

The Beauty of *Baibaoqian*



Beneath the Surface exhibition

The history of lacquer art can be traced back to the Neolithic Age (c. 100,000-4,500BC) in China and the Jōmon period (c. 14,000-300BC) in Japan. According to *Shuowen Jiezi* (*Explaining Graphs and Analysing Characters*) compiled by Xu Shen (c. AD58 – c. AD148) during the Han Dynasty (202BC–220 AD), the Chinese character for lacquer evolved from its original pictographic form (𣎵, depicting the flow of sap from tree when being cut at different sections) to the character that we use now (漆) to include its liquid nature. Lacquer's strong adhesive quality makes it one of the most commonly used gluing agent in China and Japan. In addition, lacquer was also used to coat and protect the surfaces of utensils as lacquer can protect artefacts against water and air erosion; and to beautify objects with a rich and glossy finish. The significance of lacquer as a natural material is seen through its widespread use on architecture, furniture and eating utensils.

The technique in creating lacquer art in China matured and increased in diversity with each passing dynasty. Decorative techniques developed to include - but not limited to - painted lacquer, inlay and carved lacquer. As its name implies, *baibaoqian* (*bai* meaning hundred, and *bao* meaning treasure) is the inlay of various precious materials with the application of cutting, carving and polishing techniques. Each material employed carries their very own unique colour and pattern. *Xiushilu* (*On Lacquer Decorations*) compiled by Ming lacquerer Huang Cheng records, “the materials of *baibaoqian* include coral, amber, agate, tortoiseshell, ivory, rhinoceros horn. They are intricately engraved and inlaid on lacquer panels, and are very precious.” One major type of *baibaoqian* is the inlay of bones and stones invented by Zhou Zhu, a renowned

Ming lacquerer. Craftsman who practiced this technique used a rich array of materials such as ivory, bone, mother-of-pearl, *shoushan* stone and lapis lazuli to create vivid and three-dimensional works.



Huanghuali Inlaid Table-Top Chest

17th century

Huanghuali, mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones

43 x 40.2 x 30cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

One of the three highlights from the Liang Yi collection of *baibaoqian* artefacts is this pair of *huanghuali* inlaid southern official's armchairs made in the 18th century. The chairs exhibit a traditional and elegant style, reflecting the delicate taste of the Jiangnan region. The backrests of the chairs are decorated with mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones inlaid to create pictures of plum blossoms and magpie; and pomegranates and magpie. The original inlays were missing when the chairs were first discovered and acquired for the museum collection. They were then restored to the current state to reveal their original colourful splendour.



A Pair of *Huanghuali* Inlaid Southern Official's Armchairs

18th century

Huanghuali, mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones

121 x 61 x 44cm (each)

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

Another excellent example of *baibaoqian* inlay is this *huanghuali* eight-panel screen. The front of the screen is decorated with the inlay of ivory and soapstone in the theme of *bogu*, a decorative motif that includes scholarly objects and accoutrements for appreciation in a scholar's studio, as well as auspicious flowers; the reverse is decorated with an assortment of vases and vessels carved in relief. The pierced panels are ornamented with *chi* dragons amongst curling clouds.



Huanghuali Inlaid Eight-Panel Screen

18th century

Huanghuali, mother-of-pearl and semi-precious stones

(Each panel) 147 x 33.5cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The third *baibaoqian* artefact is this *zitan* standing screen with inlaid central panel. This magnificent 18th-century screen stands at a height of 206cm. The *zitan* frame is among one of the earliest pieces acquired for the Liang Yi collection, with the original central panel missing. It was only in recent years that the current central panel was acquired to match the frame. The theme “Magu celebrating birthday”, an auspicious theme celebrating a lady's birthday, is decorated on the front with inlaid stones on a lacquered ground; and the reverse is decorated with gold painted on black lacquer ground of bats flying above the Isle of the Immortals.



Zitan Standing Screen with Inlaid Central Panel

18th century

Zitan, semi-precious stones and lacquer

206 x 135 x 65cm

Collection of Liang Yi Museum

