

Japanese Lacquerware Dowry Box (made between 1700 – 1750)

BATEA 1125

This exquisitely decorated black and gold lacquerware box is part of a dowry set which the high-status father of a young bride would provide on the occasion of her marriage. Maybe as many as fifty boxes of different shapes and sizes would provide storage for her kimonos, writing materials, tableware, cosmetics, incense, musical instruments and much more besides.

The lid of the box shows a house on top of a tree-covered hill down which a stream flows. Over the end of the box a waterfall is seen to cascade into an expanse of water where people in boats are celebrating the Autumn Moon Festival. I like to think of them as drinking sake and eating sushi. The sides are decorated with reeds, and fireflies hover over the swirling current. Throughout the piece very small inlays of mother of pearl are used for flower heads.

When the lid is removed an inner tray is revealed, decorated to continue the story with a silver moon rising behind a rocky hillside. When this is lifted the inside of the box is decorated in dense gold speckles.

The box itself is probably made of cherry wood or Japanese Cypress, which would have been cut and left to drive for seven years so that it would not warp when decorated. The lacquer derives from the sap of the Japanese lacquer tree, or *Toxicodendron vernicifluum*.

As the name suggests, it is poisonous in its original state and has to be purified very carefully. When the box is made, it has to be coated with clear lacquer to seal it. Once dry, a fine clay is painted onto the box to fill in the natural grain of the wood and create a smooth surface.

The box is smoothed and polished by hand with a pumice stone and a fine abrasive like charcoal to ensure the surfaces are absolutely smooth. 20 or 30 layers of lacquer follow, each being dried in humidity of about 85% for up to two weeks. Colour is only introduced for the last few layers. An artist will draw out a design in red lacquer on very fine paper and press it into the surface when the last layer is just damp.

Then gold powder, particles of gold and silver and maybe tin are used to fill in the design alongside carefully carved pieces of Mother of Pearl, resulting in the amazing artwork we see here.

You can understand why pieces are so expensive and were the preserve of the wealthy.