

Puzzling panels

Mark Nesbitt investigates an intriguing set of Japanese panels held in Kew's Economic Botany Collection, recently conserved thanks to a generous donation

Secretively beautiful and deeply mysterious in origin, Kew's collection of 26 Japanese panel paintings is truly one of its most unusual treasures. Each carries an illustration of the leaves, flowers and fruit of a tree, painted on wood from that tree, framed in its bark, with cross-sections of its branches at the four corners.

The panels are both a scientific collection of wood specimens – a xylotheque – and a collection of botanical art. Almost all the trees are native to Japan, and are central to Japanese culture through their uses. For example, the sap of the varnish tree (*Rhus vernicifera*, now known as *R. verniciflua*) is applied in up to 300 layers to make Japanese lacquer. Ginkgo



Before conservation, a large unsightly split runs through the *Sapindus* (soap nut) panel and label

(*Ginkgo biloba*) was introduced to Japan by Buddhist monks, and the largest trees are still found near Buddhist monasteries. Many of these timbers are prized by woodworkers, while the fruits of Japanese persimmon (*Diospyros kaki*) are dried on rooftops and eaten during winter.

Paper labels give the names of the plants in both Japanese and Latin. The panels are unsigned, but bear a red impression of a Japanese seal on the back, dating them to 1878. This was just a decade after the establishment of the Meiji government, which modernised Japan and opened it to the outside world. Research by Walter Lack, at the Botanic Garden in Berlin, has shown that the seal belonged to Chikusai Kata, the botanical illustrator at the Botanic Garden of the University of Tokyo, which had opened one year earlier.

There are two other sets of panels of identical appearance – one at the Botanical Museum in Berlin, donated by a naval physician in 1911 and comprising 152 panels, and another set of ten in private hands. No panels are known in Japan. Were these panels intended as gifts for visiting botanists, or as aids for teaching and research? We simply don't know.

How and when did these panels come to the Economic Botany Collection at Kew? Unusually, there's no record of their arrival in the Kew Museum Entry Books, which do document the acquisition of large holdings of Japanese paper and lacquer in the 1870s. The panels don't feature in the old museum guidebooks either, but they were definitely at Kew by 1970. It's most likely that they were given to Kew in the post-war years. It was clear from the thick layer of dust on them that they were displayed in a fairly polluted environment before their arrival at Kew.

This dirt, and their shaky condition, was a major obstacle to displaying and enjoying the panels. Now, however, thanks to a generous donation from George Loudon, a trustee of Kew, the panels have recently been conserved by the Wandsworth-based conservators Plowden & Smith. Many of the wood panels had split, possibly because they were made from fresh, unseasoned timber. These panels were taken apart and the gaps closed up. The original iron nails were replaced with corrosion-proof brass screws, in wide slots that will allow the wood to shift without splitting. Loose bark was treated with a consolidant, and any missing branch sections replaced.

In the most delicate work of all, the wooden panels and paper labels were gently cleaned with 'smoke sponges' (dry sponges made of natural rubber). The paintings themselves could not be cleaned, as the tempera paint is far too fragile.

The panels have been transformed through this gentle and minimally invasive conservation. The eye is no longer distracted by black cracks or missing parts. They can now be handled and displayed with confidence, and the grain of the wood has been restored to its original lustre. The full potential of the panels, both as art and as a research resource, can now be fully explored.

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Until the panels go on public display, they can be viewed by appointment with the Economic Botany Collection (email: ecbot@kew.org). For more on the history of the panels, see Plant Illustration on Wood Blocks – a magnificent Japanese xylotheque of the Early Meiji period by HW Lack, in Curtis's Botanical Magazine (vol 16, issue 2, pp124–134; 2004)



Far left: the split in the *Sapindus* panel (see previous page) is no longer visible

Left: the varnish tree is cultivated for its highly toxic sap, which is used to make lacquer



Far left: Japanese persimmon fruits can be either eaten fresh or dried for storage

Left: the seeds and leaves of *Ginkgo biloba* are used in traditional medicine