

Two Examples of Japanese Export Lacquer Chairs

Studies on Japanese export lacquer have been started in Europe, where many export lacquer objects and documents concerning them have remained, like e. g. the typical Western style chest or chest of drawers. Until recently, it was hardly possible to find other information than the year of completion and the origin of the shape. In this article I want to present two export lacquer chairs, which are now in Japan again. For these two objects I want to determine the period, when they were made from their shape and decoration. First of all, I want to concentrate on the design and the decoration techniques.

1. Decoration

A landscape makie armchair

The armchair (fig. 1), that was acquired by the Tokyo National Museum in 1997, is lacquered in black except for the seat, and decorated in *hiramakie* and *takamakie*. On one part of the U-shaped back there is a peony scroll in *hiramakie*. On the rail below the seat at the front of the chair there are sprays of flowers in *hiramakie*. On the four legs flowers, grasses, birds and a dragonfly are drawn inside a cartouche in *hiramakie*, and on the four supports there are geometrical patterns also in *hiramakie*.

The most remarkable part is the back board. On the front a landscape is drawn in *takamakie* technique (fig. 2). There are *kirikane* (small metal plate) inlays in the rocks, and distant mountains and clouds drawn in *togidashi makie*. Various techniques are used to make the composition clear. The reverse side has two parts (fig. 3): On the upper side autumn grasses and rocks are drawn, on the lower side there is a landscape in *takamakie*.

This type of pictorial style *takamakie* and geometric patterns, flower sprays, grasses within a cartouche in *hiramakie* are often found on Japanese export lacquerware from the mid or the second half of the 17th century.

Fig. 1. Landscape *makie* armchair, Tokyo National Museum; width 66.0, depth 63.5, height 105.5 cm

Fig. 2. Front side, drawing of a landscape in *takamakie*

Fig. 3. Reverse side with autumn grasses and rocks (upper side), and a landscape in *takamakie* (lower side)

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A flower arabesque makie raden folding chair

The other object is a folding chair (fig. 5), which has entered a private collection in Kyoto after the sale at Christie's in London in 1993. It was displayed at an exhibition at the Kyoto National Museum and the Fukuoka City Museum in 1995.

On the sides there are phoenixes in *takamakie* and mother-of-pearl inlay (fig. 4). On the rails and turned balusters of the back and posts there are chrysanthemum scrolls and geometric patterns in *hiramakie* and mother-of-pearl inlay (fig. 6). On part of the rail patterns are inlaid in very fine mother-of-pearl or drawn in gold and silver *hiramakie* (fig. 7). The baluster also shows mother-of-pearl inlay (fig. 8). The side is decorated with a phoenix. This type of long-tailed phoenixes is also seen on the well-known Mazarin chest at the Victoria & Albert Museum, which was made around 1640.

Fig. 4. Folding chair (cf. fig. 5), phoenixes in *takamakie* and mother-of-pearl inlay on the sides

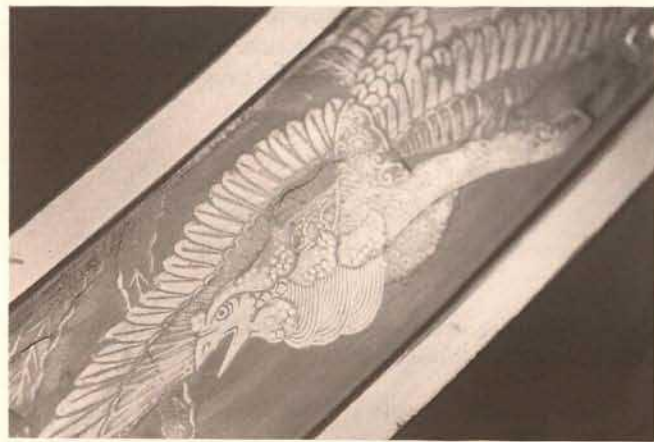


Fig. 5. Flower arabesque *makie raden* folding chair, private collection, Kyoto; width 36.0, height 67.0 cm



Fig. 6. Chrysanthemum scrolls and geometric patterns in *hiramakie* and mother-of-pearl inlay on the rails and turned balusters of the back and posts

Fig. 7. Patterns in very fine mother-of-pearl inlay and gold and silver *hiramakie* on part of the rail



Fig. 8. Mother-of-pearl inlay on the baluster





Fig. 9. Folding chair *kyokuroku* with U-shaped back, Kodai-ji temple, Kyoto



Fig. 10. Armchair *kyokuroku* with U-shaped back and four legs, Myoshin-ji temple, Kyoto

Though this type of fine mother-of-pearl inlay is very rare on export lacquerware, I think this kind of an overall decoration in *hiramakie* and mother-of-pearl inlay is one of the general characteristics of export lacquerware in the first half of the 17th century.

The decoration style can be used to attribute the two chairs to different periods. It is generally acknowledged, that an overall decoration in *hiramakie* with mother-of-pearl inlay, generally called *namban* style, disappeared before the middle of the 17th century, and was then followed by the so-called 'pictorial' style with *takamakie*. Therefore, I think I can say, that according to its decoration the folding chair was made in the first half of the 17th century and the armchair in the second half of the 17th century.

2. Shape and structure

Armchair

This type of chair with a U-shaped back is called *kyokuroku* in Japanese, but this word includes two types with different structures. One of them has four legs, the other type is a folding chair. Both forms were mainly used for rituals at temples. In pre-modern Japan people usually sat on the floor and did not use chairs in daily life. Only from the Momoyama period in the early 17th century onwards did they start using this type of chair at parades, festivals, kabuki performances or during cherry blossom festivities. This tradition was for example preserved at the Kodai-ji temple in Kyoto, which is an example of the Momoyama period (fig. 9).

Most of the Japanese U-shaped back chairs are folding chairs. Only two four-legged examples are known. The chair at the Myoshin-ji temple in Kyoto (fig. 10) has an U-shaped back and four legs, nevertheless, it is quite different from the export lacquer chair in proportion and details. But in China lots of four legged chairs with an U-shaped back were made during the Ming and Qing dynasty. The form of the export lacquer armchair seems to be more similar to Chinese than to Japanese chairs. The chair (fig. 11) from the Palace Museum in Beijing from the Kohki period (1662–1722) is very similar to the export



Fig. 11. Armchair, Kohki period (1662–1722), Palace Museum, Beijing

Fig. 12. Armchair, 18th century, Palace Museum, Beijing



lacquer chair in proportion, the shape of the posts at the back and there is a rail below the front seat. Another example (fig. 12), also in the Palace Museum in Beijing and from the 18th century, shows a different shape and more decorated parts. Particularly the way of joining the seat and legs is a new feature typical for the 18th century.

The export armchair has the same structure and form as the examples from the late 17th or early 18th century. But this is no contradiction for the dating of the decoration, which is characteristic for the second half of the 17th century.

Folding chair

Folding chairs are not only seen in the Far East but also in Europe. Figure 13 shows a Dutch chair of the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam from the 17th century. The shape of the legs and rails are very similar to the export folding chair. In the back of the folding chair there are rails with five arches between turned balusters. On top of the posts there are lions carrying shields. These are all well known features of Dutch chairs of the 2nd quarter of the 17th century. You can also see the rails with arches, balusters and lions on another example from the Rijksmuseum (fig. 14). This Dutch chair is of the same period as the one before. So the shape of the export chair is the same as Dutch chairs of the 2nd quarter of the 17th century which corresponds with the period found for the decoration.

Fig. 13. Dutch folding chair, 17th century, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam



3. Conclusions

In documents of the Dutch East India Company there is a record that in 1640 they sent a chair decorated with *makie* lacquer to the Governor General of Dutch East India from Hirado, Japan. I believe this chair was in European form just like the export folding chair referred to before. But a complex structure and carvings were needed to make a chair in European form and I suppose the Japanese had difficulties with this and also with the larger size. I think, that they began to make export chairs based on the Chinese form or that they were ordered to decorate chair frames, which had been sent from China, with a *makie* decoration.

But the European chair might still have been in demand, because it fitted into European interiors. In documents of the English East India Company there is a record from 1687 which says, that they sent chair frames from Europe to Tonkin to be lacquered there. So in the 18th century the Chinese began to make chair frames by copying the models sent from Europe and then lacquered them.

From these two examples I draw the conclusion, that export lacquer chairs changed in the 17th century in both: shape and decoration. The export folding chair with a decoration style from the first half of the 17th century also has a shape based on a Dutch chair from the same period and the armchair with the decoration style from the late 17th century has a form based on Chinese chairs from the same period.

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Fig. 14. Dutch chair, 17th century, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

