An English Cabinet in Imitation Lacquer

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In the spring of 2014, the last remaining objects belonging to the Biby estate in Södermanland were finally dispersed. The internationally renowned and unique collection of paintings from 18th-century Constantinople assembled by members of the von Celsing family during that period had already been sold to Qatar, and now the remaining furniture, paintings and other items were sold at auction. In the sale, the Nationalmuseum was able to acquire a number of objects from the estate, including an English-made japonaiserie cabinet which, according to family tradition, has a Swedish provenance going back beyond the entailment of the estate in 1788.

The cabinet is said to have been acquired by the ironmaster Johan Lohe (1643–1704), who in 1687 bought the ironworks of Hällefors Bruk in Mellösa, Södermanland, where the cabinet was reportedly to be found when Gustaf Celsing (1723–1789) acquired the property in 1781. On Lohe’s death, his estate, valued at over two million copper daler, was divided among his thirteen living children. One of his daughters, Hedvig Lucia (1684–1770), inherited Hällefors Bruk and Biby Manor, the latter bought by her father at public auction in 1703. Hedvig Lucia was married to Adam Leijel (1669–1744). Their son Henrik Leijel (Henry Lyell, 1717–1803) eventually emigrated to England and therefore sold Hällefors and Biby, including their contents, to Gustaf Celsing. He in turn, in 1788, created an entail within the von Celsing family which only ended with the death of the last tenant in tail in 2008. Around 1900, the cabinet was moved from Hällefors Bruk to Biby Manor in conjunction with the sale of Hällefors from the von Celsing estate.

How the cabinet ended up in Sweden is not known, but Johan Lohe had a large network of contacts across Europe that he had built up by trade, primarily in iron and sugar. Lohe is also said to have travelled in Europe, including England, in his youth. Another possibility is that the cabinet was acquired through Lohe’s son-in-law, Adam Leijel, who was widely connected internationally. His family hailed from Scotland and had moved to Stockholm in the first half of the 17th century. Contacts with the British side of the family seem to have remained close, with the result that Adam’s son Henrik finally left Sweden to look after a substantial inheritance he had received from two uncles, Henry Lyell (1665–1731) and Baltzar Lyell (1672–1740), both born in Stockholm. Their fortunes had been amassed by investments and directorships in the English East India Company.

The long Swedish provenance of the cabinet shows that high-quality English furniture was already being imported to Sweden in the late 17th century. What impact this had on domestic production is hard to say, as research still has many questions to answer about Swedish furniture making at this time, in both Stockholm and the rest of the country.

In the second half of the 17th century, Japanese and Chinese lacquerwork was the height of fashion and was much sought after on the European market. Most in demand was the Japanese variety, for both its quality and its rarity. Since 1637, the Dutch East India Company had had a monopoly on trade with Japan, limiting the supply and pushing up prices. Some of the company’s trade went via Batavia, in present-day Indonesia, where the East India companies of other countries, including England, also traded. It was previously believed that the Japanese lacquerwares brought into England in the 17th and 18th centuries were imported from Holland. That is not possible, though, as the English company had a monopoly on such imports, which it made every effort to defend against competition. To reach England, therefore, Japanese lacquers had to pass through other trading stations between Japan and Europe.

The price of the genuine article soon prompted European craftsmen to start imitating Oriental lacquer, but they did not have access to the same technical expertise or raw materials. Oriental lacquer, which consists of the sap of the Chinese lacquer tree or urushi (Rhus vernicifera), becomes extremely hard and water-resistant. The European craftsmen had to make do with various shellac-based varnishes. In England, the technique that came to dominate was known as “japanning”, alluding to the geographical origins of its model.

The cabinet now acquired was probably made in London around 1680. The cabinet itself closely follows the design and decoration of the Japanese originals, while the stand reflects the idiom of the European Baroque, with richly carved and gilded ornamentation. The square Japanese cabinets were originally intended to be placed directly on the floor, but in Europe they were mounted on stands to conform to European furnishing conventions.

Notes:
1. Provenance details are based largely on information compiled by Stockholms Auktionsverk, Special Catalogue, Biby Estate, lot 1117.