

Lacquer designs based on woodblock-printed book illustrations by Nishikawa Sukenobu

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Introduction

Japanese lacquers, especially those decorated with *maki-e* have a rich iconography. From the Heian period through the Edo period we can observe several styles, in particular we can differentiate “Chinese style” and “Japanese style” *maki-e* decorations. In many cases *maki-e* decorations were inspired by paintings and other pictorial sources. Compositions in “Japanese style” are usually either related to Japanese classics or simply represent everyday objects or scenes.¹ During the Edo period some *maki-e* objects were prepared with designs based on woodblock prints or woodblock-printed books. This is a continuation of the previous tradition of adopting compositions from screens or painted scrolls. *Maki-e* objects and their pictorial inspirations are linked through the under drawing (*shitae*),² which transfers the chosen image to the surface of the lacquer for realisation through various *maki-e* techniques, which involve the sprinkling of metal powders. Especially in the Edo period, paintings, prints, the decorative arts and many other art forms were part of a shared visual culture and influenced one another. As a result, we can identify many visual cross-references.

The techniques of the *maki-e* decoration, especially the so-called line drawing (*tsukegaki*)

*1 There is an extensive reference literature on the iconography of lacquer art, see the ARC online database of lacquer bibliography: <<http://www.dh-jac.net/db10/bunken/lacquer.htm>>

Just to mention two volumes for reference:

Kyoto National Museum (ed.): *Maki-e*, exhibition catalogue, Kyoto, 1997

Haino, Akio: *Nihon no ishō (Japanese design)*, Iwanami shoten, 1995

*2 Most of the under drawings are prepared with strong outlines, as it allows an easy tracing of the patterns to the lacquer surface, so woodblock prints were easy to turn into usable under drawings.

technique, allows the *maki-e* artist (*makieshi*) to design and/or execute compositions with precise lines indicating fine details such as sharp outlines, the human face, kimono patterns or delicate flower petals, water waves. Also the various types of metal (gold, silver, bronze, etc.) and coloured powders (used especially in *iroko-makie*), as well as the combinations of the sprinkling techniques facilitate the expression of painting- or print-like features, including gradations of tones and a sense of depth in the composition.

In the Edo-Meiji period, we can find numerous lacquer objects whose designs were based on prints or images featured in woodblock-printed books. Most of them are *inrō* (men's portable medicine containers), sake cups (*sakazuki*), portable picnic boxes (*sagejū*) and to a lesser extent writing (*suzuribako*) and document boxes (*ryōshibako*). The majority of the print-inspired objects are related to eating, drinking, picnicking, leisure or fashion. We know a few lacquer objects with designs based on compositions by Nishikawa Sukenobu.³ I will examine the ways in which Sukenobu's designs were adopted to three dimensional objects and executed in *maki-e*.

Writing boxes

There are two writing boxes (*suzuribako*, used to store the implements necessary for calligraphy or painting, including the ink stone, ink stick, brushes, water dropper, small knife [*kogatana*], and so on) in the collection of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London that are decorated with designs based on book illustrations by Sukenobu.

One of the writing boxes depicts a powerful scene of a woman writing characters on a garden wall by spitting ink from her mouth with her attendant at her side holding a cup with ink in it on a lacquer stand.⁴ (**Fig.1** [p. 102]) The characters "*shinobu koi*" (secret love or perseverance in love) represent a fashionable conceit of the time, while the composition may also recall a famous Kabuki

*3 We are working on the identification of a few more such objects.

*4 *Maki-e* writing box, Victoria and Albert Museum. Acc.no.: W-309-1916. H:4.8; W:21.3; L: 24.8 cm.
For reference see:

Strange, Edward F. Catalogue of Japanese Lacquer, Victoria and Albert Museum, London 1924, vol. 1.

stage scene called “Kusunoha leaves her child behind” (Kowakare) from Kusunoha. This play was first staged in 1734 in Osaka in a *ningyō jōruri*, as an act in Ashiya Dōman Ōuchi kagami. It was then adapted to the Kabuki stage in Edo in 1737 at the Nakamura-za, and in 1748 in Osaka.⁵ The writing box’s composition is based on a Sukenobu design published in *Ehon Tamakadzura* in 1736. (Fig.2 [p. 103])

The writing box bears the signature “Shunshō”. The fourth generation Yamamoto Shunshō ([山本 春正] Kyoto, 1703-1770) was a contemporary of Nishikawa Sukenobu (1671-1750), so we might consider the possibility of his authorship. The original Sukenobu composition depicts four women; one of them is sitting on the wooden porch, facing the garden wall and holding a fan while the three others stand in front of the wall on to which the characters are being spit. In the background there is a willow tree, in the foreground flowers. For the writing box the composition was simplified, only the most significant elements were kept: the wall, the woman spitting ink and her attendant. The decoration is executed in *iroko-togidashimakie* (gold, silver, colour burnished down composition), on a black lacquer background. The original Sukenobu design unfolds on two facing pages, so we might say that the lacquer artist had “cut off” one-third of the design on the right side and then selected the most significant remaining compositional elements. The wall is depicted as a mud-plastered wall using subtle gold, brown and yellow colours; the left edge of the wall is suggested by the left edge of the lid. The depiction of the woman blowing ink and her young attendant are almost exact copies of those in the Sukenobu book. The kimono of the woman is decorated with straw hat and plum flower motifs while the attendant’s is with stripes as in the original. The attendant is holding the cup with ink in it on a lacquer *tenmokudai*. The *maki-e* master used gold and silver, black and red powders to depict the figures. The smooth surface of the *togidashi maki-e* recalls the qualities of the two-dimensional, black and white source image to which the lacquer artist has added subtle “colouring”. The flat, square-shaped surface of the lid fits very well for the adaptation of the print. The subject of the decoration refers to the act of writing, so it might have been considered, an oblique way, as a suitable design for a writing box. The box

*5 There are significant differences in between the Kabuki scene and the Sukenobu composition and their imbedded meaning is seemingly unrelated. In the Kabuki scene Kusunoha is holding a brush in her mouth while cuddling her baby and writes her farewell poem on a *shoji*. In the Sukenobu print there is no brush, the woman, apparently a courtesan, is blowing ink directly from her mouth to the wall in a scene that seems to be of some fun and the other women enjoy looking at it. We also have to note that Kusunoha wrote a farewell poem which is not connected to the “*shinobu koi*” characters.

was bequeathed to the Museum in memory of William Cleverly Alexander (1840-1916) in 1916; it had previously been in Alexander's highly regarded Japanese lacquer collection. He was a keen collector, a member of the Burlington Fine Arts Club and a founding member of the National Art Collections Fund. He also collected Japanese woodblock prints, including the 36 views of Mount Fuji by Hokusai; in addition, he was one of the major patrons of James McNeill Whistler.

Another version of Sukenobu's "*shinobu koi*" design is to be found on a writing box created in the nineteenth century. It was previously in the Charles A. Greenfield collection.⁶ (**Fig.3** [p. 104])

That writing box is signed "Kinyōsai" [欽羊齋]. In this case the *maki-e* master followed the model very closely, including a third female figure sitting on a bench and a larger part of the wall. In this example, the wall is executed in silver that originally almost appeared to be white. Another difference is the background: the Greenfield box has gold powder sprinkling, while the V&A's is completely black. The V&A's writing box was created at an earlier date than the Greenfield box. The Greenfield writing box was previously in the R. Matsumoto collection (auctioned in London, 1955), and was sold at the Greenfield sale in 1990 in London.⁷

Another writing box at the V&A is also decorated with a design based on a Sukenobu composition.⁸ (**Fig.4** [p. 106])

In this case we see a party of eight men and women enjoying a summer night out on a boat, eating, drinking and catching fireflies that shine brightly against the night sky. The

*6 *Maki-e* writing box, H: 6.3; W:20.9; L:25.1cm.

*7 *Auction catalogue of the R. Matsumoto collection*, Glendining and Co., London, 5-6 May 1955, no. 28 (pl.IV)
H. Batterson Boger: *The Traditional Arts of Japan: A Complete Illustrated Guide*, London and New York, 1964, no.15

Harold P. Stern: *The Magnificent Three: Lacquer, Netsuke and Tsuba*, New York, 1972, no.57

Andrew J. Pekarik: *Japanese lacquer, 1600-1900: Selections from the Charles A. Greenfield Collection*, New York, 1980; cat.no. 37, fig. 48

Antique Monthly, Atlanta, October 1980, p. 18a

Kitamura Tetsuo (ed.), *Zaigai Nihon no Shihō (Japanese Art Treasures Abroad)*, vol. 10, *Kōgei (Decorative Arts)*, Tokyo, 1981, pls.20-21

Eskenazi Limited, *The Charles A. Greenfield Collection of Japanese Lacquer*, London, 1990; cat.no.37

Christie's, *Netsuke and Lacquer from the Japanese Department of the Eskenazi Ltd*, London, 1999, Lot 14

*8 *Maki-e* writing box, Victoria and Albert Museum. Acc.no.: W-354-1921. H:4.4; W:21.6; L:24.1cm.

composition is detailed, with the refined facial expressions, complex kimono patterns and even a small *inrō* hanging from the *obi* of the man sitting in the front of the boat or a landscape depicted on the fan of the man reaching up to catch fireflies. The scene is copied from Sukenobu's *Ehon makuzugahara* of 1741. **(Fig.5 [p. 106])** This book contains thirty illustrations created to accompany a poem contest (*uta-awase*). The two-page composition depicts the same firefly-catching company, against a more fully worked out background, that includes more of the water and a shore with reeds.

The winner's poem is inscribed in the upper right corner and reads: "Hotaru yūgure ha kokare yuku mi no ajikinaku ōgi ya sora ni kakaru shigarami". The poem refers to the sad feeling of a secret love that reveals itself despite the efforts made to hide it. The *maki-e* master ignored the upper right part of the print and focused on the boating party and the bright fireflies. The depiction of the water continues over the edge of the box and down the left side of the lid, while a part of the boat and the eighth figure are represented on the right side of the lid. The composition is executed in gold, silver and red powders applied as *togidashi makie*. The background is black; the fine details are expressed in line-drawing (*tsukegaki*) or gradation (*maki-bokashi*) techniques, while the shine of the gold and red fireflies is enhanced with green mother-of-pearl inlays. The inside of the box is plain *nashiji*. The box was part of the Michael Tomkinson collection and entered the Museum as part of the Tomkinson Memorial Gift of 1921. The box is published in the catalogue of the Tomkinson collection,⁹ which attributes it to Shunshō and dates it to the 18th century. The Denys Eyre Bower Collection at Chiddingstone Castle has a very similar writing box. Further studies are necessary to identify the relation of the two boxes.

The V&A has two very high-quality pieces of lacquer coming from probably the Shunshō workshop in Kyoto in the latter half of the eighteenth century, which are elegantly decorated with scenes taken from book illustrations by Nishikawa Sukenobu. Unfortunately, by this date we have no documentary evidence relating to them.

*9 *Specimens of Japanese Art from the Collection of Michael Tomkinson*, London, 1899, no.527
The writing box is published in: Earle, Ioe (ed.): *Japanese Art and Design*, V&A, London, 1986 pp.68-69

Variations of Sukenobu designs in lacquer

There are other lacquer objects that feature Sukenobu designs. A *maki-e* decorated sake cup (*sakazuki*) is decorated with a farming scene, tilling the rice fields with an ox pulling the plow.^{*10} **(Fig.6 [p. 107])** The ox-pulled plow motif is an almost exact copy of a Sukenobu design published in *Ehon shinōkōshō* around the mid-eighteenth century. **(Fig.7 [p. 107])** On the sake cup the *maki-e* master changed the background, but the main figures are almost exact copies from the book. The sake cup may be dated to the early nineteenth century.

A nineteenth-century cosmetic box (*tebako*) in the collection of the Kyoto lacquer workshop, Zohiko,^{*11} is decorated on the inside of the lid with a firefly-catching scene, which is loosely based on Sukenobu's composition published in *Ehon wakakusa-yama* of 1745. **(Fig.8 and Fig. 9 [p. 108])** It is again a lively summer party-boat scene, depicting firefly catching, with the addition of several figures who participate in the fun from the shore.

Finally, I can mention a nineteenth-century *inrō* decorated with a party-boat scene, where the man in the front of the boat launches a firework. **(Fig.10 [p. 109])** Sukenobu published a similar design in his *Ehon miyakozōshi* of 1746, but the *inrō*'s design does not exactly follow the print. **(Fig.11 [p. 109])**

Ukiyo-e inspired lacquers

During the early history of *maki-e*, we can not find many representations of contemporary people. The Momoyama and early Edo period saw significant changes in the technical development of *maki-e* as well as in lacquer designs. At the same time Japanese painting, especially folding

*10 Kawamura Michiaki, *Nishikawa Sukenobu Ehon shinō kōshō Nō no bu to sono eikyō (Ehon shinō kōshō vol. Nō and its effects)*, vol.16, *Rekishi to Minzoku (History and Folklore)*, Tokyo, Heibonsha, 2000, pp.209-249

*11 *Togidashimaki-e tebako*, Zohiko collection, Kyoto. Published in: Matsushita Takaaki (ed.), *Miyako no dentō to monyō 8, Kyōshikki – Zohiko*, Kyoto, 1979, pl. 53 [Traditions and motifs of the Old Capital 8, Kyoto lacquer – Zohiko]

screens went through major developments. Some of the screens, specifically the *Nanban* and *Rakuchū-Rakugai* screens pictured in detail the faces, clothes, and gestures of human figures. This was probably the first time in the history of Japanese art that contemporary humans provided the main subject matter of large-format images. At the same time *Nanban*-style *maki-e* boxes or *inrō* were prepared with detailed representations of the exotic foreigners, which indicate an important connection between popular, large-sized pictorial compositions and contemporary lacquer designs. I believe that with the new popularity of representations of everyday life, including the activities of commoners on folding screens, such scenes became an accepted and fashionable pictorial subject for lacquer objects as well. We must remember that in contemporary interior arrangements screens were displayed together with lacquers and other decorative objects and they often shared similar or related pictorial motifs.

From the early Edo period *maki-e* lacquer objects were prepared depicting genre scenes (*fūzoku-ga*), such as rice-planting, delivering rocks or towing a boat. These compositions depict peasants engaged in agricultural activities or workmen involved in hard physical work; the representation of these subjects expresses respect for these activities, which were necessary for the well-being of the whole of society. At the same time they were everyday scenes, part of the annual rhythm of life.

By the early Edo period genre painting by ukiyo-e artists of scenes of merry-making under cherry blossoms, pleasurable activities in landscape settings as well as the indoor delights of city life and of the Yoshiwara district came to be represented in large scale painting. By the second half of the seventeenth century even women and men of the “floating world” were depicted in paintings. With the development of woodblock printing not only the portraits of popular kabuki actors and courtesans, but many other subjects became widely available through commercially produced prints. All these ukiyo-e subjects were adapted to lacquer designs.¹²

*12 Many *inrō* designs are based on prints, for reference see: Kress, Heinz and Else: *Inro a key to the world of samurai*, Tampere Museum, 2010

The Sukenobu lacquers

The high-quality eighteenth-century writing boxes decorated with the fine and original Sukenobu designs in the collection of the V&A illustrate a contemporary interest and fashion for his compositions. We might assume that these luxurious boxes were prepared for special orders, probably from wealthy commoners. We will have to investigate further the possibility of their having been produced in the same workshop and the attribution of the boxes to the Yamamoto Shunshō family of Kyoto *maki-e* masters. Lacquers based on dated woodblock prints and woodblock-printed books can also serve as valuable references to Edo period lacquer culture and history of *maki-e*. The nineteenth-century lacquers with Sukenobu compositions demonstrate the continuing popularity of his designs. At the same time, looking at the collecting history of these boxes, we can identify the Meiji period fashion for print-related artworks among the foreign collectors of Japanese art.

[Figure captions]

- Fig.1** *Maki-e* writing box with “*shinobu koi*” ink spitting scene, second half of 18th century
Victoria and Albert Museum, reproduced in: *Maki-e*, Kyoto National Museum, 1997, pl. 218
- Fig.2** Nishikawa Sukenobu: *Ehon tamakazura*, 1736, © Trustees of the British Museum, 1915,0823,0.38
- Fig.3** *Maki-e* writing box with “*shinobu koi*” ink spitting scene, 19th century, previously in the Charles A. Greenfield collection
Reproduced in: Eskenazi Limited, *The Charles A. Greenfield Collection of Japanese Lacquer*, London, 1990; cat.no.37
- Fig.4** *Maki-e* writing box with “catching fireflies” design, second half of 18th century
Victoria and Albert Museum; reproduced in: *Maki-e*, Kyoto National Museum 1997, pl.219
- Fig.5** Nishikawa Sukenobu: *Ehon makuzugahara*, 1741, National Diet Library
- Fig.6** *Maki-e* sake cup with tilling the rice fields design, 19th century, reproduced in: Kōno, 2000, p. 246
- Fig.7** Nishikawa Sukenobu: *Ehon shinōkōshō*, reproduced in: Kōno, 2000, p. 218
- Fig.8** *Maki-e* writing box with “catching fireflies” design, 19th century, Zohiko; reproduced in: *Kyōshikki – Zohiko*, 1979, pl. 53
- Fig.9** Nishikawa Sukenobu: *Ehon wakakusa-yama*, 1745, National Diet Library
- Fig.10** *Maki-e* *inrō* with party-boat design, 19th century, Published in: Kress, *Inrō*, 2010, p.222
- Fig.11** Nishikawa Sukenobu: *Ehon miyakozōshi*, 1746, National Diet Library