

→ European and Oriental lacquerware



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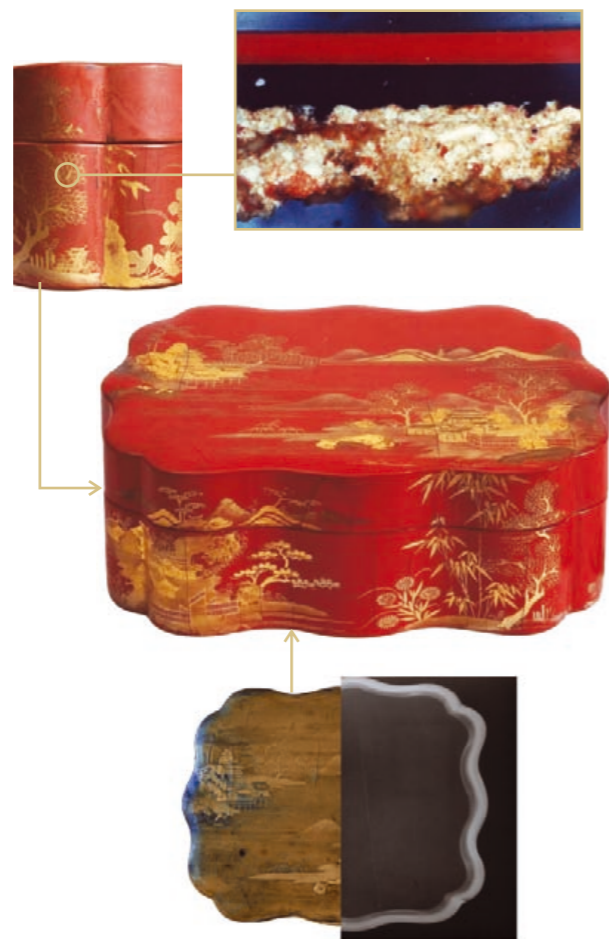


European and Oriental lacquerware



Oriental lacquer constitutes one of the methods of decorating surfaces made of wood, bamboo, ceramics and papier mâché. Obtained from lacquer trees grown in Asia, it is a resin that hardens in contact with the air. Its main component is the compound commonly referred to as *urushiol*, insoluble in typical solvents. After applying and polishing a number of layers of coloured or colourless resin, the obtained surface is so smooth that it shines. It may be additionally gold- and silver-plated, decorated with embedded metal filings (so-called *aventurine*), applications and drawings containing oriental flora, fauna and landscape motifs.

The first products of the type were imported to Europe in the 16th century by Portuguese Jesuits and gained instant appreciation of the period wealthy clientele. Attempts were soon made to learn the secret of lacquer production. To this end, individual components were smuggled to Europe. However, importation of exotic resin proved impossible as during a long-lasting journey the resin was subject to certain processes which rendered it useless. Consequently, new recipes were worked out and new lacquers made of components available in Europe, such as shellac, sandarac and other resins, the so-called copals, as well as various oils and essential oils. The function of pigments was fulfilled among others by vermilion, madder lake, lamp black, bone char and later also by various types of blue. The technique is nowadays referred to as European lacquer or European lacquer imitation.



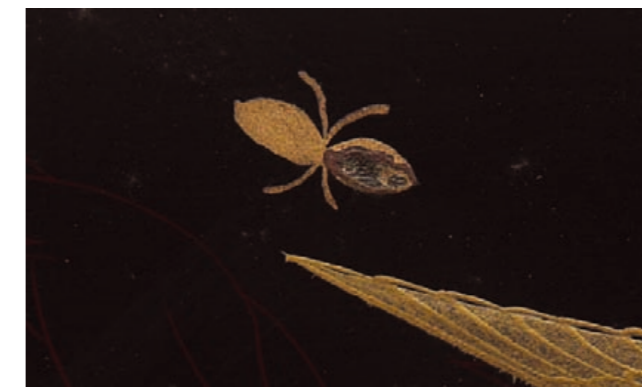
The Wilanów Palace Museum boasts several dozen objects decorated with lacquer. They include furniture and everyday items. The collection was supplemented and modified by all successive Wilanów owners. Archival sources reveal that already Jan III gave some of the interiors a "Chynese-style" arrangement. Subsequent proprietors enlarged the collection and rearranged the existing items according to current fashions.

Present conservation and restoration activities, coupled with simultaneous style-related research as well as examination of the chemical composition and the layout of successive technological layers, help not only to restore display-related values of the historic exhibits, but also shed light on their history and their manufacturing technique.



The decision making process concerning the discussed collection is complicated. Difficulties stem from the specificity of lacquer technique, both eastern and European, and from uneven condition of the historic objects. Consequently, conservation projects are always prepared for each individual item, while taking into account the selection of proper materials and the adoption of a suitable conservation approach.

Problems faced by conservators were diverse. All objects restored so far were cleaned from surface dirt and the 20th-century fill-ins of ground and layers of decoration. Support constructions were reinforced and repaired. Whenever possible, deformed scales of ground and lacquer were smoothed out and glued on.



Coats of overpaintings were removed based on reconstruction-related decisions considering the artistic and historic value of exhibits. To quote but one example, all insects painted by a conservator probably in the 19th century on damaged even surfaces, were left intact.

An interesting case is a ceramic vase covered with red lacquer. Extensive loss of the surface layer reveals white and blue ceramics. When drawing up the programme of conservation activities, the decision was made not to fill in the surface layer loss. After gluing back the peeling scales of the painted decoration, virtual reconstructions were made for documentation purposes.

Also fascinating is the history of a set of Saxon furniture commissioned by Augustus II and manufactured in 1727–1732 by the outstanding artist Martin Schnell. The set comprised pairs of secretaries, cabinets and cases.



As early as in 1776 the inside panels dismantled from the Saxon cabinets were used as doors of English-style cupboards, while the drawers and the back doors of one of the secretaries were used to create a desk.

The latest conservation and restoration activities helped to identify the initial arrangement of the secretary drawers and to reconstruct the edge of the desktop previously known only from an archival photograph.

An extant inkwell from 1750–1800 has recently been discovered to contain elements taken from Schnell's furniture. This fact proves that even the tiniest fragments decorated with quality lacquer were considered extremely valuable in the past.

It was the first ever so thorough examination of the discussed period objects. Further activities and research will help to fully systematize our knowledge of the collection. Thanks to the already accomplished restoration, numerous lacquer-decorated objects were included in the full time display in the Wilanów interiors. Today, most of the exhibits can be viewed in the Chinese and Hunting Rooms.

