

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



## **Twelve-Panelled Kangxi Lacquer Screen with a Dutch Hunting Scene**

China, Kangxi period (1662-1722)

lacquer wood brass

119.4cm high, 266.4cm wide (open), 22.2cm wide (each panel)

Provenance: From the Collection of Dalva Brothers, New York.

Stock no.: A5462

This unique twelve-leaf folding screen, made in late seventeenth-century in South China for the local market, belongs to a rare group of about eight other known lacquered screens depicting Dutchmen. Of medium size, it is finely carved and vibrantly decorated on the front with a continuous scene depicting male figures, mostly on horseback, in European attire pursuing leisure activities (hunting tigers) on a rocky landscape, framed by the “one hundred antiques” motif. Screens such as this were made using the kuancai lacquering technique; the iconographic elements were carved through the built-up coats of dark lacquer (or in previously reserved areas) on each of the twelve wooden screen leaves, usually made from teak. Tinted lacquer and oil paints were then applied to the cut areas, producing a brilliant, polychromatic effect on the dark background. Made from twelve wooden panels joined together by hinges, the continuous landscape of this folding screen indicates that it was intended to be viewed from a distance. Like other known examples, the outer borders of the present screen are decorated with the “one hundred antiques” motif interspersed with floral arrangements. The “one hundred antiques” is the most common decorative motif found on lacquer screens of this type, as may be seen on a twelve-leaf screen in the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (inv. Bc.1260), depicting a scene of Dutchmen in a tribute procession. The border of the present screen is framed by narrow friezes; a Greek fret in red bordering the central panel and an outer frieze with floral scrolls and stylised lotus flowers. The back of the screen is undecorated and thus, probably intended to be set against a wall. A mention should be made of a much smaller ten-leaf screen (55.5 x 158.5 cm) which also has an undecorated back, in the collection of the Casa-Museu Medeiros e Almeida in Lisbon.

The production of the so-called ‘Coromandel lacquer’, or kuancai, emerged in sixteenth-century China. Aimed primarily at the domestic market, such screens were frequently gifted to high-ranking Chinese officials. Producing large and highly decorative screens more economically was both an innovation and a challenge for Chinese lacquer craftsmen as these were intended to replace the more expensive and time-consuming screens with inlaid mother-of-pearl decorations. The sixteenth-century Chinese handbook on lacquering techniques titled *Xiushilu*, refers to the technique as kuancai, literally “cut out colour” or “engraved polychrome”, which goes back to the Song dynasty. Up to thirty coats of lacquer could be applied, each layer decorated with pictures, incised and painted to create a design contrasting against a dark background. With a relatively short manufacturing history, it enjoyed its

heyday from ca. 1650 to ca. 1700, declining thereafter. This type of lacquerware was flourishing during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1662-1722), and was exported to Europe, referred to as “Bantam work” (Bantam was a Javanese port) in late seventeenth-century Britain and as *vernis de Coromandel* or “Coromandel lacquer” in French sources of the late eighteenth century. Both large and smaller highly decorated screens, alongside cabinets and other pieces of lacquered furniture, were shipped to European markets via the Coromandel Coast of south-east India, where the Dutch East Indies Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie, or VOC) and its European rivals had their commercial bases. The term “Coromandel lacquer”, which is used to identify kuancai lacquers, thus derives from the mistaken assumption that this trading port was the source of these objects. Rather, the screens seem to have been produced in South China where several traditional lacquer manufacturing centres were located.

The majority of the surviving screens are either decorated with figures in pavilions, based on popular Chinese themes, or feature landscapes or animals and birds amongst trees. Rare examples such as the present screen show European rather than Chinese figures. Their iconography has been identified as depicting a delegation of the VOC which was sent to China in 1666 to petition the Kangxi emperor for a new trading post on the Chinese mainland. Like the Namban screens made in pairs depicting the arrival of the annual Portuguese carrack in Nagasaki, Japan and their procession into the city, the Dutch are portrayed almost as caricatures, with their long curling hair, oval eyes and hooked noses. There seem to be two iconographical types within this production: one which depicts the Dutch delegation hunting in the hills among trees, with Dutch ships and Chinese junks at one side, and the other depicting the tribute procession of the Dutch delegation. Examples of the first type include a large twelve-leaf screen (321.0 x 624.0 cm) in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv. BK-1959-99) and another (244.0 x 552.0 cm) in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (inv. 1975.333); both have depictions of Dutch trading vessels. Examples of the second type include the aforementioned screen in Copenhagen (267.0 x 583.0 cm) and the small screen in Lisbon. It is likely that the two types, forming part of the same story, were produced as pairs. The absence of Dutch vessels depicted in the present screen may suggest that it was not intended to portray a specific Dutch delegation, but probably made in the wake of the actual event as a general depiction of leisure activities by Europeans in South China during this period of intense cultural and artistic confluence. Their shared iconography, decorative repertoire and high level of craftsmanship suggest that all the screens in this group depicting Europeans were made in the same region or workshop. The much smaller, ten-leaf screen in Lisbon, mentioned above, and the present screen provide us with a better understanding of the different sizes available and the diverse intended uses of these screens. Unlike other Coromandel screens, they were most likely produced for the Chinese market, ending up in European collections between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It should be emphasised that the Namban screens were made for Japanese merchants and ship owners. It has even been suggested that two screens with European figures, one in Copenhagen and the other in a private Belgian collection, probably formed a pair, and may have been produced for the imperial court in Beijing.

In contrast to the Namban screens, exotic and colourful Coromandel screens made for export were in high demand by the European upper classes hungry for novelties from the East in the late seventeenth century. Alongside their use for decorating and partitioning domestic spaces, European cabinetmakers often cut the screens into smaller panels and inserted them into pieces of locally made furniture following fashionable shapes or mounted them on wooden wall panels. A fine example of such “lacquer cabinets” is the medal cabinet made in France around 1730 and bought in 1784 for the “Cabinet des médailles” of the French Royal Library, now part of the Département des Monnaies, médailles et antiques of the Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (inv. 55.701). A panelled room incorporating such lacquered panels, known as “The Frisian stadholders’ lacquer room”, made before 1695 for the Court of the Stadholders’ at Leewarden is on display in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (inv. BK-16709). It formed part of the apartment of the consort of the Frisian stadholder, Princess Albertine Agnes of Orange and Nassau.

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