



## Lacquerware Document Boxes

*Document Box with Tray*  
Late Edo-Meiji period, late 19<sup>th</sup>-early 20<sup>th</sup>  
century  
Wood, lacquer, and gold  
1954.89

### Where did lacquer originate?

Lacquer is made from the sap of a type of tree called *Rhus verniciflua*. This tree is native to China, but between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries, lacquerware techniques were brought first to Korea and then to Japan. Japan especially continued to develop lacquerware styles, entering the “Age of Lacquerware” between the 8<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> centuries.

### How is it made?

The first step in the lacquerware process is extracting a creamy-gray sap from the trunk of the tree. This sap is strained, and special kinds of dyes may be added to make different colors of lacquer. Sometimes the lacquer is stored and kept for years before it gets used. The actual lacquering process can take a very long time, and is divided into three parts. First, the object that is going to be lacquered needs to be constructed very carefully so it does not break inside the lacquer. Thin coats of lacquer are then applied, one at a time. Lastly, additional decorations are added to the lacquerware’s surface.

### What kinds of lacquerware styles are there?

The “sprinkled picture” technique (*maki-e*) is one of the most characteristic forms of lacquering. Powdered gold, silver, or copper is sifted onto a wet lacquer surface, and then either polished flat (*hiramaki-e*), built up with more powder (*takamaki-e*), or covered with more lacquer (*togidashi maki-e*). All three of these styles can be seen on the box’s surface.

### Why is lacquer used?

Lacquering is not just a decorative effect. The technique also strengthens objects and protects them from water. Many of the old lacquerware pieces in museums today are still in tact because the lacquer protecting them for so long.