

A unique small scale Venetian red lacquer bureau cabinet, decorated throughout with *Chinoiserie* scenes in gold and silver depicting exotic birds, flowers, foliage and figures in a landscape with pagodas and other architectural structures, in three parts, the upper section with an arched moulded cornice above a conforming mirrored door opening to an interior fitted with shelves, the mirror engraved with a figure of Neptune and set into a bevelled frame, the bureau section with a pull-out candle slide on each side and with a hinged fall-front enclosing a fitted interior with pigeon-holes and drawers, the lower section with three drawers, resting on bun feet.

Black ink inscriptions on the beck: FB: N°3.

After a George I English Example. Venice 1720 Circa

Height: 65,35 in. (166 cm)

Width: 22,45 in. (57,5 cm)

Depth: 14,17 in. (36 cm)

Condition: decoration refreshed

Comparative Example:

- A very similar bureau cabinet is illustrated in Ralph Edwards and Percy Macquoid, *The Dictionary of English Furniture*, rev. ed. 3 vols, p.135, fig.26, which is given a provenance of Mrs David Gubbay.
- Sotheby's, Important English Furniture, The property of a European Princely Family, 23th November 2005, lot 38A
- For the similar painted decoration: Saul Levy, *Lacche Veneziane settecentesche*, Vol.I, Gorlich 1967, Tav. 222-223

The present bureau cabinet is a fine example of furniture in japanned lacquer popular throughout Europe from the mid-seventeenth century onwards. Although some details such as the bun feet might suggest an English or Dutch provenance, the scale, the kind of wood used, the quality of the lacquer and the style of the decoration suggest that this might in fact be a piece made in Venice (compare the decorations of the present bureau cabinet with the decorations of a Venetian lacquer table in S. Levy, op. cit., tab. 222-23). An element further confirming a Venetian provenance is the engraved mirror. Mirrors such as the present one, produced using mostly mercury, and enriched with engraved decorations, are typical of eighteenth-century Venice.

Chinese lacquer imported to Europe in the seventeenth century caused a sensation and served as the source of inspiration for an even greater fashion, an art of creative

imitation known as japanning, which was by no means a faithful copying, but a Chinese inspired version of painting in the oriental manner. Using various background colours as overall decoration, wonderful chinoiserie forms were superimposed in gloriously fanciful, exotic and often slightly humorous forms in gold, and sometimes with other colouring.

Venice was one of the most important centres for lacquerwork throughout the eighteenth century. Being a major cultural and economic hub, the city had both the financial and artistic resources to produce some of the most lavish and expressive japanned pieces in Europe, and trade in Venetian lacquer was very active as early as the mid 1600s. Initially, as with most European lacquer manufacturers, Venetian *laccatori* aimed at imitating oriental lacquer by using a local recipe of varnish that had been perfected by Father Marco Coronelli (1659–1702), the official cosmographer of La Serenissima. Differences from other European lacquer manufacturers' formulas included, among others, colouring and the thickness of the varnish. Whereas *laccatori* in other parts of Italy and Europe tended to work with fixed colour palettes and a limited number of forms and designs, their Venetian contemporaries made pieces in a wide range of hues and shapes, even using mixed-techniques that sometimes resulted in the creation of new legitimate art forms such as *lacca povera*, which makes pieces in Venetian lacca some of the finest and most original ever produced.

The inventiveness of Venetian *laccatori* is clearly reflected in the present bureau cabinet. Other than the decoration in the Chinese style, the overall shape of this piece attests to the dynamism and cross-cultural dialogues that characterised eighteenth century Venice. As mentioned before, some of the details suggest that the *bancalario*, or cabinetmaker, that produced the present bureau cabinet was very specifically referencing an Anglo-Dutch model. Yet, such continental appropriations are juxtaposed with a typically local element, the engraved mirror, another craft for which Venice was particularly renowned throughout Italy and Europe. Most unusual is the reduced scale, which makes this piece a unique example of the synthesis of European and Eastern influences with local tastes and practical constraints.