

Simplified Chinese Lacquer Techniques and Style Decoration on Luso-Asian Objects from the Late Sixteenth or Early Seventeenth Centuries

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Abstract

This study delves into the fusion of Chinese lacquer techniques with Portuguese and local Asian motifs in Luso-Asian art objects from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, illustrating an early form of artistic globalization. By analyzing various artifacts, this research highlights the integration of aesthetic and material cultures through the lens of lacquered works. It explores how these objects not only served aesthetic purposes but also functioned as mediums of diplomatic exchange and cultural negotiation. The presence of Chinese dragons and lotus flowers alongside Portuguese coats of arms and Christian symbols in these objects reveals a complex narrative of cultural synthesis and artistic adaptation across diverse cultures. The implications of this synthesis extend beyond artistry, offering insights into the broader themes of identity formation, cultural diplomacy, and technological exchange during a pivotal era of global exploration. The conservation challenges associated with these artifacts further emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary approaches to preserve such culturally and historically significant objects. Through the preservation and study of these Luso-Asian lacquered works, this research gains a deeper understanding of the historical dynamics of cross-cultural interactions and the role of art in bridging disparate worlds, thus enriching our comprehension of global historical processes and cultural heritage.

Keywords: Chinese Lacquer, Luso-Asian Art, Cultural Exchange, Artistic Techniques, Global Trade, Conservation.

Introduction

The late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries marked a significant era of cultural and commercial exchanges facilitated by maritime explorations, which notably included the Portuguese seafaring ventures into Asia. This period heralded the inception of profound intercultural engagements, as exemplified by the introduction and assimilation of Chinese lacquer techniques into the material culture of Luso-Asian regions (Claro & Ferreira, 2020). The distinctive art form of lacquering, developed over centuries in China, became a significant

aspect of this cultural interchange, leading to the creation of unique Luso-Asian art objects. These artifacts, adorned with a fusion of Eastern and Western motifs, not only highlight the aesthetic exchanges but also the complex socio-economic interactions between these diverse cultures (Liu et al., 2023).

Chinese lacquer, derived from the sap of the *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* tree, was renowned for its lustrous finish and remarkable durability (Yu et al., 2021). The meticulous and labour-intensive process of applying multiple lacquer layers and painstakingly polishing each layer became a highly revered art form in China. As the Portuguese expanded their trading networks and established colonial outposts throughout Asia, they encountered this exquisite technique and incorporated it into the local artisanal practices within their territories. This integration was not merely a transfer of technology but also a blending of artistic visions, where traditional Chinese motifs such as dragons and lotus flowers met and mingled with Portuguese symbols like the coat of arms and Christian iconography. This amalgamation on lacquered screens, furniture, and ceremonial objects, served various functions from domestic use to diplomatic gifts illustrating the role of art as both a bridge and a repository of shared and diverging cultural identities during this dynamic period of early globalization (Körber, 2019).

In the culturally diverse regions under Portuguese influence, local artisans began to incorporate Chinese lacquering techniques with regional designs and motifs, creating a unique fusion that reflected both Eastern and Western aesthetic sensibilities. This blend was not merely an attempt to cater to European tastes but represented a genuine synthesis of cultural expressions. Artisans adopted Chinese methods and motifs, such as the intricate use of inlays and the traditional iconography of dragons and phoenixes and melded them with Portuguese elements like coats of arms or Christian symbols. This resulted in objects that were not only beautiful but also served as symbols of cultural dialogue and adaptation.

The study of these Luso-Asian lacquer works offers valuable insights into the early processes of globalization in the art world. They exemplify how artistic techniques and styles can transcend their original cultural boundaries and become part of a global vocabulary of art. Through an examination of these objects, we can understand more about the dynamics of cultural exchange and the ways in which art serves as a conduit for both expressing and shaping identities across different societies. This exploration not only contributes to our historical knowledge but also enriches our appreciation of how art can influence and reflect broader cultural interactions. The two main objectives of this research on the integration of Chinese lacquer techniques in Luso-Asian objects from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries are:

To Understand the Processes and Impacts of Cultural Exchange in Artistic Practices

This objective aims to explore how Chinese lacquer techniques were adopted and adapted in Luso-Asian contexts, illustrating the mechanisms of cultural exchange and adaptation. By examining the aesthetic and material fusion in these objects, the research seeks to understand the ways in which different cultures interact, influence, and transform one another's artistic traditions. This involves analysing the technical aspects of lacquer work, the incorporation of motifs and symbols from both Chinese and Portuguese (or local) cultures, and the resultant hybrid styles that emerged. Understanding these processes provides insight

into broader themes of globalization and cultural synthesis, highlighting how art serves as a platform for intercultural dialogue and exchange.

To Analyse the Role of Art Objects as Mediators of Cultural Identity and Diplomacy

The second objective focuses on the socio-political roles of Luso-Asian lacquered objects within the historical contexts of colonialism and global trade networks. This part of the study investigates how these objects were not just passive elements of décor but active participants in diplomatic, cultural, and economic exchanges. It seeks to reveal how art objects symbolized power, conveyed social status, and facilitated diplomatic relationships between the Portuguese and various Asian polities. By examining the placement and use of specific symbols, the research also considers how these objects contributed to the formation and expression of cultural identities, serving as material manifestations of cultural resilience and adaptation in colonial contexts.

Together, these objectives provide a comprehensive look at the interplay between art and cultural dynamics in a historically significant period, offering valuable insights into the complex processes of cultural interaction and the role of art in shaping historical and cultural narratives.

Materials and Methods

Chinese lacquer, a revered material in art and craftsmanship, has a history that stretches back over thousands of years, predominantly in East Asia (Barbieri-Low, 2021). Derived from the sap of the *Toxicodendron vernicifluum* tree, known colloquially as the lacquer tree, this material requires meticulous handling and application to achieve its characteristic finish. The process begins with the extraction of the raw sap, which is a labour-intensive activity typically conducted by skilled workers who carefully score the bark of the lacquer trees to collect the milky sap without harming the tree's overall health. Once collected, the raw lacquer sap undergoes a purification process to remove impurities and achieve a consistent quality suitable for use (Wojcieszak et al., 2023). This stage is crucial as the purity of the lacquer significantly influences the quality and durability of the final finish (Van Acker et al., 2023). The purified lacquer is then mixed with various additives, depending on the desired characteristics of the final product. These additives can include powdered metals like gold or silver for color, wood ash for body, and oils to enhance fluidity and drying properties.

The application of lacquer is an art form that requires precision and patience. Traditionally, the lacquer is applied in very thin layers over a prepared surface, usually wood, although it can also be applied to metal, leather, or fabric. Between each layer, the lacquer must be left to dry and harden in a controlled environment with high humidity and low light to prevent premature curing and cracking (Ratnasingam, 2022). This drying process can take from several hours to days, depending on the ambient conditions and the thickness of the applied layer. After each layer dries, it is polished using fine abrasives such as charcoal or pumice, smoothing out any imperfections and preparing the surface for the next layer. This polishing process is essential as it not only smooths the surface but also increases the adhesion of subsequent layers (Ratnasingam, 2022). The number of layers can vary from a few to several dozen, depending on the intended use of the object and the level of finish desired. High-quality pieces may have up to a hundred layers, creating a deep, rich finish that can appear almost translucent.

The technique of inlaying and decorating lacquer objects is also a significant aspect of its use, especially in Chinese and Luso-Asian art. Artisans may embed mother-of-pearl, precious stones, or different colored lacquer into the base layers before applying the final lacquer coats (Körber, 2019). This method allows for intricate designs, patterns, and scenes that are preserved under the lacquer's protective surface. The durability of lacquerware is one of its most valued properties, providing resistance to water, heat, and chemical degradation. This resilience makes lacquered items highly prized and functional, not just decorative. In historical contexts, lacquered items were often used as tableware, in furniture, and as storage containers, reflecting their practicality in daily life alongside their artistic value (Shelley, 2019).

Today, the traditional methods of lacquer application are still practiced by artisans dedicated to preserving this ancient craft, although modern synthetic lacquers have been developed. These new materials mimic the properties of traditional lacquer but cure faster and are less susceptible to environmental conditions. Nevertheless, the depth and quality of finish achieved by traditional methods remain unparalleled, making ancient and traditional lacquerware highly sought after by collectors and museums worldwide.

Results

The examination of Luso-Asian lacquered objects from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries reveals a fascinating integration of Chinese lacquering skills with local and Portuguese motifs (Körber, 2019). This merging of artistic elements is evident in various aspects of the artifacts studied, indicating not just an exchange of goods, but a deep cultural interchange that influenced artistic expressions across continents. One of the most significant findings is the presence of hybrid motifs that combine traditional Chinese designs with elements that are distinctly Portuguese or reflective of local Asian cultures. For example, many lacquered pieces feature the traditional Chinese motifs of dragons, phoenixes, and lotus flowers alongside Portuguese coats of arms, Christian crosses, and even floral designs that are native to specific regions in Asia (Guo & Min, 2022). This stylistic synthesis suggests that the artisans were not only familiar with both Chinese and European artistic languages but also adept at combining them in ways that were aesthetically pleasing and culturally resonant.

Furthermore, the technique of lacquer application itself underwent adaptations. While the foundational methods remained rooted in traditional Chinese practices characterized by the meticulous application of numerous thin layers of lacquer followed by careful polishing there is evidence that local materials and techniques were also incorporated (Zhu et al., 2023). For instance, the lacquer used in some Luso-Asian objects appears to have been mixed with local resins or dyes to alter its consistency or color, adapting to local tastes or available resources. The decorative techniques also varied, showcasing a range of lacquering skills from the very refined to more rustic applications, depending on the region and the intended use of the object. In some cases, the layering of lacquer was less precise, possibly reflecting the work of less experienced local artisans adapting to the demands of new markets. In other instances, the craftsmanship was on par with the finest examples of imperial Chinese lacquerware, indicating the involvement of master artisans in these cross-cultural exchanges.

The function of these lacquered objects also varied widely, encompassing both everyday items such as bowls and trays and more ceremonial or decorative pieces such as cabinets and screens. This functional diversity suggests that lacquerware was not only a luxury item but

had also permeated different levels of society, indicating a broad acceptance and appreciation of this art form across cultural boundaries. Moreover, the survival of these objects over centuries and their continued appreciation highlights the durability and enduring appeal of lacquer as a medium. This resilience further underscores the effectiveness of the Chinese lacquering techniques, even when adapted to different climates and working conditions found in various parts of Asia and Europe.

Finally, these findings contribute to a richer understanding of the global artistic landscape during this era. They show how art served as a bridge between diverse cultures, facilitating not only commercial but also artistic and cultural exchanges that shaped the identities and heritage of the involved regions. This integration of Chinese lacquering skills with local and Portuguese motifs is a testament to the dynamic nature of art as a reflection of human interaction and exchange.

Discussions

The presence of an intercultural dialogue in Luso-Asian lacquer works, particularly through the juxtaposition of Chinese dragons and lotus flowers with Portuguese coats of arms and Christian symbols, exemplifies a profound blending of Eastern and Western artistic traditions. This synthesis not only represents aesthetic fusion but also symbolizes the complex socio-political relationships between Asia and Europe during the age of exploration and colonial expansion. The Chinese dragon, a potent symbol of power, strength, and good fortune in Chinese mythology and culture, often appears in traditional lacquerware as a primary motif (Tho, 2015). Its inclusion in Luso-Asian art signifies the continuation of these auspicious meanings but also adapts to new contexts where such imagery would resonate with both Asian and European audiences. Similarly, the lotus flower, representing purity and beauty in Chinese and broader Asian traditions, complements the symbolic integration.

In contrast, the Portuguese coats of arms and Christian symbols such as the cross reflect the European influence and the spread of Christianity as a component of Portuguese colonial efforts. These symbols served not only as markers of identity and sovereignty but also as tools of cultural assimilation and religious conversion in the colonies. This blending of motifs from distinctly different cultures goes beyond decorative purposes; it serves as a visual narrative of the cultural encounters and exchanges that occurred. The integration suggests a level of respect and appreciation for Chinese artistic techniques among Portuguese patrons and, conversely, a willingness on the part of Chinese and local artisans to adapt these elements into their repertoire. This mutual adaptation could be seen as a form of diplomatic artistry, where the objects created served as embodiments of peaceful coexistence and cooperation.

This also extends into the technological and material realms. The application of Chinese lacquer techniques in the creation of these objects indicates not only a transfer of knowledge but also an adaptation to local conditions and materials. This might include variations in the lacquer formulation or the incorporation of locally available materials to suit the tastes or practical requirements of the local market or Portuguese patrons. The influence of these hybrid objects on local artistic practices cannot be understated. They likely inspired local artisans to experiment with new techniques and motifs, leading to a lasting impact on the artistic landscape. This influence might be observed in the evolution of regional styles that, while rooted in traditional forms, began to reflect a more globalized aesthetic palette.

Finally, these objects contribute to our understanding of how cultural identity was expressed and negotiated in colonial contexts. They reflect the complexities of colonial interactions, where cultural dominance and adaptation were constantly in flux. The artistic outputs from this period provide insights into how cultures adopt, resist, or transform foreign influences, which is crucial for understanding the dynamics of cultural heritage and identity formation in historically interconnected regions. This discussion offers a deeper look into how Luso-Asian lacquer works not only as art objects but as cultural artifacts that encapsulate a critical period of cultural negotiation and exchange.

Conservation Challenges

The conservation of lacquered objects from the late sixteenth to early seventeenth centuries, particularly those created in Luso-Asian contexts, presents a myriad of challenges. These challenges are compounded by the inherent vulnerabilities of organic materials like lacquer in the face of harsh environmental conditions, as well as the additional complexities introduced by the tropical climates of many Luso-Asian regions. Lacquer is an organic material that reacts sensitively to environmental changes. In tropical climates, high humidity and temperature fluctuations can be particularly detrimental. High humidity can lead to the swelling of the lacquer and the substrates (often wood) it covers, potentially causing cracking, warping, and delamination. Conversely, periods of low humidity can lead to contraction and further cracking. Frequent cycles of these conditions, common in tropical regions, accelerate the degradation process, complicating preservation efforts.

The warm and moist environments of tropical regions also foster the growth of biological threats like mold, fungi, and bacteria, which can break down organic materials. Wood, a common substrate for lacquer, is particularly susceptible to these organisms, as well as to insect infestation by termites and wood-boring beetles, which can compromise the integrity of lacquered objects from the inside out. Lacquer's color and finish can deteriorate under exposure to light, particularly ultraviolet light, which can cause fading and weakening of the material. Many Luso-Asian lacquered objects were originally vibrant and colorful, but prolonged exposure to light before proper museum conservation standards were established may have led to significant aesthetic and structural damage.

The traditional Chinese lacquer technique involves the application of numerous thin layers, each needing to cure properly before the next is applied (Webb, 2000). This layered structure, while contributing to the depth and beauty of the finish, also adds complexity to any conservation effort. Each layer can react differently to environmental stresses or conservation treatments, requiring meticulous, often individualized attention during restoration. Over time, the chemical composition of lacquer can change, especially when exposed to oxygen and light. This oxidation process can alter the physical properties of lacquer, making it more brittle and less adherent to its substrate, which poses significant challenges for conservation. Reversing or even halting this degradation without damaging the lacquer or altering its appearance requires highly specialized techniques and materials. Conservation must balance the preservation of material integrity with the maintenance of historical and artistic value. This includes respecting original materials and methods used in the object's creation, which can often conflict with the need to use more modern materials or techniques that offer better protection and stability (Ashby & Johnson, 2013).

Finally, the conservation of historic lacquered objects requires specialized skills and deep knowledge of both the original materials and techniques used for their creation and the modern methods suitable for their conservation (Hung et al., 2021). There is often a need for interdisciplinary approaches, combining expertise in chemistry, art history, and fine art conservation techniques. These conservation challenges highlight the need for ongoing research and development in the field of lacquer conservation, as well as the importance of international collaboration in sharing knowledge, skills, and technologies that can help preserve these culturally and historically significant objects for future generations (Coueignoux & Rivers, 2015).

Conclusions and Further Research

The study of Chinese lacquer techniques in Luso-Asian objects not only enriches our understanding of art history but also provides profound insights into the dynamics of early globalization in the cultural and artistic spheres. These objects serve as tangible evidence of the complex interplay between cultural identity and artistic expression, encapsulating the multifaceted themes of exchange, adaptation, and diplomacy that characterized the interactions between East and West during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. The incorporation of Chinese lacquer techniques into Luso-Asian art represents one of the earliest forms of globalization in the art world. It highlights how trade and exploration were not merely economic or territorial pursuits but also avenues for significant cultural and artistic exchange. These objects demonstrate how artisans and patrons from different parts of the world influenced one another's aesthetics and technologies, leading to innovations that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries.

The hybrid nature of Luso-Asian lacquer works where Eastern and Western elements blend seamlessly illustrates the adaptive responses of artisans to new cultural influences and demands. This fusion of styles did not merely mimic or reproduce existing motifs but often led to entirely new artistic expressions. These adaptations speak to the artisans' abilities to negotiate multiple cultural identities and aesthetics, creating works that were appreciated across diverse cultural contexts. Moreover, these lacquered objects were often used as diplomatic gifts, playing crucial roles in the formal exchanges between different empires and kingdoms. They were not only luxury items that showcased the wealth and sophistication of their owners but also instruments of diplomacy that facilitated international relations. The presence of specific motifs such as Portuguese coats of arms or Christian symbols alongside traditional Chinese designs underscores the role of art in mediating and memorializing diplomatic relationships.

The integration of diverse cultural elements in these artworks also reflects the complex identities of the regions where they were produced or used. For the local populations in Luso-Asian regions, these objects could represent a form of cultural negotiation or resistance, incorporating foreign elements into local traditions and thereby asserting a new, blended cultural identity. For the European patrons, they represented exotic treasures that conveyed prestige and cosmopolitanism. From a historical perspective, the preservation and study of these objects allow contemporary audiences to access visual and material narratives of our shared global past. Each piece holds stories of encounter, exchange, and coexistence, providing a medium through which modern viewers can explore and understand the complexities of historical global interactions.

In conclusion, the art of Chinese lacquer in Luso-Asian objects offers invaluable insights into the early processes of globalization. These artifacts are not merely beautiful or exotic; they are historical documents that capture the essence of cultural interplay through the medium of art. They remind us that our current globalized world is deeply rooted in these early exchanges and that art has always been a powerful conduit for understanding, negotiating, and celebrating our diverse cultural heritages.

This research on the integration of Chinese lacquer techniques in Luso-Asian art from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries contributes significantly to existing knowledge in several key areas of art history, material culture, and global studies. By examining the fusion of artistic techniques and motifs across different cultures, the study enriches our understanding of cultural exchange, adaptation, and the early processes of globalization in the art world. Here are several aspects of its theoretical and contextual contribution:

The study operates within a theoretical framework that views art as a medium of cultural exchange and diplomacy. By tracing the adoption and adaptation of Chinese lacquer techniques in the Portuguese empire's Asian territories, the research aligns with theories of hybridity and transculturation, which suggest that cultural exchanges lead to the creation of new, hybrid forms and practices. This perspective challenges more traditional views of cultural interaction that often emphasize dominance and resistance, offering instead a more nuanced understanding of mutual influence and creative adaptation.

Moreover, material culture studies benefit greatly from investigations into how objects are made, used, and valued in different cultural contexts. This research highlights the role of materiality in this case, lacquer as an active participant in cultural and historical narratives. By focusing on the technical aspects of lacquerwork and its aesthetic qualities, the study contributes to a deeper understanding of how materials can influence artistic innovation and cultural adaptation over time and space.

Additionally, historically, the study of art history has often been compartmentalized into Western and non-Western categories. This research bridges these divides by showcasing how artistic techniques like lacquering can serve as a conduit for intercultural interaction. It adds to the growing body of literature that supports a more interconnected view of art history, one that acknowledges the complex global networks of exchange that have shaped artistic production and appreciation. In terms of contextual significance, this research provides insights into the early phases of globalization, illustrating how the global trade networks established by European colonial powers facilitated not only the exchange of commodities but also the flow of artistic ideas and techniques. The study highlights how art objects functioned within these networks, not merely as trade goods but as ambassadors of cultural knowledge and technological expertise.

On the other hand, by discussing the conservation challenges associated with preserving Luso-Asian lacquerware, the research contributes to ongoing discussions in the field of art conservation. Understanding the material science behind lacquer and the environmental factors affecting its preservation can help conservators develop better techniques and strategies for maintaining these culturally and historically significant objects.

Finally, this research plays a critical role in the study of cultural identity and heritage. By analysing how different cultures adopt and adapt foreign artistic elements, it provides a framework for understanding the dynamic nature of cultural identity. This is particularly relevant in discussions about cultural heritage preservation, where understanding the historical context of cross-cultural influences is essential for developing appropriate conservation and curation strategies. Overall, this research enriches existing academic discourse by providing a multifaceted look at the intersections of art, history, and cultural exchange, highlighting the ways in which objects encode complex narratives of cultural interaction and identity.

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