

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Dutch Colonial Ebony Casket

Netherlands East Indies (Ceylon, Indonesia, India), 17th to early 18th century

Carved ebony with brass fittings

49cm long, 32cm wide, 24cm high

Stock no.: A5911

This small ebony casket is finely carved in half-relief with flowers and leaves on undulating vines. The form is that of a portable writing desk, with a small pen compartment inside, and two small drawers at the front. However, the texture of the carved ebony does not lend itself to this purpose. This particular style of carving appears to have been reserved for objects destined for the European market. Similar decoration is found on silverware and textiles made for the Dutch market.¹

Three centres of production for ebony furniture in the Netherlands East Indies have been identified: India's Coromandel coast, notably the trading post of Masulipatam; Ceylon, now Sri Lanka; and the Indonesian archipelago, notably Batavia, but also Ambon and Makassar.² It is difficult to accurately determine the centre of production of a piece of furniture due to both the mobility of the cabinetmakers and the owners of such furniture. Lower ranking VOC (*Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie* or Dutch East India Company) would be sent to the outskirts of Dutch territory, namely India's Coromandel Coast.³ As they were promoted, the VOC officials and their possessions moved inwards to Sri Lanka, and eventually Batavia, where the government house of the Netherlands East Indies was located.⁴ The pattern and material (i.e. solid ebony, ebony cladding, or teak dyed black) can give some indication, however, there is so much overlap that is impossible to make an attribution with any certainty.

Ebony furniture largely disappears from inventories by 1730, having gone out of fashion in favour of

Chinese lacquered furniture, both imported and made by Chinese craftsmen in Batavia.⁵

A Sri Lankan coffer and a casket, both held in the Jan and Gerda Leeuwrik Collection in the Netherlands, are illustrated in Jan Veenendaal's *Asian Art and Dutch Taste*.⁶ The former has similar flower and leaf carving in mid-relief, and the latter is of similar form, with two small drawers, rounded feet, and c-shaped pattern carved into the borders. A casket in the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam (accession no. [BK-1976-60](#)) is dated to the 17th century, and has a very similar pattern of flowers with cross-hatched centres.

[1] Van Gompel, Dave. *Furniture from the Netherlands East Indies 1600-1900: A Historical Perspective Based on the Collection of the Tropenmuseum*. Amsterdam: KIT Publishers/Tropenmuseum, 2013. P. 43.

[2] Van Gompel. *Op. Cit.* Pp. 44-45.

[3] Veenendaal, Jan. *Asian Art and Dutch Taste*. 1st ed. Zwolle: Waanders Uitgevers, 2014. P. 32.

[4] *Ibid.*, P. 29.

[5] Van Gompel. *Op. Cit.* p. 56.

[6] Veenendaal. *Op. Cit.* p. 31, cat. 33, 35.