NOTICE OF GENERAL MEETING

The 1st General Meeting of the Society for 1987 will be held in:

THE CONSERVATION CENTRE, 120 WAKEFIELD STREET ADELAIDE

on

MONDAY 23RD MARCH 1987 AT 8.00 PM.

AGENDA

1. Apologies:

2. Minutes of the Previous General Meeting:
   Minutes of the previous general meeting, held in the Conservation Centre, 120 Wakefield Street, Adelaide on 27th October 1986, having been circulated in this Journal to be confirmed.

3. Papers and Journals:
   Papers and journals received from other societies and organisations, since the last general meeting, will be tabled at this meeting.

4. Speaker:
   Dr Elizabeth Williams, will address the society.
   The subject of her address will be:
   "Archaeological experiences - Cooper Creek".

5. Supper will be served at the close of the meeting.

R. Allison
Hon. Secretary
120 Wakefield Street
ADELAIDE SA 5000
Most of my activity in the Society has revolved around my archaeological interests; and have been mainly confined to our immediate locality. To-night, by way of change I would like to speak to you on a quite different topic: Chinese lacquer.

Many of you will be familiar with this product in two of its most common forms: the intricately carved red Lacquerware still produced in factories near Peking; and the lustrous black lacquerware.

Lacquer is made from the sap of a tree *Rhus vernicifera*, known in Chinese as Ch'i-shu. This tree was originally indigenous to central and southern China. The trees can be tapped when they are about ten years of age; a process very like bleeding the rubber tree. Runnels are cut in the trunk of the tree and bark stripped from the smaller branches and the exuded sap collected. The process kills the tree top, but it sends up to six new shoots from the roots, which, in turn can be tapped in six years. Eventually the root stock is exhausted and the roots die. The tapping is carried out in the summer. Once collected the resin-like sap is strained, and then boiled to reduce the moisture content. At first it is white but slowly changes to yellow and then black as it oxidises.

Lacquer possesses several characteristics which made it highly prized by the Chinese. The first is that it is extremely water resistant. In Korea, Han Dynasty tombs were submerged beneath water for centuries, but the lacquered items were extracted in a near-perfect condition. As lacquer was easily applied it was often used purely as a preservative over wooden utensils or metal or leather items to reduce corrosion.

This first use of lacquer was probably as a preservative, but when this occurred is lost in the mists of time. The first known use of lacquer was initially used for writing on bamboo tablets. It was then used in the production of food utensils: black with red interiors. Even in China before unification, in the tenth century B.C., the use of lacquer had extended to carriages, harnesses and bows. Decoration of the lacquered items began at this time also. Already the functional value of the technique was wedded to an artistic one. Gold decoration was applied. Doubtless the subtleties of colouring the substance was well understood by this.
Major Periods in Chinese History.

3,500 B.C. Bronze Age begins.
722-481 Spring and Autumn Period: Confucius.
400 B.C. Iron Age begins.
403-221 Warring States Period: 7 major states.
221 B.C. Ch'in forms the first Chinese Empire.
206 B.C. - 220 A.D. Han Dynasties.
220 A.D. - 277 A.D. Three Kingdoms.
420 A.D. - 588 A.D. Dark Age.
589 - 618 A.D. Sui Dynasty.
618 - 906 A.D. T'ang Dynasty.
927 - 1126 A.D. Sung Dynasty.
1280 - 1368 A.D. Yuan Dynasty: Marco Polo and the reign of the Mongols.
1368 - 1644 A.D. Ming Dynasty.
1644 - 1911 A.D. Ch'ing Dynasty: C18th climax.
time Cinnabar will tint the resin to the characteristic red of the carved lacquer, iron oxide will produce the ebony black. The lacquer producers were also to delight in deep blues, yellows, and greens, as their skills increased.

Whilst lacquer can be applied to any surface, and in fact has been, in modern times at least the most common practise is to apply it to a wooden base—mostly pine. Many successive applications of lacquer are required, including one of hempen or paper. Each layer requires twenty-four hours to harden. Traditionally the lacquered items were placed in caves over-night. The damp atmosphere of the caves provided optimum conditions for setting the lacquer surface. A minimum of eighteen layers is required; each one must be ground smooth, and each one is of a finer composition than its predecessor. One layer is of lacquer mixed with clay, to which hempen or paper is applied and then covered with a paste of lacquer and flour. This is smoothed and more layers of lacquer added. The later coats are each polished. This surface may then be decorated in a variety of ways. Of which more will be said shortly.

The production of carved lacquer is even more time consuming. Generally copper is used as the base, although sometimes a wooden core will be used. From eighty to one hundred and fifty layers of lacquer are applied. Sometimes these will be of different colours. Then subsequent carving of the intricate designs will penetrate to another colour to emphasise the detail of the design. The final product must then be burnished; a process that may take over a year to produce a single article.

The final product is not only a testimony to Chinese patience; but is an extraordinarily tough item; able to resist not only water, but acids, alkalis, alcohol and temperatures up to 160 degrees Farenheit (70 degrees Celcius)

By the time China was united for the first time under Chin Shih Huang the art of lacquering was in full flower. The peace and security that resulted from this emperor’s reign, and the succeeding Han Dynasty encouraged the spread of the art throughout China, and overseas, wherever Chinese influence was felt. As with a great many other crafts diversification and experimentation went hand in hand with this expansion and early in the Han period musical instruments and even buildings were lacquered. Paper pots have been found from this period that have been lacquered. At this time, the painting of lacquered utensils was introduced, and the subject matter doubtless reflected those of the artists.
working on other mediums, although no examples exist.

Experimentation did not cease and by the Tang dynasty in the seventh century A.D. lacquer was frequently in-vogue. This process was bought to new heights in the fourteenth century. The Ming craftsmen specialised in bold designs of inlaid gold, silver and mother of pearl, on items that included cups and cup-stands, trays, boxes and bowls. Towards the end of the Ming period there was a decline in the quality of lacquer, both from an industrial and an artistic point of view. During the seventeenth century, under Emperor K‘ang Hsi revived the industry, and it was reported as flourishing by Jesuit missionaries when they arrived. Technical advances were made in the industry, but stereotyping and formalism also entered the product. This revival was probably sustained by a growing export trade to the West, just developing.

Lacquerware has always fascinated peoples from outside China, and has been one of China’s most regular exports from very early times. Whilst some lacquer almost certainly found its way to Rome, during Han times, along the Old Silk Road, the first European known to have seen, and appreciated lacquer, was the Venetian traveller, Marco Polo, who saw it when he sojourned at the court of the Emperor Kublai Khan, in the thirteenth century. The Portuguese and Spanish were introduced to lacquerware in the sixteenth century, followed by the Dutch in the seventeenth century and the English and French in the eighteenth century. Exports to Europe fed a craze for Chinoiserie and some quite extensive collections exist in Europe. One such collection was built-up by the late King of Sweden, and includes many pieces believed to date back to the Ming period. Earl Spencer, Princess Dianna’s father, also has a large collection which includes the screen ordered by K‘ang Hsi for the Emperor Leopold I.

During the Sung period, around the tenth century the lacquer industry was centralised at Ch’uan-Chou in Fujien Province. From this centre lacquerware was exported to Java, India, Persia, Japan and even Mecca. This fact is of considerable interest, for Fujien remains, to this day an important centre for the production and export of lacquerware. Large amounts are produced in small factories for export to the west. Basically the same techniques are used to-day as were employed 3,000 years ago; and which have already been outlined.

The examples of traditional Chinese Lacquer that I have here have three
forms of decoration. The first is the golden embossed finish achieved by moulding the design in lacquer and applying it to the finished product. The effect can be fairly heavy handed, or quite graceful as in the delicate tracery on the bowl and pot. The second style of decoration is the application of a silver transfer to the finished item. The origins of this style seem to hark back to the silver inlays of centuries ago. A similar effect is achieved at far less cost and labour.

The third decorative approach is that of painting a design onto the lacquered surface. There are a tremendous range of motives available ranging from sinuous dragons abstract, curling patterns at simple floral motives. The depiction of the landscape has been a common theme in Chinese art, and since the Tang period has been regarded as a worthy subject in its own right. As painting on lacquer also began at this time it is not too fanciful to trace the tradition represented by the landscapes on these items back to the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. The landscape portrayed is that of Fujian province. This is one of the most picturesque regions of China: wooded hills, soaring limestone structures, winding streams threading through orchards and tea gardens and terraced rice fields are characteristic.

As thousands of these ‘paintings’ have passed through my hands I have been fascinated by their variety within a very tight stylistic regime. Most are truly traditional, some have been quite perfunctory in their execution, but occasionally a really distinctive one has appeared. The tray with its sea-scape executed almost entirely in black was one such discovery. Another was the high power transmission line striding across a traditional Fujian landscape; or in the same vein, a modern factory nestled in the valley where normally only pergodas have a place.

The symbolism of the motives is as ancient as the craft itself: the floral motives of the silver applique patterns represent love and affection. The cherry blossom has the additional association of long levity. The three fish amongst aquatic weeds, as depicted in all the bowls symbolise contentment and natural harmony.

Of course the Chinese have not had a monopoly on the production of lacquered goods. The Japanese began cultivating the Rhus Vernicifera in the sixth century A.D. They have been able to develop their own distinctive industry. The traditional lacquer music box is the best-known version of Japanese lacquer in
Australia. Like its Chinese counterpart, it consists of a wooden core, lacquered and decorated. Many, in fact, then have that decoration lacquered over to provide a superbly smooth finish. Whilst the Chinese continue to produce completely traditional product, the Japanese have introduced modern industrial techniques into the industry, and created a wide range of modern designs geared to the Western markets. Stylish and smart, these products lack the durability that has traditionally made lacquerware such a sort after, and prized product.

Burma and India also produce lacquered goods. Usually the form is made from papier-mache, lacquered with shellac, made from a secretion of the insect Coccus lac dissolved in alcohol. Characteristically, these small boxes, eggs, bracelets etc are brightly decorated with floral or animal designs.

The European craze for lacquer, from the eighteenth century led European craftsmen to seek local substitutes and to produce imitation lines. The Juniper tree was found to produce a good lacquer substitute, and some very superior "Japanning" was the result, although the Juniper lacquer is less durable than the Chinese. Carriages, and even whole rooms were lacquered. To-day the Italian lacquer industry still produces a wide range of lines. Modern plastics also often mimic the lustrous finish of the traditional lacquer.

In the West we think of the continuous tradition of Royal Doulton, or Wedgwood as epitomizing lasting cultural values; in lacquerware we see a tradition in excess of two thousand years doing just that.

C Valerie Campbell.