Stacked clothes chest

Place of origin: Korea (made)
Date: 1890-1910 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Inlaid wood, lacquer, mother-of-pearl and brass
Museum number: W.47A, B-1912
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description

During most of the Choson dynasty (1392-1910) strict sumptuary laws limited the use of red lacquer by the royal household. By the 1890s, however, these rules lapsed and customers of non-royal descent were able to order lavishly decorated red lacquerware. This chest, used for storing clothes, is inlaid with auspicious motifs in mother-of-pearl, featuring on the front phoenixes, cranes and pheasants among foliage. The metal fittings are in the form of butterflies, stylised flowers and lucky emblems, made of an alloy of nickel, copper and zinc known as paktong. The two sections are not joined but simply rest on each other. Underfloor heating was popular in Korea, then as well as now, and the stand protected the chests from the heat.

Descriptive line
Red lacquer two-tiered chest on stand with mother-of-pearl inlay and brass hinges

Physical description

A storage chest for clothing formed of two chests of similar design supported on a base. The base protects the lower chest from the under-floor ondol heating which is a feature of traditional Korean homes. The mother-of-pearl designs depict cranes, phoenixes, and pheasants amongst foliage, in a border of lucky emblems. The metal fittings are in the form of butterflies and stylised flowerheads. Chests covered in red lacquer were usually owned by members of the royal family or high-ranking aristocrats.

The Nong (stacking chest) is one of the most representative interior furniture along with the Jang (cabinet). The Nong is different from the Jang in that it consists of separable chests stacked together. The legs are decorated with scroll patterns. The top panels of the two chests are inlaid with mother-of-pearl, and it seems that there was a ring between the two chests. The front is adorned with designs symbolizing longevity and wealth such as plums, birds, heavenly peaches, mandarin ducks, phoenixes, and Seven Treasures, while the sides are embellished with rocks, fish, and willows. The back is decorated with broken pieces of mother-of-pearl and lacquered in red. Handles are attached to the front and sides. The lock with the inscription of the character "天 (hui), meaning double happiness, is attached to the front on the metal plate in the shape of a butterfly; the key does not match the lock. There are inner sliding doors. The inside of the chest is lined with white paper, and the inner side of the doors is lined with red paper. This type of stacking chest is similar to those produced for the usage of the royal family during the Korean Empire.

Dimensions
Height: 136.3 cm, Width: 84 cm, Depth: 48.5 cm

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URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O22734/stacked-clothes-chest-unknown/