

Early Examples of Japanese Export Lacquerware in Czech Collections

This is probably the first time for many experts to get acquainted with the Czech collections of Japanese lacquerware. The former Czechoslovakia spent many years in isolation from the outside world and the collections of Asian art deposited in our cultural institutions could not until recently be ranked among the well-known treasures of the world's cultural heritage. This situation is hopefully history now and the Czech collections of Asian art and their presentation and promotion will soon help throw light on major problems which experts in Japanese art face today.

The Czech lands used to be part of the West European culture for centuries, developing together with the cultures of our Western neighbours and as part of the Habsburg monarchy from 1526 onwards. Therefore, it is not surprising that the works of art found on the Czech territory are identical with those in the neighbouring states, such as Austria, Germany, Poland and Hungary. Consequently, the Czech collections of Japanese lacquerware play an important role in Central Europe and could be instrumental in comprehending Central European cultural trends. Although the Habsburg monarchy, a part of which the Czech lands remained until 1918, was not among the great powers with a multitude of colonies, many collections of Japanese art, unique in terms of quantity and quality, were amassed there, including lacquerware by Japanese masters. As it would be difficult to describe all the items in our collections in detail, we have selected just a few examples representing individual types of lacquerware, which had been imported to the Czech lands in the oldest period. The National Gallery in Prague plans to launch a representative exhibition of all major pieces of lacquerware and to publish a voluminous catalogue in 2001. We would like to display all of our important pieces of lacquerware, from the oldest examples to those dating from the early 20th century, and present this material still unknown to most of the professional and lay public.

It is common knowledge that Europe first encountered Japanese lacquerware in the second half of the 16th century. This was when the first products were imported to Europe, but those were earmarked especially for European clients. That is why it is so difficult to find examples of Japanese lacquerware made for the Japanese market before the 16th century. Also the pieces dating from the early Edo period are rarely found in the old European collections and the same was true in Bohemia. The first pieces of lacquerware probably reached its territory from Japan under Rudolf II at the turn of the 16th and the 17th centuries. In his unique collection deposited in his residence in Prague, the Emperor assembled a huge quantity of rare Oriental artifacts, including lacquerware, as we know from contemporary inventories. Due to Rudolf's many contacts with Spain and Portugal, we believe that some of the products in the style were made by lacquermasters in Kyoto for Portuguese and Spanish traders. Many items of Rudolf's unique collection were purloined during the Thirty Years' War and some of the rarest ones were taken away from Prague Castle even in the following centuries. We have re-

tained a large lacquer coffer, but this artifact probably does not come from Rudolf's *Kunstkammer* and was added to the collection later in the late 17th century. There are also numerous artifacts of Japanese origin in the palaces of the former aristocracy; palace house lacquerware in the *namban* style as well as products dating from the second half of the 17th to the early 19th centuries, which were earmarked for Dutch clients. Among the many, we want to mention at least a small collection of Japanese artifacts assembled by the Lichnowsky family, which is now deposited at the castles in Hradec nad Moravicí and Raduň, the well-known collection of Chancellor Lothar Klemens Metternich from Kynžvart Castle, some of the pieces from the collection of the Schwarzenberg family, which are housed at Hluboká Castle, those of the Lichtenštejn family at Lednice Castle, the Lobkowitz family at their chateaux in Nelahozeves and Mělník, and the Mensdorf-Pouilly family at Boskovice Castle. Apart from these castle collections, similar products can be found in Czech museums. Perhaps the most significant among them is owned by the Náprstek Museum in Prague, including four pieces of *namban* lacquerware and examples of the Japanese lacquerware production from the 18th century.

Let us briefly describe the major examples of the oldest pieces of Japanese lacquerware in the Bohemian and Moravian collections. We shall focus only on pieces dating from the late 16th to the first third of the 17th century. This is the period of trade contacts to Portugal and Spain, whereas products of a later date were undoubtedly imported by Dutch traders whose ships were the only connection between isolated Japan and Europe after the expulsion of the Spanish and Portuguese from Japan in 1625 and 1639, respectively. We shall not deal with any products made later than that.

In principle, it can be said that the Czech collections comprise only two types of Japanese lacquerware produced in the former period, i.e. while Spain and Portugal played a major role in trade contacts. One is a large rectangular chest with a half-cylinder upper lid and the other is a 'cabinet', the shape of which undoubtedly imitates the Spanish inlaid *varqueno* or miniature writing desk. Whereas its shape is undoubtedly European, its decoration is a mixture of various influences and it is not easy to tell from where the anonymous Japanese artists drew inspiration. Nevertheless, it is certain that this decoration is neither genuinely European nor Japanese. It often bears traces of Moorish and Gujarati ornamentation. At that time, the Portuguese had a fashion of Gujarati 'pseudo-lacquerware-style' products imitating Japanese decoration. It seems likely that the Portuguese commissioned a type of similar decoration, which fully suited them also from Japanese artists. This may be why this early lacquerware is so difficult to define and why we find so many different principles and patterns in its decoration.

Colour plate VII.1 shows the first of the chests found in the collection of the Náprstek Museum in Prague. It is 70 cm long, 37 cm high and 46.5 cm wide. As it was the custom for this type of lacquerware, the decoration was made in gold and silver *hi-*

ramakie and *raden* techniques, but fragments of mother-of-pearl are mostly missing on the lid. The decoration is very typical for the early period between about 1570 and the year 1600. Lacquerware artists did not yet separate individual panels or cartouches, but played with the effects of full, elegant and undivided areas. Only the edges are plainly decorated with a typical undulating line enveloping the entire scene.

The decoration depicts typical Japanese flowers. That seems to give credit to the assumption that the artists interpreted the familiar fauna and flora although it was a rather unusual pattern for them. On the lid, there are the blossoming *sakura* and *tachibana* citrus, the minutely executed vine on the front and rear parts, and the blossoming prunus on the sides in addition to the motifs on the upper lid. The inner surface of the lid is also decorated, but the lacquer masters did not use the lavish decoration like on the other parts of the chest, but contented themselves with a kind of sketched branch in the gold *hiramakie* technique and sparingly used mother-of-pearl. The simple brass fitting is decorated with a fine, stylized floral design.

The similar piece (colour plate VII.2) also comes from the Náprstek Museum in Prague. This chest is much smaller (24 cm high, 37.5 cm long and 18.5 cm wide). Its size is reminiscent of the well-known artifact from the Irving Collection, which was displayed at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City in 1991¹. Its decoration in the gold and silver *hiramakie* technique and *raden* mother-of-pearl inlay is separated into panels trimmed with mother-of-pearl. This suggests that the piece was produced later than the previous one, probably between 1600 and 1620. Notable are the detailed bodies of phoenixes made in the silver *makie* technique in two square panels on the lid. The front face is decorated with mountain goats and birds among the *sakura* blossoms, mythical unicorns under the camellia and plant motifs continuing on rectangular panels on the sides and rear face. All the panels are trimmed with spiral ornaments. The inside of the chest is decorated in simple black lacquer, while the inner surface of the lid is adorned with a simply stylized scroll design.

Colour plate VII.3 shows an artifact which represents lacquer products with frugal and simple decoration. This miniature box (10 cm high, 16.5 cm long and 9 cm wide) which originally comes from the Schwarzenberg estate at Hluboká Castle is adorned in stylized pearl curved in a net-like pattern with an inscribed lozenge-shaped rosette. The inside is decorated in simple black lacquer. The piece is undoubtedly one of the smallest *namban* lacquer-decorated boxes in the world.² In all probability, it was used for jewellery or other valuables.

Now we shall focus on the largest artifact of the same shape (fig. 1) which was already mentioned in the beginning. It is a property of Prague Castle. The production of similar chests culminated in 1620–1640. The size of this one (130 cm long, 63 cm high and 59 cm wide) ranks it among the largest pieces of this type known to date. Its lid is decorated with two cloud-shaped cartouches in the upper section. The first uses a motif of landscape with the lake, bridge, architecture, peasants, rabbits and paulownia trees with long-tailed birds. The main decoration is complemented with the pine, prunus, willow and fancy ducks on the lake. The other cartouche employs a similar decoration of landscape with architecture, phoenixes, a shika deer, ducks, pine, chrysanthemum and vine. The right side of the lid is of a semi-circular form and is adorned with a medallion with rabbits and Chinese bellflowers, whereas the medallion on the left side of the lid bears a motif of herons in the landscape. The inner part

of the lid is decorated with a packhorse, straw under the pine tree and birds flying all around. The front side of the chest is also decorated with two cloud-shaped cartouches: the one on the left depicts two owls in the landscape and a gate of the *torii* Shinto shrine, huts and plants – hortensia, fern and chrysanthemum. The right cartouche depicts a little fence and a man with draft oxen but this main motif was completed with birds and plants, bellflowers, chrysanthemums and bamboo. The right side of the chest bears a square-shaped disk with a motif of Chinese bellflowers, a peach tree, bamboo, butterflies and birds. The left side of the chest depicts a square-shaped disk with a painted decoration of a hut under hortensia and chrysanthemum. The rear side is decorated with two squares with a motif of morning glory on the fence, and another motif of vine.

The inside and bottom of the chest are covered in black lacquer. The additional decoration on the sides is shaped as a triple wave called *tomo-e* (*mitsutomo-e*) and a string of endless pearls (*shippotsunagi*) in lacquer and mother-of-pearl. In Europe, the chest was fitted with a rectangular-shaped mount on short legs, which is adorned with carved rosettes and covered in lacquer with a gold decoration of pearl.

Now we shall concentrate on the other two pieces of *namban* lacquerware of later date. One of them (colour plate VII.5) comes from the estate of the Lichnowsky family and their chateau in Hradec nad Moravicí and the other (colour plate VII.4) from the Lobkowicz estate in Mělník near Prague. These artifacts are dated 1620 to 1630. We can see the change in style, which the decoration of export lacquerware for the Europeans underwent. In the earlier period it was customary to use mother-of-pearl that sometimes covered a substantial part of the surface. In the younger products, however, the mother-of-pearl decoration played a minor role as it was used only for marginal geometric patterns as part of the frames of cartouches and panels bearing the main design without any mother-of-pearl inlay. In this piece, too, the absence of mother-of-pearl is obvious. The main cartouches of the Mělník artifact depict views of garden retreats with the pine, bamboo, bamboo fences, birds or merely

Colour Plate VII

- 1 *Namban* chest (l. 70 cm, h. 37 cm, w. 46.5 cm), c. 1570–1600, collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague
- 2 *Namban* chest (l. 37.5 cm, h. 24 cm, w. 18.5 cm), c. 1600–1620, collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague
- 3 Miniature *namban* box (l. 16.5 cm, h. 10 cm, w. 9 cm) with frugal and simple decoration, c. 1600, originally from the Schwarzenberg estate at Hluboká nad Vltavou Castle
- 4 *Namban* chest (l. 45.7 cm, h. 30.4 cm, w. 25 cm), c. 1620–1630, estate of the Lobkowicz family, Mělník Chateau
- 5 *Namban* chest (l. 37.5 cm, h. 24.6 cm, w. 22 cm), c. 1620–1630, formerly property of the Lichnowsky family, Hradec nad Moravicí Castle
- 6 *Namban* cuboid chest with upper lid (l. 89 cm, h. 64.2 cm, w. 44.6 cm), c. 1570–1600, Kynžvart Chateau
- 7 *Namban* jewellery box (l. 34.9 cm, h. 39.3 cm, w. 32 cm), c. 1600–1620, varqueno, formerly property of the Lichnowsky family, Hradec nad Moravicí Castle
- 8 *Namban* cabinet (l. 37.2 cm, h. 26.2 cm, w. 25 cm), dated c. 1600–1620, collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague
- 9 *Namban* cuboid chest with upper lid (l. 47 cm, h. 34.3 cm, w. 31.7 cm), c. 1600, Lednice Chateau
- 10 *Namban* cabinet (l. 50.3 cm, h. 32.8 cm, w. 31.3 cm), classic example of *namban* varqueno, dated c. 1600–1620, collection of the Náprstek Museum, Prague



△ 1



2 △



3 △



△ 4



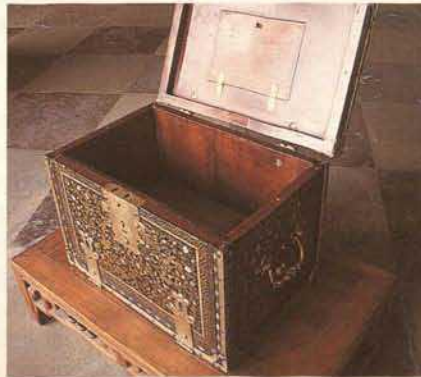
5 △



▽ 8



10 ▽



9 ▽



Fig. 1. Namban coffer (l. 130 cm, h. 63 cm, w. 59 cm), c. 1620–1640, Prague Castle

jardinières with Japanese flowers. The lacquer piece from Hradec is similarly decorated with herons, camellias, peonies and chrysanthemums. In addition, the upper lid employs vivid lacquer tones that we know from the products of later times made for Dutch traders. Only the rear sides of these chests are reminiscent of the original decoration – they are always designed in a somewhat subdued manner echoing the well-known scroll design or vine enclosed in a lozenge-shaped panel like in the piece from Hradec Chateau.

Two cuboid chests with upper lids are perhaps the most interesting items made by Japanese lacquermasters in the Czech collections. The small chest (colour plate VII.9) comes from the chateau in Lednice and the larger one (colour plate VII.6) is deposited at Kynžvart Castle. Both of them were assembled in Europe and furnished with new massive fittings. In addition, the inside was inlaid in Europe, as customary. Nevertheless, the Japanese parts can be unambiguously classified as the oldest *namban* artifacts dated 1570 to 1600. The front face, sides and lid of the chest from Kynžvart were undoubtedly part of the Japanese original designed for Portugal or Spain; impressive is the minute execution of geometric décor of the *shippotsunagi* type, which encircles the cartouches with plant patterns. The rear side of the chest, however, is decorated with a design of undoubtedly non-Japanese origin, with a motif of Chinese men and jardinière. The piece was certainly completed with its rear side and equipped with the metal fitting in Europe. The same is true for the other piece, although its rear side may be of Japanese origin.

Three pieces of lacquerware representing the other type of Japanese *namban* lacquerware, cabinets or writing desks, are focussed here. The first (colour plate VII.10), in the custody of the Náprstek Museum in Prague, is a classic example of *varqueno* (50.3 cm long, 32.8 cm high and 31.3 cm wide). Its inner walls are decorated with rectangular panels depicting scenes in the flowers-and-birds style in the low *makie* technique and inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The motifs employed are in line with the classical style of decorating products earmarked for export: Chinese bellflowers, *tachibana* citrus, prunus and *sakura* bushes and flying birds. When opened, the front lid exposes ten drawers decorated with similar arabesques. The arrangement of the drawers with a gate-shaped drawer in the middle almost faithfully imitates European originals. The second smaller piece (colour plate VII.8) (37.2 cm long, 26.2 cm high and 25 cm wide) which is also a property of the Náprstek Museum in Prague demonstrates a different decorative style. The artist mostly used mother-of-pearl cut and arranged in a lozenge-shaped lattice-like pattern. This decoration covers all the outer walls as well as inside of the drawers. The typical gate-shaped drawer in the middle is missing. Just the inner part of the lid bears decoration typical of the *namban* lacquerware in the *makie* and *raden* techniques with scroll design and vine. The third piece of this type (colour plate VII.7) – formerly a property the Lichnowsky family – is also a *varqueno*. This jewellery box is one of the smaller artifacts. Very interesting is its almost cuboid shape (the box is 30.3 cm high, 34.9 cm long and 32 cm wide). Even here, mother-of-pearl played a major role as a decorating

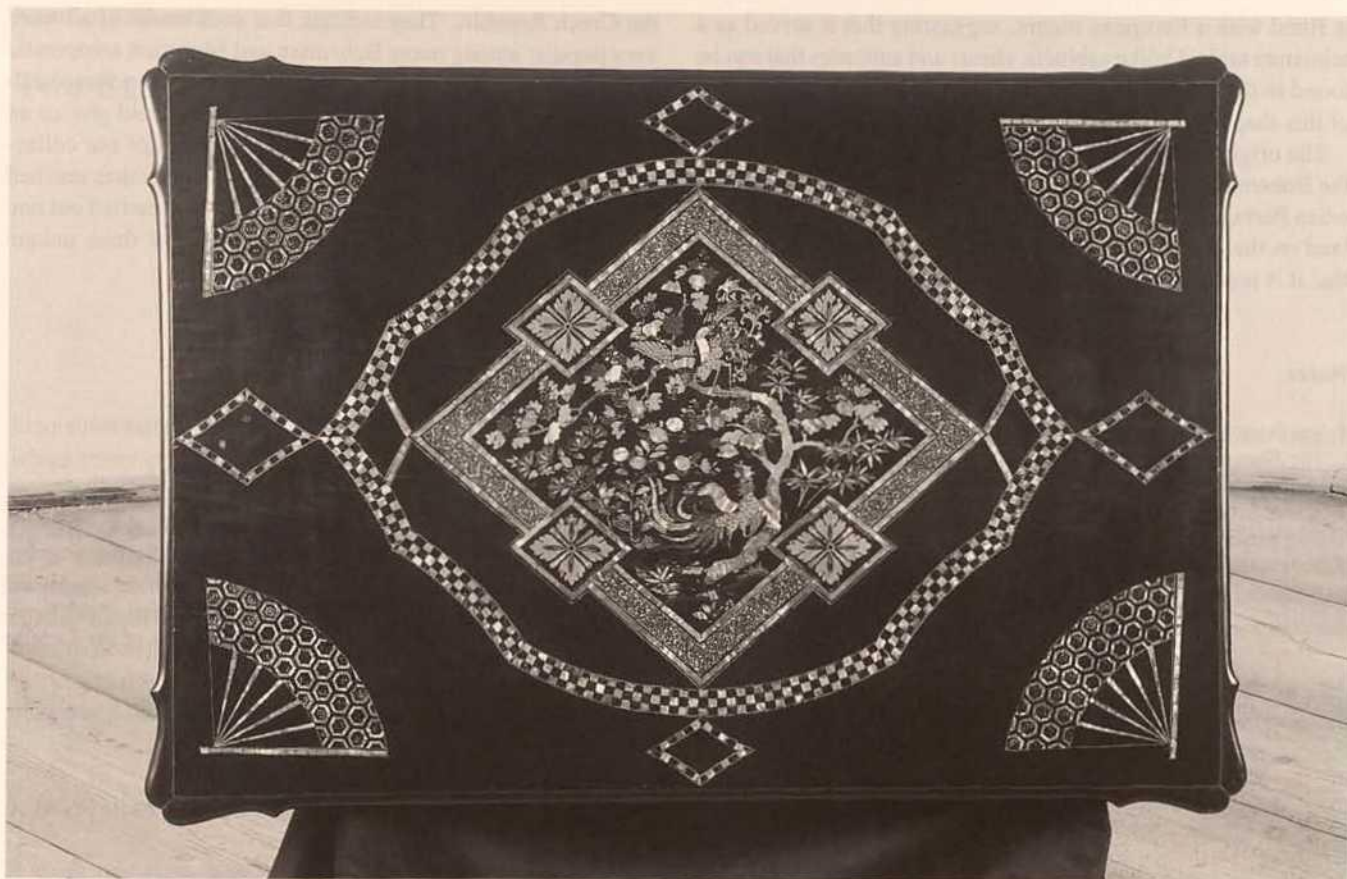


Fig. 2. Desk, top decorated in *namban* style (l. 97 cm, h. 79 cm, w. 68 cm), c. 1600, estate of the Lobkowitz family, Mělník Chateau

element. Unlike the previous piece, however, the lacquer masters employed a technique of chipping the mother-of-pearl in tiny irregular fragments with which they covered large surfaces on the front face, sides and upper side. Then, cartouches with motifs of plants, birds and wild animals were embedded in the surfaces inlaid with mother-of-pearl. The inner part of the face is similar to that of the previous artifact, but its drawers are decorated sparingly, only with geometric patterns.

Quite exceptional among the objects decorated in the *namban* style are tables or desks and chairs. Only very few have survived, however, as furniture was not a common article in the lacquer workshops of Kyoto. The Czech collections do include one example of such a desk, its top decorated in the *namban* style. The item is part of the collection of the Lobkowitz family at Mělník Chateau (fig. 2).³ The decoration of the top is designed as a square medallion in a massive mother-of-pearl frame adorned with bamboo and paulownia sprays and two phoenixes executed in the *makie* and *raden* techniques. In addition, the medallion is encircled with a lattice-like 'necklace'. In the corners of the dark brown top there are four fan-shaped medallions executed in the same technique, with motifs of hexagonal lattice or endless tortoise shell *kikkotsunagi*. While the top of the desk is lavishly decorated, its sides and legs are unadorned. This is what distinguishes this piece in the Lobkowitz collection from another well-known desk deposited in the Wilanów Palace in Warsaw.

Our last example, a *namban* artifact (fig. 3), is interesting in terms of shape. Its form imitates that of a traditional circular rice container. This form clearly shows that not all the *namban*-style

products necessarily had to be made in European moulds. This one is decorated in the gold and silver *hiramakie* and *raden* techniques. The central motif depicts three herons in the *sakura* bush, and typical Japanese flowers – chrysanthemums and Chinese bellflowers – on the edge. Inside and on the bottom decoration is missing and the wooden skeleton is covered in brown and black lacquer only. This piece, property of Kynžvart Castle,

Fig. 3. *Namban* round box (d. 53.1 cm, h. 20.8 cm), c. 1600, Kynžvart Chateau



is fitted with a European mount, suggesting that it served as a miniature table. Unlike cabinets, chests and suitcases that can be found in the world's collections in huge quantities, lacquerware of this shape is very rare.

The origin of the oldest examples of Japanese lacquerware in the Bohemian and Moravian collections is related to the period, when Portuguese and Spanish trading ships were still allowed to land on the Japanese shores. The examples shown here suggest that it is possible to find still unknown and interesting pieces in

the Czech Republic. They indicate that such works of art were very popular among many Bohemian and Moravian aristocratic families. It is disappointing, however, that we have not succeeded in finding enough archival material, which would give us an idea of when exactly these artifacts became part of our collections and disclose routes through which such products reached Bohemia. Let us hope that such research will be carried out one day and we shall learn more about the origin of these unique works of art.

Notes

- 1 See JAMES C.Y WATT/BARBARA BRENNAN FORD: *East Asian Lacquer: The Florence and Herbert Irving Collection*, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1991.
- 2 A similarly decorated coffer survives in The Netherlands. Christiaan Jörg personal communication.
- 3 For comparison see: *Exh. Cat. Japan und Europa 1543–1929*, Berlin, Berliner Festspiele, 1993, p. 269.

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Fig. 2: Photograph courtesy of the Lobkowicz family
Fig. 3: Photograph courtesy of the Kynžvart Chateau Museum
Colour plate VII.1, 2, 8, 10: Photographs courtesy of the Náprstek Museum in Prague; VII.3: Photograph courtesy of the Hluboká nad Vltavou Castle Museum; VII.4: Photograph courtesy of the Lobkowicz family; VII.5, 7: Photographs courtesy of the Hradec nad Moravicí Castle Museum; VII.6: Photograph courtesy of the Kynžvart Chateau Museum; VII.9: Photograph courtesy of the Lednice Chateau Museum