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Palanquin (norimono) with Tokugawa and Ichijo Crests

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Melissa Carr

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My name is Melissa Carr. I am a Conservator in private practice, and I specialize in the treatment of Asian lacquer, most particularly this object of Asian lacquer, this Japanese Palanquin, which is a wooden object coated in lacquer, decorated in gold and then ornamented with mounts and exquisite paintings.

Lacquer starts out as a tree sap. Urushiol, the lacquer, the resin component, they get it from a particular kind of tree, they tap it. It's kind of like maple syrup: they collect it in buckets; it's labor-intensive; there's not a lot of yield. The raw material is very expensive. The beauty of this stuff is that it's a polymer when it dries.

A polymer chemically is irreversible. The short version of that is, Asian lacquer isn't soluble in anything.

The one big enemy of lacquer is light, and if you get enough light exposure on lacquer, those bonds, those polymer bonds, start to break.

And light-damaged lacquer—and this is very light-damaged lacquer—becomes sensitive to finger oils. I don't mean just that you can leave your fingerprints on them, I mean that your fingerprints are etched on them.

The Palanquin, when I first saw it, looked like something the cat dragged in, because it had been handled and handled and handled, and all of that on that light-damaged surface. Every time you touched it, you added to it.

You'll never know unless you were there when it was done: how different this lacquer looks from what it looked like originally.

I am Yuriko Saito, I am Professor of Philosophy at Rhode Island School of Design, and my expertise is Aesthetics.

Today we are looking at a Palanquin, which is the transportation vehicle which was used during Edo Period, 1603 until 1868. And this was used for one person transportation for the upper class people. And it was carried by two men at the end, one at each end.

And my understanding is that this was used for transporting the bride-to-be from the bride's residence to the groom's residence.

It's very cramped. Obviously, it's for one person, but at the same time, the structure sort of mimics the, the residence for warrior class people at that time. For example, when you go to the castles and warrior class people residence, some of which are still open for public, then you see the, the real sort of gilded sort of opulence that is depicted, with this carrier. It's a...almost like a miniature of where they will be living. And, and also, at this time, nobility or warrior class ladies, they didn't really venture out, like a walk on the street. They were sort of hidden inside the innermost part of the, the, the residence. So essentially, the ladies were sort of like a object of longing.

So what's today's relevance? I, I do think that there are two sort of ways in which...that we can really appreciate this object. One is as a historical, historical object, which will tell us something about the life of the people who used this. And the other significance is purely aesthetics.