Lustrous Surfaces:
Lacquer in Asia and Beyond
14 October 2017 – 16 September 2018

Events and activities accompanying this display are happening throughout the year. For more information please visit vam.ac.uk/rehab

To find out more about lacquer and this display, visit vam.ac.uk/lustrous-surfaces

What is lacquer?

Asian lacquer is made from the sap of the Anacardiaceae main species of so-called 'lacquer trees'. The most sought-after type of East Asian lacquer comes from the Toxicodendron vernicifluum. To make lacquer, first the tree’s milky sap is filtered to remove impurities and gently heated to reduce its moisture content. This produces a viscous, dark brown lacquer that is applied to an object in thin layers to create a protective coat. The lacquer is then heated and polished to create a glossy sheen. Lacquer has often been compared to modern plastic because of its similar lightweight and waterproof qualities.

Lacquer techniques across the world

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Lacquer techniques

China

Diaoqi

China, The T. T. Tsui Gallery, Room 44, Level 1

The carved lacquer technique diaoqi is the best known of the many different decorative styles developed in China. Several layers of lacquer are applied to a base. Each coat must harden before the next is applied. This is repeated until the lacquer reaches sufficient thickness to be carved in relief using a sharp tool.

Korea

Najeon chilgi

Korea, Room 47c, Level 1

Lacquer inlaid with shell, known as najeon chilgi, is the most distinctive type of Korean lacquerware. Indentent shell pieces are delicately cut and glued to a lacquer ground. The whole surface is then coated with a thin layer of lacquer and hardened. This is repeated until the lacquer level mirrors the shell’s thickness. The lacquer on the shell is scraped off between coats to reveal the decorative pattern.

India and Pakistan

Lac (Lakh)

South Asia, Room 41, and South-East Asia, Room 47a, Level 1

Lac, an insect resin, was once used widely in South Asia for a variety of purposes. A key decorative technique was for sticks of coloured lac to be pressed against the surface of wooden items as they turned on a lathe. The heat generated as the item revolved melted the lacquer. The predominant type of lacquer is gold powder on black lacquer.

Japan

Maki-e

Japan, The Toshiba Gallery, Room 45, Level 1

Maki-e, which translates as ‘sprinkled picture’, is the decorative technique most associated with Japanese lacquer. It involves building up a decorative design by sprinkling gold, silver or coloured powders of different shapes and weights onto wet lacquer. The predominant type of maki-e is gold powder on black lacquer.

Iran and Afghanistan

Bookbinder’s lacquer

Islamic Middle East, The Jameel Gallery, Room 42, Level 1

Islamic lacquer, known as ‘bookbinder’s lacquer’, is a combination of materials used to imitate the colour combinations and glossiness of Chinese lacquer. The technique appeared first in bookbinding, where lacquer-style decoration was used instead of the traditional leather facing. The local tradition of painted and varnished woodwork was adapted to the decoration of pasteboard book covers, made from layers of paper glued together.

Myanmar (Burma)

Yun

South-East Asia, Room 47a, Level 1

Yun ware is a characteristic Myanmar lacquer technique. A woven split bamboo body is first filled with low grade lacquer mixed with clay. Layers of lacquer are then applied, mixed with increasingly fine fillers. After each coat, the object is smoothed and hardened. A design is engraved onto the final surface layer and colour applied to the incisions. Once hardened, the excess colour is rubbed off and the design is sealed. The same process is repeated for other colours.

Thailand

Tai khern

South-East Asia, Room 47a, Level 1

Lacquerware from the Chiang Mai area, a major centre of lacquer production in Thailand, is exemplified by tai khern, named after the original Tai people who settled in the region. Like yun ware in Myanmar, it utilises engraving on a lacquered surface. The engraved designs are submerged in a colour solution for about three days. When withdrawn, the designs are filled with colour.

Europe

European lacquer (Japanning)

Furniture, The Dr. Susan Weber Gallery, Room 135, Level 6

To imitate Asian lacquers, plant resins or shellac (a secretion from insects) are mixed with alcohol or oil. As with true lacquer, the quality of the finished product depends on the careful drying and polishing of the individual layers.

Colombia and Mexico

Barniz de Pasto and Peribán lacquer

Furniture, The Dr. Susan Weber Gallery, Room 133, Level 6

Barniz de Pasto is one of several lacquer techniques developed in South America, with pre-Hispanic origins. A plant resin called mopa is processed into thin sheets and heat-bonded to create complex, applied designs. In Central America, in the Mexican Peribán lacquer tradition, a thick mixture of oil and clay was applied and intalad.