

The Chest of Love

Maki-e is a traditional Japanese technique that applies metallic powders such as gold and silver to a black lacquer surface using bamboo straws and soft brushes to create different patterns. It is an ancient technique, and its popularity continues today.

The earliest *maki-e* object discovered was a sword named *kingindenkazari-no-karatachi* (fig. 1) made during the Nara Period (710-794), now housed at Shōsōin in Nara, Japan. The *kilin* (a mythical hooved chimerical creature), *banakuidori* (flower-eating birds), clouds and flower branches decorates the sword with the *maki-e* technique.



Fig. 1 *Kingindenkazari-no-Karatachi*
8th century
Collection of Shōsōin, Nara, Japan

Technical advancements in the manufacture of metal powders during the Kamakura period (1185-1333) gave birth to more complex patterns and sub-techniques to elevate the illusions and depths of the style. There is a large variety of patterns, including but not limited to plants, animals and religious themes. *Kamon* (family emblems) were often highlighted on objects using *maki-e*.

The political stability of the Edo period (1603-1868) led to the flourishing of the arts. Under the rule of Tokugawa Ienari (1773-1841), the 11th shogun of the Tokugawa shogunate, the technique of *maki-e* reached its pinnacle. During this period, the majority of daily necessities and wedding supplies commissioned by the Ministry of the Imperial Household were decorated with *maki-e*. A wedding chest (*nagamochi*) housed in the Liang Yi Museum permanent collection of Japanese objects is one prime example.

The Provenance: Barbara Hutton



Fig. 2 *Maki-e* Wedding Chest
Edo Period
Maki-e lacquer over wood
35 x 64.5 x 46 cm
Collection of Liang Yi Museum

The wedding chest in the Liang Yi Collection (LYMA-104; fig. 2) was previously owned by Barbara Woolworth Hutton, American socialite and style icon. Rectangular in shape, the chest is decorated with *maki-e* lacquer inlaid with silver and bronze hardware. Barbara Hutton, dubbed “the poor little rich girl”, was the granddaughter of Frank W. Woolworth, founder of the well-known Woolworth Group. She inherited one-third of his fortune and became the wealthiest woman in the world at one point.

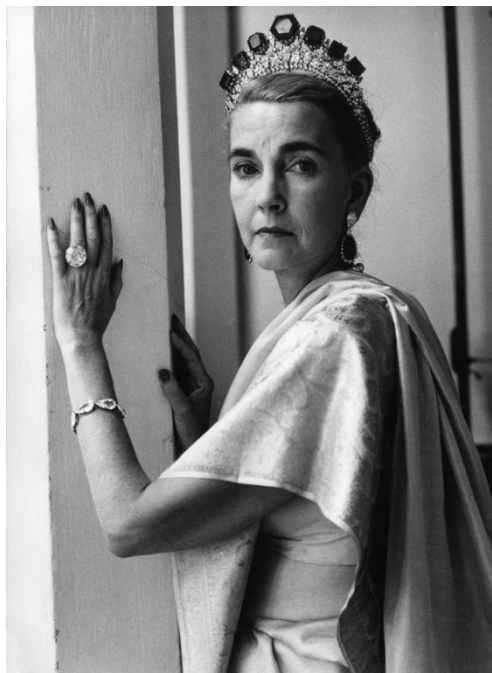


Fig. 3 Barbara Hutton

Hutton is most known for her collection of fine jewellery, including works by Cartier and Van Cleef & Arpels, she also had a passion towards oriental art. “Except for writing and developing an interest in Chinese art, I have no plans except to continue the usual mode of

life with everything in moderation..."¹. Her passion for Chinese art began in the 1930s after she married her first husband, Prince Alexis Mdivani from Georgia in the Caucasus. In her last marriage, out of seven, to Prince Pierre Raymond Doan Vinh of the Kingdom of Champasak, she decided to build a Japanese-style summer home named Sumiya in Cuernavaca, Mexico as the couple's residence.



Fig. 4 Barbara Hutton and Prince Pierre Raymond Doan Vinh sitting in the living room of Sumiya.

The buildings of Sumiya are constructed in the traditional *sukiya* style (an architectural style developed in the Azuchi-Momoyama (1574-1600) and Tokugawa (1603-1867) periods originally intended for teahouses and later adopted for private residences) which conforms to the time period of her collections. Antiques that decorated Sumiya include large screens; doors; manuscripts and paintings; as well as imperial furniture². At the lower right corner of fig. 5 is a portion of what appears to be a lidded chest decorated with *maki-e*, similar to the chest discussed in this article, suggests the chest could have been part of the furnishing at Sumiya.



Fig. 5 The interior of Sumiya

¹ Enid Nemy, "Barbara Hutton Dies on Coast at 66," The New York Times, May 13, 1979, <https://www.nytimes.com/1979/05/13/archives/barbara-hutton-dies-on-coast-at-66-seven-marriages-failed-barbara.html>.

² Ron Butler, *Dancing Alone in Mexico: From the Border to Baja and Beyond* (Tucson, AZ: Univ. of Arizona Press, 2000).

Phoenix and Paulownia



The *nagamochi* is a typical Japanese wedding trunk to store textile. The design of the chest is decorated with a combination of phoenix, stylised paulownia-bamboo and crab-shaped peon, in which the latter two are likely *kamon* (family crest) that represent the bride and the groom's families. In the Japanese culture, if a family had a daughter, a paulownia tree would be planted. When the daughter gets married, the grown tree would be used to make her wedding chest. It is also believed that if the tree was planted close enough to their house, a phoenix would come and bless the family with good luck. It is, thus, an apt decorative theme for a wedding chest.



Crab-shaped peony



Bamboo-paulownia



Phoenix

Wedding chests in Japan were elaborately executed to represent the social status of the families; and to express the notion that marriage was the most important event in a woman's life. While we are uncertain when and in which marriage Hutton acquired this chest; or whether it was a part of Sumiya's furnishing, there could be a possibility in which when Hutton purchased this chest, a longing for the blessing of love and acceptance that the traditional motif of phoenix and paulownia represents captivated her.

Conclusion

For centuries, it was customary for women to bring with them personal belongings when they got married. Wedding trousseaus during the Edo period included furniture such as chests, shelves and screens; cosmetic boxes; stationery; kimonos; as well as artworks. The most famous set being the 17th-century *The Hatsune (First Warbler) Trousseau* that belonged to Princess Chiyo (1637-1699), the eldest daughter of the third Tokugawa shogun Iemitsu, now housed at the Tokugawa Art Museum. Today, furniture commission is rarely a part of a

wedding trousseau; and a wedding chest no longer plays an important part in the marriage rituals.

While this wedding chest is the only example from the Museum's collection of Japanese works of art, a similar example is housed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2019.281.1) in terms of production period, structure and decorating technique (fig. 6). These chests, decorated with extensive *maki-e* lacquer, would have been an expensive commission that was only affordable by the upper class of the military elites or the imperial family. These surviving examples of wedding chests serve not only as a testament to the high level of craftsmanship of lacquer art; but also as a reminder of the marriage traditions in feudal Japan.



Fig. 6 Storage Trunk (*Nagamochi*) with Family Crests, Pine, and Foliage Pattern
Japan, second half of the 18th century
37.5cm x 62.2cm x 45.7cm
The Collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art (2019.281.1)