



**JAIME EGUIGUREN**

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China, Qing Dynasty (1644 - 1911)  
Qianlong Period (1736 -1795)

**A VERY RARE IMPERIAL  
CARVED RED LACQUER  
CABINET**

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## A Very Rare Imperial Carved Red Lacquer Cabinet

Carved red lacquer, gilt bronze fittings

Height: 38 cm

Width: 38 cm

Depth: 15 cm

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This exquisite cabinet has a rectangular shape with a frontal panel door divided in four sections with a sharp and precise carving of red lacquer depicting a central motif of two Koi fish intertwined with ribbons and different flowers, lotus, camellia, and chrysanthemum wreathed in scrolling foliages.

In Chinese culture, koi have been seen as auspicious for many centuries. When the wife of Confucius, the well-known Chinese philosopher, bore a boy, one of their friends gave Confucius some koi fish, which Confucius regarded as a symbol of good luck. So, he named his son "Li" (鲤: Chinese pronunciation for koi fish). According to Chinese legend, koi fish swim freely in the sea even in stormy conditions, so the people of ancient China thought koi might change into dragons and were thought to be as powerful. Because of their association with prosperity and red color (red being a lucky color in China), people began to keep koi in tanks and pools in their homes to attract luck and professional or academic advancement. According to records, Chinese royal families started to raise koi during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). Since then, they have always been present in royal court and can be seen in such art forms as decorative painting, silk embroidery and ceramic sculpture.



China, Porcelain fired in the Imperial Kilns, 18<sup>th</sup> century, detail of  
Koi Fish

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The same motifs are depicted on the exterior sides; the subject of the Koi fish in a matching composite floral scroll incorporating chrysanthemum, camellias, rose and pomegranate blooms. The top has a different subject: a central flower which could be a lotus surrounded by different leaves and flowers such as chrysanthemum or camellias. A circular bronze and red lacquer lock when opened allows the single square door to be removed showing us the interior of the cabinet. The interior has a wide low drawer, smaller drawers in the middle sector and a thin one on top. They all have a geometrical design of red lacquer. This amazing small furniture has a surrounding of black lacquer with tiny motifs in red lacquer. The cabinet is supported by a black lacquer stand. A gilt bronze handle on the top allows the cabinet to be transported. The gilt bronze surroundings, the handle and the lock have an extremely excellent quality. The sharp, precise carving of the red lacquer is characteristic of Qianlong workshops, as is the deeply carved background of brocade patterns.

## The Luxury of Chinese Lacquer

The creation of objects from the dried sap of lacquer trees (*Rhus verniciflua*), like silk and porcelain, was a medium invented by the Chinese people. From the dawn of their civilisation, dating back to Neolithic times, the Chinese used it to great effect, creating some of the most astonishing works of art in the history of mankind, and it is not until the first century B.C. do we find evidence of it being produced by other peoples. However, unlike silk or ceramics, producing lacquer wares was not only extremely labour intensive but also poisonous to the craftsmen (although the Chinese discovered antidotes to relieve this from very early on), therefore the scale of production was relatively small, and they were always highly valued luxury items. Lacquer's preciousness meant that unlike silk or ceramics, it was not widely exported but remained largely for local use. Although lacquer itself is one of the most durable organic substances known to men – it is impenetrable by water and resistant to acid, insects or worms – the core materials that are necessary in the production of lacquer wares, often wood or fabric, are highly perishable once the lacquer surface is penetrated. This, combined with its small production, has resulted in an incomplete archaeological record. For example, although many tombs from the Warring States and Han period have produced extensive lacquer finds, up until this decade, only two examples of Yuan carved cinnabar lacquer wares have been excavated. In the case of Yuan mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer, only a single fragment has been found. When compared to the extensive finds of ceramics and jade it is not surprising that historical accounts of the development of lacquer are limited and sometimes

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contradictory. Nevertheless, lacquer's high status in Chinese society is evident from many early records. Legalist Han Feizi writing in the late Warring States period (475–221B.C.) and Confucian scholar Huan Kuan in the Eastern Han (25–220) both voiced their opposition to the extravagance and wastefulness of using lacquer.

Between the Han and the Tang, the styles of decoration used in lacquer wares proliferated, encompassing ever more elaborate methods designed to show the virtuosity of the craftsman and the wealth of the owner. Among the most highly valued of these was carved lacquer, where the design is cut with a knife through layers of lacquer thickly built up around a core. Because lacquer can only dry in thin layers (if the coating is too thick only the surface will dry properly, leaving the lacquer underneath in liquid state), the best carved lacquer has up to two hundred layers to achieve the desired thickness. This normally takes up to half a year or more to prepare before carving can start. There is still no concrete proof when carved lacquer first appeared – while the consensus deduced from literary accounts and some tenuous prototypes points to a Tang date, some suggest it could be as early as the Han dynasty, although no examples from controlled excavations can attest to these claims. The earliest true carved lacquer wares from dated excavations are from the Song dynasty.

Carved lacquers achieved unparalleled excellence in the Yuan and early Ming period, when craftsmen from the Xitang area in Jiangsu created some of the most well-known masterpieces in the art of lacquer. These pieces mainly depict flowers and birds or figures in landscape beside architectural structures. The floral pieces have a naturalistic style and harmonious compositions which gives a sense of space and depth, and are meticulously polished at the edges to give a rounded finish. Without a substantial number of these dated pieces or excavated materials, stylistic analysis is used to date these pieces, and it can sometimes prove to be a difficult task, especially when it appears that a revival of the Yuan style became prevalent in the carved lacquer of this period. In order to distinguish between these two groups, it is necessary to carefully examine Chinese lacquers documented and preserved in Japan, which from the Tang period onwards had been sent as diplomatic gifts between the two countries or Buddhist temples. In these early pieces it is possible to observe the close correspondence of the lacquer landscapes to Chinese paintings, with the abstracted clouds, water and ground all correctly and logically placed.

However, although the pieces of the 16<sup>th</sup> century are still characterised by a certain freedom and freshness in execution, subtle changes in the ground pattern, and the details of the decorative schemes on these

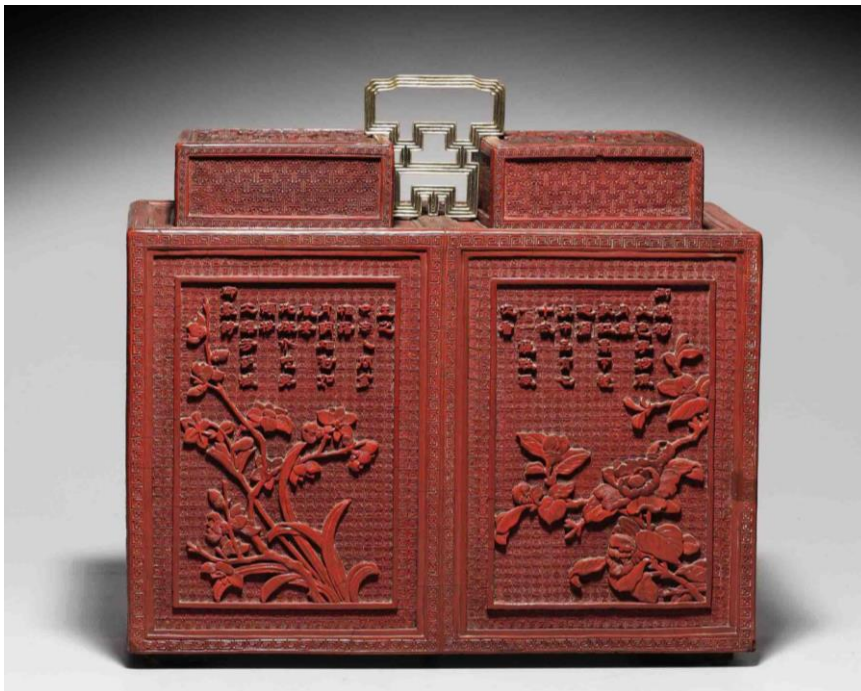
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pieces often point to a later date Another highly elaborate and time consuming technique that reached its maturity in the Yuan was 'filled-in lacquer', or Tianqi, where the decoration is carved away from an existing lacquer ground and different colours filled in, creating a polychrome surface.

In the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Liu Tong comments that connoisseurs found carved lacquer and filled-in lacquer most desirable. However, because of its rarity, early examples of Tianqi were many times more expensive than their carved lacquer counterparts. Tianqi lacquers used at court display a more formal 'Imperial' style, utilising symbols of imperial power like the dragon and phoenix combined with auspicious motifs or Buddhist and Daoist symbols in formal arrangements, with the motifs often highly stylised. These contrasts sharply with the naturalism and freedom found in carved lacquers of the earlier period.

The prestige of lacquer is underscored by the large number of master craftsmen whose names are known to us today, and many of the best pieces are signed. This can be compared to the complete absence of famous potters and a general paucity of the names of craftsmen working in any other medium (excepting bamboo and rhinoceros horn carvings, although in both cases signed pieces appear much later in the 16th century). Under the Ming, new regulations were put in place allowing lacquer craftsmen to avoid drafted labour by electing and paying replacements to perform duty in their place. The beginning of the Qing dynasty saw the florescence of many different lacquer traditions. The Imperial style continued, the stylised patterns combining to create ever more complex and elaborate designs.



*Carved Red Lacquer Cabinet,  
Private Collection*



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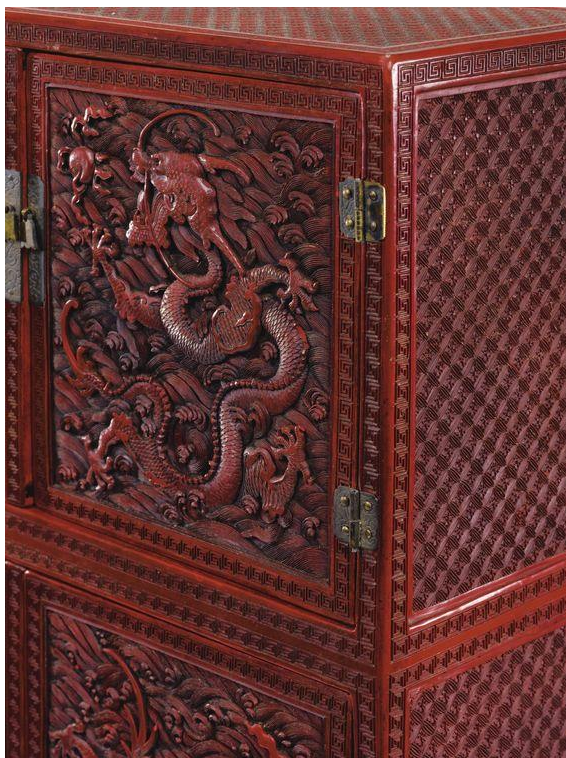
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*Carved Red Lacquer Cabinet, Qing Dynasty (1644-1911), Qianlong period (1736- 1795), Metropolitan Museum of Art*

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*Carved Red Lacquer Cabinet, Qing Dynasty (1644- 1911) Qianlong period (1736-95), Details of carved red lacquer depicting dragons, geometrical carving red lacquer on the sides.*



*Portable Cabinet, Carved Red Lacquer, Qing Dynasty (1644- 1911)  
Qianlong period (1736-95)*



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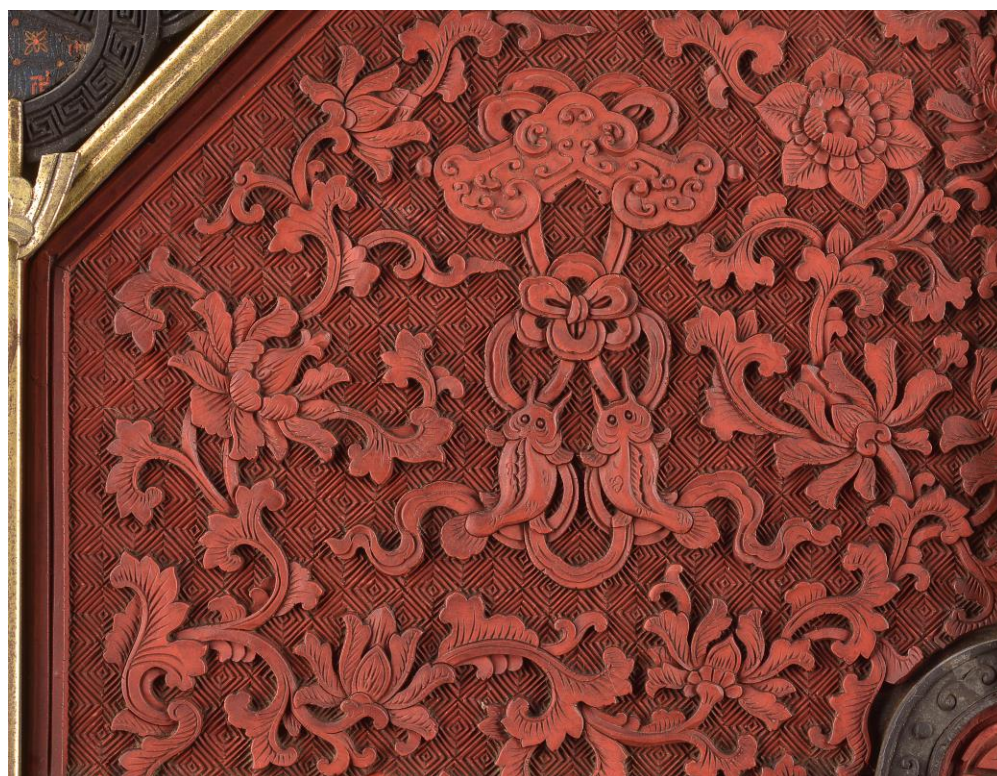
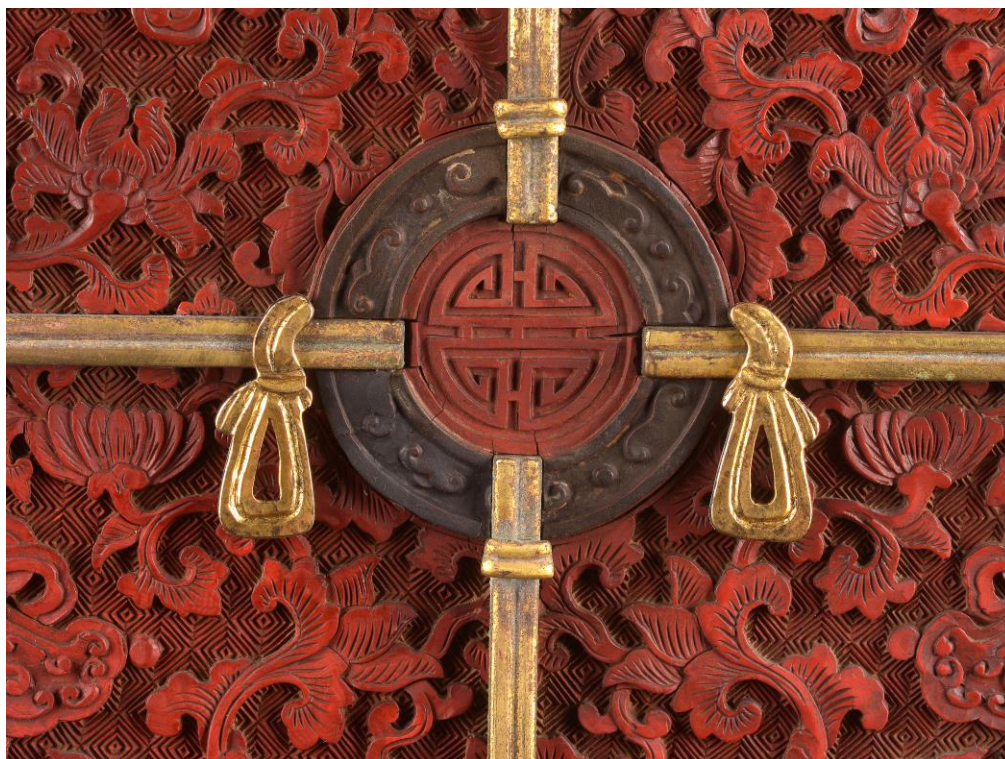
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