



# Short Notice

## Constantijn Huygens and his ‘East Indian Writing Tray’

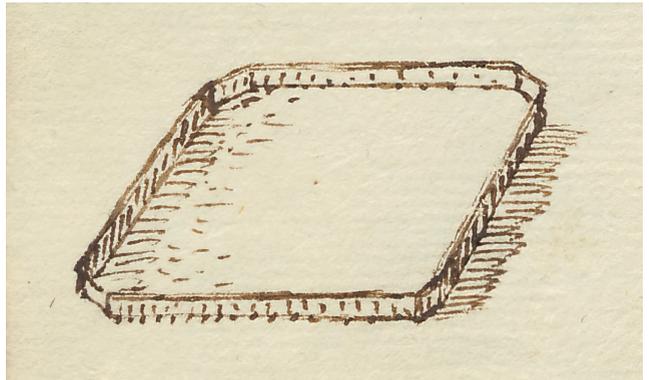
• JAAP JONGSTRA AND JAN VAN CAMPEN •

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.<sup>1</sup> 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).<sup>2</sup> 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,

< Figs. 1, 2, 3  
Letter from  
Constantijn Huygens,  
19 February 1629.  
Leiden University  
Libraries, inv. no. PAP 2.  
Details with sketches  
of the tray and the  
sand bowl.

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



(1662-1695), the wife of Stadholder William III, in which he poses as a concerned Chinese who is trying to prevent a large Chinese lacquer screen from being sawn up and used to cover the walls of a cabinet.<sup>3</sup> A similar lacquerware cabinet, the only one of its kind that has survived, now in the Rijksmuseum, came from the stadholder's court of the Frisian Nassaus in Leeuwarden.<sup>4</sup> Lacquerware, as well as other Asian luxury items, is also occasionally mentioned in his other correspondence, such as in letters to the Duchess of Lorraine, Béatrix-Marie-Françoise de Cusance (1614-1663) in Brussels. In 1652 Huygens sent her an 'Indisch doosje' (East Indian box) from his cabinet. In the same year De Cusance called him 'mijnheer de Intendant voor Indische zaken' (my gentleman in charge of East Indian things) and informed him by letter that she would like to come and look at his 'Indische zeldzaamheden' (East Indian rarities). Five years later she thanked Huygens for sending her some pretty little stones and asked him whether he 'might happen to find a small lacquer box' in which to keep them.<sup>5</sup> These are just a couple of references, but they show Huygens to have been a lover of Asian lacquerware.

Asian objects from the Huygens family, although not the lacquer tray under discussion, found their way to the Rijksmuseum by way of a great-granddaughter, as will emerge from the provenance of those objects cited in this Short Notice. This is why the letter and Huygens's love of lacquerware certainly deserve our attention.

### Red Lacquer Trays

The question arises as to what kind of lacquerware Huygens was referring to in his letter. And although there is also a drawing of a bell-shaped bowl in the margin, we will focus above all on the tray – the actual subject of the letter.<sup>6</sup> If we look at the sketch, the outstanding features are the bevelled corners and

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).<sup>7</sup> 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 Stadhoudelijk Kwartier and the Oude Hof in Noordeinde in The Hague.<sup>8</sup> 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'.<sup>9</sup> Three examples were lacquered, among them 'a writing tray covered in red lacquer'.<sup>10</sup> 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



Fig. 4

JAN BRUEGHEL  
THE ELDER, *Still  
Life with Garland of  
Flowers and Chalice*,  
1618.

Oil on panel,  
47.5 x 52.5 cm.  
Brussels, Royal  
Museums of Fine  
Arts of Belgium,  
inv. no. 5013.

Photo: Peter van  
Evert / Alamy Stock

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.<sup>14</sup> 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.<sup>15</sup>

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' lacquerware was imported from Japan: this was black lacquer with a rich decoration of mother-of-pearl inlay and gold (fig. 5).<sup>16</sup> 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



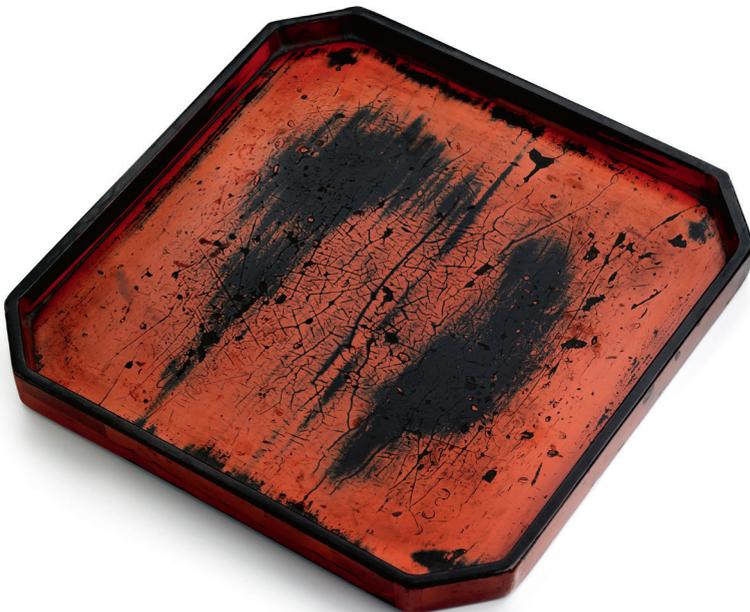
(fig. 6).<sup>14</sup> In Japan small, low tables on which meals were eaten were also often this shape, as can be seen from a model from the collection of Jan Cock Blomhoff (1779-1853, fig. 7).<sup>15</sup> The red lacquer, like that of the sixteenth-century tray illustrated (fig. 6), is known as Negoro 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.<sup>16</sup> Between 1610 and 1616 the merchants Jacques Specx (1585-1652) and Hendrik Brouwer (1581-1643),

*Figs. 5a, b*  
Covered writing box  
in Namban lacquer,  
Japan, early seven-  
teenth century.  
Wood and lacquer,  
h. 9.2 x w. 24.5 x  
d. 15.8 cm.  
Braunschweig, Herzog  
Anton Ulrich Museum,  
inv. no. Chi 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.  
London, Simon Pilling  
East Asian Art &  
Interiors.

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.<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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

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 Wereldculturen (Cock Blomhoff Collection), inv. no. v-360-3434.





*Fig. 8*  
Tray, Japan, eighteenth century?  
Wood and lacquer,  
h. 3 x w. 33.3 x d. 33.3 cm.  
Stichting Nationaal  
Museum van Wereld-  
culturen (Royer  
Collection),  
inv. no. RV-360-928.

shop near Oost-Indisch Huis in Amsterdam. He says nothing about knowing Specx, but they were actually closely connected. In 1628, exactly one year before Huygens wrote his letter, Specx made a short visit to the Netherlands.<sup>19</sup> Their families moved in the same circles and because contact between them is evident in the sixteenth-thirties and -forties and was even sealed by a marriage, a meeting during his visit is not inconceivable.<sup>20</sup> A different letter from Huygens written in 1640 tells us that Specx supplied him with special pieces of porcelain; it is possible he was also responsible for interesting Huygens in this new type of lacquerware in 1628.<sup>21</sup>

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.<sup>22</sup> 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.<sup>23</sup> 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.<sup>24</sup> 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.<sup>25</sup> 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 sijn fraeije letter ende pertinente copien, daervan hij sich 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.

Ick vertrouw U.E. gevallen aen sijn werck sal hebben. Aen mijn' copie sal hij eerst nu de hand gaen setten, des ick mij getrooste, mits U.E. maer gerieft zij'. Het originele bestaat in 57 bladen, voor 't stuck van welcke ick hem hebb moeten toeseppen 6 stuivers ende noch blijde zijn dat hij 't aennemen wilde. U.E. geve sich geen sorgh voor 't gelds wille. Ick hebbe hem voldaan, ende sal wederom een' oorsaek mogen hebben van U.E. met mijne commissien t'Amsteldam te moeijen.

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 porcelejnen 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' Hagenaes niet vermaken, die den gedraghe seevisch uijt den gevoerden 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].

## NOTES

- 1 J.A. Worp, *Constantijn Huygens: briefwisseling*, 6 vols., The Hague 1911-1917, vol. 1 (1911), p. 253, letter no. 433.
- 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. Hoof, but further research is needed to establish whether this letter was also intended for him.
- 3 Willemijn van Noord, 'The "Unhappy Ruines" of Princess Mary II's Lacquer Screen: Sir Constantijn Huygens's Plea to Preserve a Chinese Artefact, 1685-1686', in Thijs Weststeijn (ed.), *Foreign Devils and Philosophers: Cultural Encounters between the Chinese, the Dutch, and Other Europeans, 1590-1800*, Leiden/Boston 2020, pp. 148-204.
- 4 *Lacquer Room*, before 1695, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-16709.
- 5 Ineke Huysman and Rudolf Rasch (transl./ed.), *Béatrix en Constantijn: De briefwisseling tussen Béatrix de Cusance en Constantijn Huygens 1652-1662*, Amsterdam/The Hague 2009, letter nos. 1 (CH-BdC, 5 August 1652), 5 (BdC-CH, 10 November 1652) and 41 (BdC-CH, 30 August 1657). For Huygens's interest in Asia in a broader sense, see Van Noord 2020 (note 3), pp. 151-55.
- 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.
- 7 Sophie Drossaers and Theo Lunsingh Scheurleer, *Inventarissen van de inboedels in de verblijven van de Oranjes en daarmee gelijk te stellen stukken 1567-1795*, 3 vols., The Hague 1974-76, vol. 1 (1974), p. 160, no. 765.
- 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 onderscheiden, 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 *Kōmō Shikki*: Japanese Export Lacquer Trade and Taste', in Dejanirah Couto and François Lachaud (eds.), *Empires éloignés: L'Europe et le Japon (xvii-xixe siècle)*, Paris 2010, pp. 229-42. We are grateful to Cynthia Viallé for reading and commenting 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 in Japan: 1613-1623*, London 1991, vol. 1, pp. 57-58, letter no. 2. With many thanks to Cynthia Viallé for this reference.
- 18 Impey and Jörg 2005 (note 13), p. 242. In 1612 Pieter Segers writes about a shipment 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. 1367) 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 porcelain 'naar zijn contantement' (to his satisfaction). 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 himself 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 Stichting Nationaal Museum van Wereldculturen, inv. no. rv-360-662. There are various trays mentioned in the 'Lakwerken' section (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>.