

CHAPTER VI.

LACQUER.

Lacquer has furnished a prized material for one of the earliest industrial arts of the Chinese, but we have no exact records of its origin, nor of the steps of its development from being a mere preservative coating for woodwork to its culminating point as a medium for artistic work of the highest order. Lacquer is not like our copal varnish, an artificial mixture of resin, fatty oils and turpentine, but in reality a ready-made product of nature. It is derived mainly from the *Rhus vernicifera*, D.C., the lac tree or *ch'i shu* of the Chinese, which is cultivated throughout Central and Southern China for the purpose. This tree, when the bark is cut or scored with a pointed bamboo style, exudes a white resinous sap, which becomes rapidly black on exposure to the air. The sap is drawn from the tree during the summer at night, collected in shells, and brought to market in a semi-fluid state, or dried into cakes. The raw lac, after pieces of bark and other accidental impurities have been removed by straining, is ground for some time to crush its grain and give it a more uniform liquidity. It is then pressed through hempen cloth and is a viscid evenly flowing liquid ready for the lacquerer's brush.

There are three processes in the manufacture of lacquer. The *first* is the preparation and coloration of the lac; the *second*, its application by spatula and brush in successive layers, never less than three, nor more than eighteen, waiting for each layer to dry before the next is put on; the *third*, the decoration of the lacquered surface with artistic designs painted with the brush, worked in sensible relief, or carved and modelled in the soft ground before it has cooled. Wood is the usual basis of lacquered

specimens from this source in the possession of the Vicomte de Semallé were declared to be worthy to figure in the best Japanese collection. They were little cups of graceful lobed outline, light in weight and delicately modelled; one was peacock blue shot with tones of green, iridescent and intense as an enamel; another of the palest pink relieved by touches of coral red, described as an unrivalled combination of soft tints; another of the purest and deepest black, the beautiful black so appreciated in Japan; a fourth, in the same collection, of avanturine lac, with a lotus delicately incrustated in gold and silver was characterised as a marvel of taste and finish.

In some cases the ground of cinnabar lac is covered with several shades of brown applied in even layers, and the crust while still warm is carved with a sharp knife, with the result that the several layers of colour are distinctly seen in the finished work. The Emperor Ch'ien Lung had a series of pictures carved in this style, in 1766, with battle scenes commemorating the victories of his generals in Eastern Turkistan, some of which have found their way to European collections. Their form is similar to that of the Chinese Pietra Dura Picture with background in diaper of cinnabar lac in the museum which is illustrated in Fig. 91. The figures are carved in white jade, the temple, trees, and other details in variously coloured jade, malachite, and imitation lapis lazuli. The motive is a Taoist scene representing the approach of a pilgrim to the Taoist paradise. The divinity Shou Lao is standing under a pine, on the left, holding a *ju-i* sceptre, his attendants, in procession, carrying a staff with scroll tied to it, a peach as the fruit of life, a pilgrim's gourd, and the box of good gifts held by two acolytes in the rear—the genii of union and harmony. Another acolyte on the bank of the "isles of the blessed" eagerly awaits the arrival of a boat laden with flowers and jewelled fruit, the offerings of the female divinity Hsi Wang Mu.

A richly decorated box with cover of carved red lac inlaid with variously coloured stones which show out effectively on the

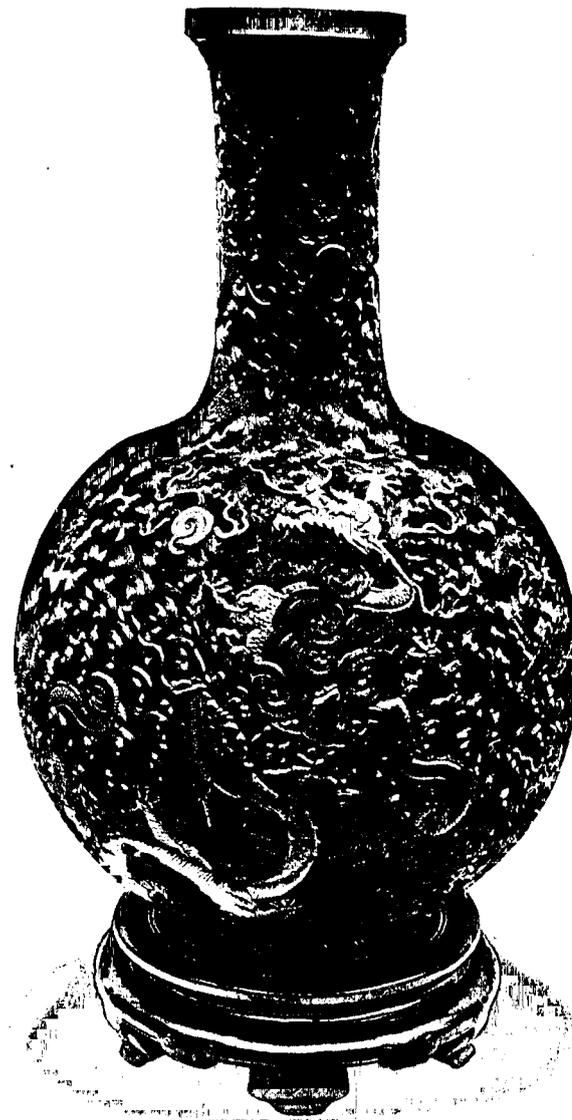


FIG. 90.—VASE (ONE OF A PAIR) OF CARVED RED PEKING LACQUER.
From the Summer Palace. Decorated with Nine Imperial Dragons.
No. 10-83.

H. 3 ft. 1½ in., D. 23½ in.



FIG. 91.—PIETRA DURA PICTURE OF THE TAOIST PARADISE.
Diapered Ground of Cinnabar Lac incrustated with Jade, Malachite, and
Lapis Lazuli.
No. 5559-01.

H. 2 ft. 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ in., W. 3 ft. 7 in.



FIG. 1.—BAS RELIEF. HAN DYNASTY.
Frontispiece (see page 42).

2½ ft. × 2 ft.

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