

Tsuitate, a Japanese screen

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Abstract

The Musée des Arts Décoratifs Paris conserves a masterpiece of Japanese art bought during the Universal Exhibition of Paris in 1878: a screen, called *tsuitate* in Japanese (inv. no. A 14.1-16), probably built with persimmon wood (*Diospyros kaki*), and displaying sixteen plates of metal samples (figure 1). The frame of the screen was in a bad condition: some of the elements were missing while others were broken. There were several ways to study and restore the frame in order to set the plates in place again. The proposed solutions consisted of either performing an archeological reconstitu-

tion to keep the original pieces of the frame, or rebuilding a new frame with traditional Japanese joinery. Being able to find a compromise between conservation and restoration of this masterpiece was a great opportunity.

Introduction

The Musée des Arts Décoratifs (MAD) is a private non-profit organization (governed by the law of 1901 on associations). The Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs (UCAD), the former name of MAD, was founded in 1882 by the merger of a library and a collection of art objects collected by industrialists

Figure 1 Japanese screen, *tsuitate*, inv. no. A 14.1-16 (h 110 x w 100 cm, the plates ca. 18 x 18 cm each). After treatment.





Figure 2 Fragments of the screen.



and connoisseurs. The museum was installed in the Louvre in 1905. The UCAD was founded on the idea of art diffusion and developing links between industry and culture, design and production. Art objects were acquired through purchases, gifts, bequests, and surrender in lieu of payment, often to increase the collection. The Japanese delegation exhibited thousands of art objects during the Universal Exhibition in 1878 and the UCAD bought some of them during this exhibition. The screen entered the collection on November 12, 1878.

The screen

In 2001, several wooden pieces of an unidentified object were discovered in the furniture conservation workshop (figure 2). The pieces resembled a frame made with a non-domestic wood, with some pieces missing. The wood had a very nice pattern with blackish lines, and a joint that looked like a mitered gooseneck tenon. The fragments were kept in the workshop awaiting a conservation treatment. In 2014, the director of the museum asked me to build a frame to display Japanese metal plates in a screen. After checking the database, the unidentified wooden pieces were revealed to come from the Japanese screen at the 1878 Universal Exhibition.

During my research on the screen, very little information was found. In the old paper data file an annotation dated August 1970 specified that the 'plates were disassembled from the frame and stored in a box made of white wood'. An 'olive-wood screen' composed of sixteen 'bronze' plates decorated and covered with enamels and precious metals bore the inventory number A 14 1 ('A' for Achat in French = purchase). This screen was reproduced in the *Revue des arts décoratifs* in 1882-1883, and described as 'metal chasing and inlay samples by Yoshida of Kyoto' (figure 3). The screen was made for the Universal Exhibition in 1878 in order to demonstrate the extraordinary smithing skills of Japanese craftsmen to European visitors.

In a description in the same magazine, the author stated: 'car celles-ci mobiles dans leur cadre de bois, sont fréquemment déplacées' ('because these [plates] are interchangeable in their wooden frame, they are often moved'). In the MAD database we can read a description which explains that the wooden frame was broken and lost. Nobody has seen the screen complete ever since.

Conservation approach

The frame of the screen was a ruin. Several approaches could be chosen to rebuild the frame. In 2016, on the occasion of a symposium in Kyoto, it was time to share knowledge to find a compromise of conservation and restoration for this masterpiece of Japanese craftsmanship. We needed to get together to find the most appropriate materials and skills to restore its entirety.

This object was made to demonstrate the skills of nineteenth-century Japanese craftsmen. The history of the relationship between Japan and France (and Europe) is long-standing. Knowledge, technical innovation, culture were spread through the universal exhibitions.

As it was written in the *Revue des arts décoratifs*, upon purchasing the Japanese screen in 1878, the museum acquired samples of *shibuichi* (typical Japanese copper and silver alloy artefacts) that were of highest interest. When the Japanese screen entered the collection of the UCAD, its status changed, and the object was transformed into a work of art. The screen became national and inalienable heritage. Today in France, only graduate conservators should take care of national heritage.

Condition

Two small decorated panels indicated the frontside of the screen. Many pieces of wood were lost: the left post and foot, the lower rail, and the small piece between the two lower panels (figure 4). All of the inner frame that joined the gaps between the plates of metal was lost. Some pieces of wood were broken

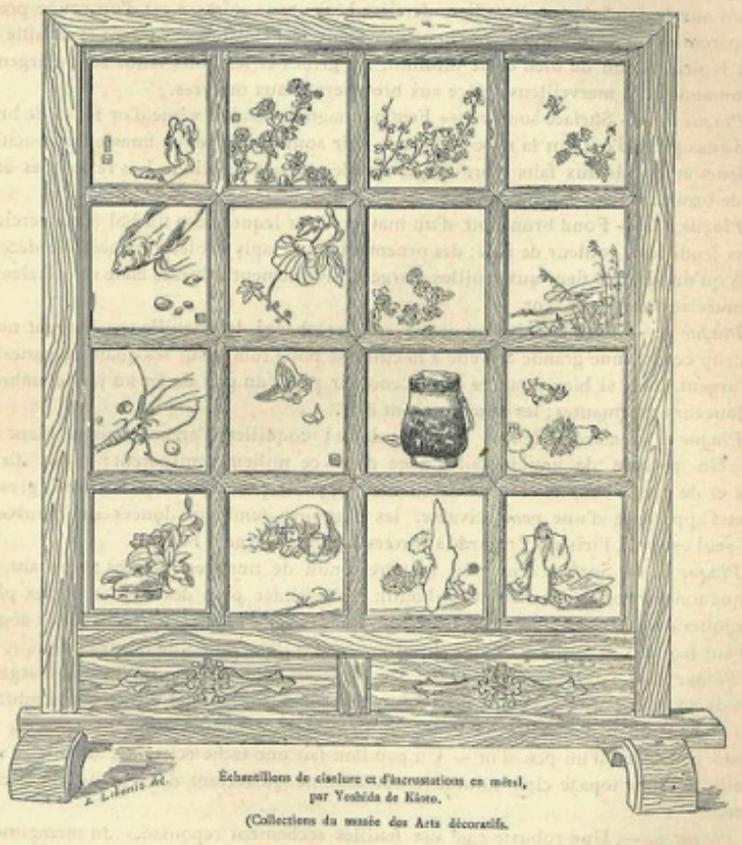


Figure 3 Extract of the *Revue des arts décoratifs* (p. 357), showing the screen in entirety.

around the joint on the bottom of the right post and the top of the right corner. The metal plates were in good condition except for some areas of metal tarnishing.

Treatment

This paper enables us to develop the western point of view on conservation. It is based on the theory

Figure 4 Front view of the screen in 2016.



Figure 5 Detail of the screen showing the wood pattern.

of conservation. We may choose between different conservation options. Conservation actors (curator, conservator, etc.) need to share their points of view before any operation of conservation. In this case, because we had such sources of information as the article and the original pieces of wood, the collections department and the curatorial department decided to start the conservation of this screen by the reconstruction of the frame. The choice of wood was one of the main dilemmas. Using a different species of wood would differentiate the original parts from the new parts. This was one option. Furthermore, the structure can't be made with a veneered wood because the result will not be appropriate considering the complexity of the frame. But the unity of displayed objects in a museum of decorative arts such as the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris oriented the choice of the wood. The appearance, the grain and the stripes of the new wood must match with the original wood. This is the reason why we would choose to use of a wood of the same species with the same appearance. Which kind of wood should we use?

In the *Revue des arts décoratifs*, Josse, the author, mistook the exotic wood for olivewood (*Olea* spp.). Indeed, the frame was probably made in Japan, and it was certainly made by a craftsman using a precious wood appropriate for an object such as this. Persimmon wood, *Diospyros kaki*, looks like the one used for the frame (figure 5). Its colour, its pattern, and its non-finished matte surface fit well with the shades of the patinated metal plates. Persimmon wood was often used for valuable objects. If we use the same wood for the restoration, there may be a faulty interpretation of the material history of the screen. In order to differentiate the new parts, we would mark them. The original piece of wood must absolutely be kept in place. The new pieces of wood must fit perfectly in the original assembly, without any pieces cut out. The conservation report will automatically accompany the object in the collection.

In the top right corner (figure 6) we faced a problem: for a museum visitor, the lost part is seen as a figurative anomaly. Consequently, the restoration of the missing part should stay in the background and have a lower level of color or should be made



Figure 6 Detail of the broken top right corner joint.



Figure 7 1:2 scale model made with cherrywood.

in a neutral color. The conservator's work should not consist of the creation of a new work of art, but instead focus on decreasing the appearance of defects to recover a unity of interpretation. When restoring the functional character of the screen, we had to keep in mind to allow for the patinated metal plates to be taken out, too. Consequently, the panel in the back should not be sealed to the frame. I built a scale model (figure 7) of the *tsuitate* to bring to Japan and I brought some pictures of the wood. During the Kyoto symposium in 2016 I met different wood specialists, scientists, *sashimono yasan* (a woodworker specialized in wooden furniture and objects without any nails or screws), and wood merchants. We had many discussions around the *tsuitate* with all those specialists. I visited the workplace of Mr. Taizuke Murao, a wood merchant, with Dr. Mechtild Mertz, Asian wood specialist and translator of ideas for the project. We saw lots of *kaki* wood planks, but the grain didn't correspond to our frame. It was very impressive! Murao-san sells very high-quality wood for craftsmen. He confirmed that the wood of the screen is black *kaki*, *kurogaki*. It is very difficult to find *kaki* wood with this type of black-striped pattern because only 2% of *kaki* trees are black. When he saw the model I brought, he asked me: 'Who made this?' He was impressed, and therefore he agreed to sell me some wood. It was like an exam; Murao-san chooses his customers!

He promised to find some boards for the reconstruction of the missing parts, and he told me that it would cost me an arm and a leg. The more black, the more expensive it would be. At the same time, I asked Mr. Hiroaki Usui, one of the cabinetmakers we met, if he wanted to come to Paris to participate in a workshop.

Back in France, we applied to the Fondation franco-japonaise Sasakawa Project Support program to invite the craftsmen to Paris. In May 2017, Murao-san found the right *kaki* wood. The tree had been

cut down twenty-five years earlier and was well seasoned. The 'Friends of the MAD' gave money to buy two boards of the *kaki*, and *hinoki* (*Chamaecyparis obtusa*) for the backboard of the frame.

The Sasakawa foundation accepted our project. Financially supported, the two Japanese craftsmen Usui-san, CEO of Kuroda Kobo, and his assistant Choi-san came to Paris in June 2018 to share their expertise for the project. Usui-san and Choi-san are two craftsmen from Otsū city with a huge range of skills in traditional woodworking. Together with Dr. Mechtild Mertz we discussed every detail of the *tsuitate*. Dr. Mertz made an important contribution to this project. Together we found solutions for how to implement the traditional techniques and materials in the conservation and reconstruction of the screen.

We began the technical work first with a long observation of the original pieces of the *tsuitate*. Together we determined how to cut the very expensive wood. We planned how to make the *kidori*; this step of cutting the wood is very important because this first sawing will determine the best, or the chosen surface, of the board that will be visible. Hiroaki-san showed me how to draw and cut the famous Japanese joints for this job. We did some samples of joints such as the famous *kamatsugi* joint, a gooseneck tenon-and-mortise. During this journey, every detail of the conservation was checked together. We found a great combination between western and Japanese solutions to rebuild the screen.

After the training, I began the work alone but I kept in my mind the recommendations of the craftsmen on every step of the work. I shaped the new pieces of wood as the left post and the long lower rail. The second foot was cut out and carved to match the original and the moldings were shaped.

One of the most important aspects of the restoration was the possibility of dismantling some parts of the *tsuitate*. For example, the tenon of posts going through the lower rail and legs was held in place as

is done the traditional way in Japan, a long tenon just locked with a key. I discovered the same kind of joint on several *tsuitate* in Japan.

Under UV light we could see that some joints of the outer framework were glued with protein glue. The left top corner *kamatsugi* joint was drawn on the new *kaki* post and cut with traditional Japanese saws and chisels to fit with the tenon without anything cut out from the original part.

I was cautious in this work because the original elements were deformed and twisted. The cutting of the wood integrated the defects of the *kaki* because it gave some surprises such as knots and cracks. Hiroaki-san told me about the problem of splitting during the cutting of the wood. The hardness or density is similar to a dense walnut with more areas of cross grain.

For the inner framework I did not use solid *kaki* because this wood twists too much. Solid European walnut was used and veneered with a thick layer of *kaki*. All the pieces were jointed with a range of small tenon-and-mortises (figure 8).

To finish the work, I redid a panel as a *fusuma*, a light softwood panel made with a latticework covered on each side with a thin panel of *hinoki* (figure 9). All the surface of the redone wood was planed with



Figure 9 Back view of the screen.

a smoothing plane and polished with horsetail to give a very nice shiny surface, then brushed with a vegetal Japanese brush. The original wood surface was simply cleaned with an aqueous buffered solution and brushed after.

During 2018, Mrs. Catherine Didelot, metals conservator at MAD, took care of the metal plates. They were analyzed by the laboratory of the C2RME, the

Figure 8 The screen after completion.



Center for Research and Restoration of Museums of France. The different steps of analysis of the alloyed metal consisted of X-ray photography, microscopy, and hirox to determine the process of manufacturing. The metal plates were then installed into each small set-up frame and held in place with two splints of bamboo. A piece of corrosion-preventive textile was placed between the metal and the backboard.

Conclusion

The restoration of this screen is a true and global interpretation of this work of art. The frame was restored to understand the original purpose of the screen, particularly its display function. Based on the existing historical information, such as the nineteenth-century print and the conserved parts of the *tsuitate*, the curator, the head of collections department and I decided to rebuild the frame for the metal plates to be installed in. The new wooden parts were stamped with the date of 2018 to distinguish them from the original.

As a conservator we stand between the scientists and the craftsman. We have to win everyone's trust. The Japanese people did not talk much at the beginning. But such undertaking cannot be done without the willingness to share knowledge. The most difficult aspect was time, because everything takes more time in Japan, and I was careful not shake up their habits.

We found a compromise between conservation and craft, and the result was very close to the print in the *Revue*, but now with the added colors of the wood and metal plates. I was very proud that we were able to save and conserve such a beautiful and important piece of art from the MAD.

I thank all the actors of this great human project, and through this work I pay tribute to our regretted friend Xavier Bonnet, who was as passionate as me.

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Photo credits

- Figures 1, 8, 9: MAD Paris/Christophe Dellière.
- Figures 2, 4-7: author.