

From Asia to Europe: Asian Lacquerware applied to French Furniture

This report will concentrate on the use of Oriental lacquers by French 18th century furniture makers, that I have been able to study in detail in the course of various restorations at the Atelier Brugier¹, and in public and private collections in Paris.

First contacts between the Chinese and the Europeans developed from Marco Polo's travels. China appeared as a vastly different place with unknown customs. The mystery increased as Chinese works of art started to be imported and stimulated a fascination and a taste for Chinoiserie. We do not know exactly, when the first pieces of Chinese lacquerware appeared in Europe. In the inventory list of Schloss Ambras near Innsbruck in Austria from the 16th century we find the earliest mentioning of pieces of lacquerware, which gives us a starting point. In the 17th century, collectors of lacquerware were already numerous and in 1658, the great collector cardinal Mazarin organized a lottery, that included several cabinets from China. The taste for the exotic continued to develop during the 18th century. At that time any serious amateur had to possess a curiosity cabinet with works of art in the 'Indian or Chinese style'.

But even in the 18th century it was not that easy to find Eastern lacquers, as we learn from the writings of the most famous *marchand-mercier* Gersaint, whose shop in Paris was called 'A la Pagode'. In 1745, Gersaint who often travelled to Holland wrote: 'Lacquer is still a rather unknown curiosity and therefore not well spread. Good quality pieces are extremely rare, when they are old. They reach prices, that amaze everyone, even in Holland.'

Traders took great care as to the quality of lacquer and asked for panels which were lacquered on both sides in order to make several pieces of furniture out of one. It was at this time that the idea was born to transform Oriental lacquerwork in order to adapt it to European interior decoration and to ornate Western furniture with Oriental lacquer panels. Contrary to what was often said and written, European furniture was not sent to China or Japan to be lacquered. The imported wares such as cabinets, screens, chests and cupboards were transformed in Europe to fit into Western furniture. In proof of this we have numerous sales archives from English, Dutch and French vessels, which also give us an idea of the importance of the trade as listing was done with extreme accuracy. The fact that none of the Oriental parts were varnished in Europe gives another proof for this.

The different types of lacquers and techniques in use during the late Baroque and Rococo period, when Paris was the center for the manufacturing and sale of luxurious furniture and interior decoration in Europe, will be illustrated by three different examples: A commode in Coromandel lacquer by Jacques-Philippe Carel; a chest of drawers in Japanese lacquerware by Bernard II Vanrisamburgh, preserved in the Musée du Louvre, and a red and gold lacquered ensemble from the Hôtel du Châtelet in Paris, now at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, luxurious pieces of furniture and interior decorations made in Paris between 1730 and 1770 from Chinese panel screens and a Japanese chest.

1. A Commode in Coromandel Lacquer by Jacques-Philippe Carel

The Louis XV commode in Coromandel lacquer by Jacques-Philippe Carel illustrated in colour plate VI.3 once belonged to an ensemble of two corner cabinets, which can be traced back to the property of Valençay castle, and was probably separated only during the auction of the Duke of Talleyrand collection in 1899.

There is little known about Jacques-Philippe Carel. He was active from 1724 to 1750 and gained his mastership in 1723. Looking at the diversity of his work it is most probable that he also acted as a salesman on behalf of his fellow furniture-makers. He worked with François-Antoine Gaudreaus, who produced and provided furniture for Louis XV.

The commode opens by two doors. Its interior is made of natural fruit wood and amaranth and shows three rows of oak-wood drawers. The panels used are probably coming from a twelve panels screen of the Kangxi period showing classical palatial scenes. The twelve panels were once corresponding to the twelve months of the year. Each panel was divided into two parts, thinned out and applied to the structure of the Louis XV commode.

Engraved lacquer called Coromandel lacquer was applied to the commode. Chambers wrote about this kind of lacquer in 1753: 'That kind of Indian painting and carving on wood looks like Japanese work only more fun.' We believe Coromandel lacquer appeared first in 1685 in Versailles. Louis XIV received three screens including a twelve panels one from the famous Siamese embassy as gifts from the Chinese emperor. The new Chinese fashion spread and soon many courtesans had their own Chinese screen. The Chinese word for Coromandel lacquer is *ke hui* and is of purely Chinese origin. In England this technique became to be known as 'Bantam work' according to the name of a trading center of the English East India Company in Java.

After having lost their trading center in Java, the English went to the Coromandel coast in Java. From this time on Bantam lacquer became Coromandel lacquer. It appeared in China during the Ming period at the end of the 15th century, but no piece was dated before the Kangxi period. On the front, one can still recognize two out of four Chinese liberal arts: 'music' on the upper left side and 'painting' on the right door. The two other arts 'writing' and 'chess' (or Go) were originally on the other side. The rich gilded bronze mounts were applied to enhance this magnificent decor. The most frequent decors on the twelve panels screens are palatial scenes, flowers and birds, scenes from the Taoist Paradise and European hunting scenes. Chinese craftsmen generally used some kind of pine wood pieces maintained together by bamboo nails. The panel was covered up with a thin layer of clay and a layer of mixed fibers. Once the layer was dry it was sanded down between 8 to 15 times. Finally, layers of black lacquer were applied following the same process. At this stage the craftsman would outline the drawing and carve out the

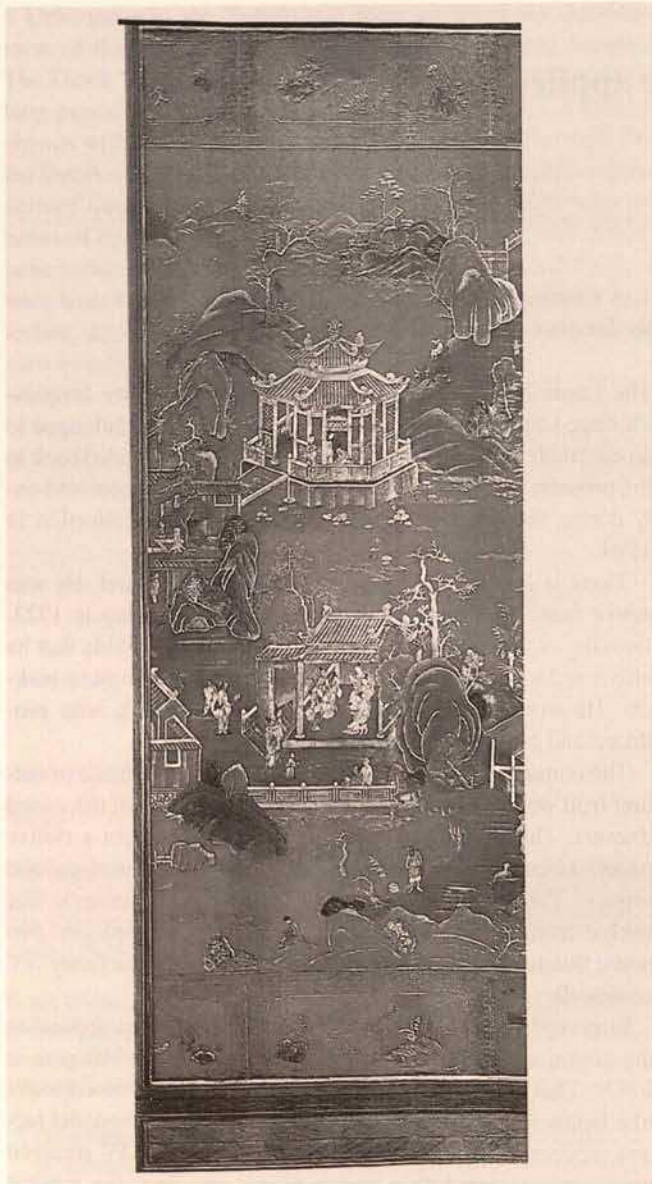


Fig. 1. Red and gold lacquer panel from the Hôtel du Châtelet, Paris, before 1770 (Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs)

lacquer along the lines in 'intaglio'. The different parts were then coloured with pigments, mixed with a sand to create a mat effect contrasting to the shining appearance of the lacquer background.

2. A Chest of Drawers in Japanese Lacquerware by Bernard II Vanrisamburgh, Paris 1730–1735 (Paris, Musée du Louvre)

The chest of drawers by Bernard II Vanrisamburgh, illustrated in colour plate VI.4, is among the first recorded works using Oriental lacquer. Bernhard II Vanrisamburgh (1696–1766) was received master before 1730. Being of Dutch origin, Vanrisamburgh worked for thirty years at the Faubourg Saint-Antoine, the center of Parisian cabinet making. He produced a large number of luxurious furniture fitting in lacquerware or porcelain panel for important Parisian *marchands-merciers* or traders like Darnault and Poirier. Lacquer was provided by the traders and was seldom to be found in the stock of furniture makers, as we know from their inventory lists.

The style of Bernard II Vanrisamburgh is highly specific and exceptional as can be seen from this chest of drawers. His great speciality became furniture decorated with panels of Japanese lacquer. This piece of furniture bears the label of François-Charles Darnault, who was furnisher of the crown from 1738 on. Lacquer was amongst his specialities. As the taste for chests of drawers and commodes developed since the end of the 17th century, traders often transformed Japanese cabinets into commodes.

Japanese cabinets were also amongst the gifts Siamese ambassadors brought to the royal court of Louis XIV. Pieces like that were also bought by *marchands-merciers* to give them to the furniture makers for further workmanship. The chest of drawers is built from a Japanese cabinet of common shape with two doors opening to ten drawers of various size. The cabinet doors have been thinned down to two or three millimeters and applied on the slightly incurved sides of the commode. The first lacquer panels to be applied on incurved structures are dated approximately 1724. Parts which are not made of lacquer have been painted with black varnish and parts left out by the Japanese locks are filled out and also painted with black varnish. The bronzes precisely fit the drawers and side panels. They are very plain. On the sides they divide Japanese work from varnished parts. The decoration is made of gold *hiramakie* on a *roironuri* ground with pavilions in the landscape.

3. A Red and Gold Lacquered Ensemble from the Hôtel du Châtelet (Paris, Musée des Arts Décoratifs)

The Hôtel du Châtelet, property of Louis-Marie Florent, Duc du Châtelet was built in 1770 by the architect Cherpitel in the heart of the most fashionable part of Paris. It included a *cabinet des laques*. Duc du Châtelet was the son of the famous Marquise du Châtelet, a very close friend of Voltaire, and one of the most sophisticated ladies of her time.

In 1793 the Duke was arrested and beheaded. The Hôtel was seized by the revolutionaries. The ensemble was saved by a miracle: nine panels, four cupboards a desk and a commode. Everything stayed in place until the 19th century. Two out of nine panels are still within their mahogany frames. In 1907 the panels were given to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris were they remained since then (fig. 1, cf. colour plate V). The cylinder desk and its *cartonnier* are of satinwood and lacquer as well as the four cupboards. In 1860 the cylinder desk and the four cupboards were sent to Compiègne following the instructions of the empress Eugénie. They stayed there and were often believed to be late 19th century works. The commode went to the Palace of l'Élysée in 1877 and is now part of the Mobilier National. It opens with two doors and its upright mounts are decorated with garlands of leaves.

These pieces of lacquerwork seem to be created earlier than the construction of the Hôtel in 1770 and could have been the property of the Marquise du Châtelet, who surrounded herself with lacquerware. None of these pieces bears a stamp. It seems obvious that the whole ensemble was produced from the same screen or the same series of panels of red and gold Qianlong Chinese lacquer. The decor is made of classical scenes with pagodas amongst gardens with walking figures. There are also scenes showing country life, family life, fishing parties, riding and plays on water.² When the cabinet was described in 1842, it is interesting to note that its lacquer was considered to be from Japan, which reminds us that the difference between Chinese and Japanese lacquer was not altogether clear at that time.



1 Cabinet or *comptoir*, Japanese lacquer decorated in the 'pictorial' style with a landscape. The stand is European. Third quarter 17th century, dimensions 76 x 89 x 50.5 cm. Groninger Museum, Groningen (see C. Jörg, in this publication, p. 43)



2 Knife box, Japanese lacquer after a European model, decorated with a landscape in Japanese style. Mid 18th century, height 37.9 cm. Groninger Museum, Groningen (see C. Jörg, in this publication, p. 45)

3 Commode in Coromandel lacquer by Jacques-Philippe Carel, Paris 1724–1750 (Paris, Musée du Louvre)



4 Chest of Drawers in Japanese lacquerware by Bernard II Vanrisamburgh, Paris 1730–1735 (Paris, Musée du Louvre)



The French artist Louis Cane, born in 1943, lives and works in Paris. He designs furniture with ancient lacquer panels. The Coromandel cabinet (fig. 2) is made out of a Kangxi period panel. It opens with two doors and is set on a bronze stand. The decor of the palace on the front has been used as an abstract element of architecture. The sides show usual items and vases known as the 'Hundred Antiques'. Still today, a taste for the exotic is inspiring contemporary artists to combine Oriental lacquers with modern furniture design.

Notes

- 1 The Atelier Brugier was founded by my father André Brugier in 1920; I am in charge of it since 1987. We are specialized in the restoration of Chinese and Japanese lacquerware as well as European lacquers, Vernis Martin and Art Deco lacquers. Our clients are museums, private collections and antique dealers. Amongst many other things we were lucky enough to restore for the Musée du Louvre the most famous blue and white chest of drawers realized by the furniture-maker Criard for the Comtesse de Mailly. Furthermore, we acquired a large collection of historical lacquerware: screens, panels, chests and cupboards.
- 2 I am most grateful to Madame Ledoux Lebard for her research on those red lacquers.

Acknowledgment

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Photo Credits

Fig. 1: Atelier Brugier, Paris

Fig. 2: Atelier Brugier, Paris, B. Keller

Colour plate VI.3, 4: Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris



Fig. 2. Coromandel cabinet by Louis Cane, private property