



Contact: Katrina Carl
805.884.6430
kcarl@sbma.net



Phoenix Box, Chinese, early Ming dynasty, 15th century. Carved red lacquer, h. 4 ¼", Mike Healy Collection (photographed by Shuzo Uemoto)

Rarely-Exhibited Lacquer Spans 2,000 Years of China's History

**SBMA Presents *Masterpieces of Chinese Lacquer from the Mike Healy Collection*
January 14 – April 16, 2006**

November 10, 2005 - One of the richest decorative art traditions of China will be on view at the Santa Barbara Museum of Art in the exhibition *Masterpieces of Chinese Lacquer from the Mike Healy Collection*, on view January 14 through April 16, 2006. Spanning a period of almost 2,000 years from the Han (206 BCE – 220 CE) to Ming (1364-1644) dynasties, this exhibition presents 31 works from the exceptional Mike Healy Collection. Objects in the exhibition include intricately carved examples of cosmetic boxes, wine cups, plates and table screens, with all of the pieces being shown in the western continental United States for the first time. They made only one earlier appearance in New York at the China Institute Gallery in late 2005.

Lacquer art has a long history in China, with archaeological evidence dating back to Neolithic times (10,000-2,000 BCE). The richness of the color and the extraordinary craftsmanship necessary to create lacquer ware made it a luxury item treasured by the Chinese Imperial families and upper class.

The techniques include painted, carved, and several types of inlaid lacquer, with each developed over many hundreds of years and evolved according to use, interest, taste, and patronage. After the tenth century, the techniques of *qiangjin* (engraved gold) and *diaotian* (filled in) were most popular. The lacquers of later periods, from the 14th century onwards, are mostly *diaoqi*, or carved, a technique considered a uniquely Chinese achievement and lacquer art in its pure form.



Oblong Plate, Early Ming dynasty, ca. 1400. Carved red and black lacquer, h. 1", Mike Healy Collection (photographed by Shuzo Uemoto)



Inlaid Box, Chinese, Yuan dynasty (1260-1368). Black lacquer with inlaid mother-of-pearl, h. 4 ¼", Mike Healy Collection (photographed by Shuzo Uemoto)

Lacquer ware is created by using lacquer, a natural product that comes from the sap of a particular tree (*Rhus verniciflua*) that is native to and grows wild in China. It is also a cousin to and shares characteristics with *Toxicodendron diversilobum*, or more commonly known as poison oak. It is naturally a creamy grey color but changes to a brownish black when exposed to light. The lacquer must be infused with ash for stabilization, and a variety of materials are used to color the lacquer. Cinnabar, an ore of mercury mined in the provinces of Guizhou and Henan, is used for the red color; iron oxide for the black; and orpiment, an arsenic trisulfide mineral, for yellow. The substructure for lacquer ware consists of a very thin wood core that may be reinforced with fabric and sometimes is primed with lacquer and clay.

In the case of carved lacquers it often took several hundred layers of the thin coating (between 3 and 5 mm) to achieve sufficient depth for carving. Each layer of lacquer is allowed to dry and then burnished before another layer is applied. This time-consuming process could involve several years of work, and given that raw lacquer is toxic and extremely difficult to work with, it is not surprising that lacquer became the cherished possession of the upper class.

Birds, animals, fruit and flowers are frequent themes in lacquer ware; one of the most elegant objects in the collection is a round red box covered with carved peony blossoms in full bloom. A plate in the collection depicts a chrysanthemum pattern that is identical to that on a circular box in Beijing's Palace Museum.

Among the highlights in the exhibition are two early Han dynasty 1st century CE pieces: a cosmetic box and a red wine cup with two handles. Lacquer was so popular in the Han dynasty that it was used for everything from utensils, containers for food, wine and cosmetics to numerous tomb objects.

Lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, or *luodian*, was developed during the Song dynasty (960-1279). Today, few examples from this period survive since they are extremely sensitive to temperature changes and as a result, are difficult to preserve. The Healy collection has five pieces of *luodian* from the Yuan and Ming dynasties.

The influence of Chinese lacquer spread to neighboring countries, especially Japan and Korea. "Some of the finest lacquer items in the Healy collection arrived via Japanese collections, and some of the storage boxes, which are of Japanese origin and bear inscriptions indicating Japanese ownership, still remain with the lacquers," notes Stephen Little, Director of the Honolulu Academy of the Arts, in the full-color catalog that accompanies the exhibition.

Modern lacquerware from Japan and Korea is highly finished in appearance when compared to that still produced in China and other parts of Southeast Asia. Today, lacquerware items remain important in most East and Southeast Asian households, although they tend to be more expensive than either ceramics or plastic.

The exhibition is organized by the Honolulu Academy of Arts. The presentation at Santa Barbara, representing its only western continental states venue, has been made possible through the generous support of Timothy Walsh and Susie and Hubert Vos.

The Santa Barbara Museum of Art is a privately funded, not-for-profit institution that provides internationally recognized collections and exhibitions and a broad array of cultural and educational activities as well as travel opportunities around the world.

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