

The Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai*,  
so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen

# UNFOLDING STORIES







## FOREWORD

Over the years, we have had the privilege of acquiring a number of exceptional objects, each considered iconic due to its artistic quality, historical significance and rarity. Among these are remarkable pieces such as the Chinese porcelain Jiajing (1522-1566) blue-and-white bowl, inscribed with *AVER AMARIA GRACIA PLENA DOMINIUM*, now part of the RA Collection – Renato de Albuquerque Foundation; the pair of early 17th-century Japanese Osaka to Nagasaki Sea Route Map Screens, currently housed at the Art Gallery of South Australia; the rare 17th-century matchlock gun, intricately decorated with silver inlay depicting a figure of a *nambanjin*, now in the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore; the Chinese porcelain Chongzhen (1628-1644) jar decorated with the coat of arms of Pinto, Pereira Guedes and Pimentel, now in the Fundação Carmona e Costa's collection; and the 17th-century Japanese Namban tray, featuring a scene from *The Tale of Genji*, now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. To this day, each of these pieces remains the only known recorded example of its kind. These extraordinary works — and many others of equal significance that we have had the privilege of handling and placing in both private and institutional collections — stand as true masterpieces of our field.

Works of art of such historical and artistic importance are the ultimate aspiration of any serious collector, museum and, of course, art dealer. However, due to the nature of their rarity, it is uncommon for such pieces to surface on the art market... yet when they do, no matter how many years one has spent handling extraordinary objects, encountering another of these rare and iconic works is always an exciting and deeply rewarding experience, one that unfolds through discovery, research and, finally, the presentation of the work of art to a wider audience.

This monograph is dedicated to one such rare and truly extraordinary work of art: a Chinese Kangxi (1662-1722) Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai* Lacquer Screen. This screen exemplifies the finest artistic refinement found in *kuancai* lacquer, depicting two of the most intricate and masterfully executed scenes ever created in this medium. As far as we can determine, it is the only known example combining these two specific scenes. The screen portrays 394 human figures - 163 Europeans on the Dutch Tribute side and 231 Chinese on the West Lake side, along with 48 inscriptions identifying temples, bridges and other landmarks. Remarkably, the screen remains in a surprisingly good condition, unusual for a lacquer screen, and indicating the care with which it has been treated over the last few centuries.



To fully appreciate the rarity of these scenes, it is important to note that only one other known screen features the same Dutch Tribute depiction — by far the most detailed and complex among the approximately ten recorded *kuancai* screens portraying Europeans. This ‘twin’ screen is housed in the collection of the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen. We had the pleasure of viewing this impressive screen on a visit to Copenhagen, where we were able to study the similarities and differences in relation to ours. The present screen differs from the Copenhagen example in two aspects. Firstly, its overall composition is more expansive, featuring an additional section in the top-right corner that is absent in the Danish version. Additionally, our screen includes 163 European figures, compared to the 158 in the Copenhagen example. Secondly, while the reverse side of our screen is decorated with the West Lake scene, the Copenhagen example is plain, covered only with cloth, a thin layer of lacquer paste and paper. The reason for this remains unclear, but it is possible that, as was often the case, one side of the screen was removed and repurposed as part of a lacquer-panelled room. Several known examples of lacquer rooms adorned with panels originating from split screen sides exist, each repurposed as a wall panel. One of the most famous instances is the apartment of Coco Chanel at 31 rue Cambon in Paris, where, among her collection of thirty-two *kuancai* screens, eight were installed as wall panels.

Although the Dutch Tribute scene is the rarer of the two depicted on this screen, there are also only a few known examples illustrating a comparable Hangzhou and West Lake scene. West Lake is one of China’s most famous and culturally revered landmarks. Since the Tang Dynasty (618–907), the area has undergone numerous enhancements, including the construction of causeways, artificial islands, renowned temples, pagodas and gardens – many identified by the inscriptions found on the present screen. Over time, it has evolved into a symbol of beauty and tranquillity, serving as the source of inspiration for poets, painters and philosophers, embodying traditional Chinese ideals of harmony between humanity and nature.

*Kuancai* lacquer has been highly valued and treasured in both China and the West since its earliest production and the subsequent arrival of the first folding screens in Europe. However, the term ‘Coromandel lacquer’, commonly used in the West, is considered inaccurate and misleading by most scholars, as it refers to a port of passage in India rather than the actual place of production or the technique employed. For this reason, throughout this publication, we use the term *kuancai*, the term most used in China and the specific name for the technique used to create these screens and related objects. Further discussion on terminology can be found in the first article by Valentina Bruccoleri.

In November of last year, the City University of Hong Kong hosted a most interesting conference and seminar, *Unfolding the Coromandel Screen*, bringing together over sixty scholars from around the world. Beyond the discussions on terminology, the presentations and subsequent debates covered a range of topics related to *kuancai* lacquer. The most surprising consensus among attendees was how limited the research conducted so far was on this type of lacquer, despite its widespread appeal across the world. There are also relatively few dedicated publications on the subject — the most recent and essential work being Nicole Brugier’s 2015 book, *Les Laques Coromandel*, recommended to anyone interested in these lacquers.

This monograph, featuring articles by three scholars, seeks to cover what is currently known about *kuancai* lacquer, the present screen, its historical context and the parallels with Japanese folding screens, which, from the 15th century onward, often also depicted maritime trade and foreign merchants — including the Chinese, Portuguese, and later, the Dutch.

The first article, by Valentina Bruccoleri, *A Journey into Kuancai, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer*, and who also authored the fourth article dedicated to the detailed analysis of the present screen, provides an overview of *kuancai* lacquer. The second article, by Xialing Liu, *Decoding the Screen Frame the Names and Pattern Sources of Chinese Antiques on the Dutch Tribute and West Lake Kuancai, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen’s Frame*, focuses on the frames of *kuancai* screens, particularly those few examples that share similarities with the present screen, while also exploring the symbolism, interpretation and sources of their decorative motifs. The third article, by Alexandra Curvelo, *Europeans Paying Tribute on a Kuancai Screen, Representing Otherness in Early Modern China*, examines the historical context and parallels with Japanese folding screens, including the well-known *Namban* examples.

We hope this monograph will contribute to a deeper understanding of *kuancai*, and in particular this extraordinary screen, which, beyond its immense historical and artistic significance, is visually remarkable for its pictorial richness, its vibrant colours and meticulously detailed landscapes, figures, inscriptions, architecture and other decorative elements.

Luísa Vinhais  
Jorge Welsh





# *A Journey into Kuancai, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer*

VALENTINA BRUCCOLERI

*'From an aesthetic point of view, a well-crafted Coromandel screen is pure enchantment. It embodies all the refined distinction of Chinese art, blended with an admirable and never chaotic imagination. With constant attention to overall composition as well as the tiniest details, its inexhaustible themes include mythology and the history of customs, daily observations, and a love for interpreted nature. Just when one thinks they are thoroughly familiar with such a piece, they find yet another precious detail to discover'.<sup>1</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> 'Au point de vue esthétique, un paravent de Coromandel bien réussi est un enchantement. Toute la distinction raffinée de l'art chinois s'y retrouve, mêlée à une imagination admirable et jamais désordonnée. Avec le souci, toujours, de la composition d'ensemble et celui du plus infime détail, la mythologie et l'histoire des mœurs, l'observation journalière et l'amour de la nature interprétée, en constituent les inépuisables thèmes ; on croit bien connaître l'un de ces ouvrages, et voici qu'on y découvre encore du nouveau précieux.' Gronkowsky, 1919, pp. 484-492.





## *Decoding the Screen Frame*

# The Names and Pattern Sources of Chinese Antiques on the Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai*, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen's Frame

XIALING LIU

The central panels of Chinese *kuancai* (also known as 'Coromandel') lacquer screens provide a visual stage for paintings, normally the viewer's primary focus. In contrast, the frames of these screens have been frequently overlooked. The decorative motifs on these frames are commonly described as the 'Hundred Antiques', or various items of the 'Eight Treasures (or precious objects)'. In fact, however, they represent objects that each have their own distinct names and origins. Several specific Chinese woodblock prints served as patterns for these, particularly those made in Huizhou. This article suggests that the similarities between the motifs on different *kuancai* lacquer screen frames serve as visual evidence for authentication, linking screens that have been dispersed around the world and providing a method for grouping them. Through this process, oblique references to 'an anonymous *kuancai* workshop' or 'a group of unknown lacquer artisans' gradually become decipherable, and the connection between *kuancai* lacquer screens, woodblock prints, ink engravings and paintings becomes clearer, revealing a network of artistic, material, crafts-related and technical exchange.





# *Europeans Paying Tribute on a kuancai Screen:* Representing Otherness in Early Modern China

ALEXANDRA CURVELO

## UNFOLDING HISTORY

The twelve-panel Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai*, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen depicts, on one side, European tribute scenes and, on the other, scenes of West Lake, Hangzhou, China. My analysis focuses on the former of these, which depicts a coastal landscape with a procession of European figures (see pp. 104-142).

The Europeans are shown walking from the land towards the harbour to bring goods and load them onto ships. The inland area is illustrated on the right side of the scene, while the ships are on the left. The figures and chariots are directed towards the left, indicating the intended direction of the narrative of the scene. The scene unfolds across ten panels, telling a story that reads from right to left, set in a landscape and presenting the activities of the numerous figures within it. The composition is dominated by land, the right-hand side featuring a fortified building. In contrast, the left-hand side presents a busy group of Europeans and ships either sailing, or preparing to sail, from the coast. The upper-left corner of the scene is intentionally left blank to represent the ocean, and a cluster of buildings is depicted among the clouds, separate from the land on the same side.











# The Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai*, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen

VALENTINA BRUCCOLERI

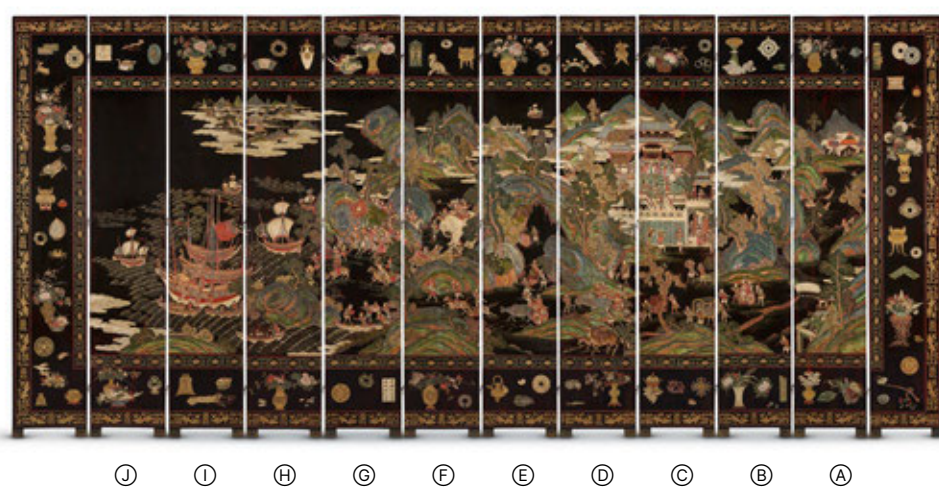
Wood, lacquer, pigments and gold; metal mounts  
China — Qing dynasty, Kangxi period (1662-1722)  
H. 268 L. 588 cm (open plan)

Like most *kuancai* screens, the Dutch Tribute and West Lake *Kuancai*, so-called Coromandel, Lacquer Screen consists of twelve panels; in this case, each of these measure 268 cm in height and are held together by iron fittings,<sup>1</sup> with a total length of 588 cm. Both sides are decorated. The central scenes are enclosed within a triple frame: two narrow outer frames and a wide central frame. The two outside panels are completely covered by the frame, allowing both scenes to unfold across ten panels. On each side the frame consists of three registers: an internal, narrow one, with a series of lotus flowers and stylised mythical animals, a large, central register filled with representations of antiques and precious objects, and an external, narrow register with pairs of dragons and phoenixes. The frames of this screen are discussed in detail in Xialing Liu’s article within this catalogue.

The central scenes of the screen depict, on one side, a coastal landscape with a tribute procession of European figures, and on the other the celebrated West Lake in Hangzhou. The present screen owes its uniqueness directly to the subjects depicted in the central scenes on both sides. Both themes are relatively rare. Of the screens featuring scenes with Europeans, this scene, depicting a procession moving from a fortified complex towards ships in a harbour, exists in only one other example, held in the National Museum of Denmark, Copenhagen (see fig. 3, p. 43). However, the other side of the Copenhagen screen has no decoration, suggesting it may have been dismantled in Europe after its arrival. The rare combination of this portrayal of Europeans with a depiction of the West Lake, both executed with exceptional craftsmanship, highlights the extraordinary nature of the present screen.

<sup>1</sup> Studies on the iron fittings of *kuancai* screens are basically non-existent, largely due to the fact that the original fittings are rare, having been replaced multiple times over the years. For a short discussion see Brugier, 2015, p. 158.





## THE EUROPEAN SCENE

The scene is spread across the ten central panels (excluding the two edges panels, which form part of the frame), creating a continuous narrative that reveals a landscape and the various activities of the human figures within it. Most of the composition is dominated by land: the right-hand side centres around a fortified building and the left-hand side features a detailed depiction of a group of Europeans and the ships sailing – or ready to sail – from the coast. The upper-left triangle of the scene is left blank, representing the ocean, while a cluster of buildings appears among the clouds, detached from the land on the same side. The scene is rendered with polychrome motifs set against a black lacquer background. Earthy tones of brown, green and grey dominate the landscape, while white highlights the clouds, parts of the buildings, and the human faces. The clothing of the figures is adorned with shades of red, yellow, green, grey and blue, adding vibrant accents to the composition. Gold is also visible in several elements of the scene.

**In the first panel** ① (which corresponds to the second panel of the entire screen, as the first is reserved for the frame), when viewed from top to bottom, the scene opens with a mountain wreathed in clouds, accompanied by different varieties of trees. Below the clouds is a camp, with a central tent housing three men, each holding a bowl, with a man positioned outside. Another figure is inside one of two smaller side tents. In front of the tents a triangular red flag flutters, while two men with spears are seen walking away from the camp. The middle section of the panel, set apart by green and brown hills and rocks, shows a hunting scene. Here, three men are seen carrying spears, with one securing a deer using a rope. On the opposite side of the deer, another two men appear – one holding a spear and a curled-up pangolin in his left hand, and the other carrying a full tray. In the lower foreground a bridge crosses a river, leading to a building with a pagoda-roof pavilion, where one figure is visible inside. Surrounding this scene are various trees, including a palm.











T S R Q P O N M L K

## THE WEST LAKE SCENE

The West Lake scene takes a distinctly different approach, firmly rooted in the traditional Chinese artistic tradition of depicting the most celebrated lake in China. The depiction centres on the basin of the lake, horizontally traversed by a causeway adorned with multiple bridges. This composition is presented from a wider perspective than the scene on the other side of the screen, with the figures rendered smaller in scale. While the scene appears to follow no specific linear narrative, its layout adheres to the traditional right-to-left viewing approach typical of Chinese paintings. Black is used to represent the sky, the water and the signs marking various buildings. White is primarily used to depict the clouds and bridges, while shades of grey, brown and green enhance the natural landscape, consistent with the palette of the scene on the other side. The buildings and garments are highlighted with shades of yellow, green and red, with red less dominant on this side of the screen. Gold is also visible in several elements of the scene.

Most of the buildings, at least those in the foreground, carry inscriptions that help us navigate this lacustrine landscape. Although altered and reconstructed over time, some of these buildings still exist today.

In the **first panel** ① of the scene (which corresponds to the second panel of the entire screen, as the first is reserved for the frame), we see hills amidst clouds, depicted in a style strikingly similar to that of the scene on the other side of the screen. In the distance, a temple with a pagoda is visible, and a black sign with gilded characters identifies it as the Shengguo Temple (聖果寺). On the left, incised on a rock, are four characters, *qianwang zuji* 錢王足跡 ('Footprints of King Qian'), accompanied by foot imprints.









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