Recent Museum of Art Acquisition:
Korean Lacquer Box

Box with double dragon design
Joseon period (1392–1910), nineteenth century
Lacquered wood with mother-of-pearl, tortoise shell, and copper wire inlays, 19.5 × 77 × 45 cm
Gift of Linda Dresner Levy and Ed Levy, Jr., 2007/2.8

Two dragons flying through the clouds are about to catch the framing jewel in the center of the box. Their legs with sharp claws and undulating bodies move dynamically in the confined, rectangular space of the box. Yet the perfect diagonal symmetry of the two flying dragons, as well as the lined circles on the rim, create a sense of order. The dragons’ bodies are adorned with shimmering mother-of-pearl, delineated by copper-alloy wire. Expensive tortoise shell was used in the framing jewel and the lined circles. This exuberant, lavishly inlaid lacquer box exemplifies the height of lacquer art in the late Joseon period.

Along with ceramics, lacquer work constitutes an important aspect of Korean art. No material evidence or written records of lacquer ware survive from the prehistoric era, but we infer that Koreans had started lacquer production by the Neolithic period (6000–1000 BCE) from the fact that both China and Japan had lacquer by that time. The earliest examples, excavated from Lelang (Nangnang in Korean), the Chinese administrative post in the Korean peninsula, in the Han period (202 BCE–206 CE), consist of writing brush holders and food containers, lacquered in black (Bourne et al. 1984, 64). During the Three Kingdoms period (212–686 CE), sophisticated painted lacquer works were produced in Goguryeo in the north and Baekje and Silla in the south. Especially impressive are panels and lacquered wood coffins from the tombs of Goguryeo kings, decorated with red and white floral motifs on a black ground.

The technique of mother-of-pearl inlay (najon in Korean), which was applied to represent the glittering skin of the dragons on this box, also originated in China. From the artifacts preserved in Shōsō-in, the Royal Repository of Nara, Japan, it is presumed that by the eighth century, the technique had been transmitted to the Korean peninsula (again, no evidence is extant). Since then, mother-of-pearl inlay has become the dominant mode of Korean lacquer ware down to the present day. In this technique, fragments of various shells and other materials, such as the tortoise shell on this box and sharkskin, are inlaid
on a lacquer ground to form a design. The lacquer itself serves only as a lustrous background. Because the surface decoration is considered the most important in inlaid work, unseen parts of an object usually do not receive detailed treatment. In the case of this box, the inside is lined with fabric rather than lacquer. The use of copper-alloy wires, seen in the stylized clouds and rising hair of the dragons on this box, was invented in the Goryeo period (936–1392 CE) and is unique to Korean lacquer ware (Bourne et al. 1984, 65).

In the Goryeo period, inlaid lacquer wares were prized as equal to celadon wares among social elites. The high quality of mother-of-pearl inlaid lacquer was noted by the Chinese envoy from the Song court Xu Jing, who wrote in 1124 that although Korean lacquer ware compared poorly to the Chinese version, Koreans excelled in intricate mother-of-pearl inlay work (Arakawa 1985, 248–249). Use of lacquer ware was limited to the upper class, and its production was monopolized by the imperial workshop. We deduce from the extant works that lacquer ware was mostly associated with Buddhist practice, of which Goryeo royal family members were ardent devotees. Containers for Buddhist sutras or rosaries have delicate mother-of-pearl inlay decoration with lotus motifs covering their entire surface.

As the influence of Buddhism weakened in the Joseon dynasty (1392–1910 CE), lacquer production took a greater variety of forms. While the production of containers for religious practice continued, boxes for secular use, furniture pieces, and vases joined the repertoire. The production of lacquer ware was controlled under strict sumptuary laws, reflecting the Neo-Confucian social hierarchy of scholars, peasants, artisans, merchants, and the lowborn (Bourne et al. 1984, 67; Kawashima 2002, 46). While the royal family continued to patronize lacquer ware production in the royal workshop in the capital, government workshops in the provinces catered to the landowning scholar class known as yangban. The departure from Buddhist symbolism also resulted in the proliferation of design motifs; instead of the Buddhist-associated lotus scrolls that dominated Goryeo lacquer ware, auspicious motifs appeared: pine trees, turtles, and cranes (all associated with longevity), dragons, and birds and flowers. Scenes of paragons from the book Illustrations of Actions in Accordance with the Five Relationships (published in 1588), which teach

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1 Lacquer arguably stimulated the development of clay inlay, a technique often seen in Goryeo celadon but little practiced in China. As noted, the Chinese ambassador Xu Jing mentioned lacquer inlaid with mother-of-pearl, but his texts contain no reference to inlaid ceramics, which would have appeared equally exotic to his eyes. He only wrote about green-glazed ceramics without inlay (Bourne et al. 1984, 67).

2 For extant lacquer work in the Goryeo period, see Arakawa 1985.
correct Confucian social conduct, became popular motifs in furniture pieces as well (Bourne et al. 1984, 69).

The box with double dragon design was created in the later Joseon dynasty, presumably in the nineteenth century. This type of box was usually placed on top of a chest in “female quarters” to store important clothing for men, such as their official robes. Dragon motifs have long been associated with the emperor in Korea, yet in the late Joseon period they also appeared as favorite motifs outside the royal workshop; dragon paintings adorned the entrances to houses to bring good fortune to the family in the coming year. A dragon motif appearing in a scholar’s study symbolized his status as head of the household. Following the strict visual demarcation between men and women in Joseon society, lavish mother-of-pearl inlay, as seen here, was almost entirely limited to pieces for “female quarters” (Asakawa 2003, 124).

The dazzling effect of this box owes much to the technique of inlaying cracked shell pieces. This technique, in which the shells are cracked before inlay, was invented in the early Joseon period and was fully exploited in later inlaid lacquer ware to enhance the shimmering effect of the mother-of-pearl. The cracked shells can be seen in the dragons’ faces, manes, and legs, the frames of the jewel, and the clouds that float around the dragons. While the cracked technique in earlier works creates a nuanced reflection emanating from the shell surface, in later works an intentionally cracked surface creates a rugged feeling that corresponds to the bold, unpretentious yet dynamic design of contemporary ceramics and decorative paintings.

_Natsu Oyobe, PhD, Research Curator of Asian Art_  
_University of Michigan Museum of Art_

_Works Cited_


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3 One fine example of the early Joseon period lacquer ware with the cracked mother-of-pearl technique is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. See Watt and Ford 1991, pl. 154.