Bending Asian lacquer in eighteenth-century Paris: New discoveries

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Rococo furniture decorated with fragments of Asian lacquer was highly fashionable in eighteenth-century France. The furniture’s curvilinear designs forced cabinetmakers to manipulate flat lacquer elements so that they could be applied to a curved carcase. By removing material from the rear of lacquered wooden panels, they produced sheets of lacquered ‘veneer’ with enough flexibility to allow careful bending. Their application was usually limited to substrates that were straight or curved along only one axis. New evidence has revealed that cabinetmakers experimented with techniques allowing the use of lacquer veneer for decorating bombé furniture designs, characterized by curvatures along multiple axes. This article presents examples showing such strategies, found on a pair of corner cabinets from the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (78.DA.119.1–2) and a commode from the Rijksmuseum Amsterdam, Netherlands (BK-16652). In all three instances, the bombé forms are covered with Chinese lacquer veneer harvested from different types of export lacquer objects. X-radiography showed that segments of the veneer were removed to facilitate its compound bending, effectively tailoring it to the curved substrate. In addition, cross-sections from samples of the corner cabinets show that the original substrate of the Chinese lacquer is leather. The cutting techniques differ on all three objects, indicating that cabinetmakers were still searching for the most effective methods.

Keywords: Chinese lacquer, Asian lacquer, Japanning, Rococo furniture, Bombé furniture, French furniture, Ébénistes, Lacquered leather

Introduction

Furniture decorated with fragments of Asian lacquer was highly fashionable in eighteenth-century France and Parisian cabinetmakers were particularly known for this type of ornate and exotic furniture. As the increasingly curvilinear designs of the Rococo period took hold, these craftsmen were forced to manipulate lacquered veneers in ways that made it possible to apply them to complex curved substrates (Piert-Borgers, 2000).

In order to produce thin sheets of lacquer veneer with enough flexibility to allow for careful bending, the general approach was to select parts from export lacquer furnishings, then carefully reduce the thickness of these panels by removing the bulk of the wooden substrate through sawing, planing, and scraping away material from the rear. Roubo (1774, pp. 1020–1021) wrote that lacquer panels should be reduced to at most one ligne (2.25 mm) in thickness, and while this instruction may have been heeded for flat surfaces, it is the experience of the authors, based on inspection of numerous cross-sections, that bent lacquer panels were reduced to between 1 and 2 mm in thickness. After application of the lacquer veneer to the furniture carcase, the surrounding areas would subsequently be ‘japanned’ – varnished in imitation of Asian lacquer – while gilt bronze mounts were commonly used to disguise the transitions between the two types of surface decoration (Koller et al., 2000).

The application of lacquer veneers was usually restricted to surfaces that were curved along one axis only, given the limited extent to which the veneer can be bent. However, the examination of three examples of French lacquer furniture has revealed that Parisian cabinetmakers experimented with novel techniques, contriving strategies to apply lacquer veneer to the complex surfaces that were characteristic of eighteenth-century bombé furniture designs.

Observations

The three examples of furniture with convex bent lacquer veneer discussed here include a pair of corner cabinets by Jacques Dubois from the collection of the J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles, USA, (Wilson & Heginbotham, forthcoming), and a commode by Adrien Faizelot Delorme at the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, Netherlands, (Baarsen,
A different bending strategy was used on the lacquer veneer of each of these pieces. This suggests that the cabinetmakers were experimenting with new forms and techniques and had not yet settled on an optimal approach. Both doors of the corner cabinets and the side doors and front drawers of the commode have a bombé shape. Each was decorated with Chinese lacquer veneer (Fig. 2) framed by imitation lacquer and gilded bronze mounts.

The two doors of the Getty’s corner cabinets are each covered with a large single sheet of Chinese black lacquer veneer with gold and polychrome decoration. Both depict landscapes with temples and domestic architecture and are populated by an array of courtiers, servants, horsemen, and soldiers. It is
interesting to note that the Chinese lacquer does not extend to the edges of the fields defined by the gilded bronze mounts. The French craftsman responsible for japanning the remainder of the case would have had to add significant sections of new decorative work to extend the original composition, particularly at the sides. This circumstance was doubtless brought on by necessity and therefore it seems reasonable to assume that the original Chinese panels were never significantly wider than their current maximum width of approximately 50 cm. Unfortunately, at some point in the past, much of the original Chinese lacquer was overpainted as part of an overzealous, though skillfully executed restoration campaign.

The drawers and side doors of the Rijksmuseum commode are similarly embellished with sheets of Chinese black lacquer veneer, showing fine gold powder designs including some subtly raised decoration. As with the corner cabinets, the Chinese lacquer—and in this case the japanned surfaces as well—has been entirely recoated and redecorated.

One explanation for the extensive surface restoration is that the stresses involved in bending the lacquer may have caused significant damage as the bent panels aged. The redecoration of the Rijksmuseum commode was executed with great accuracy: X-radiography and microscopic examination of the surface
made evident that the present impression closely reflects the original design. The lacquer veneer on the commode doors, both measuring approximately 40 cm square, depicts boats and pavilions on a waterfront. On the basis of their size and the vertical direction of the underlying wood grain, it can be suggested that the lacquer fragments were retrieved from a folding screen, as the individual panels of Chinese lacquer screens are seldom wider than 55 cm.

Although the lacquer veneers on the drawer fronts show similar scenes, the dimensions, especially the width of the individual segments, differ noticeably from those found on the doors. In keeping with this observation, samples from the doors and drawers confirmed that their lacquered parts originated from two distinct objects, as cross-sections revealed significant differences in both layer sequence and morphology (Fig. 3).

The drawer fronts were divided visually into three sections by the bronze mounts. They were decorated by applying two rectangular lacquer segments to each of the drawer fronts, with the addition of japanned veneer at the outer ends. As with the corner cabinets, the lacquer veneer was not cut to match the shape of the bronze mounts but was defined by the size of the available lacquer fragment. Closer examination revealed that the lacquer veneer covering the two drawers originally formed a single sheet of approximately 80 cm wide and 50 cm high. Similarities in terms of dimensions and decoration can be found in a tabletop at Castle Steinau, Germany, (Reepen & Handke, 1996, pp. 111 and 193), a fall-front door of a portable altar from a private collection (Jackson & Jaffer, 2004, p. 119), and wall paneling at Drottningholm Palace, Sweden, (Miklin-Kniefacz & Miklin, 2015, personal

Figure 5  Diagrams illustrating the patterns of incisions found in the lacquer veneer of the doors on the sides of the commode (top) and front of the corner cabinets (bottom). Images: Arlen Heginbotham & Christina Hagelskamp.
These examples provide avenues for further study to establish the type of Asian export objects from which the lacquer found on the Rijksmuseum drawer fronts may have originated.

Cutting techniques for bombé surfaces

The curvature of the front of the Rijksmuseum’s commode is relatively gradual and the drawers are principally bent in a single plane. In contrast, the lacquer veneers on the side doors of the commode and on the doors of the corner cabinets are curved along multiple axes. It would have been impossible to apply them intact to such a complex three-dimensional bombé surface. Examination revealed that the lacquer panels had sections removed to facilitate compound bending and allow the shape of the lacquer veneers to be tailored to the carcaces.

Cuts, made in all four lacquer fragments, were visible to both the naked eye and in X-radiographs (Fig. 4). The cutting patterns encountered on the lacquer panels on the two corner cabinet doors of the Getty Museum cabinets differ from each other and from the Rijksmuseum’s commode doors. On one of the corner cabinet doors, incisions were made radially from the top and sides of the panel, while the other shows two long horizontal cuts that all but split the sheet into three sections (Fig. 5). Interestingly, on the doors of the corner cabinets, cross sections showed that the immediate and original substrate for the lacquer is leather, not wood (Fig. 6). Unlike wood, leather has isotropic properties and can be bent equally in all directions, which must have been an advantage for this particular application. In contrast, the lacquer veneers on both commode doors, with their thin wood substrates, were cut diagonally to allow them to follow the bombé curve of the carcase.

The unexpected leather substrate raises the question about the origin of these two fragments. Normally, lacquer incorporated into Western furniture is assumed to derive primarily from Asian export furniture in which, in the vast majority of cases, the lacquer ground is applied onto a wooden substrate. As with the commode doors, the size of the veneers used on the corner cabinets would normally suggest a screen as the source object but at this point the authors are not aware of Asian lacquer screens made with leather substrates. This might suggest a different type of source: lacquered leather trunks, with tops as large as 105 by 53 cm were in regular production in Guangdong in the first half of the nineteenth century (Hedde et al., 1849, pp. 125–126). However, since the production of such trunks in the middle of the eighteenth century has not been confirmed, the origin of the lacquer fragments used on the corner cabinets remains enigmatic.

In preparation for application, long narrow wedges were cut out of the lacquer veneers to allow them to be fitted onto the convex surfaces (Fig. 7). Two of the eight seams on the two commode doors prepared in this way do not meet perfectly. X-radiography, as well as exposed wood along these joints, shows that thin wedges of wood veneer were inserted into the bottom seams of the right hand door. These were integrated using black-pigmented varnish and the interrupted original gold decoration was corrected with
bronze powder-based retouching. The latter is still visible on the corner cabinets (Fig. 8), but has been obscured by later surface treatments on the commode.

**Conclusion**

To date, these three objects are the only examples of bombé furniture with incised Asian lacquer known to the authors. In addition, the corner cabinets present the first known instances of lacquered leather panels incorporated into eighteenth-century French furniture. The three variations in the cutting pattern of the lacquer veneer may indicate that cabinetmakers were still searching for the most effective method for applying Asian lacquer onto the bombé forms popular in French furniture at that time. With this new information in mind, future study of related objects might reveal more examples of eighteenth-century craftsmen applying their ingenuity to incorporate Asian lacquer into their stylish but complex new furniture designs.

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