

# An Intricate Tradition

## Chinese Lacquer comes to the Santa Barbara Museum of Art

by Victoria Charters

SBMA curator Susan Tai adores lacquer. "The significance of the exhibition is that it is consistently of great quality. It covers a wide range of time certainly through the height of lacquer techniques and some of the pieces are the best of their types. It's great to share this with the public." Spanning almost 2,000 years from the Han Dynasty (206BCE – 220 CE) to Ming Dynasty (1364 – 1644), this collection consists of 31 exquisite lacquer vessels, plates, and boxes.

"Lacquer is one of China's most ancient and dynamic artistic traditions," Tai explains. "When people found out that lacquer from the lacquer tree could coat porous materials like fabric, clay, wood or bamboo, that it's waterproof, and it's insect proof, it became almost like the earliest plastic."

Lacquer is indeed created from the sap of a particular tree (*Rhus Verniciflua*) native to China. *Rhus Verniciflua* is also a cousin to and shares characteristics with *Tocodendron Diversilobum*, more commonly known as Poison Oak. "In its raw form it's extremely toxic which makes it difficult to work with," Tai asserts. In order to turn this toxic sap into lacquer, it must be infused with ash for stabilization and colorized with mineral pigments. Then layers of lacquer are applied to a thin core, usually constructed of wood or cloth or bamboo. Signature lacquer ware colors evolved as black (from iron oxide) and red (from cinnabar, an ore of mercury) and yellow, considered an Imperial color. Any pieces containing yellow are of the highest quality and were most likely Imperial commissions.

Carved lacquers often are made up of several hundred layers of fine lacquer, to achieve enough depth for carving. Each layer had to be allowed to dry and



Oblong Plate, early Ming Dynasty, ca. 1400. Carved red and black lacquer.  
Mike Healy Collection. Photograph by Shuzo Uemoto.



Inlaid Box, Chinese, Yuan Dynasty, 1260-1368. Black lacquer with inlaid mother-of-pearl. Mike Healy Collection. Photograph by Shuzu Uemoto.

was then burnished before the next could be applied. Tai explains, "This made it very expensive and lacquer ware became the preference of the rich." Lacquer ware includes some of the most prized luxury items produced throughout Chinese history.

The Mike Healy Collection reflects the major trends in the development of lacquer production, including early lacquers with refined monochrome finish or painted design. Carved cinnabar lacquer of the later periods exhibits strong pictorial design, from floral patterns to a variety of scenes. Tai notes the use of the Peony, "a symbol of luxury and abundance because it's so full of petals. She is the Queen of flowers. If you give a gift with the representation of a Peony on it, then you also give good wishes for prosperity, abundance and good

health." *Tixi*-carved lacquer of "cloud-collar" decoration is also well represented in the collection, as is lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl or *luodian*, developed during the Song Dynasty (960-1279). Few such examples survive since they are very sensitive to changes in temperature; The Healy Collection has five pieces of *luodian* from the Yuan and Ming Dynasties.

This collection reveals also the Japanese taste for Chinese lacquers since many works came into the West via Japan where they were treasured as objects of great beauty for centuries.

The exhibition is organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts and comes to us via the China Institute Gallery in New York.



Phoenix Box, Chinese, early Ming Dynasty, 15th century. Carved red lacquer. Mike Healy Collection. Photograph by Shuzu Uemoto.

*Masterpieces of Chinese Lacquer from the Mike Healy Collection.*  
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