



## Lacquer Box

Beautiful, light, and durable, small lacquer boxes held all manner of things and were also exchanged as fine gifts and treasured as fine heirlooms. Lacquerware has been described as "not unlike modern plastic in that it is light, durable and clean. Although we don't know what this box may have been made for, many smaller round boxes have been described in literature as incense boxes. They may have also been used to hold cosmetics, seal paste, or other small items.

The carving is done with a *tixi* technique (pronounced *tea-she*) or "marbled technique," is a distinctive style of carved lacquer popular in China from around 1200 to 1500.

The *tixi* technique takes excellent advantage of the layering process necessary in the production of lacquer. By layering two or more contrasting colors, the widely angled carving creates a vibrant marbled effect along the sides of the cut edges. Lacquer made in the *tixi* technique was popular with small objects datable between late Sung and early Ming dynasties. The layers of red are barely visible in the rich black lacquer.

*Tixi* is characterized by deep v-shaped grooves that expose alternating layers of colored lacquers (red and black in this example). The primary decorative motif of *tixi* lacquers is a "pommel-scroll" pattern like the one seen on this example and on others in the permanent collection. Some say that it is said to resemble the saddle pommel, the slightly raised area at the front of early Mongolian horse saddles. Others say the design resembles ancient sword pommel, the counterweight at the end of the handle of a sword.

The decorative carving is done after all the layers of lacquer have hardened. This box was coated with alternating coats of red and black lacquer. The carver makes deep u- or v-shaped cuts revealing the alternating colors of lacquer.

The Chinese are considered the inventors of lacquer. The earliest evidence of the use of lacquer in China comes from the Shang dynasty. Lacquerware is waterproof and has a high resistance to intense heat and strong acids. Since ancient times the durability and beauty of lacquerware made it a desirable and valuable trade item. Lacquerware was exported to and copied at an early date in Korea and Japan.

The basic shape of the lacquer ware object is created out of paper, cloth, leather, shell, bamboo, or the most frequently used material, wood. The wood was often covered with a glued-on coarse cloth before the lacquer was applied. Lacquerware includes small or large containers, tableware, and larger objects such as furniture and even coffins painted with lacquer. Before lacquering, the surface is sometimes painted with pictures, inlaid with shell and other materials, or carved. The lacquer can be dusted with gold or silver and given further decorative treatments.

Lacquer is the hardened sap of the sumac tree (*rhus vernicifera*, or *ch'i- shu* in Chinese), a tree native to China. The sumac tree is tapped, notches are cut into the growing bark and the sap oozes out into containers. After the sap has been gathered, straining and heating it for several hours purify it. At this point lacquer will dry to a matte black. The coloring process of lacquer occurs during the heating process with vegetable and mineral dyes being added to produce the desired color, such as red from cinnabar (the most common), black from carbon (soot) and yellow from cadmium. There appears to have been a change in the early Ming from using red from natural mineral cinnabar to synthetic vermilion which changed the coloring of the red from brownish-red a shade to a "bright scarlet."

Highly toxic in its liquid state, lacquer is applied in thin layers to the foundation material. It can take weeks for each layer to dry and harden thoroughly. Each layer is polished before the next layer is applied. Polishing provided the next layer of lacquer a proper surface to adhere to and ensured that the finished top surface was smooth. A layer of lacquer is approximately 0.05 mm thick. During this process different colors of lacquer could be applied. These different layers of color would be exposed during the carving process. Chinese lacquer objects have from thirty to three hundred layers.

## **Resources**

China Art Cart Manual 2009

Labels from related Mia objects

Wikipedia/Carved lacquer [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carved\\_lacquer](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Carved_lacquer)

## Power and Beauty Connections – Room 2

Snuff Bottle, 27.1.60a-c	Presentation Box and cover in Tsung form, 79.3.2a,b
Snuff Bottle, 31.112.5a,b	Hexafoil Box, 85.33.a,b
Pair of Quatrefoil Boxes, 79.3.1.1&2	Pair of Vases, 95.98.84.1&2
Tray, red cinnabar, 95.98.84.2	Circular Box with Cover, 2001.68.15a,b
Quatrefoil Box and Cover, 2001.68.16a,b	Box with Cover, 2006.41a,b
Cover of Chun Box, 2001.68.17	Cover Box, lacquer, 82.49.3a,b
Nine Dragon Box, (tixi) 2001,68.14a,b	

## Imperial Throne – Room 5

Made during the Qianlong period (r. 1736–95), this rare piece of court furniture is one of the larger and more fully decorated thrones outside China. Few lacquered thrones have dragons and celestial landscapes like those found here, painted in gold lacquer across the entire expanse of the seat. The composition and iconography of the five-clawed imperial dragons cavorting among clouds and flaming pearls above the ocean is an official insignia and similar to the decoration of court robes and other official court textiles of the period. The cabriole legs, aprons, and openwork back and side panels are all carved in relief with scrolls and lacquered in green, red, and gold. The panels of the removable back and side rails are decorated with stylized dragons and *shou* (longevity) medallions emblematic of imperial rule and long life.

**Imperial Throne, 18<sup>th</sup> century, polychrome lacquer over a softwood frame, 93.32.a-d**  
<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/4546/imperial-throne-china>

## Collection Connections

### Small Circular Box

The boldly carved, triple-pommel scroll forming the lid of this vessel and its dramatically layered polychrome create a striking effect in a relatively small object. The style of cutting is in keeping with early *tixi* lacquer, evidenced by deep, wide-angle v-shaped grooves, alternating layers of black, red, and yellow, and a high polish. Lacquer of this type is rare and mostly confined to small objects datable between late Sung and early Ming.

The *tixi* technique takes excellent advantage of the layering process necessary in the production of lacquer. By layering two or more contrasting colors, the widely angled carving creates a vibrant marbled effect along the sides of the cut edges. The designs were usually based on the pommel scroll motif: a symmetrical pattern of two linked spirals whose shape resembles that of ancient sword pommels.

**Small Circular Box, 14<sup>th</sup> century, carved black lacquer with red and yellow layers (tixi) 2001.74.2A,B G215**

<https://collections.artsmia.org/art/32530/small-circular-box-china>

### **Octagonal Box**

Lacquer carved with pommel scroll motifs probably had its beginning in the late Song dynasty (13th century). It reached its greatest popularity during the Yuan (14th century) and early Ming era but continued well into the sixteenth century. This large octagonal box is carved in the tixi technique with three layers of black, barely visible in the red. Four concentric bands of sword pommel scrolls surrounding a central design of four small c-scrolls around a central boss continue down the shoulder to the slightly raised lip, which fits onto the base. The lower section has a repeat of this design with a wide spreading foot decorated with a classic scroll. The gentle curvature of the relief design and the wide grooves with u-shaped troughs are in keeping with the late fourteenth, early fifteenth century tixi style.

This piece was constructed with a mesh fabric over its wooden core. Inside the high octagonal foot ring, the base is lacquered black and has a fine crackle. A large, covered box such as this would have made a fine presentation gift in an upper-class household.

**Octagonal Box, 15<sup>th</sup> century, Red and black carved lacquer (tixi), 2001.73.2A,B G215**  
<https://collections.artsmia.org/search/Lacquer%20box>