

Contemporary lacquered furniture design: reinventing ancient China lacquerwares

Chinese lacquerware is marveled for its ability to lavishly adorn and protect materials such as wood, bamboo, or cloth.

As a measure for preservation, lacquerware paved the way for many distinct art and furniture styles across Asia. Lacquer provides a durable finish to materials that would then have a greater resistance to the elements, including water proofing and discoloration brought about by the sun. Lacquer work has long been used to color and enhance screens, furniture, decorative objects, musical instruments, and even used on coffins. Often, elaborate scenes from nature, mythology and literature are depicted.

This desirable protective covering is made by applying many coats of lacquer to a dense material. In essence, lacquer is a natural plastic which prevents items from being exposed to oxygen and humidity, making it a fantastic material for added protection. Asian lacquer has long traditions dating back several thousands of years in China, Japan, Vietnam and Korea. It can be identified from a resin native to China, made from the highly toxic sap of the *Rhus Verniciflua* tree, a near relative of poison ivy.

The History of Chinese Lacquer Furniture

The development of lacquer work dates to Ancient China. It is understood that black lacquer was first used for writing on [bamboo](#) slips and then began appearing on dining utensils. Lacquer subsequently transcended to ceremonial usage, becoming a standard within iconic black and red interiors within China.



Asian Black and Red Interior



Ancient Chinese Wooden Bowl

The wooden bowl above is decorated in red and black lacquer with mythical birds and animals, it serves as one of the many decorations used during the Zhou Dynasty (1111-255 BCE). Often, lacquer was used for decorating carriages of nobility, bows

and arrows, but artisans also used it as building decoration and for musical instruments.

Once the Chinese cabinetmakers mastered the intricacies of producing lacquer cabinets, using the mortise and tenon technique devoid of any nails or screws, this design aesthetic became the baseline of many Chinese homes. Within Chinese societies during the Ming Dynasty China, homes were free from the westernized built-in closets as clothes were never hanged vertically but rather laid flat inside a chest or cabinet. Likewise, the dynastic robes would be folded and stacked horizontally rather than suspended vertically on hangers.

East Asian cabinetmakers were highly sought after for their works that possessed a flawless finish and light-reflecting qualities. Large lacquer cabinets were made in two main styles, the square-corner cabinet and the round-corner cabinet. Artisans would often make these cabinets in matching sets to be placed together side by side, to balance the space. Such cabinets could store practically anything, from books to precious porcelain ornaments, whatever you wanted to remain unseen and kept secure, these cabinets catered to it.

Different Types of Asian Lacquered Furniture

Asian lacquered furniture is still popular worldwide now and have an enduring quality to them. Many pieces are crafted using mortise and tenon, from cabinets to lacquered stools and writing desks, the list goes on. Both traditional and modern styles are readily available, each bringing its own unique quality into the space. Explore this selection of curated lacquer furniture for both the contemporary and traditionalists home.

Cabinets

The fundamental intention of the Chinese cabinet was to store clothes. The doors were vertical and mounted on metal hinges. Most of these cabinets were lacquered and decorated with scenic landscapes. The most lavish designs came from Shanxi and Fujian province, which featured an iconic red lacquer that is embellished in gold motifs.



*Early 20th Century Carved
[Cabinet from Fujian, China](#)*



*Modern Lacquered Cabinet
[Juliettes Interiors](#)*

Designers have created contemporary and luxury expressions of the ancient Chinese lacquered cabinet. An example is shown above from Juliettes Interiors.

The Lacquered Stool

By the Tang dynasty, stools and chairs had become common amongst the elite and those of rank. Once seen as a focal point in traditional Chinese homes, the East and West have since combined aesthetics, and now more modern silhouettes are available.

Take the Tam Tam stool from Pols Potten, who crafted a high-gloss lacquer finish for this stool with a remarkable sculptural outline, perfect for adding a contemporary feel to the home that is grounded in history.



Chinese lacquer stool



Tam Tam Stool by [Pols Potten](#)

The Apothecary Cabinet

Often called a medicine cabinet or hundred-eye cabinet, it generally sits lower and broader than a standard cabinet. This style cabinet provides endless storage compartments. Chinese doctors would label each box for herbs and medicines, making it very functional yet striking to see. Such cabinets have been reconstructed to house open compartments and can be used as shelving to display treasures and valuables.



An early 20th century Chinese
Apothecary cabinet



[Axis Bookshelf By Frank Chou](#)

The Cinnabar Vase

The Cinnabar Vase was used to carry water and was made by applying hundreds of layers of red lacquer and then carving its iconic detailing by hand. Today we can appreciate its modern counterpart as a floor vase, a beautiful way of turning a dull and forgotten corner into the focal point of the room.



[Carved Chinese Cinnabar Vase](#)



Modern Floor Vase on [Pinterest](#)

The Lacquered Writing Desk

Lacquer writing desks of the past tended to be made in sets with boxes to hold paper and writing tools. Most are characterized by their shorter legs and were largely undecorated. The contemporary version of a modern office desk today is more minimal in modern times, often using sleek lines and stylish accents that don't shout for attention.



[Red Lacquered Chinese Table](#)



*Luxury console by Christopher Guy
[Altina II – Touched Interiors](#)*

The Lacquer Chair

Carved lacquer chairs were initially only affordable by the imperial family or the extremely rich but were soon made for export to be shipped to European markets. Here we share Armani Casa, who created an elegant and modern design featuring a classically Chinese aesthetics via lacquer expression.



Lacquered Chinese Wooden
Dragon Emperor's chair



Jylia Chair with armrests
Armani Casa

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<https://www.livingindesign.com/asian-design-glossary/lacquerware>