

# Japan Courts and Culture

## Large Text Labels



# Japan

This exhibition explores British royal encounters with Japan over a period of 350 years.

From samurai armour sent to James I in 1613, to a Coronation gift for HM The Queen in 1953, Japanese treasures have reached the British Court through trade, travel and treaties.

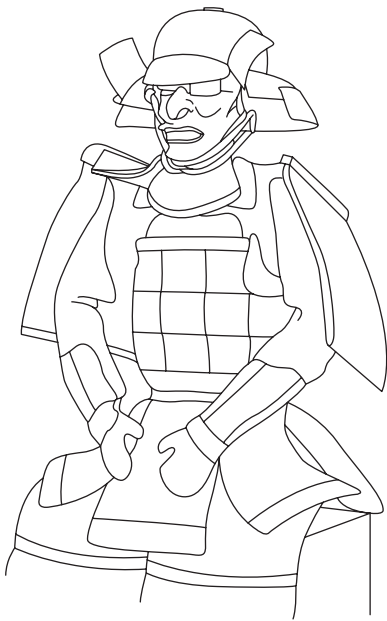
Each object on display reflects materials and techniques particular to Japan. Uniquely, many were commissioned or presented by the Japanese Imperial Family. Together, they reveal the ceremonial, diplomatic and artistic exchange linking the two courts of East and West.

# Trade

From the 1630s, Japan's military rulers (shōguns) isolated the country from the outside world to reduce foreign influence. For 200 years, the Dutch were the only Europeans permitted to trade directly with Japan. However, demand for exotic Japanese goods remained high in Europe, where the secrets of porcelain and lacquer manufacture were not yet known.

Despite these restrictions, royal collectors such as Mary II (1662–94) and George IV (1762–1830) acquired Japanese art via Dutch and Chinese traders, assembling some of the finest examples in Britain. Costly imports of furniture and porcelain became an established feature of royal interiors, representing luxury and cosmopolitan taste.

Japanese wares were also adapted and imitated by European artists, who freely imagined a distant and mysterious land.



## **Armour (dōmaru), 1580–1610**

Iwai Yozaemon

This samurai armour was the first diplomatic gift from Japan to Britain. It was sent to James I in 1613 with a document granting the British permission to trade with Japan. Silk lacing joins individual iron pieces to form a flexible and lightweight covering. An impressive and costly present, it is the work of Iwai Yozaemon, personal armourer to the ruling Tokugawa shōguns.

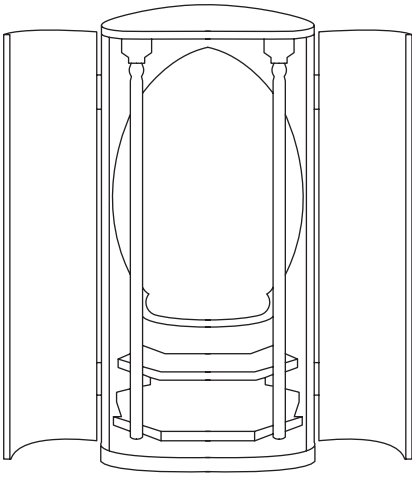
Iron, gilt-copper alloy, copper alloy (**shakudō**),  
lacquer, silk, horsehair, deerskin

Given to James I by Shōgun Tokugawa Hidetada, 1613

RCIN 71611



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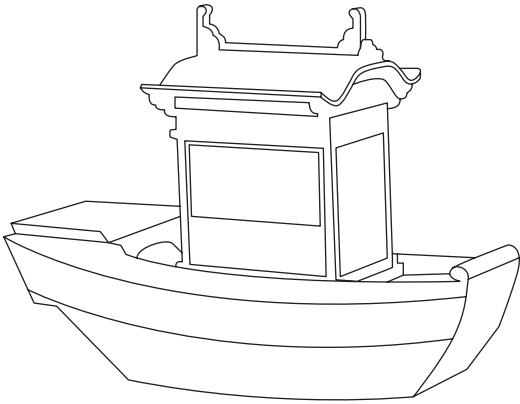
### **Portable shrine (zushi), 1700–1800**

Buddhism was introduced to Japan from mainland Asia in the sixth century and had a profound impact on all modes of cultural expression. This miniature shrine depicts Amida Buddha (**Amitabha**), the great saviour in Mahayana Buddhism. His right hand is raised in **abhaya mudra**, signifying reassurance and safety.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

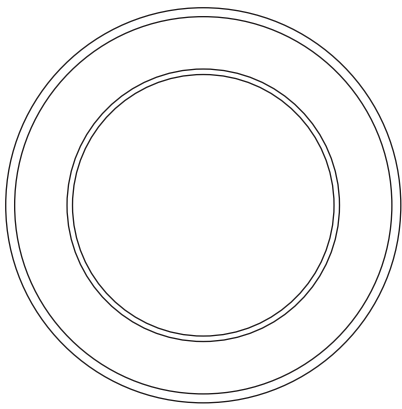
RCIN 26008



### **Model boat, 1750–1800**

Like many wares destined for Europe, this model combines Chinese and Japanese elements. The shape is based on a Chinese boat called a junk, but the decoration is Japanese gold lacquer, including chrysanthemums and dragons. The model is a table caster, fitted with a clockwork mechanism for the attractive (and mobile) display of condiments at meals.

Wood, black and gold lacquer  
Probably acquired by George IV  
RCIN 26011



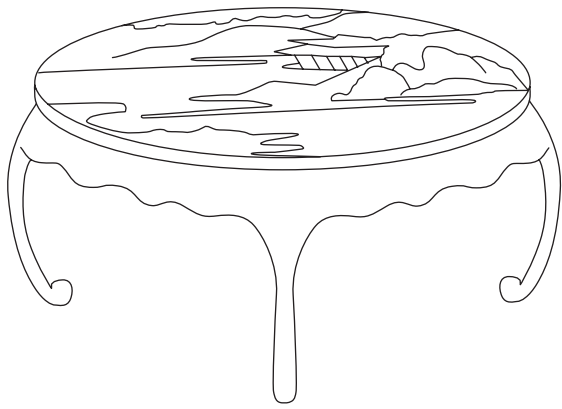
## **Dish, 1700–50**

Lacquer dishes were sometimes customised in Europe with coats of arms or with monograms to mark weddings. This dish has been painted with the cyphers of Charles I and Henrietta Maria. It was probably prepared for a Jacobite sympathiser and later bought by George IV, who was keenly interested in his Stuart predecessors. The shape mirrors European pewter plates.

Wood, black and gold lacquer

Probably purchased by George IV, 1820

RCIN 3281

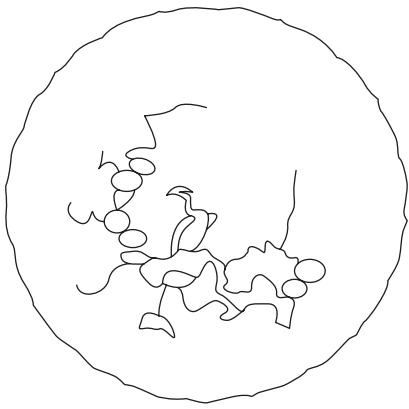


### **Table stand, 1750–1820**

Literary allusions appear frequently on Japanese decorative arts, including items intended for export. This stand shows Lake Biwa, where the court classic, the Tale of Genji (**Genji Monogatari**), was composed in the eleventh century. Written by the noblewoman Murasaki Shikibu (978–1016), the book's vivid description of courtly romance is considered the world's earliest novel.

Wood, black and gold lacquer  
Probably acquired by George IV  
RCIN 26012





**Dish, 1670–90**

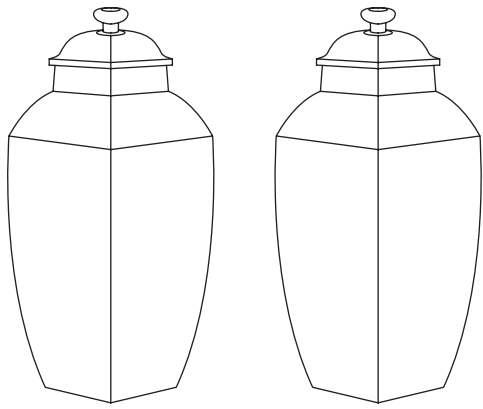
Arita

The secret of porcelain manufacture was not known in Japan until the early seventeenth century. The dazzling white on this dish exemplifies the milky body quickly achieved by kilns on the southern island of Kyūshū.

Porcelain, overglaze enamel

In the Royal Collection by 1927

RCIN 58821.1



## **Pair of hexagonal jars and covers, 1670–90**

Arita

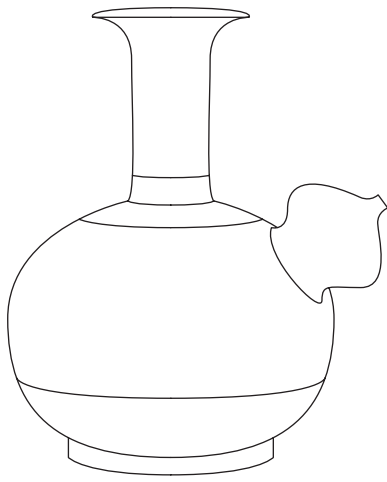
Jars in this form and style are known as ‘Hampton Court vases’ because Mary II displayed many vessels of this kind in the palace in the late seventeenth century. Rather than being thrown on a potter’s wheel, the hexagonal body of each jar was hand-fashioned in slabs and then painstakingly assembled.

Porcelain, overglaze enamel, overglaze gold

Acquired by Mary II

RCIN 1094





**Pouring vessel (kendi), 1670–90**

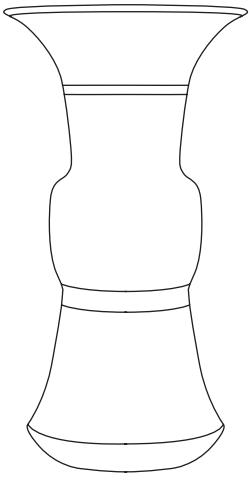
Arita

Early Japanese export porcelain imitated Chinese styles already popular in Europe. This piece takes the form of a vessel used for offerings and ritual handwashing. Bird and flower motifs allude to Chinese painting.

Porcelain, overglaze enamel

Acquired by Mary II

RCIN 1047.2



**Beaker-shaped vase, 1650–75**

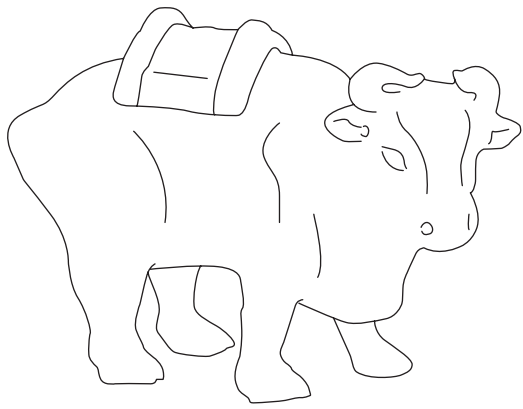
Arita

This vase imitates the shape and deep blue palette of wares from Ming China. Around the mouth are the ‘Three Friends of Winter’ – pine, bamboo and plum blossom – which flourish even in adverse conditions.

Porcelain, underglaze blue

Acquired by Mary II

RCIN I206.1



**Incense burner in the form of an ox, 1640–70**

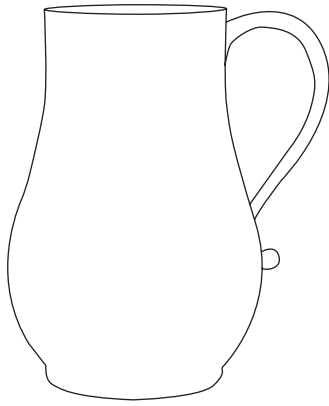
Arita

Holes in this ox's nostrils and ears allow incense to diffuse throughout a room. Its distinctive green-grey glaze, called celadon, originated in China. Dutch traders turned to Japan to supply these wares after civil war disrupted Chinese production in the seventeenth century.

Porcelain, celadon glaze

Acquired by Mary II

RCIN I170.1



**Tankard, 1670–90 (porcelain); 1700–30 (mounts)**

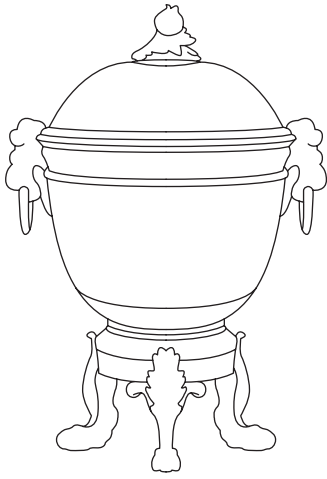
Arita

The unusual shape of this tankard was probably tailored for the export market, inspired by European silver versions. The large chrysanthemums on the exterior are associated with long life because they flower for an extended period.

Porcelain, gilt bronze

In the Royal Collection by 1927

RCIN 58879.1



## **Bowl and cover with French mounts, 1690–1730**

Arita

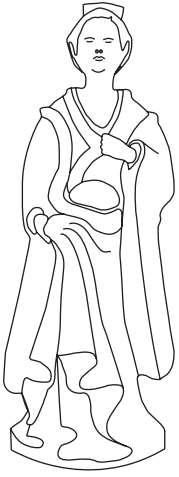
The gold pigments on this vibrantly coloured bowl would have been applied only after the hottest initial firings, since they could not withstand the same high temperatures as the enamels.

Porcelain with underglaze blue, overglaze enamel and gold, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 45262





## Female figure, 1690–1730

Arita

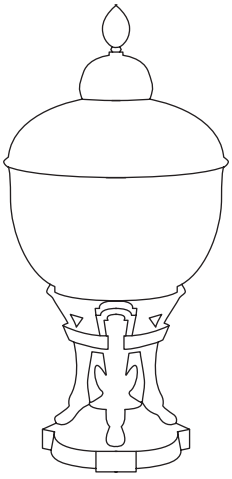
Beautiful women (**bijin**) were a popular theme in Japanese woodblock prints of the Edo period (1615–1868). These fashionable female figures were soon added to porcelain, creating an idealised view in Europe of the exotic Japanese woman with eye-catching kimono.

Porcelain, underglaze blue, overglaze enamel and gold

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 2402.2





## **Bowl with French mounts, 1690–1800**

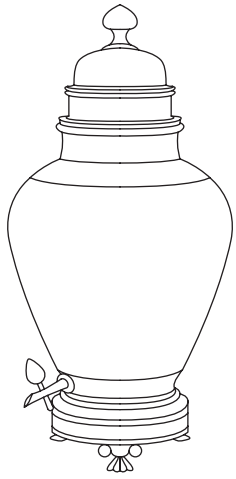
Arita

This bowl incorporates elements of a woodblock genre called **ukiyo-e** ('pictures of the floating world'). Such prints depicted music, food and sexual fulfilment as the best response to life's transience. The luxurious motifs of flowers and flowing kimono translate well onto porcelain due to the brilliance of the enamels.

Porcelain with underglaze blue, overglaze enamel  
and gold, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 28790.2



## Jar with French mounts, 1690–1720

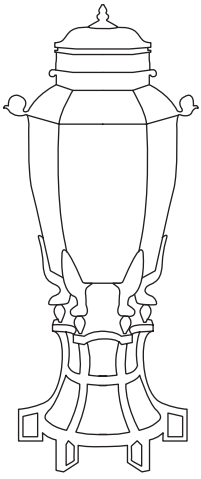
Arita

Japanese porcelain was often transformed in Europe by the addition of extravagant gilt-bronze mounts. These mounts were intended to harmonise with fashionable, gilded interiors and sometimes completely altered an object's function. This jar was adapted in France in the eighteenth century for use as a **pot-pourri**.

Porcelain with underglaze blue, overglaze enamel  
and gold, gilt bronze

Purchased by George IV, 1820

RCIN 39239



**Vase with cover, 1750–75**

Chelsea Porcelain Manufactory

Imitations of expensive Japanese wares were made soon after the secret of porcelain manufacture was discovered in Europe in 1709. This example was produced at the Chelsea porcelain factory, established in 1745. The nineteenth-century English mounts are European approximations of an imagined ‘Asian’ style.

Porcelain, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 2336.2



## **Pastille burner, 1680–1700**

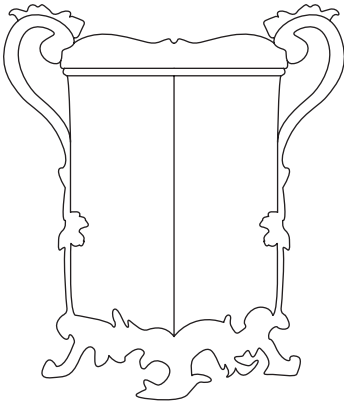
Arita

A symbol of longevity, the mythical tortoise (**minogame**) is said to have lived for 10,000 years. Models of this kind were imported to Europe by the Dutch East India Company as early as 1665.

Porcelain, brown and blue glaze, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 4961.1



## **Jar with French mounts, 1690–1720**

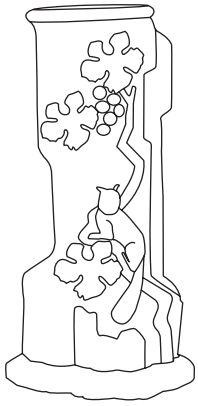
Arita

Carp (**koi**) in swirling water represent the strength and determination of the samurai. The motif stems from Chinese tradition, which tells of fish attempting to swim upstream at the Dragon Gate rapids, impeded by demons. The rippling form of the jar's French mounts mimics turbulent water.

Porcelain with underglaze blue, overglaze enamel  
and gold, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 12.1



## **Vase with French mounts, 1650–1700**

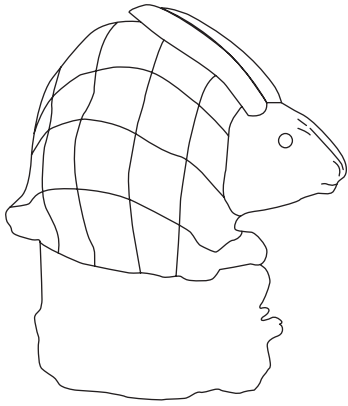
Arita

This vase presents a Chinese pun – in visual form. In Mandarin, the word for ‘squirrel’ sounds like ‘pine’, and the word for ‘grape’ sounds like ‘peach’. Pines and peaches are symbols of longevity, and so the combination of squirrels and grapevines here is a cleverly expressed wish for long life.

Porcelain, brown and blue glaze, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 3574.1



**Pastille burner in the form of a hare, 1680–1720**

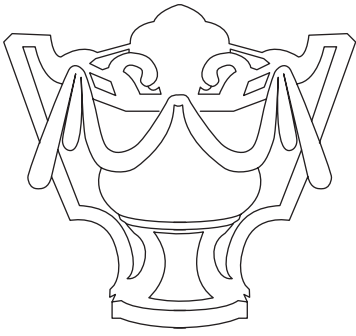
Arita

In China and Japan, hares were said to prepare the elixir of immortality. The theme of longevity is reinforced by the fungi growing on the rocks, which is found on Mount Hōrai, the mystical land of the Immortals.

Porcelain, underglaze blue, overglaze enamel and gold

Purchased by the Prince Regent (later George IV), 1818

RCIN 100967.1



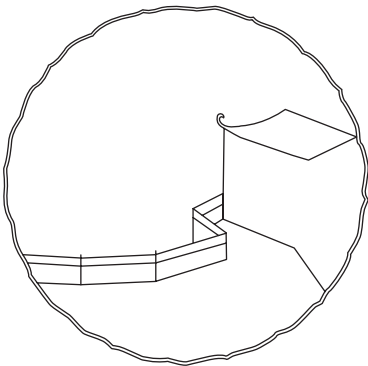
**Jar with French mounts, 1740–60**

Arita

Porcelain with underglaze blue, overglaze enamel, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 388.1



**Dish, 1670–90**

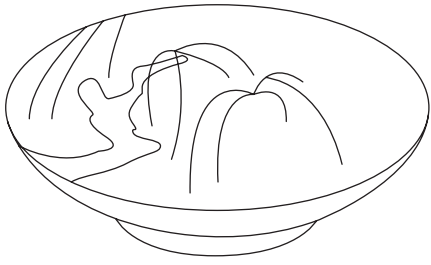
Arita

Porcelain, underglaze blue

Probably acquired by Queen Victoria

RCIN 58992.1





**Dish, 1800–60**

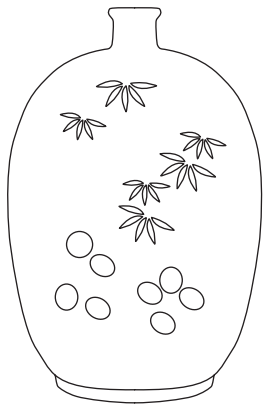
Nabeshima factory

This dish was made for the Nabeshima feudal lords who established their own closely guarded kiln near Arita in the late seventeenth century. They gave their wares as gifts to win favour with the shōgun and other nobility. Exclusive pieces with distinctive cobalt blue decoration were later used for diplomatic exchange.

Porcelain painted in underglaze blue

Probably given to Queen Victoria by Shōgun Tokugawa Iemochi, 1860

RCIN 2389.1



**Saké bottle, 1840–60**

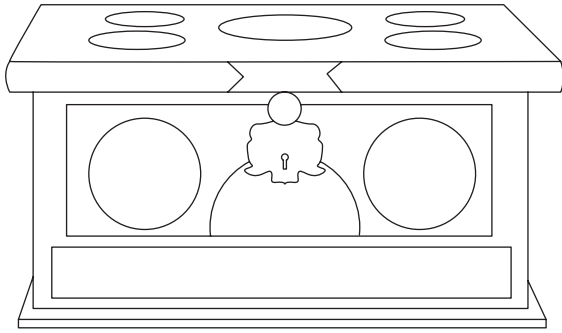
Arita

Traces of **saké** can still be found in this bottle. A painted design of the ‘Three Friends of Winter’ suggests loyalty even in difficult conditions – a suitable theme for a gift sent to Britain shortly after Japan resumed direct trade in the 1850s.

Porcelain with underglaze blue, white slip

Probably given to Queen Victoria by Shōgun Tokugawa Iemochi, 1860

RCIN 27526.1



## Chest, 1600–30

Chests of this type were among the earliest Japanese goods exported to Europe. The varnished decoration, called **urushi**, is made from the sap of the lacquer tree native to East Asia, inlaid with thick pieces of mother-of-pearl.

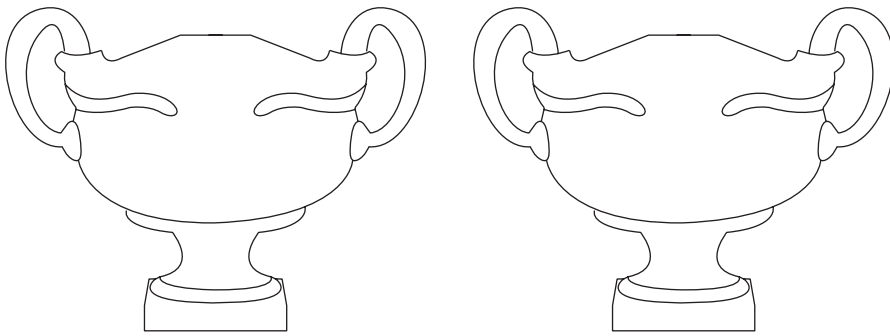
Partly ebonized wood; black, gold and red lacquer;  
mother-of-pearl, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 39244



5



### **Pair of bowls with French mounts**

1680–1720 (lacquer); 1750–75 (mounts)

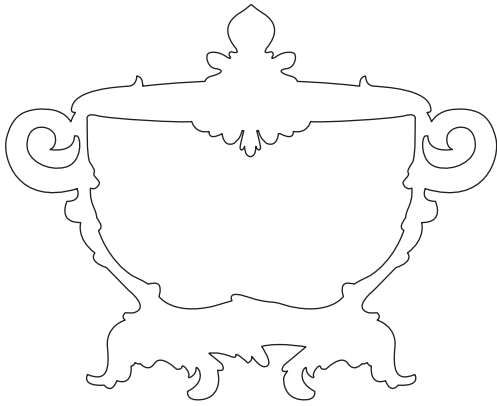
Lotus plants represent the Buddha's seat of meditation, offering enlightenment amid the swirling mist. Symbols of longevity include cranes, evergreen pines and an ancient tortoise. The original wooden handles have been replaced by gilt-bronze mounts of Bacchus, the Greco-Roman god of wine and pleasure.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, gilt bronze

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 3154





### **Bowl and cover with French mounts**

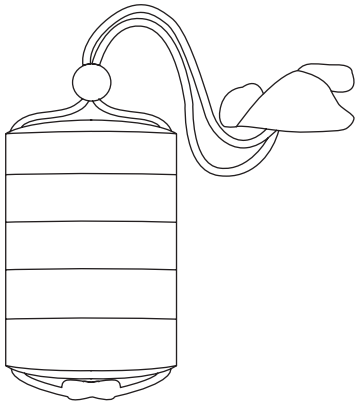
1680–1720 (lacquer); 1740–1860 (mounts)

Originally a rice bowl, this magnificent lacquer vessel is decorated with stylised chrysanthemums. The plant was first used in Japan for medicinal purposes and quickly became a symbol of purity and long life.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, gilt bronze

Probably purchased by George IV

RCIN 3152



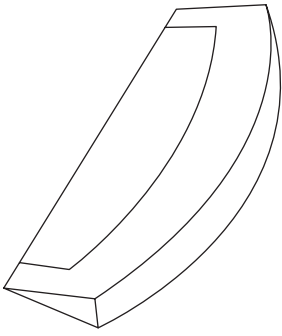
### **Inrō with netsuke, 1800–1900**

**Inrō** were worn suspended from the waist sash of a man's kimono. Originally used as containers for medicine and seals, they also offered an opportunity for fashionable self-expression. The rat on this **inrō**'s toggle is the first animal in the East Asian zodiac calendar.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, amber, silk

Given as a wedding present to the Duchess of York  
(later Queen Elizabeth), 1923

RCIN 107127



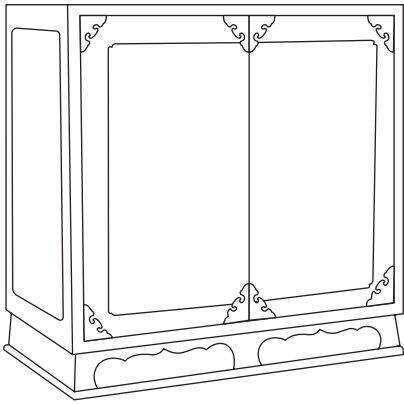
## **Comb, 1800–1900**

Combs were an essential component of fashionable female dress by the late Edo period (1615–1868). They were worn in the hair as accessories alongside ornamental hairpins. Here, a minute beach scene evokes Japan's long coastline.

Wood, gold lacquer

In the Royal Collection by 1911

RCIN 29461



## Cabinet, 1640–90

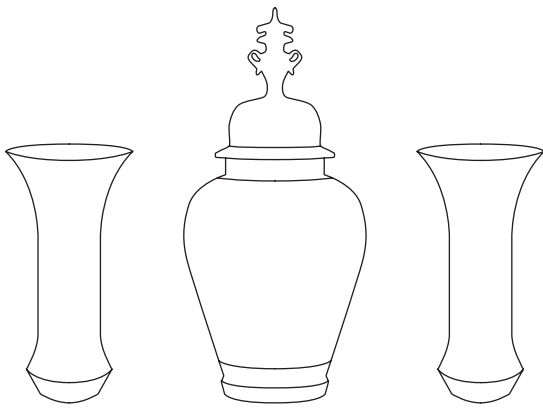
Subtle allusions to the seasons appear frequently on Japanese export lacquer, but were probably unfamiliar to early European collectors. On this cabinet, geese land after their celebrated migration southwards, signalling the start of harvest or **kanraigetsu** ('the month of the geese's return'). George IV displayed 16 cabinets and chests of this kind at Windsor Castle in the 1820s.

Wood, black and gold lacquer, gilt bronze, gold

Probably acquired by George IV

RCIN 35273





## **Garniture of a jar and pair of beakers, 1690–1730**

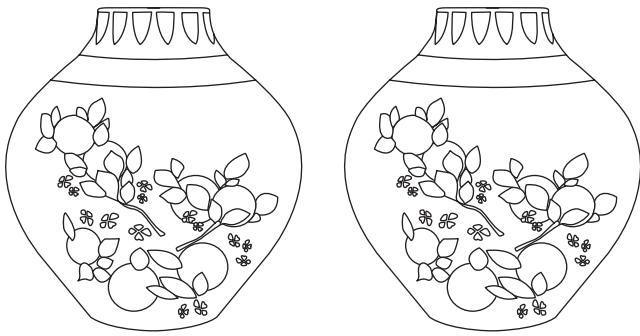
Arita

In the late seventeenth century, collectors such as Mary II displayed Japanese porcelain in complementary groups known as garnitures. Matching pieces were assembled on chimneypieces and cabinets, placed beside hearths or mounted on brackets over doorways. Together, they created dramatic areas of colour, enhanced by the dark walls of wood-panelled rooms.

Porcelain, underglaze blue, overglaze enamel and gold

Probably acquired by George IV

RCINs 602.1–2 and 194.2



## **Pair of jars, 1870–90**

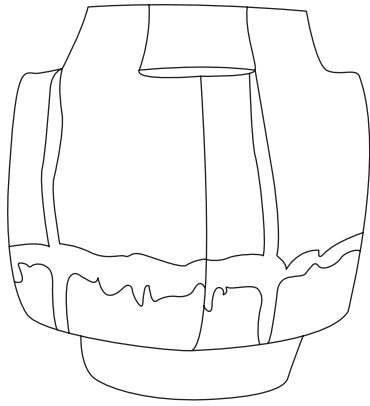
Kutani

Porcelain styles changed dramatically after Japan's reopening to the West in the mid-nineteenth century. The generous use of gold and red on these vases represents a new style popular with overseas buyers. They were made by the Watano family, who successfully exported wares worldwide.

Porcelain, enamels, gold

Probably acquired by Queen Victoria

RCIN 829

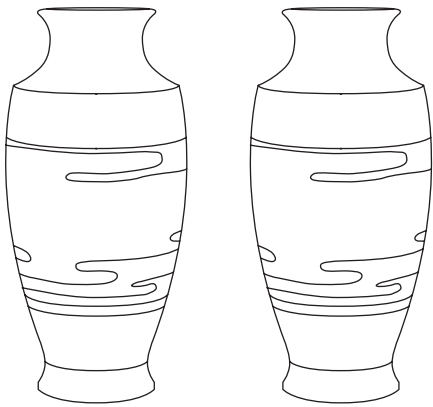


**Square vessel, 1960–75**  
Hamada Shōji (1894–1978)

A Japanese Folk Craft movement emerged in the early twentieth century in reaction to the country's rapid industrialisation. Potters like Hamada Shōji sought to return to rural values and simple techniques. Here, Hamada has achieved a spontaneous effect by applying blue-green pigments with a homemade dog-hair brush.

Stoneware, **kaki** glaze

Given to HM The Queen by Prime Minister Miki Takeo, 1975  
RCIN 68402



**Pair of vases, 1900–22**

Keida Masatarō (1852–1924) and others

This pair of vases represents spring (cherry blossom) and autumn (chrysanthemums) respectively. Both plants seem to dissolve into the cream glaze of the vases, suggesting the fleeting nature of each season. Porcelain in this style was displayed to resounding success at the world exhibition in Paris in 1867.

Pottery, enamels, gold

Given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII)

by Kagoshima Prefectural Office, 1922

RCIN 152

## **Hanging scroll painting (kakemono), 1922**

Mitsui Takamine (1857–1948)

Wealthy samurai hung seasonal scroll paintings in dedicated alcoves (**tokonoma**) where they could be admired by guests. This painting depicts Mount Arashiyama, near Kyoto. Diagonal lines of trees draw the eye down the spring-time scene, and the season's freshness is reinforced by the bright mounting of gold and green brocade.

Ink and colour on paper, silk brocade, bone, wood

Given to the Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII)

by the artist, 1922

RCIN 69750