On the Originals of Portrait Maki-e Plaques

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Plaques and plaquettes that used the maki-e technique for copying European prints comprise one category of export lacquer that was produced from the end of the 18th century through to the early part of the 19th century. This paper focuses on the originals for plaquettes that depict portraits.

Of the various plaquettes that survive in large numbers, earlier research has determined the particular originals from which quite a few have been produced, though there are still some that have not been identified. This paper identifies the collection of engravings titled 'Historia augusta imperatorum romanorum' that forms the originals for the group of pictures of Roman emperors, which is recognized as the group with the most extant items but the groups of originals in the collection of prints titled 'L'Europe Illustre,'. It also offers new insights into the group of Jean Victor Moreau portrait maki-e plaques and several other portrait plaques.

A comparison of the style of the prints that served as models and the style of the maki-e plaques reveals that in many cases the style of the original was copied extremely faithfully, suggesting that there was little room for the maki-e craftsmen to make any changes. In other words, by using traditional methods it was possible for craftsmen with absolutely no education in Western painting or foreign languages to produce a series of lacquer items. Finding the prints that served as models is also useful for speculating about the period of production, purpose and reception of maki-e plaques.