use of lacquer in the interior.

A third example of such Dutch influence can be seen at the end of the 18th and in the early 19th century. As I said, Japanese export lacquer was decorated in Japanese style, but about the 1780s Dutch merchants suddenly became aware of the possibilities of ordering lacquer with Western designs.¹⁷ The first examples of this new trend seem to be the well-known plaques depicting portraits of famous Europeans and Roman emperors (fig. 3).¹⁸ These oval plaques are lacquered on copper and have a ring to hang them. The portraits are done in slightly raised gold lacquer and copy in detail prints from a 6-volume French publication, named *L'Europe Illustré*, published in Paris between 1755 and 1765 by Dreux du Radier. This book clearly was in line with the European interest of that time in famous persons, famous historical events, famous sights and other outstanding famous things. The series of 593 engraved portraits in *L'Europe Illustré* was a cheap art gallery, imitating the grand painting galleries of the past. It is interesting to see that apart from such prints, smaller but comparable series of portraits were also made in other materials in Europe, for instance the portrait of Shakespeare of black basalt Wedgwood ware. It is possible that such ceramic plaques triggered the initiative of a Dutch merchant in Decima to have series of portraits done in Japanese lacquer. One



Fig. 3. Three plaques of Japanese lacquer on copper, the portraits those of the Roman emperor Gordianus, of Catherina de Medici and of the Frankish king Childebert I. Late 18th century, dimensions 14.5 x 12.3 cm. Groninger Museum, Groningen

of them, Mr. Reede van de Parkeler, who was Head in Decima in 1783, is known to have done so because in a letter to his father of 1793 he mentions sending over two plaques with 'the oval portraits or busts of Frederick II or the Great, one of which is lacquered with colours and a ditto inlaid with pearlshell or nacre'.¹⁹ Several examples are known that match this description. Lacquer plaques proved to be extremely popular, several extensive series were made and individual plaques are still not rare. However, when European portraits could be done by the Japanese, other Western motifs and scenes could be lacquered as well. Within a few years this became a fashion and all kinds of plaques were ordered, for instance those with sea battles or those with famous buildings and city views.

Fig. 4. Tobacco box of Japanese lacquer on copper, on the inside of the lid a dedication in Dutch, executed in gold lacquer. C. 1830, dimensions 8 x 23.5 x 2.5 cm. Groninger Museum, Gronigen



Unfortunately, the Napoleonic Wars disrupted the development of this privately ordered lacquer with European designs. The Dutch factory in Decima was cut off from the world for a long period and trade was not resumed until 1817. Lacquered objects with European designs still were made as souvenirs for the Dutch merchants, for instance card boxes with Dutch scenes derived from prints. Other fashionable souvenirs were tobacco boxes of lacquered copper, some of them decorated with European scenes or names written on the inside (fig. 4). A third item were large lacquered trays, for instance one from a private collection, dated 'Japan 1823' on the reverse and decorated with the view of a Dutch village in pearlshell on front.

Generally speaking, however, the new 19th century fashion was the 'Nagasaki' style with its exuberant Japanese-style decoration of flowering plants and butterflies in colourful pearlshell. Pearlshell and floral styles again: the circle had come round, from *namban* to 'Nagasaki'.

The Dutch were proud on their exclusive contacts in Japan. Their taste and preferences largely dictated the development of Japanese export lacquer for the Dutch market in shape and decoration and lacquer remained an excellent example of Dutch-Japanese interaction.

Notes

This paper resulted from the research undertaken for the forthcoming book *Japanese Export Lacquer* by Oliver Impey, Christiaan Jörg and Cynthia Viallé. I am grateful to both my colleagues for allowing me to use their work.

In the following notes 'VOC' means: the archive of the Dutch East India Company, which is housed in the General State Archives in The Hague. 'NFJ' (Nederlandse Factorij Japan) means the archive of the Decima factory, which is a separate part of the VOC archive.

- 1 Of the many introductions to the subject of the Dutch in Japan I only mention the classic by C. R. BOXER, *Jan Compagnie in Japan, 1600-1850*, The Hague 1950, and the exhibition catalogue *Japan und Europa 1543-1929*, Martin-Gropius-Bau, Berlin 1993, pp. 72-106, 272-305, 316-337, 369-390 and the many up-to-date references given there. See for lacquer in particular pp. 147-154, 266-271.
- 2 Letter of Henrick Brouwer to the Governor-General in Banten, 28 January 1613, VOC 1056.
- 3 A good survey is M. H. MENDES PINTO, *Namban lacquerware in Portugal. The Portuguese presence in Japan (1543-1639)*, Lisbon 1990.
- 4 TH. H. LUNSINGH SCHEURLEER, 'Aanbesteding en verspreiding van Japans lakwerk door de Nederlanders in de zeventiende eeuw', in: *Jaarverslagen Oudheidkundig Genootschap*, 82-83 (1939-1941), Amsterdam 1941, p. 56.
- 5 See, for instance, the decisions of Heren XVII with regard to the sale results, 19 March 1614, VOC 7293.
- 6 TH. H. LUNSINGH SCHEURLEER 1941, p. 57.
- 7 Letter of Heren XVII to Banten, November 1614, VOC 312. This instruction did not reach Japan until August 1616.
- 8 The order was promptly met by the VOC merchants in Japan: see the shipping list of 24 November 1634 for the ship 'T Wapen Van Delft', NFJ 762, and the list of 15 February 1635 for the *Bredam*, NFJ 763.
- 9 S. W. A. DROSSAERS/TH. H. LUNSINGH SCHEURLEER, *Inventarissen van de inboedel in de verblijven van de Oranjes en daarmee gelijk te stellen stukken 1576-1793*, vol. 1, The Hague 1974, pp. 179-237, items 259, 263, 264, 269, 275, 277, 530, 534, 567.
- 10 A list of the auctioned goods, mentioning buyers and prices, dated Batavia 20 September 1627, is in VOC 1093. The document is discussed by A. M. LUBBERHUIZEN-VAN GELDER, 'Een oude Indische inventaris', in: *Cultureel Indië*, 8, Leiden 1946, pp. 211-220.

- 11 Shipping lists of 13 November 1635 for the *Nieuw Amsterdam* and of 31 December 1635 for the *Wassenaer*, NFJ 763.
- 12 See for a survey of Chinese transitional porcelain: R. S. KILBURN, *Transitional Wares and their Forerunners*, exhibition catalogue Hong Kong Museum of Art, Hong Kong 1981; S. LITTLE, *Chinese ceramics of the transitional period: 1620-1683*, exhibition catalogue China House Gallery, New York 1983.
- 13 C. J. A. JÖRG, 'Japanese Export Lacquer-Interactions between the Japanese and the Dutch in the 17th century', in: *Western Influence on Japanese Art - 16th century - 19th century*, exhibition catalogue Fukuoka Art Museum, Fukuoka 1995, pp. 55-64.
- 14 See for the life and career of Caron: C. R. BOXER, ed., *A True Description of the Mighty Kingdoms of Japan & Siam by Caron & Schouten*, Amsterdam/New York 1971, pp. xv-cxxix.
- 15 This box is now in a private collection. It was auctioned at Sotheby's London, 12/13 June 1986, lot 727.
- 16 C. J. A. JÖRG, 'Chinese Porcelains for the Dutch in the Seventeenth Century: Trading Networks and Private Enterprise', in: R. E. Scott, ed., *The Porcelains of Jingdezhen. Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia No 16*, Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art/SOAS, London 1993, pp. 194-197.
- 17 C. J. A. JÖRG, 'Japanese lacquer for the Dutch. Models and decorations in Western style', in: *Glorious Past of The Netherlands and Japan*, exhibition catalogue Kobe City Museum, Kobe 1993, pp. 138-148, 199-205.
- 18 C. J. A. JÖRG, 'Japanese lacquerwork decorated after European prints', in: *Collection of Essays in Commemoration of the 30th Anniversary of the Institute of Oriental and Occidental Studies, Kansai University*, Osaka 1981, pp. 57-80.
- 19 *Ibid.*, p. 61. The letter is in the Royal Library, The Hague, MS 133 M 36/2, no 17, dated Souracarta 15 August 1793.

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Figs. 1, 3, 4: John Stoel, Haren
 Fig. 2: author
 Colour plate VI.1, 2: John Stoel, Haren