

A Queen's Treasure from Versailles

Marie-Antoinette's Japanese Lacquer



Portrait of Marie-Antoinette painted in 1783 by Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun
Marie-Antoinette à la rose, 1783, Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun (French, 1755–1842), Oil on canvas, 116 × 88.5 cm,
Musée national des châteaux de Versailles et de Trianon. Photo © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY/Christophe Fouin

A Queen's Treasure brings to the J. Paul Getty Museum precious examples of Japanese lacquer from the private collection of the French queen Marie-Antoinette (1755–1793). Her collection of small lacquer boxes was one of the finest in Europe, and she considered it to be among her most cherished possessions. The elaborate and costly works reveal a fascinating aspect of the queen's personal taste and demonstrate the consistently high level of achievement attained by Japanese lacquer artists during the mid-Edo period (about 1681–1764), when these pieces were created.

Marie-Antoinette's collection of Japanese lacquer was kept in her private rooms at the Château de Versailles, the palace outside Paris that was the primary residence of the royal family until the French Revolution in 1789. After the queen's execution in 1793, the revolutionary government retained the lacquer and transferred it to the newly instituted Muséum central des Arts (the future Musée du Louvre). It has remained in the French national collections since then, and most of the lacquer was returned to Versailles in 1965.

This presentation at the Getty is a particularly special event because a number of the boxes are displayed open for the first time since the French Revolution, offering visitors a rare opportunity to see the original condition of the lacquer on the inside. Lacquer is a material that fades over time when exposed to light. The low light level in the gallery is to ensure the conservation of these exceptionally well-preserved objects.

The Getty and Versailles



The desk from the J. Paul Getty Museum on display at the Petit Trianon
Photo: Anne-Lise Desmas



The west front of the Petit Trianon

Petit Trianon at Versailles, completed in 1768 by Ange-Jacques Gabriel (French, 1698–1782)
Photo by Moonik (CC BY-SA 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons

The loan of these lacquer boxes from the collection of Marie-Antoinette is part of a significant artistic exchange between the J. Paul Getty Museum and Versailles. The museum owns an important desk that the queen ordered for her husband, King Louis XVI. Made by her preferred cabinetmaker Jean-Henri Riesener in 1777, it was sold during the French Revolution and remained in private hands until purchased by J. Paul Getty in 1971. Since 2001, the desk has been on long-term loan to Versailles, where it is displayed in the room for which it was made in the Petit Trianon, a mansion that served as a private retreat for the royal family on the grounds of the palace.



The garden front of the Château de Versailles

Garden front of the Château de Versailles, begun in 1668 by Louis Le Vau (French, 1612–1670), completed in 1684 by Jules Hardouin-Mansart (French, 1646–1708)
Photo by Antigone (CC BY-SA 3.0), via Wikimedia Commons



The Private Collection of the Queen at Versailles



Marie-Antoinette's *cabinet doré* at Versailles as it appears today

Photo © RMN-Grand Palais/Art Resource, NY/Jean-Marc Manai

In November 1780, Marie-Antoinette's beloved mother, Empress Maria Theresa of Austria, died in Vienna. The empress left almost the entirety of her prized collection of Japanese lacquer to her youngest daughter. Once her mother's legacy of fifty small boxes arrived in France, Marie-Antoinette had her private sitting room in Versailles, the *cabinet doré*, redecorated specifically to showcase the precious works. The queen was so taken with the collection that she added about thirty pieces to it over the next eight years.

After a Revolutionary mob invaded Versailles and forced the royal family to move to Paris in October 1789, Marie-Antoinette asked a trusted art dealer to return to the palace and collect some of her most treasured possessions—chiefly, the lacquer boxes. An inventory was made, and it is from this that the original location of each piece in the *cabinet doré* is known. A few favorite examples were placed on small tables. The majority of the boxes were displayed on shelves in a glass-fronted cabinet. Because of the quick action of the art dealer, Martin Éloy Lignereux, the lacquer collection was carefully packed and kept safe in Paris until it was ordered to be transferred to the Muséum central des Arts (the future Musée du Louvre) after the queen's execution in 1793.

AT LEFT: Mural image based on a design for Marie-Antoinette's *cabinet doré* at Versailles made by Jules-Hugues Rousseau in 1783

Collecting Asian Art



A French cabinet at the Getty Museum (on view in Gallery S111) that incorporates panels of Japanese lacquer. It was made about 1765 by the Parisian cabinetmaker Joseph Baumhauer.

Marie-Antoinette's sophisticated collection of Japanese lacquer is a manifestation of the European passion for collecting objects from East Asia, particularly China and Japan, that dominated fashionable taste during the eighteenth century. Works of Asian lacquer and porcelain were imported into major cities such as Amsterdam, where art dealers would acquire the luxury items in order to sell them to distinguished clients throughout Europe.

In this way, collectors—primarily members of the aristocracy—created large assemblages of East Asian art, which became prominent attributes of wealth and prestige.

For hundreds of years, Europeans lacked the technical knowledge and access to the raw materials necessary to produce lacquer and porcelain. Aristocratic collections of Asian art served as catalysts for the foundation of domestic workshops producing imitation lacquerware—known in French as *vernis Martin* and in English as jpanning—and manufactories of ceramics that succeeded in producing porcelain like that made in China and Japan. Additionally, European consumers created such a demand for East Asian objects that local artists integrated these materials into furniture and other decorative objects. This fashion can be seen in many European works of decorative art at the Getty incorporating Asian porcelain and panels of Chinese and Japanese lacquer.

Lacquer Production and Trade



The principal trade routes and sites in Asia during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the time, it could take three years to complete a round-trip voyage from Europe to Japan.

East Asian lacquer refers to the refined sap of the lacquer tree that is native to the region. First developed in China, lacquer has been used for centuries to create intricate and admired decorative surfaces. The technique involves applying progressively finer layers of lacquer to a wooden core. As many as twenty-five preliminary layers may be needed

before any decoration is applied. Among the most celebrated decorative techniques of Japanese lacquer is *makie* (“sprinkled picture”), seen in the examples from Marie-Antoinette’s collection. In this process, powders of gold, silver, and other metals—as well as pieces of shell and colored pigments—are sprinkled on or set into the surface. Up to fifteen successive layers may be added to create the rich finish of *makie*.

During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, high quality Japanese lacquer was made to order in Kyoto and transported to Nagasaki harbor for shipment abroad by Chinese or Dutch merchants. At the time, these were the only nationalities permitted to trade with the Japanese. The volume of the Chinese trade with Japan was the largest, and it is likely that they bought lacquer to sell to various European merchants at other Asian ports. Once it arrived at European ports, principally Amsterdam and London, the lacquer would be acquired by agents of private collectors and dealers in luxury objects to members of the upper class.

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