Editorial

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Editorial

IIC’s 2014 Hong Kong Congress, the 25th biennial congress, was titled *An Unbroken History: Conserving East Asian Works of Art and Heritage*. Five days of intensive cultural and knowledge exchange encompassed a range of material types, advances in preventive conservation, and new applications of materials. A number of recurring topics emerged at the Congress, including the study, examination, conservation, and analysis of East Asian lacquer. This special issue of *Studies in Conservation* draws together these contributions, allowing many of those who presented papers or posters in Hong Kong to cover their subjects in greater detail than was possible within the constraints of the Congress preprints, published in both Chinese and English. Several authors have taken this opportunity to update and expand the scope of their papers, and this special issue also benefits from the inclusion of key additional contributions from leading researchers in the field.

Taken together, these papers represent the latest developments in the rapidly evolving discipline of Asian lacquer conservation, and draw on several projects with their roots in the longstanding Western fascination with objects lacquered in East Asia. In both East Asia and the West, the historical progressive rise of conservation as a philosophy and profession has been coupled to a desire to learn more about lacquer manufacture, traditional restoration techniques, and how these might be adapted to accommodate current conservation ethics. Milestones along this path include the proceedings of the *Urushi* Study Group, published by the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI), Los Angeles, USA, in 1985, and the five-year Japanese-German collaboration that culminated in the 1999 East Asian and European Lacquer Techniques conference. The Co-operative Programme for the Conservation of Japanese Art Objects Overseas, administered by the National Research Institute for Cultural Properties, Tokyo, Japan, has played a critical role and made sustained long-term contributions both to the conservation of objects and to fostering cross-cultural discussion and knowledge exchange.

From 2003 to 2008, the Mazarin Chest Project at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, UK, combined a substantial body of research with an ambitious cross-cultural conservation programme. Funded by the Toshiba International Foundation and the Getty Foundation, it culminated in an international conference in 2009 at which ground-breaking analytical work, presented by Michael Schilling and Arlen Heginbotham of GCI, rewrote Western understanding of the composition, materials, and techniques used in East Asian lacquer. The lasting impact of their work can be seen in this volume, where many of the articles draw on their methodology to bring new understanding to lacquer manufacture and conservation. Their contribution to this volume, co-authored with Henk van Keulen and Mike Szelewski, sets out a systematic method by which the often bewilderingly complex results from pyrolysis-gas chromatography/mass spectrometry can be interpreted to provide information on both the lacquer itself and on the various additives known or thought to be added to the ground and finishing layers. These methods, which are part of an expert system developed for the *Recent Advances in Characterizing Asian Lacquers* (RAdICAL) workshops organized by the GCI, are illustrated with examples that focus on lacquered objects discussed elsewhere in the volume, reinforcing the sense of a shared research network in this fast-evolving field.

Writing with Julie Chang and Herant Khanjian, the same authors also provide an overview of the components of lacquer and lacquer additives, setting the subtleties revealed by modern analysis in the context of the historical development of lacquer technology and contemporaneous descriptions of process and practice. The importance of understanding these historical texts is the theme of a further contribution by Chang and Schilling, which charts references to lacquer production across 8000 years of Chinese literature. This synergy between the identifications made using advanced analytical techniques and accounts in historical texts is also well illustrated by the description by Silvia Miklin-Kniefacz et al. of an ultimately successful 20-year quest to establish analytically the
much-reported but largely unproven presence of blood in ground and lacquer layers.

This emerging understanding of the components likely to be found in traditional lacquer samples has allowed more unusual formulations to be studied with confidence, for example the paint media used in twentieth-century Vietnamese lacquer paintings, which are the subject of a contextual and analytical study by Bettina Ebert et al. In contrast, several papers explore the adaptation of traditional Eastern techniques and materials to suit the Western market, from the choices of materials used in artefacts made for export from Portuguese trading centres in Asia (Ulrike Körber et al.), or to the newly founded American republic in the late eighteenth century (Maria João Petisca et al.), to the repurposing of flat Asian lacquered wood or leather panels to decorate the curved surfaces of eighteenth-century French Rococo furniture, described by Christina Hagelskamp, Arlen Heginbotham, and Paul van Duin.

It is no surprise that conservation treatments and the decision-making processes involved in conserving Asian objects in a Western context lay behind many contributions. Václav Pitthard et al. present the detailed examination and treatment of an eighteenth-century Chinese carved lacquer screen that is now in a museum collection in Vienna, while Delphine Mesmaeker addresses the challenges of conserving an astonishingly complex and extensive decorative scheme in Japanese lacquer within an architectural context (the Japanese Tower in Laeken, Belgium). Another perspective is offered by Pamela Hatchfield et al. as they describe the difficult choices about conservation and redisplay presented by a Coromandel lacquer screen in the Acton Collection at the Villa La Pietra, Florence, Italy, an object that has been much altered and the present state of which strongly reflects its collection history and current location. The paper by Hsin-Hui Hsu and Dean Sully reminds us that while cultural and historical contexts are familiar concerns, the religious setting in which an object was created — in this instance a lacquered statue of the Buddha — is less frequently considered when treatments are developed. Raina Chao discusses a method for loss compensation using paper.

Every successful conservation treatment relies on a sound understanding of the materials of the original object and of the way in which that treatment affects them in the short and long term. Lacquer objects are no exception and their complex multi-layered structures and differing surface finishes make it challenging to predict their future behaviour. The contribution by Judith Thei et al. offers a glimpse at this complexity while providing detailed macroscopic and microscopic documentation of the changes to lacquer surfaces as they are conserved using traditional Japanese methods, and of the longer term changes shown by these treated surfaces. Such fundamental studies of material properties frequently rely on the availability of test lacquer samples; the data generated by these experiments are only as good as the ability of the samples to replicate the behaviour of old lacquer objects. Marianne Webb et al. have used the latest analytical data on lacquer compositions to inform their goal of producing test samples that best reflect the way in which lacquer objects in museums and historical settings respond to conservation treatments and the vicissitudes of their environment. The paper by Donna Strahan and Masahiko Tsukada on measuring mercury emissions from lacquered objects is a timely reminder that safe treatment options must also include an assessment of potential health and safety risks to conservators and to other museum professionals: the literature on potential hazards to people from artworks is still rather sparse.

These extended postprints provide a rich picture of the current state of treatment, analysis, and understanding of Asian lacquer objects, which will serve as a point of reference and inspiration for those interested in their history, conservation, and examination, and a starting point for future research and investigation into the materials, context, and preservation of this important and prevalent class of artefact.

Together with the postprints of the environmental session which took place in Hong Kong during An Unbroken History: Conserving East Asian Works of Art and Heritage, this volume documenting a key theme of the congress should ensure that the latest research and best practice in this area are available for present and future practitioners.

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