The Luxury of Chinese Lacquer
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The Luxury of Chinese Lacquer

The creation of objects from the dried sap of lacquer trees (*Rhus verniciflua*), like silk and porcelain, was a medium invented by the Chinese people. From the dawn of their civilisation, dating back to Neolithic times, the Chinese used it to great effect, creating some of the most astonishing works of art in the history of mankind, and it is not until the first century B.C. do we find evidence of it being produced by other peoples. However, unlike silk or ceramics, producing lacquer wares was not only extremely labour intensive but also poisonous to the craftsmen (although the Chinese discovered antidotes to relieve this from very early on), therefore the scale of production was relatively small, and they were always highly valued luxury items. Lacquer's preciousness meant that unlike silk or ceramics, it was not widely exported but remained largely for local use.

Although lacquer itself is one of the most durable organic substances known to men – it is impenetrable by water and resistant to acid, insects or worms – the core materials that are necessary in the production of lacquer wares, often wood or fabric, are highly perishable once the lacquer surface is penetrated. This, combined with its small production, has resulted in an incomplete archaeological record. For example, although many tombs from the Warring States and Han period have produced extensive lacquer finds, up until this decade, only two examples of Yuan carved cinnabar lacquer wares have been excavated. In the case of Yuan mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer, only a single fragment has been found. When compared to the extensive finds of ceramics and jade it is not surprising that historical accounts of the development of lacquer are limited and sometimes contradictory.

Nevertheless, lacquer's high status in Chinese society is evident from many early records. Legalist Han Feizi writing in the late Warring States period (475–221 B.C.) and Confucian scholar Huan Kuan in the Eastern Han (25–220) both voiced their opposition to the extravagance and wastefulness of using lacquer. This did not stop its popularity, and in the Han period, vessels decorated with finely executed paintings, like that found on the basin in the current exhibition (no. 1), were the preferred luxury objects for the court. The famous 4th century painting by Gu Kaizhi (345–406), *The Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies* (fig. 1), depicts a noble lady being coiffured next to mirror stands and storage boxes made of lacquer. Similarly, a painted lacquer dish (fig. 2, *Zhongguo Qiqi Quanji*, Warring States–Yuan, p. 12) excavated in the tomb dated...
to the Eastern Wu (222–280) of Zhu Ran, a Strategist and Grand Secretary, in Anhui province, depicts court nobilities banqueting and merry-making, also amongst vessels and furniture made of lacquer, similar to those seen on the *Admonitions* scroll.

Between the Han and the Tang, the styles of decoration used in lacquer wares proliferated, encompassing ever more elaborate methods designed to show the virtuosity of the craftsman and the wealth of the owner. Amongst the most highly valued of these was carved lacquer, where the design is cut with a knife through layers of lacquer thickly built up around a core. Because lacquer can only dry in thin layers (if the coating is too thick only the surface will dry properly, leaving the lacquer underneath in liquid state), the best carved lacquer has up to two hundred layers to achieve the desired thickness. This normally takes up to half a year or more to prepare before carving can start.

There is still no concrete proof when carved lacquer first appeared – while the consensus deduced from literary accounts and some tenuous prototypes points to a Tang date, some suggest it could be as early as the Han dynasty, although no examples from controlled excavations are known. The earliest true carved lacquer wares from dated excavations are from the Song dynasty, and the large black *ti*xi lacquer dish in the current exhibition (no. 2) is an example of the sophisticated execution and design that existed by this period.

Carved lacquers achieved unparalleled excellence in the Yuan and early Ming period, when craftsmen from the Xitang area in Jiangsu created some of the most well known masterpieces in the art of lacquer. These pieces mainly depict flowers and birds or figures in landscape beside architectural structures. The former seem to have evolved from Song dynasty engraved silver (fig. 3a, b), while the latter clearly are related to academic paintings of palaces (fig. 4a, b). The floral pieces have a naturalistic style and harmonious compositions which gives a sense of space and depth, and are meticulously polished at the edges to give a rounded finish. The extremely rare sutra stand (no. 4) and crisply carved pen tray (no. 5) are wonderful examples of this type.

Between the Xuande and Jiajing reigns, very few lacquer pieces bear reign marks, probably indicating that the court reduced consumption of these costly pieces. Many that are dated to the mid-Ming period used in the Palace were probably commissioned from local craftsmen or might not originally be intended for the court. The Hongzhi marked box and cover in the British Museum, for example, was made in the Gansu area in West China, far away from the capital. Without a substantial number of these dated pieces or excavated materials, stylistic analysis is used to date these pieces, and it can sometimes prove to be a difficult task, especially when it appears that a revival of the Yuan style became prevalent in the carved lacquer of this period.

In order to distinguish between these two groups it is necessary to carefully examine Chinese lacquers documented and preserved in Japan, which from the Tang period onwards had been sent as diplomatic gifts between the two countries or Buddhist temples. In these early pieces it is possible to observe the close correspondence of the lacquer landscapes to Chinese paintings, with the abstracted clouds, water and ground all correctly and logically placed (fig. 5a). However, although the pieces of the 16th century are still characterised by a certain freedom and freshness in execution, subtle changes in the ground pattern, and the details of the decorative schemes on these pieces often point to a later date (fig. 5b). This can be seen in the box and cover (no. 9), the oval tray (no. 11), and the tiered box (no. 7) in the current exhibition.

Another highly elaborate and time consuming technique that reached its maturity in the Yuan was ‘filled-in lacquer’, or *tianqi*, where the decoration is carved away from an existing lacquer ground and different colours filled in, creating a polychrome surface. In the early 17th century, Liu Tong comments that connoisseurs found carved lacquer and filled-in lacquer most desirable. However, because of its rarity, early examples of *tianqi* were many times more expensive than their carved lacquer counterparts.

The magnificent 15th century *tianqi* lacquer cabinet (no. 3), the largest and most complete of its type known, would undoubtedly have excited such connoisseurs. Superbly decorated in five different colours with vivid scenes of the Daoist paradise with the outlines picked out in gold dust, it recalls the legendary work of the early Yuan dynasty lacquer master Peng Junbao, who in the *Gegu Yaolun* of the early 15th century is recorded as making consummate gilded lacquers with landscapes, human figures, pavilions, flowers trees, birds and animals.

Given that *tianqi* was held in such high regard, it is not surprising that it was favoured by the imperial Ming court, as can be seen on the rare early 15th century offering tray (no. 6) and a magnificent cabinet of the Wanli period (no. 8). *Tianqi* lacquers used at court display a more formal ‘Imperial’ style, utilising symbols of imperial power like the dragon and phoenix combined with auspicious motifs or Buddhist and Daoist symbols in formal arrangements, with the motifs often highly...
stylised. These contrasts sharply with the naturalism and freedom found in carved lacquers of the earlier period.

The prestige of lacquer is underscored by the large number of master craftsmen whose names are known to us today, and many of the best pieces are signed. This can be compared to the complete absence of famous potters and a general paucity of the names of craftsmen working in any other medium (excepting bamboo and rhinoceros horn carvings, although in both cases signed pieces appear much later in the 16th century). Under the Ming, new regulations were put in place allowing lacquer craftsmen to avoid drafted labour by electing and paying replacements to perform duty in their place. In this exhibition there are two signed works dating to the 17th century, the carved lacquer pouring cup by Yang Ming (no. 12), and the set of four lacquer hangings by Jiang Qianli (no. 16).

The latter specialised an elaborate technique of mother of pearl inlay where the thin inner layers of shells of varying hues were used, creating a delicate and nuanced appearance, with rich pure gold and silver metallic inlays adding to the sense of luxury as the glittering decoration catches light and shimmers lustrously against a black background.

His work was so famous that it was compared to that of his contemporary and compatriot in Yangzhou, the famous painter Zha Shibiao (1655–1698). Looking at how skillfully he translates a series of album leaves using mother of pearl, gold, silver and copper inlays, it is easy to see why this was the case.

The beginning of the Qing dynasty saw the florescence of many different lacquer traditions. The Imperial style continued, the stylised patterns combining to create ever more complex and elaborate designs, such as those on the hexagonal jardinière (no. 26). The use of lacquer in conjunction with other precious materials, such as seen on the jade-inset ornament (no. 25) and the inlaid chest (no. 27) also became fashionable. However, we do still find lacquer pieces made outside the court displaying a restrained elegance. The xipi box (no. 13) shows how the elaborate and difficult technique of marbled lacquer could be used to produce an object of great purity suitable for the most severely neo-Confucian scholar. The set of bone-inlaid lacquer pieces (nos. 19–22) also displays an austere aesthetic, sparsely interposing the pale elements of bone on the dark background. Similarly, the pair of small polychrome dishes (no. 18), probably used as teacup stands, are painted with such charm and delicacy, as to transform the most mundane utensils into objects of delight and luxury.
發達到這種境地，我們需要對在日本保存下來的海器作詳細的研究，唐朝以降，海器常被用作兩國交涉的贈品。許多年前的海器因為得以如此確切地保存，使得海器的研 evidenced its rich and varied aesthetic qualities. In this manner, the study of these artifacts provides valuable insights into the artistic and cultural traditions that underpinned this ancient exchange system.

另一項特別值得注意的裝飾手法是【地區】，所謂『遠海刻印海馬』，形似鼠海馬，藝可謂高，久顯奇功，現時期特別典型地見於江蘇吳江等處出土的石雕及青銅器等物上。後期的吳江某器中保存着周氏的墨跡，可見原來的海馬是『遠海刻印海馬』，但此時期兩者已分離，不能相提並論。此器的款識中，『遠海刻印海馬』始於西漢，於東漢階級而大盛。若非如此之遠海刻印海馬，則不知為何器。此器的款識中，『遠海刻印海馬』始於西漢，於東漢階級而大盛。若非如此之遠海刻印海馬，則不知為何器。此器的款識中，『遠海刻印海馬』始於西漢，於東漢階級而大盛。若非如此之遠海刻印海馬，則不知為何器。此器的款識中，『遠海刻印海馬』始於西漢，於東漢階級而大盛。若非如此之遠海刻印海馬，則不知為何器。
A PAINTED BROWN LACQUER CIRCULAR BASIN

Han Dynasty

The circular basin, the central medallion finely painted with two fish around a mythical bird, in red on a brown ground. The cavetto painted in dark brown and red with a geometric band. The rim covered in gilt-copper.

26.2 cm. diam.

Compare a similarly painted basin but decorated in black on red lacquer (fig. 6), illustrated in Zhongguoqiqiquanji2 zhanguo-qin pp. 128, no. 113. Sir Harry Garner describes this group of vessels with fine and fluent line paintings, instead of the wider brush strokes found on normal wares, as Imperial style wares made for the nobility of the time. These were mainly made in Imperial factories set up by the court, three of which, in Chengdu, Guanghan and Henan, were devoted to the manufacture of lacquer wares.
2 A BLACK TIXI LACQUER CIRCULAR DISH

Southern Song Dynasty

The circular dish carved deeply through layers of black and red lacquer with two tiers of ruyi scrolls around a pair of confronting triangular tendrils. The reverse of the dish further decorated with a band of ruyi heads above a straight foot.

32 cm. diam.

Tixi lacquer wares were probably the first true carved lacquers developed by the Chinese. Although they were very popular both in China and Japan, and were made over a long period of time – from at least as early as the Song period to the end of Qing – their origins seem obscure. The earliest excavated examples are from the Southern Song period and already display highly sophisticated designs and execution, so it seems likely that there were even earlier prototypes. A curious tixi lacquer box and cover (fig. 7), published in 2000 years of Chinese Lacquer, Chinese University of Hong Kong, no. 20, p. 55, from an unknown source is dated to the 5th century and has characteristics of Han period lacquer. If so, this box could be the earliest example we have of tixi lacquer.

The origin of the unusually shaped scrolls found on these pieces is still uncertain. However, it is very possible that they relate to the scrolls found on archaic jade pieces, such as those on Warring States jade discs (fig. 8); Jade bi, early Warring States period, Yang Boda, Zhongguo yuqi quanji (I) simplified Chinese version, Hebei, no. 178, p. 275.). The heart-shaped scrolls on the Hong Kong University box are reminiscent to some of the scrolls seen on the jades.

The scrolls found on the current dish are very similar to two other excavated Southern Song pieces. One is a black lacquer mirror box excavated in the Wujin county of Jiangsu (fig. 9) illustrated in Zhongguo qiqi quanji 4 – Sanguo – Yuan, Fujian, 1998, no. 124; the other is a red tixi box excavated in Fuzhou Chuyuan Shan (fig. 10). Both have similar confronting triangular motif at the centre, the so-called jianhuan scroll described by Huang Cheng in his Xiushilu. Jianhuan, literally 'sword ring' has always been mistranslated as 'pommel' or sword-hilt in the West, but actually means 'sword guard' in classical Chinese, as the triangular scroll resembles a Chinese sword guard.

An identical black tixi lacquer dish is in the Hayashibara Art Museum in Okayama (fig. 11) illustrated in Hyashibara Bijutsukan, Okayama, no. 164, p. 148). Compare also a red tixi lacquer dish with identical pattern from the Nezu Museum illustrated in The Colours and Forms of Song and Yuan China, Tokyo, 2004, no. 68.
A MAGNIFICENT TIANQI LACQUER ‘DAOIST PARADISE’ CABINET

15th Century

The cabinet of rectangular shape, decorated with filled-in lacquer of black, green, red, brown and yellow, incised and gilt on each side with a large lobed panel depicting elaborate palace style buildings set in heavenly mountainous landscapes: at the front with a majestic palace compound, its main building surrounded by vaporous ruyi-shaped clouds ascending to the sky; at the top with multi-peaked sacred mountains flanked by buildings and under the sun; at the back with roiling waves crashing against the rocks and inhabited by auspicious animals such as cranes, phoenixes and deer; and at the sides with processions of immortal figures as if paying tribute. The panels are surrounded by sprays of chrysanthemums, camellias and peonies, and reserved on a trellis ground embellished with wan symbol. The front panel opens to reveal ten drawers in the interior of different sizes, each similarly decorated with various plants in landscapes.

64 cm. high x 82 cm. wide x 59 cm. deep

Provenance: Manno Collection, Osaka
This magnificent cabinet represents the Daoist paradise, with fantastical landscapes and palace buildings inhabited by auspicious animals and immortals including the Queen Mother of the West and the Eight Daoist Immortals. It is curious to note that apart from the immortals on either side of the cabinet, the front, the top and the back are devoid of any divine figures. It is very possible that these represent the residences of the three highest ranking Daoist deities, the Three Purities (San Qing): Taishang Laojun (Great Highest Elder Lord; Laozi), Yuanshi Tianzun (Celestial Worthy of Primordial Beginning) and Lingbao Tianzun (Celestial Worthy of Spiritual Treasure). It is recorded in the Ming novel Fengshen Yanyi (The Investiture of the Gods) that Taishang Laojun’s residence is the Bajing Palace in the Xuandu Cavern of Daluo Paradise, while Yuanshi Tianzun lives in the Kunlun Mountains, and Lingbao Tianzun resides on the Jin’ao Island. These are represented by the elaborate palace compound on the front, the majestic mountains on the top, and the island in the turbulent waves on the back of the current chest.

It is possible that the recipient of the chest sees himself as the God residing in the palace, with the immortals gathering to pay tribute to him. As the Eight Daoist Immortals and Queen Mother of the West are often related to birthday celebrations and longevity, it is very also possible that this chest was made for the recipient’s birthday.

Compare an example bearing the mark of Xuande, and probably of the period, also depicting Daoist paradises in the Yamagata Provincial Museum, Japan (fig. 12, illustrated Chinese Art in Overseas Collections – Lacquerware, National Palace Museum, 1987, no. 136, p. 139). An even earlier depiction of this popular scene can be found on a kesi panel dated to the Northern Song dynasty (960–1127) in the collection of the National Palace Museum, Taipei (fig. 13, illustrated When Silk Was Gold, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1997, fig. 14, p. 57).

Fig. 12

Fig. 13
A CARVED BLACK LACQUER REVERSIBLE SUTRA STAND

Yuan Dynasty

The stand has a single groove along the length of one side for display, and a double groove on the other for reading. The single side is decorated in the groove with three peony blooms on leafy stems, above lotus petals around the neck. The sides are variously decorated with chrysanthemum, gardenia, camellia and prunus. The double groove is decorated with meandering camellia and further peony blooms, all against a red background.

38 cm. long x 8 cm. wide x 5 cm. high
This rare sutra stand is a beautiful work of art as well as an ingenious piece of design. The roll-up sutra scroll can be placed on the single-groove side while not in use, and reverently placed on an altar. When the sutra is unfolded and read, it can be placed on the double-groove side to mark the place of last reading, should the reader be disrupted and need to stop, as sutras are normally of considerable length and often take a few sessions of reading to complete.

The carving on the current stand is very typical of Yuan lacquer carving. Very similar treatment of floralscrolls can be found on the side of a carved cinnabar lacquer box and cover signed by Zhang Cheng in the Hong Kong Museum of Art (fig. 14 illustrated in Zhongguo qiqi quanji 4, no. 160, p. 176). The treatment of gardenia and the chrysanthemum is remarkably similar on both pieces.
A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER TRAY

Early Yuan Dynasty

The tray is of rectangular shape with slightly canted corners. It is carved in the interior with two long-tailed birds in mutual pursuit amongst a dense ground of blossoming peonies borne on leafy branches. The edge of the rim is embellished with trellis pattern, and the reverse with a composite floral scroll.

34 cm. wide

This type of carved lacquer, finely carved on a relatively thin ground, with widely spaced sprays of leaves and flowers, showing very little overlap and turning of the leaves and petals, illustrates how ideas regarding early carved lacquers have changed over the last few decades.

A box and cover in the Victoria and Albert museum along with a flower-pot (zha dou) in the Beijing Palace Museum (fig. 15), both with Yuan dynasty Yang Mao marks, were consigned to the 16th century by Sir Harry Garner in the 1970’s primarily on the basis of the relatively thin ground and flat carving when compared to late 14th and early 15th century imperially marked lacquers. However, since then, a dated Yuan carved lacquer table in Canton was excavated, it’s thin ground and open floral sprays being very similar to the Palace Museum and Victoria and Albert pieces (fig. 16). The two pieces are now acknowledged to be masterpieces of Yuan carved lacquer by Yang Mao.

Our understanding of the evolution of carved lacquer has also been substantially advanced by the recent publication and exhibition of early lacquers (many from Japanese temple collections) by the Nezu Institute of Fine Arts. A black box and cover with a feng and huang (male and female phoenix) amidst floral sprays dating to the southern Song dynasty shows no overlap in the design, and large open areas of yellow background (fig. 17). Another dish dated to the late Song/early Yuan has two birds amidst floral sprays (fig. 18), and is closely comparable to our tray, in both the design and the details of the execution, although this tray is even more finely and clearly carved.

Thus it is possible to suggest a chronology where carved lacquers evolved from thinner ground pieces with simpler, flatter designs, which by the late Yuan had become thicker and more complex. This is followed in the early Ming with the cheesier and more complex pieces, which however had lost a little of the freedom of composition that is evident in the earlier pieces.
A TIANQI LACQUER OFFERING TRAY AND COVER, WITH THREE ASSOCIATED STEM BOWLS

The tray Yongle Period or Earlier, The Bowls Kangxi

The tray and cover of rectangular shape, decorated with filled-in lacquer and gilt on the cover with six blossoming lotuses in profile centering on two full-frontal lotuses, each colored in vermillion bearing one of Eight Buddhist Emblems in yellow. The blooms are borne on curled leafy tendrils decorated in yellow, vermillion and two tones of green, all against a dark brown background. The sides of the box are decorated with twenty further smaller blooms on curled stems. The similarly arranged lotuses on the tray are all full-frontal, with the outer six each enclosing a circular aperture. The foot of the tray is pierced with eight ruyi-shaped apertures between two parallel lotus scrolls.

14.7 cm. high x 43.7 cm. wide x 29 cm. deep

In late Ming writer Liu Tong’s (circa 1593–1636) DijingjingwuLue (Brief Accounts of Scenes in the Imperial Capital), it is recorded that:

“Tianqi - carved with flowers and birds, filled with coloured and unctuous lacquer, polished flat like a painting. The longer time passes, the newer it appears... its archaic colours are dark and lustrous, and very few examples have been passed down, so they are many times more expensive than carved cinnabar lacquers. (juan4)

Gao Shiqi (1645–1704) of the early Qing in his Jinao tuishi biji (Retirement Notes at the Golden Tortoise Bridge) goes on to say:

“Both (filled-in and carved cinnabar lacquer) are called changzhi (made by Guoyuan chang), and are much treasured through generations, although difficult to acquire. (juan 10)
Guoyuanchang was the Imperial lacquer workshop set up during the Yongle period to manufacture lacquer pieces for the court. Only two types of lacquer were apparently made in this workshop – carved cinnabar lacquer and filled-in lacquer, the former being the majority. This rare tray, probably used in a Buddhist temple as an altar offering-tray, can be stylistically dated to the early 15th century, so it was highly likely made in the Guoyuanchang. Only one other piece of tianqi lacquer dated to the early 15th century, a cabinet decorated with dragon and phoenix in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is recorded, and it has comparable lotus scrolls around the central panel (fig. 20 illustrated by Sheila Vankier in Chinese Silk: A Cultural History, Rutberg University Press, New Jersey, 2004, pl. 90, p. 139.)

Similar multi-layered lotuses with the distinctive curled petal can be seen on the back slat of the carved lacquer chair, also in the Victoria and Albert Museum (fig. 21 Sir Harry Garner, Chinese Lacquer, London, 1979, fig. 86, p. 145.) See also the carved lacquer box (fig. 22 Zhongguo qiqi quanzhi, Fujian, 2002, no. 103, p. 120-121). The current tray was acquired with three stem bowls, made later in the Kangxi period to replace the lost originals. They compare closely with two covered boxes of the Kangxi period in the palace museum illustrated in Qiong Long. The Complete Collection of Treasures of the Palace Museum – 46, Hong Kong, 2006, no. 72, p. 104 (fig. 25). Many of the incomplete furniture pieces in the Palace have Kangxi replacements, an indication that large-scale restoration works were carried out during this period.

The circular openings would have been made for inserting stem bowls, made of either lacquer or porcelain. There are several tables dated to the Ming period with these openings in the Palace Museum, Beijing (fig. 24 illustrated in Furniture of the Ming and Qing Dynasties (I) – The Complete Collection of Treasures of the Palace Museum – 53, Hong Kong, 2002, no. 103, p. 120-121).
A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER THREE-TIERED BOX AND STAND

Mid-Ming Period, Second Half 15th Century 明中期
The box of quatrefoil section and carved on the cover with a scholar and two attendants between rockworks and below a pine tree, the sides are variously carved with peach blooms, peony, chrysanthemum and gardenia. The stand has an arched bracket frame terminating in large ruyi shaped panels, carved all over in a profusion of flowering peonies.
23.5 cm. high x 17 cm. wide
Provenance: Manno Collection, Osaka
This beautifully carved carved lacquer box is a fine example of mid-Ming lacquer work, and is particularly rare for the elaborate original stand, which has survived in remarkable condition. The carving on the current carved box, although very much in keeping with the Yuan style, displays various idiosyncrasies when compared to Yuan examples. Firstly, the sky/water pattern on the cover have been simplified to a trellis ground, instead of the parallel scrolls seen on Yuan pieces, which requires much more skill. Secondly, the arrangement of floral scrolls on the sides and the stand has lost the more naturalistic sensitivity of earlier pieces, and appears a profusion of scattered motifs. A rectangular dish carved with a scholar and his attendant gathering herbs in the Palace Museum, Beijing (fig. 26 Zhongguo qiqi quanji, vol. 5, no. 81, p. 81) also has similar trellis for the sky. A similar arrangement of scattered floral motifs can be seen in the panels of a square dish, also in the Palace Museum, Beijing (fig. 27 Zhongguo qiqi quanji, vol. 5, no. 76, p. 76). A remarkably similar quatrefoil carved lacquer box (without its carrying stand) can be seen in the 16th century Painter Du Jie's masterpiece "Ladies in the Palace" (Frontispiece) illustrated in 'Shimao Fengqing: Highlights of Ancient Chinese Figure Painting in the Liaoning Provincial Museum and The Shanghai Museum', vol. 1, pp. 51, shows how this box might have been used to contain scholarly ephemera during an outdoor literary gathering.
A TIANQI LACQUER ‘DRAGON’ CABINET

The cabinet is of rectangular shape divided into two sections and standing on an integral base. The upper part has a hinged top cover opening to reveal a shallow storage compartment. The lower section has a removable front panel concealing four drawers. The top, back, two sides and the removable panel are similarly decorated with pairs of confronting dragons rising from waves and three mountains below, flanking two millet sprays and a sword plunged into a further mountain borne on clouds. The front of the storage compartment and the four drawers are decorated with pairs of horizontal dragons. All are reserved on a red ground of wan-symbol trellis, apart from the edges and the base with camellia scrolls or waves on a yellow ground. The interior and the base is lacquered black. The tianqi lacquer mark is in the upper centre on the back, while the incised mark is on the base.

71.5 cm. high x 53.5 cm. wide x 52.5 cm. deep
This tianqi lacquer cabinet is one of the most impressive 16th century filled-in lacquer wares, and only one other example of similar quality and size is known in the Musée Guimet in Paris, although it appears to be unpublished. A cabinet decorated in mother-of-pearl inlay on black ground with very similar decoration and unusual metal fittings is in the Palace Museum, Beijing, illustrated in Zhongguo qiqi quanji, vol. 5, p. 163, no. 154 (fig. 28). The motif of sword and millet on the current cabinet is very unusual. The wan-symbol and the sharp (li) sword combine to make Wanli – the name of the emperor's reign name, while the millet (he) is a synonym to peace, beside its connotation of a bumper harvest. It could therefore be read as a good wish for peace and prosperity for the Emperor's reign.

Fig. 28

Mark
A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER CIRCULAR BOX AND COVER

The box and cover is of circular shape. The cover is decorated with two scholars playing chess under a pine tree, being watched by an elder holding a staff and two attendants, one carrying a back sack, the other holding a qin. The box is decorated with a deer and a crane in flight beside a pine tree and amongst other vegetation and rockworks.

10.5 cm. diam.
A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER BRUSH AND COVER

Ming Dynasty, 16th Century

The cover is carved with a bearded elderly figure, DongFangShuo, carrying a branch laden with peaches on his shoulders. The top of the cover is carved with a shou character. The brush is decorated with an official standing under a large fan held by a young attendant, beside a pine tree and against a ground of honeycomb pattern.

26 cm. long

A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER OVAL DISH

Mid-Ming Period

The dish is of oval shape with a flat base and upturned sides. It is carved in the centre within an octafoil panel depicting the Tiger-taming Luohan seated on a mat, his right hand raised and holding a circular implement, wearing loose flowing robes gathered in folds above the splayed legs. He is confronted by a subjugated tiger, and surrounded by five boys in a rocky landscape dominated by a pine tree. The interior rim is carved with key pattern, and the exterior with ribboned precious objects.

21.8 cm. wide

This is another fine example of mid-Ming carved lacquer which displays characteristics of Yuan style. The use of shaped panel is very much popular during the Yuan period, and the treatment of figures and rockwork is reminiscent of that on 14th century pieces. However, the ground pattern has been simplified to a single type of trellis, and the precious objects on the reverse have all but dissolved into almost abstract patterns - features that point to a later dating.

Compare a mother-of-pearl inlaid dish depicting a very similar Tiger-taming Luohan in the Simon Kwan Collection (fig. 29, illustrated in Chinese mother-of-pearl, Muwentang Collection, series no. 15, no. 59, p. 176). Note that the Kwan example also has a mixture of Daoist and Buddhist precious objects on the reverse, a sign that the amalgamation of Buddhism and Daoism which began in the Yuan period is now deeply rooted in the popular consciousness.

Fig. 29
A SMALL CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER POURING CUP

Signed Xitang Yangming Zao, 16th Century

The cup is of oval section with a wide pouring mouth. It is carved around one side with a bird perching on blossoming camellia branches, on the other with a further bird on prunus branches above bamboo. The handle is carved with a chilong head terminating in a ruyi-shaped panel containing the signature.

10.5 cm. wide

Yang Ming was a late Ming lacquer craftsman from the Xitang area. He was obviously also a learned man as he annotated Huang Cheng's Xiushilu, one of the most comprehensive records of lacquer production in the Ming period. No other carved lacquer pieces with Yang Ming's signature appears to have been published, although an oval lacquer dish signed Yong Ming zuo (Made by Yang Ming) from the Plisch Collection was sold in Christie's London, 3 November 2009, lot 178.
A XIPI LACQUER BOX AND COVER

17/18th Century

The box is of rectangular shape. Lacquered all over with mixed layers of red, yellow, brown, green and black lacquer to create a marbled effect, and fitted with original baition clasps and hinges.

15 cm. high x 47 cm. wide x 27 cm. deep
The term *xipi*, literally ‘rhinoceros skin’, describes a type of lacquer where the pattern was made by applying successive layers of different colours on a base of raised moulded lacquer, and then polished flat to reveal the pattern. It is relatively uncommon and seems to have been made after the 16th century. The Ming examples usually have spiral scrolls, while the Qing examples have irregular patterns, like the current box. Compare a lacquered table of similar surface, formerly in the E. T. Chow Collection, sold Sotheby's Hong Kong, 3rd May 1994, lot 297.
A CARVED CINNABAR AND BLACK LACQUER MINIATURE STAND

Ming Period, 16th Century

The stand has a square top and incurved leg terminating on a square stretcher base with ruyi-shaped feet. It is carved on the top through the cinnabar lacquer to a black-lacquer ground with blossoming camellia. The same decoration is repeated around the lobed apron and the legs between bands of key pattern and trellis around the rim, waist and base.

9 cm. high

A CARVED CINNABAR LACQUER MINIATURE ROULEAU VASE

Mid-Ming Dynasty, Second Half 15th Century

The cylindrical vase has a slightly flaring neck. It is carved around the exterior with branches of flowering magnolia, osmanthus and prunus against a ground of trailing water pattern below a band of key-pattern around the rim.

11 cm. high

The design and carving of this charming vase is reminiscent of a brushpot carved with prunus in the Palace Museum, Beijing (fig. 30 illustrated in Zhongguo qiqi quanji, Fujian, 1995, no. 54, p. 55). However, the dating of the current vase could be slightly earlier, as it retains the trailing water pattern typically found on 14th century carved lacquer dishes, such as that on the ‘feet-washing’ dish formerly in the Lee Family Collection, sold in Christie’s Hong Kong, 1st December 2020, lot 1811.
A SET OF FOUR MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAID PANELS

Signed Jiang Qianli, Late Ming/Early Qing Period, 17th Century

The panels are of rectangular shape, each finely inlaid in mother-of-pearl and gold. Each are decorated variously with panels containing butterflies, birds, deer or poetic inscriptions.

Each 80 cm. high x 47 cm. wide
It is recorded in Jiaqingchongxiuyangzhoufuzhi (Gazetteer of Yangzhou Prefecture Revised in the Jiaqing Reign) that:

In the Kangxi period, there was a scholar in Weiyang named ZhaErzhan (Shibiao), who excelled in painting level-field landscapes and Mi-Family style paintings. If one could obtain even a small piece of his work, it was considered a treasure. There was also Jiang Qiushui (Qianli), whose mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer wares were most refined and delicate, and no one's table is without them. There was a saying: Cups and dishes everywhere are by Jiang Qiushui; Scrolls and hangings in all households from ZhaErzhan.

Jiang Qiushui's popularity was such that a proliferation of pieces that bears his mark were made, even well into the 19th century, however, few of these are by him. A ewer in the former Chinese History Museum and a set of five panels in the Hebei Provincial Cultural Bureau (fig. 31, ibid, no. 189, p. 204) are generally considered his work. The use of gold and silver inlays alongside mother-of-pearl on the Hebei panel is reminiscent of those on the current panels, as well as the style of inlay work. Furthermore, one of the current pieces bears the name of Duo Lun (year unknown), an official of the Kangxi reign. His daughter married one of Kangxi's grandsons, Prince Yong Xiang, and he went on to become the Right Vice Minister of The Board of Rites in 1756.

Fig. 31
A MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAID CHEST

Kangxi Period

The chest has a hinged top cover, double doors and stands on an integral stand. The front is inlaid in fine pieces of mother-of-pearl and gold foil with ladies and boys engaging in leisure pursuits in a courtyard garden between two large pavilions. The sides are inlaid with further boys at play, and the back with flowering plants.

34.7 cm. high
The style of inlay work on the current chest is very close to that of a large mother-of-pearl inlaid paneling table in the Palace Museum, Beijing. Both are influenced by the works of master craftsman Jiang Qianli, who pioneered the ‘scattered-shell’ technique, where pieces of minute shells are used en masse to create texture, as well as the use of gold foil alongside fine mother-of-pearl inlays. The treatment of rockwork, floral design, and the use of panels on a fine trellis ground on both pieces are also very similar. The Palace table is dated to the xinwei year of Kangxi, corresponding to 1691, and it can be assumed that the current chest was also made in the similar period.
A PAIR OF BLACK-GROUND POLYCHROME PAINTED LACQUER CIRCULAR DISHES

Early 18th Century, Probably Yongzheng Period

The dishes have slightly everted rims and flat bases. One is painted in the centre in green, yellow, silver, red, brown and gilt with two frogs amongst flowering lotuses, all against a black ground; the other is similarly painted with two rabbits beside a flowering osmanthus tree below the full moon.

14 cm. diam.

These dishes were probably used as teacup stands. Compare a painted lacquer teacup plate of ink-stand form from the Yongzheng period in the Palace Museum, Beijing (fig. 32 illustrated in Qing Lacquer Wares: Complete Collection of Treasures of the Palace Museum, no. 155, p. 205). There are no carved cinnabar lacquer pieces dated to the Yongzheng period in the Palace, while records show that the Yongzheng emperor had a preference to painted lacquer. The refined modelling and delicate painting found on the current dishes are in keeping with the Yongzheng style and could have been made in his reign.

Fig. 32
A BONE-INLAID BLACK LACQUER CHEST

18th Century

The chest is of rectangular shape standing on an integral base. It is inlaid in bone and highlighted in gilt and ink on the front with a group of seven boys playing in a courtyard garden below a phoenix in flight and watched by a scholar and his wife; the sides and top are similarly decorated with boys and figures.

35 cm. high x 35 cm. wide x 23 cm. deep

A BONE-INLAID BLACK LACQUER KANG TABLE

18th Century

The table of rectangular shape with short cabriole legs and shaped aprons, inlaid in bone on the top with a procession led by a dignitary being greeted by four kneeling figures offering tributes, all set in a landscape. The sides, aprons and legs decorated with floral sprays, butterflies, auspicious objects and chilong.

101 cm. wide x 63.5 cm. deep x 26 cm. high

A BONE-INLAID BLACK LACQUER DOCUMENT BOX

18th Century

The box is of rectangular shape and inlaid at the top in bone with a panel depicting the meeting of two officials, the visitor with attendants bearing various gifts for the host, all set in a landscaped garden. The sides are decorated with floral sprays.

34 cm. long x 18.5 cm. wide x 6 cm. high

Compare a very similar document box in the Palace Museum, Beijing (Zhongguoqiqiquanji – Qing, no. 250, p. 203). Although this box is in the Imperial collection, it is unlikely that boxes of this type were made for the court, as the subjects commonly found on these pieces – normally involving officials or dignitaries meeting each other bearing gifts – were of a more popular nature. The combination of pale coloured bone against a black-lacquer ground is very effective, however, and since the decorations are normally fairly sparsely arranged, these pieces normally appear restrained and elegant.
A BONE-INLAID BLACK LACQUER BOX  

18th Century  十八世纪

The box of rectangular shape inlaid in bone on the top with a panel depicting young officials paying a visit to their superior, all set in a landscaped garden. The sides with various antique objects and prunus blossoms.

57.5 cm. wide x 17.5 cm. deep x 11 cm. high

A BONE-INLAID BLACK LACQUER STEPPED BOX  

18th Century  十八世纪

The box is of squat ‘T’-shape. It is inlaid in bone on the top with official and martial figures next to pavilions obscured by clouds below the moon, between antique objects. The front and sides are similarly decorated with antique objects and prunus blossoms.

72 cm. wide x 17 cm. wide x 11.5 cm. high

The unusual shape of this box suggest that it was used over the poles of a sedan chair. A similarly shaped box (illustrated in Chinese Lacquer, London, 1979, fig. 198, fig. 33) is in the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada.

此盒ですが形状、書章中列居、上方突出處理最先端様之上。加拿大多倫多博物館藏有一件形式相仿之箱箱。
A MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAID BLACK LACQUER TABLE SCREEN

Kangxi Period

The screen is of rectangular shape, finely inlaid in shades of thin mother-of-pearl on one side with a maid kneeling in front of her mistress, and an attendant holding a cane, inside a courtyard house with verdant trees, rocks and vine-strewn trellis in the garden. The reverse is inlaid with inscription.

23 cm. high x 12.2 cm. wide

The inscription is taken from the Tale of the West Chamber, and can be translated:

Oh Mistress, if you could let it be, then let it be. Why dwell in such triviality? It is said when a daughter has grown up, she is hard to keep!

The kneeling figure in the image is Hong Niang, the maid of the heroine of the tale, Cui Yingying, who is being questioned by Madame Cui for her part in the matchmaking of her young mistress and the scholar Zhang Sheng. It is one of the most popular scenes in the story, popularised by the opera Kao Hong (The Interrogation of Hong Niang).

Table screens like these are popular in the early 18th century. Often they are decorated with popular tales such as the current screen, but sometimes also depict more elegant scenes, such as the pair of screens in the Hong Kong Museum exhibition 2000 years of Chinese Lacquer (fig. 34 Hong Kong, no. 94, p. 181) decorated with landscapes.

A MOTHER-OF-PEARL INLAID LACQUER AND JADE-INSET ORNAMENT

18th Century

The ornament is shaped as a flower basket, finely inlaid in thin mother-of-pearl on a black lacquer ground with various trellis and floral designs. The interior is inlaid with two white jade plaques, carved in shallow relief with narcissus and lingzhi issuing from wicker work.

9.2 cm. long
A CARVED THREE-COLOURED LACQUER HEXAFOIL
JARDINIERE

Qianlong 乾隆

The jardinière stands on six ruyi-shaped feet and flares to an everted rim. It is carved around the outside through cinnabar and yellow to reveal the black ground with six panels, each enclosing a scholar and his attendant gathering herbs in mountainous landscape. The panels are surrounded by dense lotus scrolls and below a band of key pattern around the rim.

24 cm. wide
The Qianlong emperor was very fond of carved lacquer, but it would appear that the complex techniques and craftsmanship required to produce it have not been passed down to the lacquer workers in the palace workshops. This is evident in the fact that ivory and bamboo carver Feng Qi was ordered by the emperor to attempt carving lacquer in the 3rd year of Qianlong, without much success; and in the 45th year of Qianlong, three pieces of carved lacquer with minor damage were sent for repair in Suzhou, because ‘craftsmen in the capital were not able to fix them’. Suzhou seems to be the main production centre for carved lacquer in the 18th century, as records show that many of the carved lacquer in the Palace were made in this area. This jardinière was probably also made in Suzhou, as the style of carving can be compared to many of the pieces in the Qng Court collection, such as that on the ‘Paulownia-washing’ box in the Palace Museum, Beijing (Illustrated in Complete Collection of Treasures of the Palace Museum - Qing Lacquer, no. 8, p. 14) or the ‘Strolling under the moon’ box, also in the Palace Museum, Beijing (Illustrated ibid, no. 26, p. 43).
AN INLAID BLACK LACQUER CHEST

18th Century

The chest is of rectangular shape with canted corners on the top and standing on an integral base. It is inlaid in mother-of-pearl, bone and various semi-precious stones at the top with stylised floral sprays enclosed within a border of linked archaistic scrolls and ruyi heads, on the sides with bats above floral sprays, and on the front doors with two quatrefoil panels each containing antiques objects. The doors open to reveal various sized drawers, each decorated with floral sprays.

41 cm. high x 39 cm. wide x 32 cm. deep
The combination of lacquer and other precious materials, although not a new invention, reached a zenith in the 18th century. Contrary to carved lacquer, the majority of which appears to have been made in Suzhou, the inlaid lacquer pieces seem to have mainly been produced in the Yangzhou area. The current cabinet is a very good example of this new style, combining the delicate soft mother-of-pearl inlays with hardstones to create contrast. Although no other identical examples appear to have been published, a tiered box in the Palace Museum, Beijing, is decorated with similar cloud scrolls and bats in hard mother-of-pearl inlays. (Illustrated ibid, no. 181, p. 242).