



◀ K

Comprehensive index starts
in volume 5, page 2667.

Lacquerware

Qīqì 漆器

Lacquerware—objects made of wood, metal, or porcelain to which layers of lacquer have been applied—first developed as an art form in China and dates from about 1600 BCE. Carved lacquer is a uniquely Chinese achievement and is considered lacquer art in its pure form.

Lacquerware refers to wares that are made of wood, metal, or porcelain to which lacquer has been applied. Lacquer is the resin or sap of the lacquer (*rhus verniciflua*) or varnish tree, which is native to central and southern China and perhaps to Japan. When lacquer is applied to wood, metal, or porcelain, it gives the ware a smooth, hard, transparent, and shiny surface. People in China and Japan have used true or Far Eastern Asian lacquerware since ancient times.

Artists have used the sap of the lacquer tree as a protective and decorative varnish for both art objects and household objects. Artists apply the lacquer in thin layers on wooden objects or inlay it on metal objects. The lacquer, when solidified, also has been used as a medium for sculpture. Lacquerware, like porcelain, has been much appreciated not only in Asia but also Europe, where people have collected it since the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Many lacquerware items were beautifully decorated, and many that were household utensils gave durable, waterproof service in households in Asia, where wood was once plentiful. Wood fashioned into lacquerware was

versatile, as shown by the wide range of objects included among the wares.

East Asian lacquer is different from the lacquer that forms the basis of some of the varnishes used in the japanning (applying varnish to yield a hard, brilliant finish) of European furniture from the sixteenth century onward. Differences exist in chemical composition and sources: The English resin lac or shellac comes from a substance deposited on trees by certain species of insects.

Two broad categories of lacquer objects exist. In one category the lacquer has been applied largely to protect and to decorate. Therefore, the application of lacquer does not change the form of the objects, such as wooden chairs, that are so decorated. In the second class the objects, such as containers, are made mostly of leather, supported by a nonlacquer core. The core can be wood, hemp cloth, or metal and is encased in a lacquer coating thick enough to modify the form of the object. The lacquer coating gives the object a fleshy, plump shape that can be decorated by carving or by painting and inlaying.

Lacquer objects—including all in the second category and any in the first category in which lacquer forms a considerable part of the decoration—are works of art. Lacquer as an art form developed in China and dates from about 1600 BCE during the Shang dynasty (1766–1045 BCE). Artists created pictorial or surfaced decoration and also carved lacquer. The techniques of *qiangjin* (engraved gold), *diaoqi* (carved lacquer), and *diaotian* (filled in) gradually evolved after the tenth century. Carved lacquer is a uniquely Chinese achievement and is considered lacquer art in its pure form.

Visitors at the Yangzhou Lacquerware Factory, with some of the factory's wares displayed along the back wall. PHOTO BY JOAN LEBOLD COHEN.



Range of Objects

Lacquerware included objects ranging from containers—such as bowls, cups, vases, coffers, and bamboo baskets—to chopsticks, screens, and even suits of leather armor. The lacquer vases produced in Soochow, China, resembled fine porcelain with their carvings on wood stained in coral and lacquered. These objects were crafted for the emperor during the Ch'ien Lung period (1736–1796) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1912) and were among the treasures used in the summer palace. Other types of lacquerware include Japanese ware of black and gold inlaid with silver, gold, and mother-of-pearl. Japanese and Chinese screens of lacquered, gilt, and painted wood are familiar not only in Asian institutions and homes today but also in fine art museums. Often well-known artists or copyists paint these screens by hand.

Modern lacquerware from Korea and Japan is highly finished in appearance when compared with lacquerware

made in China and other parts of Southeast Asia. The Straits Chinese or Peranakan society in Southeast Asia reproduced lacquered basketry, originally made in China, to carry special gifts offered to deities in temples or during occasions such as festivals and weddings. Lacquerware objects remain important in most Southeast and East Asian households, although they tend to be more expensive than objects made of plastic or ceramic.

OOI Giok-Ling

Further Reading

- Clifford, D. (1992). *Chinese carved lacquer*. London: Bamboo Publishing.
- Cocks, A. S. (1980). *The Victoria and Albert Museum*. Leicester, U.K.: Windward.
- Garner, H. M. (1972). *Ryukyu lacquer*. London: School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.
- Watt, J. C., & Ford, B. B. (1991). *East Asian lacquer*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art.