
Title of Object

Cosmetic Container

Photo of Object (optional)



Object Information

Artist: Unknown

Culture: Chinese (Han Dynasty)

Date of Object: c. 100 BCE -c. 200 CE

Country: China

Accession Number: 2001.69.2.2a,b

File Created: 4/26/2016

Material/Medium: Painted lacquer with silver inlay over wood core

Author of File: Elizabeth Germick

Reviewer of File: Kara ZumBahlen

Department: Chinese, South and Southeast Asian Art

Last Updated/Reviewed: 6/2/2016

Tour Topics

Group 2 tour, ancient culture, beauty, daily life, fashion/dress, funerary/afterlife, gender roles, innovation/avant-garde, nature, power/status, ritual/ceremony, women, combs

Questions and Activities (list 3 to 4 sample questions here):

1. Our first object is from the Han Dynasty, dated about 100 BCE. Take a moment to look closely at it. What do you see that surprises you?
 2. What about this item that would make it popular for trade?
 3. What clues do you see to the purpose of this case and who do you think used it?
 4. What do we see today that reminds you of this Cosmetic case? What are similar items made of today?
-

Key Points (Form: subject matter, medium and techniques of manufacture, style, etc.)

The lacquer is the sap of the “lacquer tree”, related to many trees including the pistachio, mango, and cashew. But the sap is very toxic and caustic, with Urushiol, the active ingredient as in poison ivy, that

causes blistering as well as breathing problems so there were occupational hazards for the artists who worked with this medium.

The process of creating lacquerware is very time-consuming. Sap is painstakingly harvested, colored, and cured. 30-40 thin layers are applied with special tools to a wooden or bamboo core, as many as 300 coats for items with carving, and each must be dry for a full day and polished before the next layer. Craftsmen used cypress wood spatulas and human hair brushes to apply thin coats of the sap. They used rat or mouse hair brushes for detailed fine lines.

Lacquerware was usually polished to a very high gloss. It was extremely durable and virtually indestructible.

Cinnabar (also toxic due to mercury) was used to make for red, carbon or iron oxide for black. Most other colors cannot combine with the lacquer.

Carved lacquer is uniquely Chinese.

Key Points (Context: use, history, cultural information, artist bio, etc.)

Lacquerware first appeared during the era of Neolithic China (5000BCE), became more sophisticated in the Shang dynasty (1600 BCE) and is well established by the Han dynasty (200BCE) and spread through trade to Korea, Japan, and the rest of South-East Asia.

10x more expensive than bronze casting, rivalled bronzes as the most prestigious medium for ceremonial and ancestral offerings. Also treasured by the upper class due to rich color, extraordinary craftsmanship, and difficulty and toxicity of the process.

Given as imperial gifts straddling diplomacy and bribery with the prized and prestigious reputation. Lacquerware was elegant, stylish, and spoke of opulence.

Both men and women wore long hair and possessed dressing items. Found in tombs, the sets became entangled with biographies of individuals, ensured the order and beauty of the body into death, and acted as potent objects of memory throughout rituals surrounding death.

Toiletry cases were among the most elaborately ornamented of all lacquerwares in burials, with intricate ornamentation, precious stones, elaborate designs and imagery, even on the interior. Their status as personal possessions warranted such lavish decoration and was meaningful in the context and practices of beautification.

Either pictorial design or carved, rarely a mixture.

Early Cosmetics: During the Han dynasty, women put a red dot on their lower lip and a pointed shape on the upper lip. The remainder of the lips were covered with powder. Main box is called the "Lien", smaller boxes still contain face powder.

From the British Museum: During the Warring States Period (475-221 BC) and the Han dynasty lacquer was predominantly used to provide painted surfaces for coffins, cosmetic boxes, musical instruments and food vessels. At first, geometric painted patterns were employed, but during the Han dynasty a more flowing linear style developed in accordance with the natural tendencies of brush painting. These flowing lines were read as cloud patterns and as landscapes, among which were scattered detailed

animals and figures. Such scenes were linked to the Han dynasty preoccupation with immortality and belief in paradises, in which dwelt gods and immortals. Goblins and fairies, fantastic animals and birds are all depicted floating about in cloud- and wave-filled Daoist heavens. In addition, lacquer as material was thought to have magical qualities as an elixir of immortality, which may have contributed to its popularity at this time.

Current Mia Label Information (optional)

This brilliantly decorated lacquer cosmetic case was recovered intact, complete with three small lacquer boxes inside. Each smaller box is formed and decorated to match the larger case or lien with its delicately drawn scrollwork and silver inlay. The two small circular boxes have silver inlaid quatrefoil on top, and one still contains red face powder. In the narrow D-shaped box are four wooden hair combs of the same shape. The boxes are made of thin wood protected by several coats of dark brown lacquer. They are decorated with elaborate tracery painted in red and ochre lacquer, and their sides and shoulders are inset with silver sheet images of striding animals. The interiors of all boxes and lids are lacquered and embellished with identical scrollwork. This luxurious group of ancient lacquer is one of the best-preserved sets to have survived from the Han dynasty. Radiocarbon tests have dated it to between 98 BCE and 89 CE.

Sources of Information and/or Prop Ideas (photos/videos)

Object information and podcast about a Han lacquer cup:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/ahistoryoftheworld/objects/OoYPF3oeT06fdg9_lhH96Q

Essay on lacquerware from Met Museum: http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/elac/hd_elac.htm

Cosmetic box in British Museum (similar in design to the Mia box):

http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=257841&partId=1