



Figure 1 Shield (inv. KA 13521), front side



Figure 2 Shield (inv. KA 13521), rear side

Cultural encounters manifest in a lacquered shield from the Amsterdam Museum's collection

In contrast to the numerous shields made of moulded raw-hide which were sent by the *Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* (VOC) from various parts of the Indian subcontinent (Gujarat, Bengal, Coromandel) to the Japanese *Deshima* island from the mid seventeenth century onward to receive a coating with Asian lacquer and *makie-e* decoration (Impey/Jörg, 2005, 252- 264), the Amsterdam Museum' example consist of a wooden core faced with leather, which has been coated with lacquer and embellished with gold-leaf decoration according to a non Japanese lacquer tradition. (Fig.1, 2)

Structure and lacquer decoration are consistent with those present on 16th century Perso-Indian shields ordered by Portuguese nobles, which received a lacquer coating and decorations with their coat of arms, typical Renaissance style decoration, and Chinese or South- or Southeast Asian motifs. About twenty known examples are distributed over various European and American collections. (For example: Museu Nacional de Soares dos Reis Porto, Portugal, inv. 63 div; Ashmolean Museum Oxford, inv. AN1685 B.13; Wallace Collection London, inv. A315; Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna, inv. A915...)

The whole group is divided into shields with a lacquer coating following either a Southeast Asian (*thitsi* lacquer – Burma, Thailand) or an East Asian lacquering tradition (*laccol-/ urushi* lacquer – Southern China, Ryukyu Kingdom). (Körber, 2013; Körber, forthcoming)

The earliest provenance known of is the Armoury, or 'wapenkamer,' of the Amsterdam City Hall at the Prinsenhof in 1888, which owned collections from the 16th to the 19th centuries. (Thanks to Jaap Boonstra for this information)

With a diameter of 78 cm it is the largest example within the whole known group of related shields. Its black lacquer coating is embellished with gilt decoration on the front-side.



Figure 3 Front' centre with depiction of two figures in Renaissance style fashion

The decorative elements resemble multiple influences. In the centre are two human figures depicted, a horseman with the reins in his left hand and a whip in the right, followed by a servant who holds a sword in his right and a shield in his left. They appear to represent Europeans with their clothes and hats recalling European Renaissance fashion, unlike to the headgears and dresses worn by Mughals or Persian-Indians, Hindus or Chinese. (Fig. 3)

The figures are set into a Chinese style' landscape of flowering branches, plants as bamboo, with Chinese style clouds and birds on the top. The whole scenery is framed by decorative friezes. First a narrow band of consecutive spirals surrounded by dots, which is also present on diverse other Luso-Asian shields or small sized furniture as writing boxes, portable altars or mass book lecterns. (Körber 2013, Körber forthcoming) A broad frieze with arabesque scrollwork and Persian style cartouches with flowers and birds is following which is defined by a wave-border with floral motifs on the shields edge.

Two further examples share the same bellflower shaped nails on their front sides, one belongs to the collection of Schloss Ambras in Innsbruck (inv. PA 562), and the other is housed in the Cotehele House in Cornwall (inv. 347404). Front side's decoration of the latter shows a comparable figurative decoration. The nails affix an arm-support on the rear-sides consisting of a leather arm-pad, a leather loop for the forearm and a wooden hand-grip, which are common to all three.

Analyses of the Asian lacquer coatings of a group of Luso-Asian objects have been undertaken in the scope of a PhD thesis (Körber, 2015) with great support of senior scientist Michael Schilling at the Getty Conservation Institute (GCI) in Summer 2013, including the Amsterdam shield (TMAH-Py-GC/MS Michael Schilling; Separation of individual layers, cross-section, staining Ulrike Körber; Staining, Julie Chang; SEM-EDS Luis Dias, Hércules Laboratory – University of Évora, Portugal; Peptide Mass Fingerprinting (PMF), Daniel Kirby, Harvard Art Museum).

The results shed light on materials and techniques applied and reinforce the theory that it constitutes the same group of Luso-Asian parade shields which emerged from the epoch of Portuguese presence in Asia during the 16th and early 17th centuries.

The lacquer coating was obtained with *thitsi* lacquer from the Southeast Asian *Melanorrhoea usitata* tree species. Stratigraphy (Fig.4) and identified materials are consistent with what we find described in literature about contemporary Burmese or Thai lacquer techniques. (Fraser-Lu, 2000; Körber, 2012)



Figure 4 Cross-section of gilded area, 40x magnification, Blue light illumination

An organic mixture **(C)** of *thitsi*, drying oil (tung or perilla oil), protein (probably blood), wood oil (*Dipterocarpus*) and charcoal was first applied onto the leather covering **(B)**, followed by a coarse layer **(D)** composed of a mixture of *thitsi*, perilla oil, wood oil, gum benzoin and some protein to which earth material (clay and other silicates (*phytolith*), calcium sulfate, calcium), wood and bone ashes have been added. The final layer's composition is of *thitsi* lacquer mixed with tung and wood-oil **(E)**. In this layer there was also detected a trace of laccol lacquer, but it is unclear, whether it is part of this layer composition, or if it is contamination from the bole layer above, which unfortunately couldn't be tested. In areas with gilt decoration **(G)** gold leaf has been applied to a thin bole layer **(F)** of unknown organic composition to which an arsenic pigment and gypsum was added to give it color and body.



Figure 5 Red-brownish bole layer underneath gilt decoration

Usually what is found in such like bole layers to which gold leaf or powder are attached is red iron oxide or orpiment, depending on the color of the lacquered surface. Due to the red-brown color of the bole layer (Fig. 5) it might have been the red arsenic pigment realgar, or orpiment together with another red pigment which hasn't been detected via SEM-EDS in the particular cross-section. Material composition and the stratigraphy of the cross-section (without the gilding) are consistent with results from *thitsi*-lacquered Luso-Asian items obtained in an earlier study. (Körber et al., 2011, 2012)

All of these objects have been embellished with gold leaf decoration technique according to the Burmese *shwei-zawa*, or the Siamese *lai rod nam* technique.

The main difference to objects which were lacquered with laccol lacquer and embellished with gold leaf decoration was that the latter almost always showed a pigmented bole layer, either with red iron oxide or orpiment, which we didn't observe on *thitsi* lacquered objects. In Southeast Asian lacquered objects pigmented bole layers haven't been detected and don't correspond to decorative techniques applied in Burma or Siam.

The gilded motifs on the Amsterdam shield are structured with incised lines. This is also typical for East Asian decorative techniques, and not for the contemporary gilding technique applied in Burma or Thailand.

Are there different lacquering traditions combined in the same object? Further analyses on the composition of the bole layer will hopefully give answers.

Thanks to Daniel P. Kirby from the Straus Center for Conservation and Technical Studies/ Harvard Art Museums it was possible to identify the leather source via peptide mass fingerprinting (PMF) as coming from the Asian water buffalo (*Bubalus bubalis*). This proves that the shield is definitely not of European, but of Asian and possibly Indian manufacture, as rhinoceros and buffalo hides were the chief materials for shields.

Curiously, it is the first example with a *thitsi* lacquer coating, depicting the same narrow band of consecutive spirals surrounded by dots, which is present on five other shields and diverse items of Luso-Asian furniture with a laccol lacquer coating. It is also the only shield where a shield is depicted known to the author.

It was a great opportunity to study this shield's lacquer coating and many thanks to Jaap Boonstra for informing me about its existence and facilitating the whole procedure. It contributes to the study of the whole group of shields and related Luso-Asian furniture. Our results and comparison with similar objects led to new questions and illustrate the complex historic background of this shield, as cultural influences of diverse origins seem to merge in this individual example.

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