

A M I R M O H T A S H E M I



Writing Cabinet

Circa: Early 17th century

South China, Early 17th century

Carved, ebonised, lacquered and gilded wood

40.5cm high, 57cm wide, 40cm deep

Provenance: Private European Collection

This fall-front writing cabinet is rectangular in shape and has an ebonised wood structure and protruding stepped mouldings covering the edges. The decorative arrangement of the exterior sides consists of a large central field - rectangular on the front, top and back, and square on the sides - with a narrow beaded border. All of the exterior sides, except for the underside and back, are deeply carved, lacquered and gilded, with a similar design: a Mannerist-style rectangular cartouche (strapwork) based on late 16th century European prints, featuring scallops on the corners, and stylised floral motifs in the central field. When open, the present writing cabinet reveals an exuberant floral decoration. The interior side of the fall-front is lacquered in red and decorated in gold with animals and vegetation of which a large, full-blossomed tree peony on the centre with a pair of pheasants (male and female) stand out. The tree peony (*Paeonia suffruticosa*) or mudan, deemed in China “the queen of flowers” and also known as fùguìhua or “flower of richness and honour”, is the symbol of royalty, prosperity, wealth and honour (see Welch, 2008, pp. 34-36). The pheasant, most probably the golden pheasant or *Phasianus pictus* which occurs in the southern provinces of China, known as jinji, often used as a substitute for the phoenix and strongly associated with women, is an emblem of beauty and good fortune (see Welch, 2008, p. 80). The present writing cabinet is fitted with four tiers of drawers, with a large central drawer occupying two tiers. The upper tier has three drawers, while the two central tiers have two, placed either side of the central drawer (featuring an arch-like moulding), and the bottom tier has only one wide drawer. The high-relief carved decoration of the fronts consists of highly-stylised plants set in symmetry and is decorated in gold against a red background, possibly repainted. The back is lavishly lacquered in black and decorated in gold with tree peonies set with pairs of animals (phoenixes, hares, long-tailed birds, mandarin ducks and carps) further highlighting the marital character of our writing cabinet, which was

probably intended as a marriage gift.

This writing box belongs to a rare group of objects - some with inscriptions in Chinese such as this one - which have been recently studied and exhibited (see Crespo, 2016, pp. 288-303, Cat. No. 25 for a very similar example; and Jordan Gschwend and Lowe, 2017, pp. 226-27, Cat. No. 249). The production of these pieces of furniture, modelled after contemporary European prototypes is almost certainly linked with commissions from Portuguese noblemen and rich merchants living in Asia, namely in the south coastal regions of the Guangdong, Fujian and Zhejiang provinces (see Krahel, 2007; Crespo, 2015).

Some documented examples may be found in the inventory drawn up in 1570, of the estate left by Simão de Melo Magalhães, Captain of Malacca from 1545 to 1548, between his widow and children: one writing cabinet with silver mountings and also its lock with gilded drawers and silver pullers (12,000 reais); one gilded writing cabinet from China (1,000 reais); and one old casket from China painted in red and gold (200 reais). These were certainly embellished with either Chinese decorative schemes and repertoire or with Renaissance motifs and compositions copied from European prints - such as our writing cabinet - all in gold leaf set on a black or red lacquered ground. The origin and style of such pieces is clear, mainly in the examples that show a typical and unmistakably Chinese decorative repertoire, such as the so-called "Cardinal Albert's" table top (Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna, Acc. No. 4958), or the so-called "Pope's Chest" (Museum für Angewandte Kunst / Gegenwartskunst, Vienna, Acc. No. MD047590).

Literature:

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