Introduction
This paper explores the possible design sources for the japanner in late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century London and colonial Boston. It is an outgrowth of a larger research project focused on the japanned furniture produced in Boston during this period. Beginning in 2012, Christine Thomson and I embarked on a project to revisit the japanned furniture from Boston, focusing primarily on the decorated surfaces. This topic has long been of interest to scholars of American decorative arts and while many articles have been written on the subject, a clear picture of the topic still seemed a bit elusive.

By taking a new approach to the subject we hoped to uncover some new information. Only fifty-four pieces of Boston japanned furniture survive today, so completing a detailed examination of each object was an achievable goal. Over the course of about nine months we examined in detail thirty-nine of the extant examples of Boston japanning. We took photographs of each of the motifs and using an image database we tagged each individual image with key words, making the images searchable. In total, our current database has close to 1000 images. Using this database we can now easily search for various motifs, such as 'cranes', and then make comparisons between the various hands at work. We used the few signed examples as a touchstone to compare with the many unsigned pieces. It was our belief that the hand of the decorator was as individual as a signature and that by using this method we would be able to separate the pieces into recognizable groups.

During the course of this project, we became interested in what sources were available to the japanner as inspiration for the japanned design motifs. This paper explores in-depth the traditional idea that the sources were printed materials such as travelogues, encyclopedias and how-to manuals. While interesting in themselves, none of these early published images have a direct relationship to the imagery found on Boston or London japanning. I will propose and explore a new theory that the imported porcelains and lacquer screens bear a much closer relationship to the imagined landscapes of japanning.

**Figure 1** Japanese lacquer cabinet raised on a Dutch gilt stand, c. 1630-50, in the Long Gallery Ham House, Richmond-upon-Thames, National Trust, NT145084. First included in the 1679 inventory.
An English japanned example now in the Victoria and Albert Museum is remarkably similar (figure 2). This chest was made in London in about 1680 in imitation of a Japanese import. It is these imitators that will be the focus of this paper. To fully appreciate these pieces it will be helpful to understand the context in which they were created.

**Historical context**

By the early seventeenth century the elite class in Europe was fascinated by the novel imports coming from Asia. Porcelains, silks and lacquers were imported to Europe as early as the sixteenth century. For Europeans, all these objects were exotic, both because they were made of new and unfamiliar materials and because they came from distant and unknown places. Their decorative surfaces contained some of the first glimpses of Asia seen in the west.

Porcelains, which could not be produced in Europe at this time, were particularly cherished. They were often mounted in silver, silver gilt or gold and would have formed part of a royal or aristocratic ‘cabinet of curiosities’. One such example is a ‘kinrande’ cup that was produced in China during the Jiajing reign (1522-1566) and is inscribed on the mounts indicating its purchase in Turkey and subsequent mounting in Germany in 1583 (figure 3). At this time, Chinese porcelains could have made
their way to Europe overland through the Middle East, as the inscription on this piece indicates.

By the sixteenth century sea routes were another viable alternative for Chinese ceramics to have been brought to Europe. The Portuguese, with their great maritime fleet, had established trade with Asia by the middle of this century and were initially responsible for much of the influx of Asian goods. A Chinese ewer, now missing its handle, was commissioned specifically for the Portuguese market and dates to the early sixteenth century (figure 4). It is painted with the coat of arms of Portugal; however, the artist must not have understood the meaning of the image they were asked to emblazon on the surface, as they have applied it upside down. The form itself is inspired by a Middle Eastern metal work ewer, further evidence of the back and forth exchange between China, the Middle East and the West.6

Lacquer was also highly prized as another exotic substance that could not be made in Europe. Perhaps one of the most well-known examples of Japanese lacquer imported to Europe is the ‘Van Diemen’ box (figure 5). It is inscribed on the inside of the lid ‘Maria van Diemen’ for the wife of Anton van Diemen, the Governor-General of the Dutch East Indies from 1636 to 1645.

Early in the history of the Dutch East India Company the records indicate that large quantities of lacquer were imported. However, by the mid-seventeenth century that number had decreased significantly. The officers of the company were allowed a certain amount of cargo space for their own private trade and it seems probable that they were responsible for much of the lacquer that arrived in Europe. The large quantities of Japanese lacquer from the seventeenth century in old collections in Europe attest to the scale of the private trade in this ware. This box was likely part of such a private cargo, and either brought or sent back by Van Diemen as a gift for his wife.7

Chinese lacquer was also imported in large quantities. Particularly plentiful was a type of screen often known as a ‘Coromandel’ screen, based upon a misunderstanding that these screens were produced in India along the Coromandel coast (figure 6). Instead, they were created in various parts of southern China and simply traded through the ports of India. In seventeenth-century England these screens could also be referred to as ‘Bantam work’, as the English trading port at Bantam in Java served as one of the transshipping port for these goods. Frequently thought of as an export product these screens were first developed for domestic use in China. The iconography is purely Chinese and was
rarely altered for the Western taste. These screens were developed in China as a cheaper alternative to the more time-consuming and therefore more costly screens produced for the Imperial court. The Imperial examples would have been made by carving a lacquer substrate and then inlaying it with either mother-of-pearl or various other colored lacquers and then polishing the surface to an even level exposing the design.

Here the lacquer artist has simply carved away areas to create the decoration and then quickly painted those recessed areas with a colored lacquer paint. This is a much more efficient process as it eliminates the time to cut the mother-of-pearl or inlay the other lacquers. This lower production cost, and a relaxation of the Imperial rules surrounding craft practices at the end of the seventeenth century probably combined to make these screens very popular with the Chinese merchant and official class. These screens quickly became popular in Europe and were imported in large quantities. While the shipping records of the English and Dutch East India Companies do not necessarily specify the types of screens imported, screens are mentioned often. In 1702 three ships from the English East India fleet return to London with their cargo which contained ‘70 chests of screens’ along with other Asian goods. The colorful patterns and exotic scenes must have delighted Europeans. The charming image in figure 7 (a detail from the screen illustrated in figure 6) depicts ‘the hundred boys’, a classic Chinese subject expressing the wish for many descendants. The boys in their patterned silk robes and top knot hairdos would have been exotic indeed.

Screens were not employed in Europe as they had been in China; that is as room dividers. Instead they were used a raw material and transformed into purely European objects. A looking glass, now at the Victoria and Albert Museum, is a good example of how these screens were reworked into familiar European forms (figure 8). Here a joiner has dismantled a screen and then sliced each panel in half lengthwise creating a veneer of lacquer. This technique allowed for the craftsman to use both sides of the screen and prevented the waste any of the precious material. The joiner has then applied the lacquer, much like a hardwood veneer, to an English wood substrate, creating a form familiar to his customers, but clad in an exotic new material.

Coromandel screens were often incorporated as wall paneling in rooms, creating a fashionable ‘china closet’. Many inventories from the late sev-

Figure 9  The Frisian stadholders’ lacquer room, the Netherlands, the lacquer China, before 1695, Rijksmuseum, BK-16709.

Figure 10  Japanned cabinet on stand, England, c. 1960, Temple Newsam, Leeds Museum and Galleries, LEEAG. FU.1959.0012.
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enteenth century across Europe mention these 'china' or 'japan closets' but very few of them have survived, probably because the craze was short-lived and the owners were continuously upgrading their interiors to keep up with the ever-changing court fashions. A room created in the 1690s for the Stadtholder’s court in Leeuwarden, the Netherlands, now installed in the Rijksmuseum, is one of the few survivals (figure 9). A similar ‘japan closet’ was installed at Chatsworth by Gerrit Jensen in 1692 and dismantled only eight years later in 1700.

Leaving behind the imported Asian goods, I will now take a closer look at japanning. For the remainder of this paper I will focus only on the japanning produced in London and colonial Boston. The images of porcelains and lacquers will return at the end of this paper as I explore the possible design sources.

Japanning in London and colonial Boston

This English cabinet on stand at Temple Newsam, dating to the late seventeenth century, is a good representation of the first flourishing of japanning in England (figure 10). Japanning becomes popular in England after the ascension of Charles II to the throne in 1660. It has often been suggested that this vogue for japanning may have come from Charles’s bride, Catherine of Braganza, whose dowry included a number of Asian lacquer pieces as well as the port of Bombay, giving England a base for trade with Asia. However, an alternative theory is that the period of the royal exile, which Charles spent partially in the Netherlands, was a time that allowed Charles himself to be exposed to and develop a taste for the fashion for Asian goods and their imitations. What is most likely is that it was a combination of all these factors which brought the taste for the ‘Asian exotic’ to London.

It is not hard to see how the more elaborate, aristocratic form of the Temple Newsam chest was transformed to the cabinet on stand or high chest of drawers. This simpler form was more likely to have been found in a wealthy merchant’s home and was common in both London and Boston. Figure 11 is a London example. Unfortunately it is missing the turned legs and is raised now only on its short round feet. However, the japanning is in a remarkable state of preservation. An example produced in Boston in the 1710s is illustrated in figure 12. These two pieces are quite similar in both the overall form and the quality and type of japanned decoration. In
fact they are equally accomplished examples. The Boston work is not a poor imitation of that made in London.

So who were these London craftsmen who developed such skill and virtuosity with this new medium? At this time we don’t know much about them. However, we do know that they did not have their own livery company. It has always been assumed that they would have been members of the Painter-Stainers’ company since that craft seems to us today most closely related to japanning. However, it is equally plausible that they belonged to no livery company, but rather as a group aligned themselves with the company whose interests they most closely shared.

In 1701, the Joiner’s company filed a petition to Parliament to restrict the importation of Asian lacquer into England, claiming it was undercutting the work of the local cabinetmaker and japanner. The japanners likely allied themselves in this case with the joiners as they were a very powerful guild. They also would have had strong working relationships with joiners as they were decorating the pieces built by them, in many cases probably working directly for them rather than for the end customer. One thing we do know is that japanners were highly skilled and would have been trained in the specific techniques to create each of the decorative motifs. There were standard methods and conventions employed to successfully create the imagined landscapes which decorate the surface.

When compared side by side it is clear that the same techniques and motifs that were used in London can also be found on Boston japanned pieces. Figures 13 and 14 illustrate the same winged insect found on London and Boston work respectively. It is not only that the depicted insect appears to be quite similar, but also the way in which it is executed that is important. In each case, the japanner has created the motif by using oval shapes for the wings and then employing exactly the same series of thin brushstrokes to indicate the legs and antennae.

I have found numerous examples of the direct relationship between Boston and London work. This relationship has not been studied before, but it should not be a surprise. At the turn of the eighteenth century Boston was not a backwater, but rather the royal colonial outpost of one the most powerful nations in the world. At that time the journey from London to Boston could take as little as six weeks. There is no reason to assume that the work produced in Boston was in anyway inferior to the work created for the merchant class of London.
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Figures 15 and 16 illustrate examples of the japanner using nearly the same composition. On both the London and Boston pieces the japanner has depicted a seated figure, attired in robes and a hat, leaning against a fence. While the small details of the work are not identical and the image has been flipped, the overall design is strikingly similar. In figures 17 and 18 each japanner has used the same techniques to produce nearly identical flower pods, perched atop long stems. Each of the flower pods are enhanced with similar black pen work composed of two horizon lines encircling the top and curved vertical lines below. These simple lines create the sense of volume in the flower pod.

The earliest Boston japanners appear, in newspaper advertisements and court records, in the early seventeenth century. Many of these Boston japanners, including the two that actually signed their work, William Randle and Robert Davis, have no known birth records in Boston. The quality of the work that they produced would suggest that they were London-trained craftsmen who immigrated to Boston fully capable of this new craft. In fact, research at the Guild Hall in London has revealed the apprenticeship records of both William Randle and Robert Davis. The early Boston japanners were in fact London japanners. In the absence of a signature or a label it is really only the wood used in the construction of the furniture itself that can confirm the place of origin. The high chest of drawers made in Boston and signed by Robert Davis is extremely skilled work (figure 21). This is not the work of someone self-trained or working outside of the style center. It is highly accomplished work with a direct relationship to that produced in London.

Design sources for the japanner

What exactly were japanners on both sides of the Atlantic looking at for inspiration? Innumerable articles on japanning cite the 1688 A treatise on japaning and varnishing, by John Stalker & George Parker, published in London, as a possible design source for japanners. Often quoted as a professional manual for craftsmen learning ‘japanning’ it is more likely a book for amateurs, particularly young ladies, to learn the skills required. It is only one of several such how-to-books written on the subject, although it certainly seems to be the most well-known. This book includes recipes for creating various colors of japanning, ‘gilding, burnishing and lacerking’, as well as imitating tortoise shell. At the end, the authors have included more than a ‘hundred distinct patterns for Japan-work, in imitation of the Indians, for tables, stands, frames, cabinets, boxes, etc. Curiously Engraven on 24 large Copper-Plates.’

It is these patterns that have long been assumed to be the source of inspiration for the japanner in both Europe and America. However, to date, none of the Boston or London pieces that I have examined
reveal the influence of this book. While this book was certainly popular and contained detailed, and for the most part, accurate recipes for the creation of japanned surfaces, it simply does not seem to be a primary source of design inspiration.

Other potential imprint sources for the japanner include early books about Asia published in Europe. One such example is China Illustrata, an encyclopedia on China published in 1667 by Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit scholar. Kircher himself never travelled to China, but based at the Jesuit College in Rome he was ideally situated to compile the reports of the many Jesuit missionaries to China.

Some of the engravings in this volume are remarkable, such as one depicting the ‘Winged turtles of Henan’ (figure 22). In addition to the turtles, this image depicts palm, as well as other exotic trees. However, the houses shown in the back left appear more European than Chinese. Careful examination of all the engravings in this book have not led to any direct relationship with any known japanned work.

In 1655 Johan Nieuhof travelled with the Dutch East India Company on an Embassy to Beijing. The
Dutch made four such journeys to Beijing in an attempt to win trading rights with China and break the Portuguese monopoly. None of these Embassies were successful and the Dutch were prevented from trading, at least legally, directly with the Chinese. Nieuhoff was requested to document the many towns and villages along the journey, describing them and making drawings. Seven years after returning to Holland, a Dutch version of his book, documenting his travels and the sights he had seen, was published in 1665. It was quickly followed by French, German, Latin and English versions. Some scholars have suggested this book as a likely source for the Boston japanner. And while it does include a number of exotic and fanciful illustrations of China, complete with pagodas, there is no direct correlation between the images here and those found on japanning in London or Boston (figure 23).

Certainly the popularity of these travel logs and encyclopedias attest to the great interest in China, and Asia, at the time. And it is this same interest that also accounts for the development of decorative arts in imitation of Chinese and Japanese objects. But in no other way are these images related to English japanning.

It is really only when comparing the porcelains and lacquers exported from China that a more likely design source for the English japanner emerges. Comparing japanning details with ceramics a pattern of lifting of individual Chinese motifs and design elements becomes clear. Figure 24 is a detail from a Chinese teapot depicting a somewhat stylized lion. A related japanned image is shown in figure 25. In some cases the japanner has fairly accurately understood the imagery such as with the depiction of this mythical beast.

In some other instances, the japanner did not fully understand the iconography he was imitating. The large figure in the middle of the Chinese jar is probably the Goddess of Longevity, who is often depicted with her two attendants with peacock feather fans (figure 26). These smaller figures on the japanned pieces have long been mistaken for children, but are more likely misinterpretations on the japanner’s part of images of attendants (figure 27). In Chinese depictions attendants are always shown as smaller in scale than the main character in the story.

While ceramics could certainly have been a source for the japanner, one must also consider the world of the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century crafts-
man and what sources were directly available to him. As I have already established, japanning was a newly developed craft without its own guild and the prestige that affords. True porcelains were still very expensive at this time. It seems highly unlikely that a japanner would have had firsthand knowledge of Chinese ceramics - or the opportunity to study them carefully.

A closer look at the relationship between Chinese coromandel screens and japanning yields some very compelling comparisons. In some cases entire decorative schemes may have been lifted from the coromandel screens by the japanner. In this example, the japanner has adopted the iconography of the ‘Hundred Antiques’ imagery which was found on many coromandel screens, often in the borders (figure 28). This subject can include precious objects, antiques and other decorative objects, such as these archaic bronzes vessels, a scholar’s rock and a low dish with narcissus seedlings. To Chinese audiences this imagery was clear; it depicts treasured objects and celebrated antiques symbolizing a reverence for tradition and the scholarly pursuit of collecting. In the japanner’s work he has depicted similar vessels arranged in a landscape and even included the peacock feather emerging from the censor (figure 29). Whether the japanner or his customer understood the subject matter is hard to say, but in their borrowing of Chinese imagery japanners made regular use of the ubiquitous Chinese ‘Hundred Antiques’ motifs.

It is possible to make many such comparisons between these Chinese screens and the work of the japanner, just as with the porcelains. However, when looking beyond the overall motifs and focusing on the small details of how the objects are depicted the influence becomes more compelling. Returning to the ‘hundred boys screen’ illustrated earlier and comparing the depiction of a cockerel with a japanned example this relationship can be seen quite easily (figures 30 and 31). It is true that the bird on the japanned piece bears a striking resemblance to the lacquer one in the overall stance, the way the wings are set and the large drooping tail feathers. But close examination of just the feet of the birds reveals a deeper connec-
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In both cases the artists have depicted the feet by using a larger tear drop shape for the toes and then added a thin, curved line ending in a sharp point for the talon. The screens were carved, similar to the techniques used for carving wood blocks used in Chinese printing processes. The japanner has reinterpreted these carving techniques with brush and paint.

The maker of the lacquer screen and a Boston japanner may have each used the same techniques to create the illusion of the edge of land as it meets a body of water (figures 32 and 33). Looking closely at the two images one can see that the face of the land mass is depicted in each case as an oblong element containing several vertical lines and then one longer line that extends horizontally beneath the adjacent lines. Here on the screen the carver has left these lines in relief, carving away the space around them. The japanner has used black paint to apply these lines to a gilded ground.

A comparison of just one vignette of this same screen (figure 34) with details from a variety of japanned pieces provides several more examples of the direct relationship in these two art forms. The depiction of the pine tree on a japanned high chest (figure 35) mimics that of the screen. The japanner has employed upward curving lines extending from a central point, similar to the carved treatment on the screen, to indicate the needles of the tree. The small dots rendered under the bird and the foliage on a japanned high chest serve as a grounding technique (figure 36). Often the decorative designs placed on japanned pieces can appear to float in space. This technique of creating a ground surface under these elements is seen on almost all japanned pieces produced in London and Boston and likewise appears repeatedly in the Chinese screens.

A final example of the japanner’s shorthand method for depicting a willow tree further emphasizes this connection (figure 37). Here again the brush strokes, downward and slightly outward, are similar to the lacquer worker’s carving technique.

I believe that this series of images makes a convincing argument that Chinese coromandel screens were a probable design source for the japanner. It is not this visual evidence alone that is convincing,
as similar parallels can be found with both Chinese and Japanese porcelains. However, when considered within the context in which London japanners were working, the connection seems stronger. I have illustrated the many ways in which these screens were reworked and reused in a European context. Both the installation of the screens as wall panels and the reworking of them into furniture would have been undertaken by the joiners of the day. Chinese screens would have been found in the shops of most of the important joiners as raw material, much like exotic hard wood veneers. Porcelains simply would not have been as readily accessible.

London japanners were working closely with the joiners decorating the furniture that they made. The 1701 petition of the Joiners’ Company to parliament, citing the japanners as also adversely affected by influx of Asian goods, further connects these two groups. It is reasonable to assume that japanners could have had very direct access to these screens. They would have ample opportunity to study these screens closely, for not only the motifs and subjects, but for the very small details of the workmanship. Perhaps the very earliest japanners made a careful study of these details creating for themselves a set of designs or patterns so that they could reproduce, as faithfully as possible, these wildly popular imports. Later japanners would have probably learned the skills and techniques from their master, perhaps making their own copy book of designs. While I am unaware of any existing copy books in London, Robert Davis’s 1739 Boston probate inventory includes a listing for ‘Sundry old Draughts of Japan Work.’

This paper has presented a brief look at japanning, and its initial develop in Europe within the global context of the incredible trade in luxury goods from Asia. Focusing on the work produced in London and colonial Boston I have presented the theory that imported lacquer screens represent a new and not yet fully explored resource of exotic Asian imagery available to the late seventeenth-century craftsman. I hope to continue this research in the future.

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**Notes**

1 There are five signed examples of Boston japanning extant today. A high chest of drawers at the Adams National Historical Site in Quincy, Massachusetts signed by William Randle, a high chest of drawers in the Baltimore Museum of Art signed by William Randle and Robert Davis, a high chest of drawers in a private collection signed by Robert Davis, a tall case clock in the Rhode Island Historical Society signed by Robert Davis but also signed by two later nineteenth-century japanners and no longer retaining any original surface and a tall case clock in the Harvard University Art Museums labeled by Thomas Johnston but now stripped and lacking any japanned surface.


3 This paper is focused only on japanning produced in Boston and London and not expressions of the form from continental Europe including The Netherlands. Although I am grateful to Michiel de Vlam for sharing information about
two Dutch cabinets with japanned decoration
drawn from an image in Johann Nieuhof’s 1665
An Embassy of the East-India Company of the
United Provinces, to the Grand Tatar Cham,
emperor of China. See endnote 18 for citations
about these pieces.
4 See the National Trust website for details on
the chest on stand at Ham House http://www.
nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/object/1140084.1
and the set of japanned back stools http://
www.nationaltrustcollections.org.uk/
object/1139867.6.
5 For further details on this mounted cup see the
Victoria and Albert Museum website http://col-
clections.vam.ac.uk/item/O109106/cup-unknown/
6 http://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/sear
ch/202581/?sortBy=Relevance&ft=portugues
e+ewer&offset=0&amp;pp=20&amp;pos=2
7 C.J.A. Jorg, ‘Dutch VOC Records as a Source for
Dating 17th Century Japanese Export Lacquer’
in: After the Barbarian II: Namban Works of Art
for the Japanese, Portuguese and Dutch Markets,
44–45.
8 W. De Kesel and G. Dhont, Coromandel
10 C.J.A. Jorg, ‘Japanese Lacquerwork of the
Seventeenth Century in Europe’ in: Schwartz
Porcelain The Lacquer Craze and Its Impact on
European Porcelain, Edited by M. Cassidy-Geiger
25–29, see p. 27 for details on lacquer installed as
wall panels.
11 A. Bowett, English Furniture 1660–1714,
From Charles II to Queen Anne, The Antique
Collectors’ Club, 1988, p. 149.
12 M. Kopplin, European Lacquer, Selected
Works from the Museum für Lackkunst Munster,
13 Joiners’ company court minutes, April 7, 1701,
MS 8046/3, Guildhall Library, London.
14 See Cederholm and Thomson, 2017 pp. 60–61
for a fuller discussion of William Randle and
Robert Davis.
15 G. Stalker and J. Parker, A Treatise on Japaning
and Varnishing, 1688, London. The author has
used the 1961 Tiranti reprint of this book for this
article.
16 Monika Kopplin has identified on English cabi-
net on stand now in the Charlottenburg Palace,
Berlin with images drawn from the engravings
included in Stalker and Parker. See Kopplin
European Lacquer pp. 67–68 for illustrations.
17 E. Lasser, ‘Reading Japanned Furniture’,
in: American Furniture 2007, Edited by L.
Beckerdite, pp. 169–190.
18 There are two nearly identical Dutch
japanned cabinets dating to the end of the
seventeenth century with an image on the
proper left door inspired from a plate in
Johan Nieuhoff’s Embassy. One cabinet is
in the Rijksmuseum, BK-1985-25, and cur-
cently catalogued as French (see https://www.
rijksmuseum.nl/en/search/objects?q=bk-1985-
25&p=1&amp;ps=12&amp;st=OBJECTS&amp;ii=0/#BK-1985-
25,0 for an image) and the other in a private
collection (see www.micheieldevlam.nl for an
image). The decoration on the second includes
a pagoda not seen in the Nieuhoff image. I am
grateful to Michiel de Vlam for sharing this
information with me. Other images taken from
Nieuhoff appear on the decoration at Rosenborg
Castle in Sweden completed by Francis de Bray
in the 1660’s. See D. Kisluk-Grosheide, ‘Lacquer
and Porcelain as en Suite Decoration in Room
Interiors’ in: Schwartz Porcelain The Lacquer
Craze and Its Impact on European Porcelain,
Edited by M. Cassidy-Geiger and L. Roberts,
2004, pp. 39–45 for a discussion of this decor-
at.
19 E. Rhoades and B. Jobe, ‘Recent discoveries
in Boston japanned furniture’, in: Magazine