Nijt aarbe, — Die schrijver denk ich
in den reden voor andere echt anders gedraging als
iniichte van zijn getalente, in feiten noch
op aarbe, dan van mij wel meer onwaar, er von nach
von zwalt von andere gedracht als ander digende, volgenszich
von Provinciaen, dan mij von begrip gemeld. Er
von zwalt von aller rijkte, er door in
eene volde mode die niet van alle als nie de Engel in
gemacht, maar gezondigd in de derkige agting.

Th voren w. C. gzen. te als geatisch
zelfde, de mijn Opstel al Pi candon
von zwalt von, er als mij gedacht, mit
N. Immer 9 achtstellig. De originele Noten
van zwalt von, von zwalt von die als die liefde
von zwalt von en de Engelse rijkte. Er gzen. te als
von zwalt von, er als mij gedacht, de
er van zwalt von van een vorst nach ooroblich
von zwalt von mijn vater in het leven
von zwalt von. Als begrip gemeld, als geacht
von zwalt von von zwalt von, en die ander
der rijkte van zwalt von, van von swalt von, met
Pi en Pi, von zwalt von, en die ander
Zeven en zwalt von, en von zwalt von, met
Engelse rijkte.
In 1629, Constantijn Huygens (1596-1687), a poet, diplomat and secretary to the stadholder, was entertaining guests in the study of his house in Lange Houtstraat in The Hague. It was there that they saw a red lacquerware tray that Huygens used with an inkwell and a sand bowl as an open writing box. Evidently it attracted the interest of his visitors – unfortunately their identities remain unknown – and Huygens was asked to order one just the same for them. To that end, on 19 February he sent a letter to an acquaintance in Amsterdam. This letter has survived; the editor J.A. Worp summarized it in five lines, in which he did indeed mention the tray and the sand bowl, but omitted all further information. During a recent examination of the original letter it was found to contain sketches and additional descriptive information about the objects (figs. 1-3 and appendix). Regrettably the lacquerware is not identified, but thanks to the description of the objects and the two small drawings we can nevertheless imagine what Huygens’s lacquerware looked like. A note in the margin tells us that the tray was indeed purchased; it cost 3 guilders and 10 stuivers. The mention and sketches of Asian lacquerware in Huygens’s study are extraordinary and intriguing. On this rare occasion an object is described in words as well as images, which shows a serious interest in Asian lacquerware.

The 1629 letter is the earliest reference to Huygens’s interest in Asian luxury goods. We know of Huygens’s fondness for lacquerware objects thanks chiefly to his famous letter written in 1685 to Mary Stuart II.
the perfectly straight low edge. It is probably safe to assume that Huygens was able to draw well enough to express what he meant and that the features (corners, edge and proportions) are sufficiently well reproduced. It is clear from the description that red lacquerware is what was wanted. There is no mention of any decoration, so it is quite possible that the tray was simply plain red lacquer.

A writing tray or shallow writing box was a more or less square or rectangular shallow container, with or without a cover. Various writing boxes and related objects in lacquer, like trays and other boxes, are mentioned in seventeenth-century inventories of the personal effects of members of the House of Orange. The earliest reference can be found in the estate inventory of the castle at Breda, drawn up in 1619 after the death of Éléonore de Bourbon-Condé (1587-1619), the consort of Philip William, the eldest son of William of Orange: ‘drye Indiaense Laeyen’ (three East Indian trays). No fewer than ten ‘schrijfflaes’ (writing trays) are mentioned in the 1632 inventory of Frederick Henry (1584-1647) and Amalia of Solms (1602-1675) of the Stadhouderlijk Kwartier and the Oude Hof in Noordeinde in The Hague. In part they were made of ‘Indiaens hout’ (East Indian wood) inlaid with different kinds of wood, but also ‘covered with marble, coral and ebony’. Three examples were lacquered, among them ‘a writing tray covered in red lacquer’. These lacquer writing boxes and trays are listed in the supplementary memorandum drawn up in 1634, which also contains objects acquired for the expansion of the stadholder’s residence that was completed in 1632. Comparable in description and the time when it was made, this red lacquer tray must have been very much alike the one owned by Huygens.

Possible Provenance
Where were Huygens’s lacquerware tray and those owned by members
of the House of Orange made? In contemporary sources lacquerware is referred to as Chinese, Japanese, Indian, East Indian, originating from the Dutch East Indies, or sometimes just as ‘lacquer’. The descriptions were used interchangeably and therefore give us no real clue as to where it was produced. In this period objects like these trays were mainly produced in China and Japan, but they were also made in Amsterdam, where Willem Kick (1579-1647) had success with his imitation lacquerware in Asian style. However, Huygens made it clear in a postscript that he had absolutely no interest in it that all. ‘I’m talking about real East-Indian lacquerware,’ he wrote. ‘The Amsterdam version cannot appeal to my Hague friends, who can tell fresh fish that has been carried from that brought in’, emphasizing his clients’ knowledge of commodities. His friends in The Hague, those for whom Huygens wanted to buy a tray, could, so to speak, easily tell the difference between the fresher fish that the Scheveningen fishwives carried on their heads through the dunes to the fish market in The Hague, and the less fresh fish that was transported by cart and barge from further afield. For him, therefore, it was only ‘real’ lacquerware from Asia that mattered. Red lacquerware from China was not unusual in European collections in that period (fig. 4), while it is generally assumed that until 1634 only the ‘Namban’ lacquer ware was imported from Japan: this was black lacquer with a rich decoration of mother-of-pearl inlay and gold (fig. 5). This would suggest a Chinese origin, but further research shows that this specific form did not occur in China and was quite commonplace in Japan. We know of sixteenth-century trays of this shape, and even decorated in red lacquer.
In Japan small, low tables on which meals were eaten were also often this shape, as can be seen from a model from the collection of Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779-1853, fig. 7). The red lacquer, like that of the sixteenth-century tray illustrated (fig. 6), is known as Negoro lacquer, after the rich and powerful temple of the same name, for which lacquerware in this style was indeed made, but aside from ‘real’ Negoro lacquer there was also a large output in Negoro style in Japan.

**Trade in Lacquerware**

Huygens’s tray stems from the years when the Dutch East India Company (voc) purchased lacquerware in Japan for the first time, but with little success. Between 1610 and 1616 the merchants Jacques Specx (1585-1652) and Hendrik Brouwer (1581-1643),

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Figs. 5a, b
Covered writing box in Namban lacquer, Japan, early seventeenth century.
Wood and lacquer, h. 9.2 x w. 24.5 x d. 15.8 cm.
Braunschweig, Herzog Anton Ulrich Museum, inv. no. Ch 913.

Fig. 6
Tray in Negoro style, Japan, c. 1500.
Wood and lacquer, h. 2.4 x w. 38.8 x d. 28.8 cm.
who alternated as the head of the VOC trading post in Japan, purchased quite considerable quantities of lacquer, but because it failed to find buyers in the Netherlands the orders were stopped; they were not resumed until 1634. It would have mainly been Namban lacquer (with mother-of-pearl inlay) and the high prices meant that sales in the Netherlands were disappointing. The fact that Huygens’s tray was red, and probably undecorated, indicates that other lacquer goods also arrived in the Netherlands – although perhaps only in extremely small quantities. This may have been a VOC experiment or it may have been merchandise imported by private individuals. There is no evidence in the VOC records to confirm that Specx and Brouwer purchased red lacquerware: it is only the shapes that are mentioned, without any reference to the decoration. We do know that English dealers, who were also active in Japan in those years, cited red lacquer as one of the possible trading goods. Among the VOC orders in 1615 and 1616 ‘roemerberden’ (rummer trays) are significant, given that when Huygens writes about his own piece he states that such trays were used for serving rummers in Amsterdam. VOC orders also mentioned lacquer bowls in different sizes, which may have been similar to the sand bowl that Huygens used with his tray. An interesting recommendation made by one of Specx’s VOC colleagues was that the lacquerware could be washed in hot water without a problem. All lacquerware is extremely durable and even Namban lacquer with mother-of-pearl inlay work can withstand washing like this – but all the better when it is undecorated lacquer. It is therefore quite possible that Specx’s colleague was describing plain lacquerware here. This could indicate that the dealers valued this type of lacquerware and may have occasionally shipped it to the Netherlands as private goods.

The plain red or black Japanese lacquerware was something for connoisseurs, who recognized the simplicity and the quality of the material and were able to appreciate it. Evidently this applied to Huygens. He writes that he had bought his tray in an East Indian

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Fig. 7
Model of a table, Japan, early nineteenth century.
Wood and lacquer, h. 3.6 x w. 3 x d. 3 cm.
Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldcultures (Cock Blomhoff Collection), inv. no. v-360-3434.
and also of Japanese lacquer, paid a large sum of money for porcelain and lacquer from her estate. Thanks to a bequest from his widow, the Royer Collection found its way into the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, and later in the nineteenth century was divided between the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. Although there was a black tray in Royer’s collection exactly the same shape as Huygens’s drawing (fig. 8), Huygens’s red writing tray cannot be found in either of the museums. But it could well be that among Royer’s seventeenth-century porcelain and lacquerware in the museums in Leiden and Amsterdam there are objects once owned by Constantijn Huygens, who was not called the ‘intendant voor Indische zaken’ for nothing. The 1629 letter has not yet enabled us to pinpoint such an object owned by Huygens, but it does contribute to the realization of how important Asian luxury items were to him. It also shows us how Dutch merchants in Asia in the first decades of the seventeenth century became acquainted with new and fascinating objects, which sometimes became very popular in Europe, but were sometimes also misunderstood, unloved and forgotten. Like undecorated red lacquerware.

And where is the tray now? Sadly, we do not know. At the end of the eighteenth century most of Huygens’s possessions were in the hands of one person, his great-granddaughter Susanna Louise Huygens (1714-1785). She lived in the Huygenshuis in The Hague, the house that Huygens had had built to his own design, which had always remained in the family, and thus was where his personal effects could still have been present. After her death, her great-nephew Jean Theodore Royer (1737-1807), a collector of Chinese objects and also of Japanese lacquer, paid a large sum of money for porcelain and lacquer from her estate. Thanks to a bequest from his widow, the Royer Collection found its way into the Royal Cabinet of Rarities, and later in the nineteenth century was divided between the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam and Museum Volkenkunde in Leiden. Although there was a black tray in Royer’s collection exactly the same shape as Huygens’s drawing (fig. 8), Huygens’s red writing tray cannot be found in either of the museums. But it could well be that among Royer’s seventeenth-century porcelain and lacquerware in the museums in Leiden and Amsterdam there are objects once owned by Constantijn Huygens, who was not called the ‘intendant voor Indische zaken’ for nothing. The 1629 letter has not yet enabled us to pinpoint such an object owned by Huygens, but it does contribute to the realization of how important Asian luxury items were to him. It also shows us how Dutch merchants in Asia in the first decades of the seventeenth century became acquainted with new and fascinating objects, which sometimes became very popular in Europe, but were sometimes also misunderstood, unloved and forgotten. Like undecorated red lacquerware.
APPENDIX

Letter from Constantijn Huygens, 19 February 1629. Leiden, Leiden University Libraries, inv. no. PAP 2 (letter no. 433 in Worp 1911, see note 1). Transcription Ad Leerintveld; translation into English: Lynne Richards

Mijn Heer,

De schrijver dien ick tot dit werck voor andere hebb willen gebruijcken, ten insichte van zijn fraeije letter ende pertinente copien, daervan hij zich seer roemt, is tot noch toe soo vast geweest aen andere dingen, rakende eenighe onser provincien, dat mij niet mogelijk geweest is dese eerste copie vroeger van hem te bekomen. Men overvalt hem van allen zijden, soodat hij in eenighe maenden niet soo veel als uijt den huijse is geweest, maer gestadigh in dusdanighe oeffening.


Als tegenwoordigh, werd ick gebeden t’Amsteldam te doen koopen seker Indiaensche ondiepe lade, ongedeckt van rood lackwerck met stompe hoecken, soo hier geteeckent staet. Men heeftse in mijn comptoir gesien, dienende om inctpott ende sandbusse in te setten, met dergelijck tuijgh. T’Amsteldam, dunckt mij, werdense gebesight om Roomers op ter tafel te reicken. Ick hebber een fraeij lacken sand-kopken bij mede hier geteeckent, slecht van rood lackwerck. Dergelijcks wilde ick U.E. vrundlick gebeden hebben mij te doen koopen, ende metter eersten te laten toekomen. Ick meene het over het Oost Indisch Huijs was daer ick bij gevalle de mijne vond, tot luijden die porceleijnen ende andere Oostindische properheden verkoopen. U.E. sal mij sonderlinge vrundschap daer aen doen ende mij wederom altoos vinden Mijn Heer, U.E. dienstwillige vrund C.Huygens.

Hage, den 19den feb. 1629.

Ick spreke van recht Indiaensch lackwerck, het Amsteldamsche kan mijn’ Hagenaers niet vermaken, die den gedraghe seevisch uijt den gevoerde kennen.

Sir,

The writer who I wanted to use for this work above all others in view of his fine penmanship and accurate copies, of which he boasts so much, has until now been so tied up with other things, with regard to one of our provinces, that it has not been possible for me to get this first copy from him any earlier. He is overwhelmed from all sides, so that he has hardly been out of his house in a couple of months, but was always engaged in this work.

I trust that his work will delight you. He will only now take my copy in hand, but I will console myself with that, so long as you have been helped. The original consists of 57 pages. I had to promise him 6 stuivers per piece and have to be happy that he was willing to accept it. You do not have to worry about the money. I have settled with him and will again perhaps have a reason to bother you with my purchases in Amsterdam.
It so happens that I was asked to affect a purchase in Amsterdam of a particular East Indian writing tray, with no cover, of red lacquerware, with blunt corners as drawn here. It was seen in my studio. It serves as a stand for an inkwell and sand bowl, with similar tools. In Amsterdam they [these trays] are, I think, used to present rummers on a table. I have also drawn a beautiful lacquered sand bowl, simply made of red lacquerware. I wanted to ask you if you would kindly buy something similar for me and have it sent as soon as possible. I think that it was opposite Oost-Indisch Huis where I chanced to find mine, with people who sell porcelain and other East Indian finery. You will be rendering me an extraordinary kindness and you will always be able to find me again, sir,
Your obliging friend
C. Huygens

The Hague, 19 February 1629

I’m talking about real East-Indian lacquerware. The Amsterdam version cannot appeal to my Hague friends, who can tell the difference between fresh fish that has been carried [here from the dunes] from that brought in [by cart].

2 A scan of the letter and Worp’s short description were made available online by the Huygens Institute, see Briefwisseling Constantijn Huygens 1607-1687, letter no. 433, resources.huygens.knaw.nl/briefwisselingconstantijnhuygens (consulted 1 December 2021). With thanks to Ad Leerintveld for the transcription and translation to modern Dutch of the letter. The first paragraphs of the letter are about a calligraphic copy, most probably of a poem. Identification of the poem, a copy of which was ordered by Huygens, may lead to the name of the recipient of the letter. Huygens also used the salutation (“Mijn Heer”) and closure (“vrund”) in letters to P.C. Hooft, but further research is needed to establish whether this letter was also intended for him.
4 Lacquer Room, before 1695, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. bk-16709.
6 Bell-shaped bowls as in Huygens’s sketch were made in China as well as in Japan. See James C.Y. Watt and Barbara Brennan Ford, East Asian Lacquer: The Florence and Herbert Irving Collection, New York 1991, nos. 86, 87, for sixteenth-century examples; there are later examples in the collection of Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen.
8 Ibid., pp. 179-237, nos. 34, 196, 1149, 1152, 1254, 1289, 1294, 1298.
9 Ibid., ‘becleet met marmer, coralen ende ebbenhout’, p. 182, no. 34; p. 190, no. 196.
10 Ibid., ‘een schrijfflae van root lackwerck overtrocken’, p. 231, nos. 1149, 1152.
11 Lacquerware was also made in Southeast Asia, but it was only shipped to Europe in small quantities and this shape is unknown in lacquerware from this part of the world.
12 ‘Ik heb het over echt Indisch lakwerk. Het Amsterdamse kan mijn Hagenaars,
die de gedragen zeevis uit de [per kar of schuit] aangevoerde kunnen onderschei-
den, niet bekoren.’ With many thanks to
Ad Leerintveld for this explanation.

13 Oliver Impey and Christiaan Jörg, Japanese Export Lacquer: 1580-1850, Amsterdam
2005. This is broadly their argument, but they also suggest the possibility that other
types of lacquerware were imported into
the Netherlands earlier, see p. 243. Other
lacquer items were also made in Japan, which
are presumed not to have been exported.
We know of sixteenth-century red lacquer
items that are extremely similar to Huygens's
sketch, but it is highly unlikely that
European dealers were able to buy them.
See Watt and Ford 1991 (note 6), no. 89.

14 For a sixteenth-century example, see Watt
and Ford 1991 (note 6), no. 90. With thanks
to Christiaan Jörg and Menno Fitski for
their help in finding relevant comparison
material.

15 This is an early nineteenth-century example –
actual earlier examples are unknown, but
they do feature as illustrations in prints.

16 Impey and Jörg 2005 (note 13), pp. 242-45;
Cynthia Viallé, ‘From Nanban Shikki to
Kômô Shikki: Japanese Export Lacquer
Trade and Taste’, in Dejanirah Couto and
François Lachaud (eds.), Empires éloignées: L'Europe et le Japon (xvie-xixe siècle),
Paris 2010, pp. 229-42. We are grateful to
Cynthia Viallé for reading and comment-
ing on an earlier version of this article.

17 ‘John Saris’ Observations on Commodities
to be Bought and Sold in Japan, 1605-1609’,
in Anthony Farrington, The English Factory
pp. 57-58, letter no. 2. With many thanks
to Cynthia Viallé for this reference.

In 1612 Pieter Segers writes about a ship-
ment of lacquer that was purchased from
a bankrupt Spanish dealer. There was a
market for Namban lacquer in Spain –
an indication that this was again about
Namban lacquer. Communication from
Cynthia Viallé. However, the possibility
that Dutch traders became acquainted with
types of lacquerware other than the most
commonly exported cannot be ruled out.

19 W.P. Coolhaas, Het Huis 'De Dubbele Arend',
Amsterdam 1973, pp. 29-64. Specx returned
to the East Indies on 25 January, so he could
not be the addressee of Huygens letter.

20 In 1638 Jacques Specx married Magdalena
Doublet, whose brother was married to
Huygens’s sister Geertruyd, see Coolhaas
1973 (previous note).

21 In 1636, Specx thanked Huygens for
helping a relative (letter no. 1567) and in
1640 Huygens asked Specx whether the
porcelain that had been ordered had
already arrived (letter no. 2577). It had
taken longer than expected to find porce-
lain ‘naar zijn contantement’ (to his satis-
faction). In the end, Specx offered him
three pieces from David van Mildert (a
porcelain dealer?) and one from his own
collection. See
Briefwisseling Constantijn
Huygens 1607-1687, resources.huygens.
knaw.nl/briefwisselingconstantijnhuygens
(consulted 1 December 2021). Specx him-
selh had ‘Een lackwercx laetgen’ (a lacquer
open box), as can be established from his
1652 estate inventory (Amsterdam City
Archives, Archive of Amsterdam Notaries
(accession no. 5372), notary H. Schaeff,
inv. no. 1689, 3 September 1652, fol. 878).

22 Jan van Campen, Collecting China: Jean
Theodore Royer (1737-1807), Collections
and Chinese Studies, Hilversum 2021,
pp. 87-88.

23 Since 2014 Museum Volkenkunde has been part of Stichting Nationaal Museum van
Wereldculturen.

24 For a red tray from the Royer Collection
with a somewhat different shape, see Sticht-
ing Nationaal Museum van Wereld culturen,
inv. no. rv-360-662. There are various
trays mentioned in the ‘Lakwerken’ sec-
tion (no. 349) in Susanna Louise Huygens’s
estate description. None of them can be
clearly linked to Huygens's red writing
tray. The Hague, Haags Gemeentearchief,
Archive of The Hague Notaries (accession
no. 0372-01), notary L. Sythoff, inv. no. 3520,
no. 72, 31 March 1786.

25 Van Campen 2021 (note 22). For the Chinese
porcelain from the Royer Collection a
search is now being carried out for related
entries in Susanna Louise Huygens’s estate
description. From the autumn of 2023 this
information will be available by way of
the object information in the Rijksstudio,
see https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/
rijksstudio.