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*Namban Writing Cabinet — Nippo-Portuguese, Momoyama Period (1573–1615)*



### NAMBAN WRITING CABINET

Japanese cedar, lacquer, mother-of-pearl and gold  
Nippo-Portuguese, Momoyama Period (1573 – 1615)  
Dim.: 54.0 × 78.0 × 41.7 cm  
F1142

Provenance: private collection, Paris

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A Namban fall-front cabinet in lacquered wood (*urushi*) modelled after an Iberian prototype, called *contador* in Portuguese and *vargeño* in Spanish.

Fitted in the interior with many drawers of diverse shapes, cabinets of this size were intended for the safe keep of important documents and letters, jewellery and small precious objects, and ranked among the most essential pieces of furniture in early modern European domestic interiors. The hinged front drops down to form a surface for writing.

This type of furniture was essential for European officials, merchants and traders living in Asia, being made with exotic and expensive materials such as tortoiseshell, ivory and delicate lacquer decorated in gold, the latter much admired and avidly sought after in Europe due not only to their appealing design but also to their technical perfection.

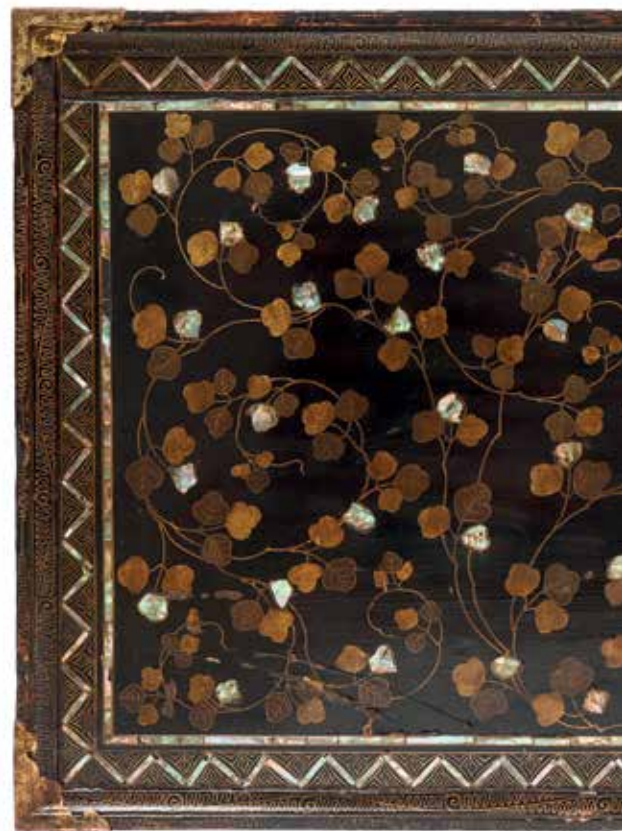
When open, this very rare and important cabinet, gives access to twenty drawers arranged in six tiers: the first and second tier, with two square drawers at the ends occupying the total height,

have four long drawers; a central drawer, with an arch reminiscent of contemporary European cabinets, occupies the total height of the three central tiers, and is flanked by five drawers superimposed on each side, two in the upper tiers and one long in the middle, on each side; and three drawers in the lower tier, two square at the ends and a central drawer which, like the drawer with the arch in the centre, has a lock.

While the decoration of the central drawer consists of a heavily loaded branch of *tachibana* orange (*Citrus tachibana*), the bottom drawer features Japanese arrowroot coiling vines or *kuzu* (*Pueraria lobata*), a species that is also depicted, in an almost omnipresent way, in the decoration of the lacquered back and in the inner side of the fall front. Among the botanical species present in the decoration of this important cabinet mention should also be made to lotus flowers (*Nelumbo nucifera*), emerging from lake scenes in the square drawers at the corners.

Not unlike other Namban lacquered pieces of furniture, with flat exterior sides and protruding edges in keeping with Chinese





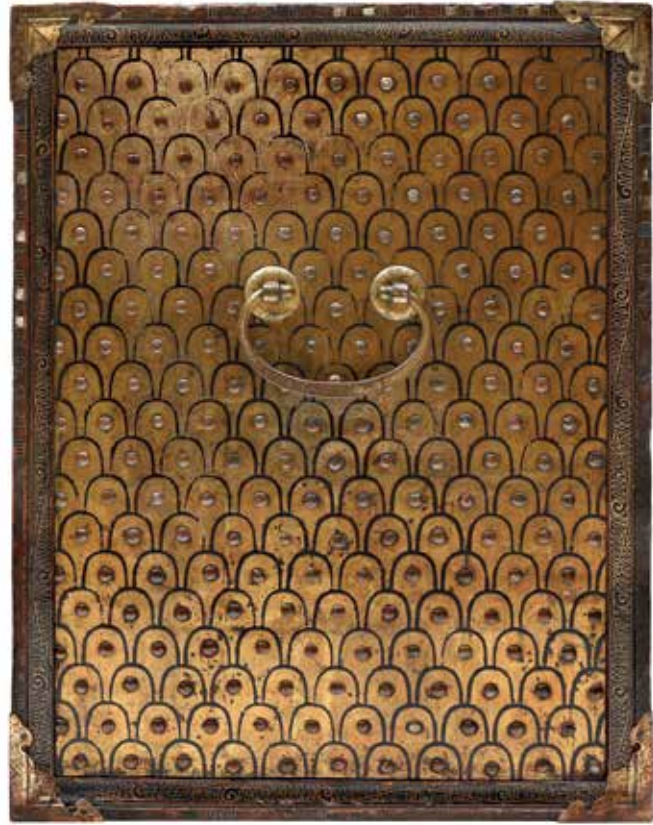
furniture, this cabinet's decoration consists on central panels with geometric borders (chequered pattern or *ishitatami*) combining the gold decoration with the mother of pearl (*raden*).

Nevertheless, and with the exception of the back which, as we have seen, is decorated by a large and continuous panel of Japanese arrowroot coiling vines, the remaining surfaces are covered by gilded copper plaques — whole plaques on the sides and two at the top and the exterior side of the fall front — decorated with a black lacquered (*urushi*) pattern of fish scales (facing upwards), with ball-shaped gilded copper nails set in the centre of each scale.

Made in a much more expensive and difficult to work material, the plaques and the fish scale pattern of the present cabinet is similar to the decoration of a rare group of Namban lacquered pieces furniture covered with mother-of-pearl (*raden*) featuring the same pattern of scales and pinned with similar round gilded copper nails. In fact, this pattern follows a taste and mode of production foreign to Japan, and one which arrived with the Portuguese, since it copy the fish scale pattern of the objects — among which

pieces of furniture such as caskets and tabletops —, produced with mother-of-pearl tesserae in Gujarat, some commissioned under direct European influence and copying prototypes brought by the Portuguese.<sup>1</sup> Few examples of this Namban group of pieces are known, such as a large (45.5 × 76 × 36.5 cm) chest (curiously decorated solely with Japanese arrowroot coiling vines) in a private collection, a large table cabinet in a private collection in Lisbon, and another large chest in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (inv. no. FE.33-1983).<sup>2</sup>

While there is no doubt about the work, difficulty and time involved in cutting and carefully setting the mother-of-pearl tesserae to the lacquered wood surface of the examples of this rare group, the manufacture of the gilded copper sheets used on the present cabinet is certainly more complex, since the knowledge used to make them belongs to metallurgy. In fact, for the manufacture of such thin and regular copper sheets it is necessary to cast an ingot which is then flattened by hammering until the desired thickness is obtained (hammering which is interrupted whenever the metal



looses its ductility and becomes necessary to anneal it, bring it to the fire repeatedly), with the subsequent and time-consuming elimination of the hammer marks, resulting in a flawlessly smooth, flat surface.

This surface was later gilded, probably by the dissolution of the gold in mercury, resulting, after it evaporates, in a gilded surface which is then burnished for greater brightness, lacquered in black with the fish scaled pattern, and further decorated with the ball-shaped nails (with the drilling stages which precedes it) placed at the centre of each scale.

Complex and lengthy stages of manufacture in the field of metallurgy, which results in an absolutely extraordinary surface, literally covered with gold, one of the most expensive materials, alongside with silk, and thus much appreciated.

It is, therefore, not a decorative option that could have resulted from any scarcity of mother-of-pearl, but a conscious preference on the part of the patron, since gilded furniture was then regarded as the most luxurious, and reserved to the elite. It should be

underscored that the excessive use of gilded furniture led to its prohibition in the kingdom of Portugal — along with enamelled gold pieces or the unregulated use of silk attire — by means of special laws known as sumptuary laws.<sup>3</sup>

The gilded copper decoration of the present cabinet, which is also present in the copper bands (chased in order to imitate the adjacent chequered lacquered borders) that cover the joints of the double plaques at the top and front, also extends to the fittings, which includes drawer pullers (with chrysanthemum-shaped escutcheons), brackets, side handles, hinges, and the large escutcheon in the shape of a crowned coat of arms decorated with a chased Japanese apricot or *Prunus mume*.

The refined gold decoration applied to this large fall-front cabinet called *maki-e*, literally 'sprinkled picture', was common in Momoyama Period (1568–1600) and early Edo Japan.<sup>4</sup>

During this period, a special lacquerware made for export, which mixed mother-of-pearl inlay with *hiramaki-e*, was called *nanban makie* or *nanban shitsugei*. *Nanban*, also spelled *Namban*,

or *Nanban-jin* (literally, ‘Southern Barbarian’) is a Japanese term derived from Chinese that refers to the Portuguese and Spanish merchants, missionaries and sailors who arrived in Japan in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Namban has also become synonymous with the types of lacquerware and other products that were commissioned in Japan for the home market or for export and reflected western taste and were modelled after European prototypes such as the present cabinet. Namban-style products, which were strictly made for export only, commonly combine Japanese techniques, materials and motifs with European styles and shapes, the present object being a valuable testimony of such production.

At present, no other Namban piece is known with gilded copper sheets decorated with a lacquered fish scale pattern such as the present piece, thus being a remarkable document of a taste at the same time refined yet overly ostentatious, a choice which in fact perfectly depicts the manners of the Portuguese in Asia during this period of the so-called Maritime Discoveries and Expansion. ✍

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<sup>1</sup> See: José Jordão Felgueiras, *Uma Família de Objectos Preciosos do Guzarate. A Family of Precious Gujurati Works*, in Nuno Vassallo e Silva (ed.), *A Herança de Rauluchantim* (cat.), Lisboa, Museu de S. Roque — Comissão Nacional para as Comemorações dos Descobrimentos Portugueses, 1996, pp. 128 – 155; Hugo Miguel Crespo, *Choices* (cat.), Lisboa, AR-PAB, 2016, pp. 114 – 121, cat. no. 12; and, in what regards a tabletop recently surfaced in the antiques market, see: Hugo Miguel Crespo (ed.), *À Mesa do Príncipe. Jantar e Cear na Corte de Lisboa (1500-1700). At the Prince's Table. Dining at the Lisbon Court (1500-1700)*, Lisboa, AR-PAB, 2018, pp. 240 – 245, cat. no. 32.

<sup>2</sup> See: Luísa Vinhais, Jorge Welsh (eds.), *After the Barbarians. An exceptional group of Namban works of art. Depois dos Bárbaros. Um exceptional conjunto de obras Namban*, London – Lisboa, Jorge Welsh, Porcelana Oriental e Obras de Arte, 2007, pp. 60-65, cat. no. 8.

<sup>3</sup> On gilded furniture (mostly of Asian manufacture) and its presence on sumptuary laws, see: Celina Bastos, *Das cousas da China: comércio, divulgação e apropriação do mobiliário chinês em Portugal. Séculos XVI a XVIII. Things from China: trading, disclosure and ownership of Chinese Furniture in Portugal 16th to 18th century*, in Alexandra Curvelo (ed.), ‘O Exótico nunca está em casa? A China na faiança e no azulejo portugueses (séculos XVII – XVIII). The Exotic is never at home? The presence of China in the Portuguese faience and azulejo (17th – 18th centuries)’ (cat.), Lisboa, Museu Nacional do Azulejo, 2013, pp. 145 – 61.

<sup>4</sup> See: Teresa Canepa, *Silk, Porcelain and Lacquer. China and Japan and their Trade with Western Europe and the New World, 1500-1644*, London, Paul Holberton publishing, 2016; and / et Alexandra Curvelo, *Nanban Art: what's past is prologue*, in Victoria Weston (ed.), *Portugal, Jesuits and Japan. Spiritual Beliefs and Earthly Goods* (cat.), Chestnut Hill, MA, McMullen of Art, 2013, pp. 71 – 78.





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