

Lacquered Chambers in Denmark

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1. Introduction

When different areas of the world interact, their civilizations and cultures influence each other. One such example is the reception of Japanese lacquerware in Europe. From the mid-sixteenth century to the eighteenth century a considerable amount of it went to Europe. Starting around the mid-seventeenth century, japanning, an imitative lacquering technique, developed as well. Today in both art and other kinds of European museums one finds many Japanese lacquerwares. Particularly from seventeenth and eighteenth century European royalty and nobility's Eastern lacquerware collections we can detect an admiration and very favorable assessment of, as well as high interest in, these rare craft objects from Japan that were covered in black.

In Denmark, Eastern lacquerware was received in this way, and even rooms made with it were created. Japanning was used not only for craftworks but also the decoration of rooms. In this paper, I will consider the relationship of Denmark and Japan, focusing on lacquered chambers, one application of japanning in Europe.

2. Japanese and European Trade

2.1 Historical Background

Lisbon, London, Amsterdam, and Copenhagen were major trade ports that imported Japanese art from the sixteenth century into the mid-seventeenth century. It appears that through these trade ports people from various countries acquired and brought home imported lacquerware. However, due to the Tokugawa shogunate closing Japan to the outside world in 1639, trade with the country became limited to China and the Netherlands. As a result, European countries, unable to import lacquerware directly from Japan, were forced to purchase it by way of China and the Netherlands. In the seventeenth and eighteenth century, this turned Amsterdam into the major trade port that handled Japanese artwork, and it was from there that craftworks, including Japanese lacquerware, came to be brought to various places in Europe. In this way, the country that led trade became the major one for distributing East Asian trade products, including Japanese artworks and craftworks.

2.2 Interactions Between Denmark and Japan

In Denmark, Christian IV established the Danish East India Company in 1616. It primarily engaged in trade with East Asia, and we can imagine that it thus had adequate opportunities to acquire Japanese artworks and craftworks. However, it appears that it was difficult for the country to trade directly with Japan. By 1639, it is said that the Dutch East India Company spoke with Hirado and Edo so that Danes would not come close to the country. Even so, from the end of the sixteenth century onwards the relationship between the Netherlands and Denmark was favorable, both culturally and commercially.

In 1729 the Danish East India Company was dissolved. However, three years later the Asiatic Company was established, and the country re-opened trade with a focus on China. Due to this trade the volume of imports from East Asia (primarily China) increased. However, it appears that the company did not try to widen its scope of trade so that it could expand its market to Japan. Denmark acquired Eastern lacquerware through the Netherlands and the Danish East India Company (later, the Asiatic Company). Since Denmark also had its own trading company, it probably had many opportunities to come into contact with Japanese lacquerware when engaging in trade in East Asia besides through the Netherlands. In fact, it is said that in 1725 there were between eight and nine thousand Northern Europeans in Amsterdam, and we can imagine that that Danes hired by the Dutch East India

Company had opportunities to visit Japan as part of the crew of Dutch trade ships. Therefore, it was probably comparatively easy to acquire information about Japan in Denmark and other Northern European countries.

3. Lacquered Chambers in Denmark

3.1 The Emergence of Lacquered Chambers

From the mid-seventeenth century to the eighteenth centuries, rooms called “lacquered chambers” that were made using japanning appeared. Not only were these small rooms Eastern-style with lacquered furniture, but they also featured flat lacquer panels on all the walls. Here, not only were there Japanese lacquerware, but also large lacquerware furniture from China were disassembled and used. The wall panels were also made with japanning. In the background to people being able to turn lacquerware into room decorations was the rapid progress of japanning techniques.

Many lacquered chambers were made, primarily in Western Europe. In the seventeenth century they were also made in the Netherlands and Germany, and in the eighteenth century spread to the likes of Germany, Poland, Australia, France, Russia, Sweden, and Italy.

In Germany, Gérard Dagly was in charge of making japanned furniture and repairing Eastern lacquerware furniture at the Berlin Palace’s workshop. Palace interior decoration work in general was also left to him. Additionally, as part of his activities as a palace japanning artisan, Martin Schnell was also involved in interior decoration, also in Germany. The Frères Martin, who were active in eighteenth century France, similarly decorated the interior of rooms. Furthermore, from 1749 to 1756 Etienne-Simon Martin is said to have created japan wall panels for the Palace of Versailles.

In this way, artisans who did japanning at the time were involved in decorating the interiors of palaces. There are some cases in which they made actual pieces as well.

3.2 The Princess’s Lacquered Chamber at Rosenborg Slot

In Denmark’s Rosenborg Slot exists a room made with lacquer panels called The Princess’s Lacquered Chamber. This chamber was made in 1665, before the time of Dagly and the Frères Martin. It is one of the oldest lacquered chambers in existence today. The panels in the room use japanning, and feature raised gold on a black surface, clearly copying Japan’s *takamakie* (raised lacquerwork). The depicted patterns copied illustrations found in a travel record published by Johan Nieuhof of the trade embassy sent to Qing China by the Dutch East India Company between 1655 and 1657, as well as those found in Japanese-made lacquerware owned by the Danish royal family. One finds many figures wearing Chinese-style clothes as well as plants and animals depicted in an Eastern way. However, there is also a lizard, as well as a bird reminiscent of a cockatoo. Very interestingly, in Figure 1 we can see a “snake that has grown wings” on the bottom right lacquer panel. It appears that the artist was trying to draw an Eastern dragon.

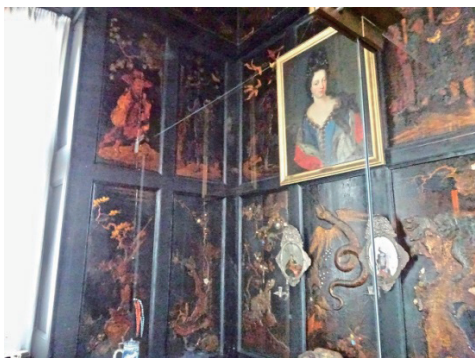


Fig. 1

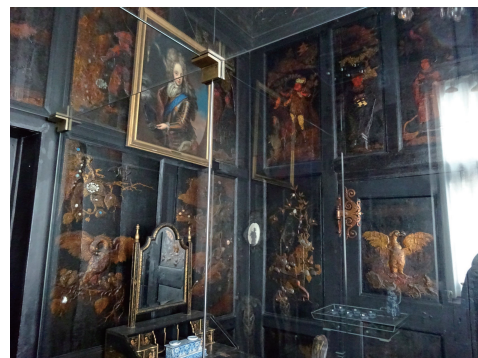


Fig. 2

As a whole, the room skillfully combined the East as imagined by Europeans and imitations of the patterns and techniques of Japanese lacquerware. Furthermore, this room was made at an extremely early time. It is an example of japanning being incorporated into Eastern-style room decorations before the appearance of Germany's Dagly and Schnell.

4. Conclusion

In Europe, Eastern lacquerware, including that made in Japan, received high acclaim. Many aristocrats in kingdoms made furnishings and decorated rooms that incorporated elements of orientalism, *chinoiserie*, and so on. This was made possible by japanning, which had rapidly developed starting around the mid-seventeenth century. This technique appears to have been widely used when creating other craftworks as well as buildings. While, along with developments in trends and tastes, the patterns used would change from Eastern-like ones to those familiar to Westerners, it appears that japanning continued to mature. In the European world creating this technique based on Japanese lacquerware and applying it to furnishings and then lacquered chambers, we can see an example of cultural transference where the reception of a technology and culture produced a new field.