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The Charlottenburg Cabinet includes a cartouche of pairs of confronting 'boar scenes from the Tale of Genji (Genji monogatari) and The Tale of the Soga Brothers (Soga monogatari). The Tale of Genji is the supreme masterpiece of Japanese prose written in the early 11th century by a court lady, Murasaki Shikibu. This massive work is divided into 54 chapters and its action, based around court life, spans almost three-quarters of a century. It follows the life and loves of Prince Genji and, after his death, the novel continues with the story of his son, Yūgiri, and Kaoru, who passes as Genji's son. The right-hand side of the Mazarin Chest is decorated with a scene from The Tale of the Soga Brothers, a tale of filial piety and revenge. The boar hunt depicted on the side of the Mazarin Chest refers to the revenge of the Soga brothers on their father's murder.

The interior and exterior of the lid of the Mazarin Chest are decorated with scenes of palaces, architectural complexes and landscapes. These allude to the Xiaoxiang ba jing (Eight Views of the Xiao and Xiang Rivers). Derived from a theme in Chinese poetry, this was taken up by Chinese painters to depict the watery landscapes of the Rivers Xiao and Xiang and Lake Dongting in southern China. The theme was introduced to Japan and was often adapted to a Japanese setting, centred on Lake Biwa in Omi Province, known as the Eight Views of Omi (Omi hakkei). These are framed by distinctive cartouches formed by pairs of confronting phoenixes on the outside and confronting dragons on the inside. Compared to all other decorative surfaces of the Mazarin Chest, the back is much more sparsely and simply decorated with a tiger among bamboo. This subject is frequently encountered in Japanese painting of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.

The Mazarin Chest has a companion piece, which is very similar in subject matter and workmanship, but it is somewhat larger in size. It was purchased at the Hamilton Palace Sale by Sir Theodore Lawrence (1831-1913), a well-known collector of Japanese art by whose name it has been commonly known. Between 1941, when it was recorded in the sale of contents of Llantharnam Abbey in Wales, and its remarkable discovery in France in 2013, its whereabouts was unknown. It was sold at auction on 9 June 2013 and bought by the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam, now referred to as the Rijksmuseum Chest. Another chest recently came to light in the State Historical Museum, Moscow. Although pictorial allusion to the Eight Views of Omi is evident on this chest, Genji references are reduced to depictions of women in court dress. Unusually the inside of the lid is also inscribed with the name Cornelis van der Lijn, governor-general of the Dutch East India Company, 1646-1650.

There are also two other items of export lacquer that have very close connections with the Mazarin, Rijksmuseum and Moscow Chests, even though they do not share the same superb techniques of manufacture. One of these was originally another similar chest that was cut up to form two Boulle-work cabinets. Although the Charlottenburg Cabinet includes a cartouche of pairs of confronting phoenixes, the fact that the item is a cabinet not a chest and is of significantly lower quality would suggest that it is of slightly later date than the others.

Despite the difference in technical execution, all these items of export lacquer reveal certain striking and distinctive similarities that suggest they were made at roughly the same time in the same workshop. There are unmistakable similarities between the Mazarin Chest and the set
of Hatsune wedding furniture for the domestic market. It is possible that Koami Nagashige (1599-1651), the tenth Koami master, who was responsible for the lacquerwork and who presided over the most prestigious workshop of the time, was also responsible for the Mazarin Chest and other related chests. According to the Koami kaden sho, a document that lists the official commissions undertaken by the first eleven masters of the Koami family, it is evident that during Nagashige's time, the workshop was extremely large and that it took on capable craftsmen when the need arose. Between 1637, when three sets of furniture were commissioned, including the Hatsune set, and 1644, when two other sets were ordered, there would have been time to fulfil more orders. This was precisely the time when the Mazarin and related chests are thought to have been made.

Descriptive line
Chest, wood covered in black, gold and silver lacquer, inlaid with gold, silver and shell, and with copper fittings, depicting scenes from the Tale of Genji and The Tale of the Soga Brothers, palaces, landscapes and a tiger among bamboo, Japanese for the European market, ca. 1640

Physical description
Flat-topped lacquer chest with a hinged lid. Lacquer decoration depicts various scenes from the Tale of Genji and the Tale of the Soga Brothers, landscapes and palaces and a tiger among bamboo.

Dimensions
Height: 56.5 cm, Width: 100.3 cm, Depth: 63.5 cm

Museum number
412:1, 2-1882

Object history note
It is assumed that, like other examples of export lacquer, the Mazarin Chest was either shipped directly to Europe or to an official of the Dutch East India Company serving in the Dutch East Indies. Nothing, however, is known of its early history. The earliest information concerning its provenance derives from the coat of arms of the Mazarin-La Meilleraye family on its French steel key, suggesting that it was once in their possession.

The Mazarin-La Meilleraye family was related to the Mazarin family, descendants of Jules Mazarin (1602-1661), who was born in Rome as Giulio Mazarino. Mazarin became a French statesman and Roman Catholic cardinal, who ruled France as the first minister of the regent Anne of Austria for her five-year-old son, Louis XIV (1638-1715). The first duke of the Mazarin-La Meilleraye family, Armand de la Porte (1631-1713), received the title when he married Cardinal Mazarin's eldest niece, Hortense Mancini (1649-99). It is highly unlikely, however, that he commissioned the chest. Not only is he known to have had little regard for works of art, but he actively defaced some treasured items. It is more likely that the duke acquired the chest from the Mazarin family, since the Cardinal himself is known to have collected lacquer.

Sometime after this, the Mazarin Chest came into the possession of Jacques Leopold, Duc de Bouillon (1746-1802), who had amassed a splendid collection in Paris. In 1800, the chest passed into the ownership of William Beckford (1760-1844), Gothic novelist and eclectic collector. He had a particularly fine collection of Japanese lacquer, much of which came from the Duc de Bouillon. Beckford kept the Mazarin Chest at his home at Fonthill Abbey, Wiltshire.

The chest appears in the catalogue of the 1823 Fonthill Abbey sale, after which it moved to Hamilton Palace in Scotland, seat of the dukes of Hamilton. It next appears in the catalogue of the 1882 Hamilton Palace sale, from which it was purchased by the V&A.

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O18900/the-mazarin-chest-chest-unknown/