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A Consideration of "Japanning" (Imitation Lacquer) in England and Europe

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Introduction

The limited availability of Japanese *urushi* lacquer wares (resulting largely from Japan's extended policy of complete isolationism) led to the development in Europe of various imitation lacquer techniques, known collectively as "japanning." Such European lacquer wares were influenced stylistically by the original Japanese versions they sought to imitate, but what, specifically was the nature of this influence? I explore this question, considering how such wares were influenced by Japanese urushi and how these influences changed over time and place.

Use of terms "japanning" and "japanned" in English

The word "japanning" has been used in English to describe various applications of the craft. Sometimes it describes examples in which true Japanese lacquer (urushi) appears on some main portion of the work, but with the remaining surrounding areas finished in japanning. In other instances, it describes works that have all areas finished in japanning.

Japanning was used in various applications for different sorts of items. In the early period, japanning was used as a form of interior decoration, appearing on walls, pillars, shelves, and so on. By the middle period, it was being used on furniture as well. And further, we also see examples of japanning being used to decorate smaller items like jewelry boxes and sewing kits.

English japanning

The popularity of Namban lacquer in Holland had peaked by the 18th century and then began to wane, but in England the taste for japanning continued unabated. A technical manual on the subject published in 1688 by John Stalker and George Parker came to be reprinted numerous times over the years and even into the modern era. The japanning these authors introduced imitated black lacquer through a method that involved the use of lampblack, and this technique was applied to imbue all manner of metal and wooden crafts with a strong sense of foreign exoticism.

Determining English manufacture

The English manufacture of examples of japanning can be determined through a number of means, summarized as follows:

1. When the name of the manufacturing company is known, and/or some record or advertisement for the company remains extant. The name "Jennens and Bettridge Co.," for example, is one of the companies known for producing japanned products, and in terms of location, Wolverhampton and Bilston are both known to have been important centres for the manufacture of japanned

wares.

2. When the design depicts an identifiable British location or place, as in the case of the box depicting Tintern Abbey, a known location situated adjacent to the village of Tintern in Monmouthshire on the Welsh bank of the River Wye.
3. When the materials and/or design are similar to those of other English furniture or crafts.
4. When the item is similar to some other known example of English japanning, as is the case with a sewing box kept at Snowshill Manor. This box resembles, in shape and design, a similar sewing box in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum. The latter, from the 1800s, includes a description that reads "Made in China for export to Europe," from which we understand the possibility of examples of japanning having been exported from China rather than made in England.

Dutch japanning and others

In October 1609 (and thus prior to the arrival of the first VOC shipment), a patent was issued by the States General to Willem Kick of Amsterdam, stating that for eight years he, with his "company," should be the only person in the Republic allowed to make "all sorts of lacquer work . . . like that which is imported from the East Indies." It is surprising that Kick set up a company for producing lacquer wares so very early, and he is the first northern European known by name to have applied himself to this purpose.

Other examples of japanning considered to have been produced somewhere other than England are listed so that a comparison can be made between such works and British ones. Note, however, that the countries of origin and years of production for these non-English examples largely remain unclear.

Conclusion

Japanned lacquer wares discussed here took Japanese urushi as their starting point. But, having taken root in England and elsewhere in Europe, they developed them into localized versions, often with improved durability that included overcoming lacquer's inherent weakness against heat.

We know that the great number of these japanned wares produced were influenced by Japanese urushi. By studying the differences between such foreign-made lacquer works and Japanese urushi products, I believe we can understand the advantages and disadvantages inherent in each of them. In my presentation, I discuss English japanning by comparing differences in the English taste for Japanese lacquerware with that of other European countries; by comparing the japanned works produced in Holland and England; and by tracking the changes that occurred over time in English japanning.