

Coating with Vermillion for Luxurious Ornament: Early Ming (1368-1435) Official Carved Red Lacquerware and Related Symbolic Meanings

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Abstract

This paper attempts to reconsider past scholarship on connoisseurship of carved lacquerware that bear the Yongle or Xuande reign marks, and to re-examine this subject from the perspective of material culture. By investigating major burial objects from excavated tombs as well as extant collections, this study first briefly combs the craftsmanship of carved lacquer in the Song and Yuan periods. It shows that the manufacture and consumption of lacquerware had flourished at the lower-Yangzi region, particularly modern Jiangsu and Zhejiang areas, since the Northern Song. The role played by Zhejiang in the making of carved lacquer became more significant after the dynastic capital removal to Ling'an (present-day Hangzhou), accompanied by the geographic transfer of cultural and political capital, during the Southern Song. The impact of such regional tradition had continued into the Yuan and early Ming dynasties. Second, while re-examining the Sino-Japanese edict lists of the Yongle reign, based on various criteria and evidence, the paper summarizes the early Ming (1368-1435) official style, a foundation upon which the intended role of these official wares used at court will be lastly analyzed in the context of ritual reform.

According to extant official lacquerware and the 1403 list, it seems clear that rather than geometric or abstract motifs associated with the *tixi* (*guri*) technique, the early Ming imperial court preferred representational and pictorial designs applied with multi-layered lacquer coating and high-relief carving. Decorative themes of bird-and-flower and figures-in-landscape, as seen on official wares, reveal the way in which lacquer craftsmen incorporated former styles and techniques into contemporary imperial designs. On the one hand, official carved red lacquerware's unified vermilion color and schematized designs reflected the early Ming emperors' aesthetic taste and reforms of ritual system. On the other hand, as political gifts repeatedly sent to Japan, they became part of important implements for display in the Ashikaga shogunate's collection of Chinese artifacts (*karamono*) during the Muromachi period.

Keywords: Song and Yuan dynasties, early Ming, carved red lacquerware, Jiang-Zhe tradition, official design and style, ritual system of utensils