

TALES IN SPRINKLED GOLD  
**JAPANESE LACQUER**  
FOR EUROPEAN COLLECTORS

March 3–May 24, 2009



**T***ales in Sprinkled Gold* brings to the Getty one of the most significant and beautiful examples of Japanese export lacquer to have survived, the Mazarin Chest, a highlight from the collection of Japanese art at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Made in about 1640 for European patrons, the chest features scenes from Japanese literature including *Genji Monogatari* (*The Tale of Genji*) and *Soga Monogatari* (*The Tale of the Soga Brothers*). It is decorated in a traditional Japanese lacquer technique called *makie* (“sprinkled picture”), in which the decoration is achieved by sprinkling gold or silver powder and flakes over successive layers of lacquer before it dries. A selection of additional items of Japanese lacquer on loan from the Victoria and Albert Museum provides history and context for this important type of Japanese art, which was popular among the wealthiest European collectors.



## THE MAZARIN CHEST



Above and cover detail: The Mazarin Chest, Japanese (Kyoto), Edo period, about 1640. Wood covered in black lacquer with gold and silver *hiramakie* and *takamakie* lacquer; inlaid with gold, silver, and *shibuichi* alloy; mother-of-pearl; and gilded copper fittings; 59 x 101.5 x 63.9 cm

Made in Kyoto, the Mazarin Chest was shipped to Europe and was owned by a series of prominent collectors before it was acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1882. Its name is derived from the Mazarin–La Meilleraie coat of arms on the key, indicating that it was once owned by a member of that French family. The chest is extraordinary for its

size and the richness of its lacquer decoration. Although the quality of the lacquer is similar to that found on the finest pieces made for the domestic Japanese market, the chest's shape and decorative program, which features pictorial scenes, often with human figures, indicate that it was made for export.



The borders of the chest are decorated with a technique incorporating elements of shell and metal foil. In this process, the shell and metals (silver and gold or tin) were cut to shape and affixed to the surface of the lacquer. Over time, many of these decorative pieces became loose. Here a section of the chest is shown during conservation treatment, when spring clamps were used to reset the loose elements.

This exhibition marks the completion of an unprecedented international conservation and research project on the Mazarin Chest that was supported by a major grant by the Getty Foundation and contributions from the Toshiba International Foundation and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Before conservation treatment began in 2005, the chest was in poor condition due to centuries of exposure to light and cyclical changes in temperature and relative humidity. Backed by thorough scientific and art historical research, the treatment had two aims. The first was to stabilize the chest and its decorations. The second was to develop an integrated approach to the conservation of lacquer

objects that respects both modern Western conservation ethics, which emphasize minimal intervention and the reversibility of treatments, and traditional Japanese conservation values, which seek to preserve the cultural continuity of objects by employing materials and techniques similar to those used at the time of manufacture. This collaboration marked the first time a Japanese conservator traveled outside Japan to treat an object and train another institution's staff in the restoration process, bridging the gap between two different cultures and conservation protocols and setting a new standard for the conservation of Japanese lacquer objects in Western collections.

## THE MAZARIN CHEST PROJECT



The chest was made using the finest and most expensive lacquer techniques, which required the greatest skill by lacquer masters. This detail of a bridge is from inside the chest's lid. Small strips of twisted and round gold and silver wire were used for the railings and other details on the bridge.



The extraordinary level of craftsmanship achieved by the lacquer masters is evident in this detail of two figures seen in the larger detail of a boat passing under a bridge (above). The patterns on the clothing were carefully rendered, and the facial features were highlighted with touches of black and red lacquer.



Two boats, one with a bow shaped like a dragon's head and the other shaped like a phoenix's head, are a reference to chapter twenty-four, *Kochō* (*Butterflies*): "Genji had Chinese-style barges made and outfitted, and on the very day they were launched, he summoned people from the Office of Music to perform on them."

The front panel of the Mazarin Chest is decorated with various scenes referring to different chapters in *The Tale of Genji*, a masterpiece of Japanese literature written in the early eleventh century by Murasaki Shikibu, an aristocratic woman. The tale is an extended novel recounting the life, love affairs, and political fortunes of Prince Genji and his immediate successors. Considered to be the world's first novel, the book is richly evocative of court life in medieval Japan.

Although Westerners in the 1600s would have had little if any knowledge of Japanese literature and would not have been able to identify these scenes, the Japanese craftsmen producing the lacquer knew that foreigners enjoyed pictorial representations that included human figures, and they seem to have drawn inspiration from those stories that were most familiar to them, such as *Genji*.



This scene shows Prince Genji walking beneath an umbrella held by his servant Koremitsu, a depiction from chapter fifteen, *Yomogiu (A Waste of Weeds)*. Genji goes to visit Suetsumuhana, a long-neglected love, and murmurs as he approaches, “Now that I am here, I myself shall seek her out through her trackless waste, to see whether all these weeds have left her as she was then.”



Here young women gather in the empress’s garden, an illustration from chapter twenty-eight, *Nowaki (The Typhoon)*: “Her Majesty was having her page girls go down into the garden to feed dew to the crickets in their cages.”



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All quotations are from *The Tale of Genji*, by Murasaki Shikibu, translated by Royall Tyler (New York: Penguin Classics, 2001). All images courtesy of and © V&A Images / Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Text and Design © 2009 J. Paul Getty Trust

The J. Paul Getty Museum is grateful to the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, for the generous loans from its collection and to the Kyoto National Museum, the Suntory Museum of Art, Tokyo, and the Yomiuri Shimbun, Osaka, for their assistance in organizing the exhibition.