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EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY LACQUER ART IN PARIS: GREEN JAPANNED PANELS FROM A CHINESE CABINET IN THE DUKE OF RICHELIEU'S TOWNHOUSE

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ABSTRACT

The Duke of Richelieu was a great lover of art, and early in the 18th century, he had a Chinese cabinet set up in his Paris townhouse at the Place Royale. The room was richly decorated with four sculpted green lacquer panels, overdoors, pier glasses, wainscoting and pilasters. His Chinese cabinet provides particularly interesting testimony to the passion for *chinoiserie* that seized France in the 18th century. It is also one of the rare surviving examples of green japanning. The unique character of the four panels and two surviving overdoors, as well as the quality of their sculptural work, led to a multidisciplinary project to restore these exceptional examples of Parisian lacquer-work and show them to the public. It also allowed to improve the understanding of Parisian interior lacquer decoration and to study the panels' history and construction techniques.

RÉSUMÉ

Grand amateur d'art, le duc de Richelieu fit aménager au début du XVIII^e siècle un cabinet chinois dans sa demeure parisienne sise place Royale. La pièce était richement décorée de quatre panneaux laqué vert en bois sculpté, de dessus de porte, de trumeaux de glace, de lambris et de pilastres. Son cabinet chinois constitue un témoignage particulièrement intéressant de la passion pour les chinoiseries qui s'empara de la France en ce siècle. C'est aussi un des rares exemples de laque verte ayant subsisté. Le caractère unique des quatre panneaux et des deux dessus-de-porte restants ainsi que la qualité de leur sculpture ont donné lieu à un projet multidisciplinaire destiné à restaurer ces exemples exceptionnels du travail du laque parisien et à les présenter au public. Il a également permis de

INTRODUCTION

The Paris townhouse of Louis-François-Armand du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu (1696–1788) – great-great-nephew of Cardinal Richelieu – was home to a fully-panelled Chinese cabinet. The quality of the panelling and the space allotted for mirrors made it a sumptuous room.

Of this luxurious décor, only four large green lacquer panels of sculpted, polychrome wood (minus their borders), and two overdoors with sculpted and gilt borders have been preserved to our times. They are in the collections of the Musée Carnavalet.

These features indicate one of the first really accomplished examples of sculpted Rococo décor in the *chinoiserie* style. They also provide a particularly interesting account of the reinterpretation of Asian lacquerwork that was so sought after in Europe, and particularly in France during the 18th century. In the 17th century, European craftsmen began to imitate the Asian lacquer technique and subject matter, and went so far as to invent a purely Western style that made use of specifically European materials, and that took on a life of its own (Ballardie 1994). This imitation lacquer, using spirit or oleoresinous varnishes, is referred to as japanning, and the panelling in the Duke of Richelieu's Chinese cabinet is a rare example of green japanning.

The project had two main objectives:

- to preserve an ensemble, which due to its unique character has earned a place of honour in the collections of the Musée Carnavalet. While in the museum's reserves for more than a century, the panels deteriorated, and their décor was threatened. It was crucial to restore both the panels and the overdoors. Launching the work was intended to be a contribution to art history as well as to restoration of Japanned objects.
- to show the public this ensemble, which conveys the taste and fashion for *chinoiserie*, which could be seen even in the reaction to Rococo.

To meet these objectives, a multidisciplinary team of curators, scientists and conservators was assembled with the financial support of the Getty Foundation.

mieux comprendre le décor laqué dans les intérieurs parisiens et d'étudier l'histoire et les techniques de construction des panneaux.

RESUMEN

El Duque de Richelieu fue un gran amante del arte, y a principios del siglo XVIII pidió que le montaran un armario chino en su casa de París en la *Place Royale*. La habitación estaba ricamente decorada, con cuatro paneles esculpidos laqueados en verde, sobrepuertas, espejos grandes entre las ventanas, revestimientos de madera y pilastras. El armario chino del Duque proporciona un testimonio particularmente interesante de la pasión por la *chinoiserie* que invadió Francia en el siglo XVIII. Es también uno de los raros ejemplos que sobreviven de imitaciones europeas del laqueado asiático verde. El carácter único de los cuatro paneles y las dos sobrepuertas que se han conservado, así como la calidad de su trabajo escultórico, llevaron a un proyecto multidisciplinario para restaurar estos excepcionales ejemplos de laqueados parisinos y poder mostrarlos al público. También permitió a los autores mejorar sus conocimientos sobre la decoración de interior con laqueados de París y estudiar la historia y técnicas de construcción de los paneles.



Figure 1

General view of the *Earth* panel, after restoration

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Shortly before 1870, the City of Paris expressed interest in preserving the decors of old Parisian townhouses threatened with demolition. The municipality offered to re-assemble them in the galleries of what was to become the Musée Carnavalet. Thus a set of panels was acquired in 1868 from the antique dealer G.A. Monbro. This set came from the former townhouse of the Duke of Richelieu, at 21 Place Royale (now the Place des Vosges). However, the panels were not on display when the museum opened its doors in 1880, and only the overdoors were rehung in a salon in 1966.

These various pieces are what remained of the décor of a Chinese cabinet, a feature of many Parisian townhouses in the 18th century. They consist of four large oak panels, sculpted in low relief, painted and varnished (Figure 1). Chinese figures and imaginary beasts can be seen in a landscape of pavilions and flowering trees, and each panel represents one of the four elements. A pair of overdoors, made in the same way, completes the set. They depict themes of hunting and fishing, and are set in sculpted and gilt wood frames (Figure 2).

Louis-Armand du Plessis, Duke of Richelieu, had inherited the family's townhouse. In 1723, he expanded it by purchasing the adjoining house, and subsequently significant redecorating work was carried out under the direction of the architect Nicolas Dulin. It was during these works, and prior to 1731, that the Chinese cabinet was installed (Forray-Carlier 2007).

An initial description of the décor was made at the time of the sale of the house to Jean-Gabriel Morin in 1756,¹ and it was included in a very detailed inventory that was made after Morin's death in 1772.² Seven large pier glasses alternated with three windows, two doors and four sculpted panels. The loss of a number of pieces is regrettable, but it is easy to imagine how the vivid colours and gilding lent extraordinary brilliance to the décor. There were, of course, other Chinese cabinets in Paris, but contemporary accounts appear to suggest that the one belonging to the Duke of Richelieu became instantly renowned (d'Estrée 1917).

Creating the cabinet required considerable effort. An architect supplied plans. A carpenter produced the panelling with its moulding, leaving raised areas for the sculptures. Craftsmen added both painting and gilding. Although various receipts exist,³ the contracts for the interior décor have not been located. In their absence, it is too early to assign names with any certainty. It would be interesting to know the exact roles of those mentioned in archival sources: carpenters Julien Maillart and Pierre Gayé, monumental mason Jacques Dropsy, sculptors Louis Régnier and François Roumier, the painters/gilders/varnishers Gilles Hecquan, Charles Leroy, Nicolas and Louis Rémy, Guillaume Martin, Rémi Maréchal and Justin Moyrin, and silverer (looking-glass manufacturer) François Doremus.

The Chinese scenes on the panels offer a curious blend of European and Eastern sources. The depiction of the four elements uses classic iconology.



Figure 2
General view of the *Hunting* overdoor, after restoration (the frame has been removed for restoration)

Figure 3
Scheme of sculpted wooden (in orange) and calcium carbonate (in green) reliefs, *Earth*

Earth is represented by a female figure accompanied by a lion and a figure upending a cornucopia. The *Fire* panel has a *putto* with quiver and arrows. In the *Water* panel, a child is seated astride a dolphin. The *Air* panel is somewhat more unusual: a figure skipping a rope is surrounded by several musicians. Other figures are similar to those found on Chinese ceramics, textiles and lacquers. The two overdoors are decorated with traditional hunting and fishing scenes, similar to those one might find on ceramics. So far, in the various pattern-books published by decorative sculptors, the authors have been unable to locate images that would have served as models for these panels.

TECHNICAL STUDY AND ANALYSIS

The large panels and the overdoors measure 3.1 m × 1.35 m and 1.05 m × 1.76 m, respectively.

They were made from oak, probably locally sourced.

Wide woods rings, sinuous grain and large knots with departures of branches are observed in all panels. The planks, no more than 30 cm wide, were taken from quartered logs. The initial thickness of the planks for the panels would have been some 35 mm, and about 25 mm for the overdoors.

Various joinery techniques were used to assemble the panels (Roubo 1769–1775). In four cases (*Earth*, *Air* and the two overdoors), butt joints were employed. For the *Water* panel, tongue and groove joints provided additional strength, while the *Fire* panel was assembled using lap joints held by rectangular tenons. The reverse of each panel was fitted with trapezoidal crosspieces. These differences in the original construction methods of the panels may indicate they have been manufactured by several craftsmen.

Adding the sculptural elements – the longest and the most delicate stage – would have taken place prior to the application of fibre reinforcements. All of the relief on the *Air* panel and the two overdoors were sculpted from the wood support, unlike the other three panels. This step involved thinning the support by hollowing out the background surface until it was roughly 25 mm thick. All of the relief sculptures appear to be the work of a single pair of hands.

For the three other panels (*Earth*, *Water* and *Fire*), the reliefs were created in two ways: the figures, architecture and rocks in the lower sections were sculpted into the wooden surface, while the trees in the upper part are made of calcium carbonate-based material (Figure 3).

After the reliefs were sculpted, fibre reinforcements were laid evenly across the joints in the upper part of the *Earth*, *Air* and *Water* panels. The fibre reinforcements glued to the panels' reverses are also evenly distributed across the joints, with the exception of the *Fire* panel.

Cutting-out of the panels took place, at the earliest, after all the fibre reinforcements were in place.

The painting process was investigated by complementary techniques including: optical and electronic microscopy, energy dispersive X-ray analysis (EDS analysis), X-ray fluorescence analysis, infrared micro-spectroscopy and separation techniques.

The entire wood surface of the panels was coated in a relatively thick calcium carbonate-based priming layer.

An uniform green layer was then applied, passing beneath the calcium carbonate-based reliefs and continuing lightly over those in wood.

The green background on the *Water* and *Earth* panels consisted of two layers: an orange-coloured coat that was laid primarily over the priming layer, over which a green pictorial layer was applied. These coats each included two under-layers consisting of varying proportions of calcium carbonate, clay, lead white, green pigments made from copper acetate, orpiment and Naples yellow bound with oil (Figure 4).

The green background on the *Air* and *Fire* panels and the overdoors, however, vary slightly from the above description. The same materials were used, but were applied differently. Green layers made of yellow and white grains (copper acetate, white lead, orpiment and sometimes Naples yellow) and coats of varnish were laid on top of the calcium carbonate-based priming layer (Figure 5). No orange layer was found.

Once the green background was completed, a thick layer of varnish was applied in many successive coats (as many as 13). It was an oleoresinous varnish consisting of a blend of siccative vegetable oil, oxidised *Pinus* sp. resin and traces of triterpenes, indicating the possible presence of dammar.

Painted and/or gilt patterns complete the colour scheme, highlighting the various plants and the clothing and complexions of the figures, for example.

The palette of identified colours is consistent for the decorative ensemble: they include vermillion, Prussian blue, orpiment, Naples yellow, earths and ochres, and red and purple lacquers. Some greens have been found to contain lead yellow and tin.

Gilding over a red base coat was used for the figures' clothing, and certain architectural and plant elements (such as leaf and flower veins) were accentuated with mordant gilding or gilding with gold powder applied by brush.

This detailed layer by layer description of the stratigraphic structure reveals the unique character of the panels from the Chinese cabinet. Once the green background was finished and varnished, the decorations were applied on the original varnish. Therefore, the following method carried out for the green Japanned panels reflects the traditional techniques of lacquer multilayer coating used in Asia: achievement of a glossy background before an application of decorative designs, such as painting, inlaid materials,

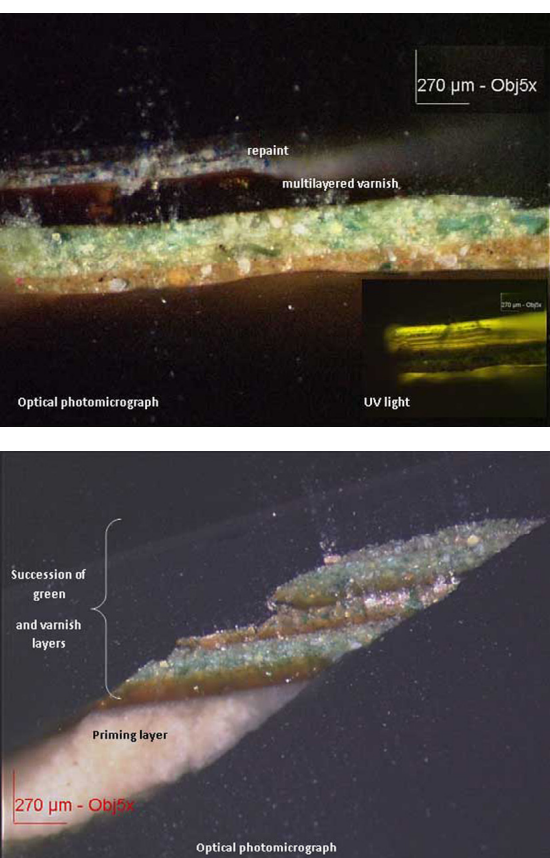


Figure 4

Cross section of green background layers,
Water

Figure 5

Cross section of green background layers,
Fire

incisions, raised reliefs, sprinkled metallic powders or foils. This means the decorative finishes were applied over the varnished or lacquered background surface.

The varnish on the panels' green background suffered extensive browning, obscuring the composition. Various efforts were used in the past to remedy this, including scraping, attempts to dissolve it and repaint.

The presence of zinc white and barium sulphate associated with cadmium yellow for the two overdoors, allowed us to indirectly date these interventions to the early 19th century.

TREATMENT

The support and polychromy were extremely damaged. The panels were structurally altered compromising the conservation and aesthetics of the painted reliefs adorning them. The main damages included loose joints, numerous ruptures, splits and breaks (mainly in the joint areas), splinters, and warped planks of the panel structure, which jutted out. Moreover, the ageing of the original varnish applied to the green background and the degradation of the pictorial coat has led to several restorations that have been identified by the present intervention. Thus, aside from several clumsily and carelessly executed recent fills and repainted parts which have aged badly, older and more extensive restorations were also revealed. During these restoration campaigns, the panels were treated in two different ways to correct the change of colour of the background to opaque brown (caused by varnish oxidation). A diluted greenish coat and a grey opaque lead-based coat of *Earth* and *Water* were applied to the darkened original varnish, crudely circling the motifs in order to recreate the original green hue (Figure 6). In the cases of *Air*, *Fire*, *Fishing* and *Hunting*, a diluted greenish paint had been applied to the background to hide several botched attempts to remove the oxidized original varnish by scraping or partially dissolving it. These drastic interventions destroyed or partially wore out the original scenery.

After these interventions, several layers of varnish were applied to the panels, but these also gradually oxidized, giving the ensemble a darkened appearance. In addition, the numerous previous paint restorations made it difficult to appreciate the beauty of the work as a whole or understand its sophisticated scenery. These aesthetic considerations were associated with serious conservation problems concerning the panel structure and the flaking of the polychromy.

In general, this decorative ensemble was difficult to interpret as the colours and contrasts were seriously different from the original. Therefore, it was decided to intervene with a thorough conservation treatment and restore as accurately as possible the colour harmony of the panels.

The entire cross pieces at the back of the panels were unblocked in order to cause lesser restraining of the wood. The joints which were mostly open were re-adhered with fish glue, blended calibrated sawdust concomitantly



Figure 6
General view of *Water*, before restoration



Figure 7
General view of *Water*, after restoration

consolidating gaps and filling small losses. Appropriate clamping, in addition to the insertion of grain-cut wedges at the back of the panels at the beginning of the splits, enabled the conservators to tone down or even to correct the jutting out of the warped planks, especially in the sculpted parts of the frames. After these treatments, the panels were less prone to damage during handling due to this reinforced structure. In addition, the consolidation of the polychromy also eased the handling of the panels since it eliminated the possibility of flake loss. The consolidation treatment was undertaken with gelatine glue.

After this stabilization phase of treatment, the actual restoration began. With the agreement of all members of the scientific committee, it was decided to bring the panels to a state as close as possible to the original. All previous fillings, putty, repaints, surface varnishes, the white lead coatings and the degraded original varnish were removed. The latter was heavily bleached because of its excessive darkening, which no longer filled its original purpose and distorted the colour balance of the ensemble.

The removal of the numerous coatings was done progressively, layer by layer, in order to fully understand the complex stratigraphy, as well as the materials and techniques of the panels. This meticulous task was accomplished by using solvents or solvent gels. The surface varnishes and the greenish paint were removed by using a combination of ethanol and diacetone alcohol (1:2 v/v) on the flat parts. A combination of solvent gels was needed on the reliefs.⁴

The removal of the lead-based grey coat, which was applied directly to the original varnish, was more difficult to tackle because of its resistance and also due to our obligation to preserve the underlying original varnish and some of the scenery. Thus, it was necessary to find another combination of solvents since the paint could not be removed mechanically. Stronger solvents such as DMSO (Dimethyl Sulfoxide) and DMF (Dimethylformamide) were inefficient as well as dangerous for the original paint and varnish and posed health hazards for the conservators. A solvent gel made from Dichloromethane (rinsed with Isopropyl alcohol) gave satisfying results.

The underlying darkened original varnish, whose thickness was unequal, was then removed in thicker areas with diacetone alcohol and with a solvent mixture of ethanol and diacetone alcohol (1:2 v/v) in thinner areas. After removal of all old and contemporary repairs, especially the overflowing fillings of the last restoration, the panels' surface was very irregular and full of gaps. It was thus necessary to repair the surface with more suitable fills to allow the motifs to be satisfactorily interpreted by the viewer. The filler compound composed of size and chalk putty was applied to the gaps. Fills were then saturated with the residues of original varnish and finally covered with a first layer of background colour. A shiny dammar resin varnish was applied to the whole panels. Lastly, the putty fills and worn areas were touched up with conservation grade paints, finishing the restoration process (Figure 7).

The panels eventually recovered their original chromatic harmony enabling the viewer to fully appreciate their technical and aesthetical qualities.

CONCLUSION

Very few European imitations of lacquerware have survived, and this is particularly so for green lacquerware. The japanned panels from the Duke of Richelieu's townhouse provided an opportunity to study their construction and to learn about the original materials used for green japanning and how the raised décor was built up. It also allowed to characterize the painted illustrations. This work marks the completion of a major research and conservation project on Parisian imitation lacquers.

Historical sources allowed to partly retrace the history of these wooden panels. Certain elements, such as the wood, the quality of the sculpting of the reliefs and the palette of colours employed, are shared by all panels. They differ, however, in some respects, including the techniques used for assembling the panels and the creation of the green background of the compositions. A thorough restoration was proposed, including removal of extensive overpaintings, which obstructed visibility of the panels' images and affected proper preservation of the original pictorial layers, which were in good condition. The harmonious set of colours chosen was as close as possible to the original polychrome scheme.

The study, treatment and, finally, an optimal presentation of these green japanned panels from the Duke of Richelieu's Chinese cabinet was made possible through a multidisciplinary international cooperative effort involving curators, conservators and scientists.

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NOTES

- ¹ A.N. XCV, 246, 6 February 1756.
- ² A.N. A.N. Z1j, 959, 4 May 1772.
- ³ A.N. V, 373, 17 June 1734; V, 381, 23 March 1737; LXV, 270, 29 April 1738; LXV, 270, 30 April 1738; LXXXIX, 451, 2 May 1738 and 31 May 1738.
- ⁴ A solvent gel made with N-Methyl-2-Pyrrolidone, Carbopol and Ethomeen from the Wolbers' methods (rinse with water) and a gel made from hydroxypropylcellulose (Klucel G®) at 10% in an Ethanol/Diacetone alcohol mixture (rinse with water) (Wolbers 2000).

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