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Antiques

Oriental Lacquerwares Are a Highlight of Asia Week in Manhattan

By WENDY MOONAN

Antique Asian lacquerwares are suddenly hotter than desert sand at high noon — evident in several gallery shows and auctions that are part of the annual Asia Week events in Manhattan.

"I've never had a response to a catalog like this," said Michael C. Hughes, a private New York City dealer who specializes in Asian art. He was referring to the catalog for his exhibition of more than 100 pieces of Chinese, Korean and Ryukyuan (Okinawa) lacquer, which opens today at the Ingrao Gallery at 17 East 64th Street (through next Friday).

Mr. Hughes's Chinese lacquerwares are mostly from the Song (960-1279), Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, although he does have one cup that dates from the fifth to third century B.C. The works include dishes, bowls, trays, chests and a water dropper.

One object that may be less familiar to Western eyes is a Ming cup stand from the 15th century, with an appealing movement and freedom to the carving. The wood cup support and saucer stand on a tall foot; the work, all one piece, is covered in cinnabar lacquer decorated with carved birds, peony blossoms and foliage. It was meant to cradle a tea vessel, probably one made of stoneware, Mr. Hughes said.

A similar, earlier lacquer cup stand from the Northern Song dynasty (960-1127) appears in the catalog for "China: 5,000 Years," a 1998 show at the Guggenheim Museum. "Designed for the display or presentation of a cup, it is a prime example of the group of objects that were created for the service of tea," Michael Knight writes in his catalog. "In shape, the cup stand related to ceramics such as Ding ware, which was made for the Imperial court during the Northern Song."

Mr. Hughes has another early piece, an oval dish from the Yuan dynasty of the 14th century, with two long-tailed birds diving into dense peony bushes. "The subject, two birds in flight amongst flowers and foliage, was a popular one during the Song and Yuan dynasties," he said. "It is usually found in a circular or oval composition, where the bodies of the birds and long, flowing tail feathers move in a circular motion."

The freshness in the carving of this dish contrasts strongly with the perfection of that in a miniature chariot in the show, from the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1736-95). The chariot's carving is so consistent that the bats and clouds in the decoration look almost machine-made.

"I think it is an imperial commission, and if it is, it has to be valuable," Mr. Hughes said. "There is one like it in the Beijing Palace Museum and another in the National Palace Museum in Taipei. It may have been used by the ladies of the court, or it might be a scholar's object."

Chinese collectors love perfection; Westerners may find such carving static and formulaic.

The Manhattan dealer William Lipton, at 41 East 57th Street, has an elegant 19th-century cinnabar lacquer stand carved on its top, sides and legs. Twenty inches wide, it would make a perfect tea tray.

Another piece from the Qianlong period is at the Chinese Porcelain Company, 475 Park Avenue, at 58th Street: a large carved cinnabar lacquer box and cover. "It's a classic nine-dragon box in a style that appeals to Chinese taste," said Conor Mahony, the company's president, pointing out the individually carved scales. "It probably held food." (Christie's has two similar Qianlong boxes in its sale on Wednesday.)

Who buys antique lacquer? "The Japanese have historically been strong collectors, but Westerners are next," Mr. Hughes said. "The Chinese only began collecting in the past 20 years, but in the last five years, demand on the mainland and Taiwan has exploded."

Mr. Hughes's collection comes from a Californian who has been accumulating lacquer for years. "More than 60 percent of the pieces came out of Japan," he said. "The Japanese have been collecting Chinese lacquer since the Song dynasty."

Mr. Hughes said the early pieces survived because they were donated to Buddhist temples. Each had its own silk bag and a specially made box marked with Japanese calligraphy. His earliest piece is a shallow black "ear" cup with a red and black zigzag pattern on its rim and two handles that look like ears.

"They were carefully stored and cared for," Mr. Hughes said. "They may have been taken out for a ceremony once every 10 years."

Coincidentally, J.J. Lally & Company, a gallery at 41 East 57th Street, has on view a pair of similarly shaped lacquered ear cups, from the Eastern Zhou dynasty, fourth to third century B.C. James Lally sold them right after publishing the catalog for his show, which runs through April 12.

"Ear cups were used for both food and wine," Mr. Lally said. "Whereas things like pottery horses were made to be buried in tombs, it's very likely a number of lacquerwares, which were treasured objects, were used in this lifetime."

Mr. Lally also has an Eastern Zhou lacquered stem dish that looks like a glass designed by the Viennese Secessionist Josef Hoffmann. It has a wide, circular top decorated with stylized serpents and S-scroll motifs and a narrow stem. A client has put the dish on hold.

"I am seeing far more interest in lacquer today than even three years ago," Mr. Lally said. "Part of the reason is Chinese porcelains have been getting so expensive. People are looking around to see what else to collect. Porcelain is the most widely collected and has the most clear-cut association with the imperial house. There are imperial lacquerwares, but they are far less common."

Sotheby's has a wider range of fine lacquerwares than usual in its sale of Chinese works of art on Thursday, which are already on presale view.

"We are seeing a lot more trade in lacquer to respond to the market," said Joe-Hynn Yang, a top specialist in Chinese art at Sotheby's. "There is great demand for rare 14th- and 15th-century lacquers, whereas mainland Chinese seem to want 18th-century pieces." (Think of Mr. Hughes's chariot.)

Thursday's sale includes an extraordinary lacquer dish, with the Yongle emperor's mark incised on the back (1403-1425), that depicts pastoral scenes. A true tour de force, it has a subtlety that invites long inspection. Men play Chinese chess in front of a gabled, tiled pavilion. Attendants fetch a zither and tea. Pine and bamboo trees are etched against backgrounds of starry sky, rippled water and a tiled terrace. Its estimate is \$1 million to \$2 million.

"It was made for the imperial household or as a tributary gift," Mr. Yang said. "It took years to make."