Cabinet on stand
Place of origin: London (probably, made)
Date: 1620 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Eucalyptus, another tropical hardwood, oak and walnut, painted, mordant gilded, silvered and varnished
Credit Line: Given by Miss E.R. Price
Museum number: W.9-1936
Gallery location: In Storage

Public access description
The earliest form of cabinet used in Britain from about 1600 was small, with twin hinged doors enclosing numerous small drawers (and sometimes a secret compartment). They are generally known as table cabinets because they were used on a table (rather than a separate stand), and tend to be elaborately decorated. The decoration on this example is an early instance of the European imitation of 'exotic' imported goods. It was inspired by East Asian lacquer, but also Indo-Portuguese and Middle Eastern wares, which were decorated using shellac (an insect secretion). The dating of this cabinet derives from the very similar decoration used on a ballot box dated 1619 in the possession of the London Saddlers' Company.

Much of the cabinet is made of the tropical hardwood eucalyptus, which was not commercially available in Britain when the cabinet was constructed. Possibly the timber came from Indonesia (then the Dutch East Indies) in the form of shipping crates for smaller goods such as spices, and was then reused in a London workshop.

Descriptive line
English, 1610-30, painted Chinoiserie scenes

Physical description
Rectangular, painted table cabinet with hinged top section in the form of a flattened pediment. The cabinet is fitted with two hinged, lockable doors enclosing an internal cupboard and 7 drawers with turned wood knobs, behind which are 3 concealed drawers.

The pediment is fitted with a hinged lid (painted on its underside), giving access to a single compartment which is fitted with a lock. Two vertical partitions (now missing) enclosed the triangular side sections of the compartment, and it seems possible that these may have been removable (accessing two secret spaces) before modifications to the top were made (see below).

The two hinged doors open to display 7 drawers, with four concealed drawers behind. Behind the top two drawers is a full-width lateral unit of bare wood, joined at a sliding dovetail to the vertical drawer divider which slides in a groove in the upper dustboard; behind the two left hand side mid-height drawers are 3 small drawers - stained black outside, painted pink inside - which slide laterally into the space behind the central cupboard. It is likely, given that the central cupboard aperture is of plain wood that there was originally a removable nest of small drawers here, concealing more effectively the secret drawers.

Decoration
The cabinet exterior is painted black directly onto the wood except for the back and bottom (once stained) which are plain wood. The plain black exterior appears to be a relatively recent finish onto stripped wood, effectively obscuring evidence of the original finish which almost certainly continued on the outside of the doors and sides.

The painted decoration was investigated by V&A Science Section in February 2011. Sampling of areas that appeared undisturbed, indicated that a thick black coat of paint was applied over a white gesso ground, with no evidence of japanning having been carried out. Multiple coats of varnish were found, the later ones (apparently shellac based) had been applied periodically over dirt. Analysis of the earliest varnish does not give a uniform and consistent picture of the constituents, but points to the use of natural plant resin.

All the gilding (both on the decorative panels and mouldings surrounding the drawers etc.) is mordant gilding. Some areas are silvered (and were always meant to look silver).

With the doors and lid open, the internal decorative scheme is fully visible, showing the interior faces of the lid, the two large doors, the central, internal cupboard (also painted on its interior face) and the 7 drawers (some of which are painted to appear as two drawers, making 10 apparent drawers in total). On all the drawer fronts, and surrounding the figurative panels (see below), and on the underside of the lid, the same decoration is seen - a scrolling fern-type stem, usually of S form, with regular leaves of feather form, any gaps being filled by a single, stylised flower-head or seed-pod. The forward faces of the cabinet sides, dustboards and internal partitions have a simple, running guilloche motif.

On the inner face of each door is an 'exotic', receding (but not perspectival), tussocky landscape scene with a foreground male figure in quasi-oriental dress (on the left door holding a palm branch; on the right holding an umbrella), with a Talbot type dog, and on the right door a large snail. In the middle ground of each scene are buildings, apparently including church spires. In the background, beneath a sky full of birds
are a windmill and gallows (left door), and a beacon(?) on the right door. On the internal cupboard door is a central, landscape scene of a tiger or lion below a palm-type tree. On the underside of the lid is a central oval. All three figuative scenes and the lid oval are bordered by ‘mitred’, or ‘bevelled’ decorative panels, giving the illusion that the panels project forward. Framing the lid underside border, and covering the inside of the central cupboard door is marbling on a black ground. Design sources for these scenes have not been identified, although they may lie in continental prints or printed books. Similar windmills are found on the painted panelling of the Little Castle, Bolsover.

The drawer interiors are painted pink over gesso, and the dustboards plain wood except for a strip of black stain along the front edge.

The joined stand with applied mouldings appears to be of oak throughout, and to have been made in the 19th or 20th century.

Wood analysis carried out in 1979 (using samples and microscopy, with additional work by Princes Risborough lab.) indicated that the following timbers are used in the cabinet:

- oak (most of the drawer parts, right and left doors, some mouldings)
- eucalyptus (body of cabinet (left, right, back, base), some drawer parts, shelves, inner door and partitions, sides and lid of top box)
- walnut (some drawer parts)
- two unidentified woods (part of cabinet structure - what parts?)
- a non-European soft textured wood (for what?)
- another non-European unid. wood (used for the secret drawer divider - dustboards or partition)

in addition some repair woods have been used.

Construction

The structure of the cabinet consists of boards 16-18mm thick (which are either single or made up from more than one piece of wood) dowelled together, with nailed, mitred mouldings, and backboards nailed to the carcase. The top board (consisting of a large, full-width, laterally-grained board with a butted batten added along the front edge) and the bottom board (consisting of two butted planks grained side to side, cut with a shallow rebate at both sides and along the front to house the cabinet doors when closed) are dowelled onto the sides. Both sides consist of more than one piece of wood: the left side consists of a large vertically grained plank butted on top of a narrow batten which is grained front to back; the right consists of a full-height vertically grained board to which a narrow, vertically-grained batten is butt ed along its front edge.

The top, pediment section consists of thin, sloping sides (c5mm boards) nailed(?) on to the trapezoid front and back boards (18mm thick). Both the front and back are cut with vertical grooves for front-to-back partitions (now missing). A lapped frame (possibly replacement), with a moulding on its front face sits around the aperture and is apparently pegged in place. The lid is held to it with two hinges. The lid consists of a single board with plain convex moulded edge, and four wide, mitred moulding nailed to the upper face forming a frame. There are traces of paint within this frame. It is not clear how the top section is fixed to the main carcase, but may be glued. The method was strong enough to have caused splitting on the left side. The two large and two small dust boards (14-155mm thick, all full-depth) are dowelled onto the sides of the cabinet and to the inner vertical partitions. The partitions slot into grooves cut into the dustboards. In front of the three concealed drawers is a ‘false’ board nailed (from behind) to the dustboard (evidently done before the backboards of the main carcase were fixed). Two small dustboards (of different thicknesses and apparently different woods) to support the upper two secret drawers are fixed from the front, into the ‘false’ backboard with nails, but it is not clear how they were fixed to the main carcase back.

Both doors consist of two vertically-grained, butted planks (17-18mm thick), with mitred mouldings nailed on their faces. They are each supported on two strap hinges held by modern screws and appear to be replacements. The left hand door is fitted with a gilded spring latch (the hasp for which has broken off the underside of the upper dust board (at centre). The right door is fitted with an internal, iron lock. This lock matches the other door lock in design (see below) though without a gilded finish, but fits badly, needing a fillet of wood below it, and overlapping the painted panel on the door inner face. An infill patch of wood appears to have been let in around the keyhole on the face of the door. It might be explained if this (the original lock) were badly fitted, and an attempt made to tidy up the mess.

The internal cupboard door is a single panel (c18mm thick) with applied, mitred mouldings, held on two strap hinges (replaced?) with modern screws, and fitted with an internal gilded iron lock (presumed original). The panel has warped and split. There is a shadow for an ornate metal escutcheon (now missing).

There is no evidence that the sides were ever fitted with handles.

Drawer construction has the sides nailed to the front and back, with mitred mouldings applied to the front. The drawer bottom (a single board grained front to back) is nailed up. The metal nails have narrow rectangular heads.

Repairs and modifications

Cross-grain shrinkage has produced splits in the two vertically grained nailed panels (with a vertical fillet between them). Also in the hinged lid, where nailed, mitred mouldings have prevented movement.

Four holes (apparently recent) in the back are probably where wires were fitted to keep the doors shut, while on display in the Museum.

Missing applied mouldings on the sides of the base (the front moulding replaced)

The top section seems to have been raised in height: just below the lid, the half-lapped frame seems too fresh (ie replaced?), and it blocks access to two internal vertical grooves (for dividers) running front to back.

Lock replaced.
Added fillet of wood along the front edge of the base.

Analysis carried out by V&A: A Science Section in February 2011 indicates that additional coats of varnish (usually containing shellac) were applied periodically over earlier layers.

Jo Darrah's report on this cabinet and the Temple Newsam cabinet, May 1973 (copy in green catalogue) indicates the following of the VA cabinet:
was made in same workshop as Temple Newsam cabinet
all exterior surfaces are gessoed and painted
the silver and gold appears to be paint rather than leaf (not studied in detail)
hinges appear to be modern; catches and locks may be old
drawer knobs made of wood
hidden outside surfaces of drawers are stained black
insides of drawers are gessoed and thinly painted red

Dimensions
Height: 67 cm without stand, Width: 59 cm doors closed, Depth: 33.3 cm maximum, at top, Depth: 30.6 cm at base, Height: 95.5 cm top open, Width: 94 cm doors open to 45 degrees each, Depth: 52 cm doors open to 45 degrees each

Museum number
W.9-1936

Object history note
Jacobean lacquer Cabinet and stand, gift of Miss E R Price, 37 Sandfield Road, Headington, Oxford.

Object sampling carried out by Jo Darrah, V&A Science; drawer/slide reference 2/80.

Exhibited at the Burlington Fine Arts Club in 1935-36. Mr Clifford Smith saw the cabinet in 1917 at the Judge's Lodgings, St Giles, Oxford, in whose house Miss E.R. Price was living at the time.

Historical context note
This cabinet, with its drawers of various sizes and well-concealed secret compartments was probably intended as a dressing cabinet to hold jewellery or other small decorative objects. The inventories of elite households during James VI's reign indicate that luxury cabinets were fashionable in the most richly furnished rooms. Types of decoration varied: ebony with mother of pearl or silver, red velvet and silver lace, marquetry, needlework, and what was described as Chinawork (gold or coloured patterns on a black ground), which probably applies to the decoration on this cabinet. The 1614 inventory of 'goodes and household stuffe' at Northampton House, belonging to Henry Howard, Earl of Northampton, lists various pieces including a cabinet, a table and frame, a small table, and a field bedstead which are described as 'China worke' or 'China guilt', sometimes specified with black and gold or silver decoration. Edwards argues that there was a clear distinction between Asian export goods and European imitations, perhaps known as Chinawork.

The cabinet forms part of a group of woodwork including 6 cabinets of essentially similar design, a ballot box dated 1611 and a set of roundels in a round lidded box, which were apparently made in England (presumably London) c.1600-1625. The members of the group display close similarities in the design and handling of the painted decoration, and are notable as forming perhaps the earliest British phase of Chinoiserie and the imitation of Asian lacquers. The cabinets differ in the woods used, and in that some of the cabinets (unlike the cabinet under discussion) retain painted decoration on the outside faces of the sides and doors.

Eucalyptus is otherwise unknown in English furniture c1620s, but in terms of design, construction and decoration, this cabinet conforms convincingly with others from the group made from native woods(?) A possible explanation for the appearance of eucalyptus is that the timber was imported from the Dutch East Indies in the form of, say, a packing crate, and (being stable and good quality) was put to practical reuse in a woodworker's workshop. The cabinet is constructed from various smaller pieces of wood, in some cases pieced together - which perhaps supports this economical re-use hypothesis.

Design sources
The precise design sources used for this type of cabinet are difficult to identify. Beevers suggests that 'the shape seems to have been inspired by small Japanese export cabinets of the late 16th century. The decoration, richly painted in gold and silver with arabesques and 'oriental' figures, resembles in some respects Milanese damascening, which might imply the Middle East rather than the Far East.' However, Japanese cabinets containing drawers, of similar size, made c1580-1620 do not conform to this shape; they tend to be flat-topped, with twin hinged-doors. A raised, cantid lid is found on some Namban boxes, without twin-hinged doors. A more plausible source for this form of table cabinet, are Indo-Portuguese cabinets with twin-hinged doors and trapezoidal upper section or pediment, usually veneered and inlaid (for example, V&A IM.16-1931. 1580-1620, Gujarat or Sindh; wood, veneered with ebony, inlaid with ivory, with gilt copper and brass carrying handles). In terms of decoration, Huth argues that 'Both the Near Eastern motifs [seen on the ballot box] and the rest of the decoration, as well as the absence of Far Eastern motifs, place this group with those objects of Venetian origin examined earlier' [referring to caskets, boxes and frames with painted damascened decoration and mother of pearl plaques, c.1575-1600, for example the casket VA inv. 7901-1861 and the mirror 506-1897], and notes that when 'these objects possessed more brilliance and luster than they have today...they must have produced the desired exotic effect of lacquer'. A much closer potential source for the wide borders with 'solitary plant forms with feathery leaves and circles representing cumulus clouds' (Huth), may be found in wooden artefacts decorated with mother of pearl motifs set in a layer of black lac, which were made in Ahmadabad (Gujarat, Western India) from at least the early 16th century, and were exported to the Portuguese colony of Goa, and even to Europe, for example the late front table cabinet, c.1610-20, V&A: inv. no. IS.24-1966. This example, like the painted
English cabinets and Namban lacquer, combines shimmering ornament on a black ground, but more pertinently, prominently displays the plant forms with feathery leaves and clustered balls or berries that are such a distinctive feature of the English cabinets. As yet, sources have not been found for the most prominent aspect of the painted decoration, the figure 'Chinoiserie' scenes, which may help date the cabinets. Likely sources may be European prints or book illustrations, or possibly Chinese ceramics, also received enthusiastically in Europe during the early 17th century.

Other comparable furniture or woodwork:
- Ballot box for the Court of the British East India Company, dated 1619 (now the Saddlers' Company)
- Set of painted beechwood roundels (V&A) inv. no. W.30-1912
- Cabinet, VA W.37-1927
- Cabinet, Christie's 24/2/1972, lot 117
- Cabinet, National Gallery Victoria, Melbourne, Australia - see Matthew Martin and Carol Cains, A cabinet of curiosity: an early English japanned cabinet in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria, in the National Gallery of Victoria Art Journal (54), 2016, pp.47-59, 110-111
- Cabinet, private collection. Sold Lucy Johnson (UK dealer) made of UK native woods (elm, oak etc.) with very similar rough construction and metalware.
- A Charles I oak architectural table cabinet, early 17th century, the lidded pediment enclosing a compartment, the lid with japanned decoration to the underside, above seven drawers around a central cupboard, various secret compartments, enclosed by a pair of later doors. HWD: 65 x 60 x 30cm. Christie's Interiors, South Kensington 25/2/2014 lot 179 estim £1,500-2000

URL
http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O60673/cabinet-on-stand-unknown/