

ON SOME WOOD COLLECTIONS OF HISTORICAL INTEREST

by

Pieter Baas

Rijksherbarium, P.O. Box 9514, 2300 RA Leiden, The Netherlands.

This year's IAWA Bulletin cover features six wood specimens of historical interest, and this note briefly comments on these and other remarkable wood collections, recently displayed at an exhibition entitled "Het Botanisch Kabinet" (The Botanical Cabinet) in the museum 't Coopmanshûs in Franeker, Friesland, The Netherlands. It is hoped that this note may stimulate curators of wood collections to reconsider their historical treasures and share their knowledge on them. Most older institutional wood collections or botanical institutes harbour noteworthy, ancient wood collections, but as far as I know their history is often poorly known or in danger of being forgotten.

The Japanese woods on our cover and Fig. 1 belong to a set of 45 specimens from Hokkaido and were shipped to the Netherlands around 1830 by the famous German physician, naturalist and ethnologist Philipp Franz von Siebold (1796–1866). They are thin boards, measuring c. 7 x 14 cm, with on one side a painting of the foliage of the species to which the wood belongs, the vernacular name in Japanese, and on only part of the specimens a Latin name. Many specimens have notes in imperfect Dutch or in German in different handwritings on the back side on the use (or uselessness) of the timber and/or distribution of the species in Japan. On one of the end grain sides of each specimen there is a hole, facilitating display (if so desired) on small vertical metal rods. How Von Siebold acquired this attractive collection we do not know. Before sending the woods, Von Siebold worked in the Dutch Government Service as a medical officer on the small artificial isle of Deshima in the harbour of Nagasaki and in and around Nagasaki itself. Perhaps it was given to him by one of his numerous Japanese professional friends and admirers or patients. The latter repaid him with gifts of ethnological or naturalistic valuables and curiosities, because he did not charge a honorarium for his medical work (see Stearn, 1970, and Van Steenis-Krusseman, 1962, 1979, for further biographical data on Von Siebold and his decisive role in the

early history of the Rijksherbarium). This Japanese wood collection provides a good example of how background information may go astray. In the thirties and forties of this century, interest in wood anatomy was low at the Rijksherbarium and all wood specimens (probably except a few which were definitely lost in the conversion to thermal energy) had been passed to the Botany Department where they were well cared for under the guidance of Dr. W.K.H. Karstens. In the early seventies the roles were once more reversed and the space-consuming wood collection of the Botany Department was handed over to the Rijksherbarium. No one, however, appeared to know the history of the delightful set of Japanese specimens with painted foliage on them, which indeed seemed more suitable for the decoration of a private residence, than to merit insertion in a serious reference and research collection. Through an erratic coincidence I was able to rediscover the origin of the wood specimens, when after hearing several stories about Von Siebold, I enthusiastically mistook the handwriting on some of the notes on the specimens as belonging to the famous introducer of western medical science

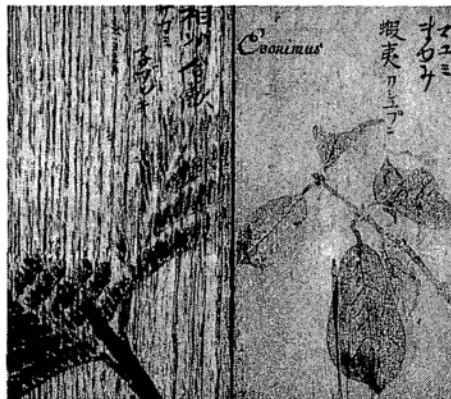


Fig. 1. Two examples of the Japanese wood samples sent to the Rijksherbarium by Von Siebold (see also front cover of this issue).

to the land of the rising sun. Further searching revealed a reference to this wood collection in a letter Von Siebold wrote himself towards the end of his life, bitterly lamenting the wrongs done to him and his botanical collections by the first Director of the Rijksherbarium, C.L. Blume. The notes on the wood specimens are probably written by Von Siebold's assistants or students, or were perhaps added at a later stage.

The second, more spectacular wood collection, partly pictured in Fig. 2, consists of 158 'volumes'; that is boxes in book form, made of different woods, partly covered with bark and/or twigs of the species concerned, and containing various vegetative and reproductive parts of the tree or shrub inside, as well as elaborate descriptive information in German handwriting. This collection belongs to the Franeker museum and dates from c. 1809. It was made by F.A. von Schlümbach from Nürnberg (Germany) and was presented to the University of Franeker by King Louis Napoleon (a brother of the French Emperor) who governed the Netherlands for a short period of time. He

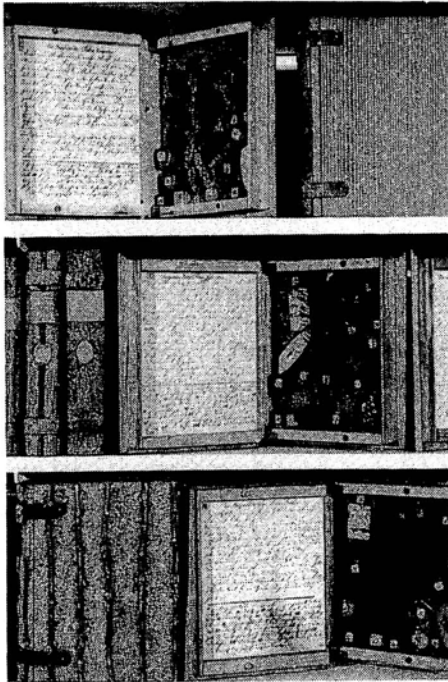


Fig. 2. Part of the Schlümbach 'Xylotheek' of museum 't Coopmanshûs in Franeker.

donated similar xylaria to the universities of Harderwijk and Leiden, probably to demonstrate his willingness to be a good patron of Science (Den Oudsten, 1980). 'Xylotheeken' or xylaria of this type are known from other makers and Den Oudsten (1980) records their occurrence in various museums in Germany, in Prague and in Moscow. A superficial inspection of some of the specimens of the Schlümbach collection reveals that the maker did not take the requirement of using wood of the species concerned too seriously: hardwood specimens sometimes contain important constructive parts of softwood.

The third example (Fig. 3) displayed at the Franeker exhibition belongs to a set of Japanese specimens owned by the Botanical Museum Berlin-Dahlem. Here again there are paintings, this time also portraying flowers and fruits, on thin boards which clearly display the figure of the wood, and framed in such a way that bark and end-grain features are also shown. All we know of the origin of this Japanese wood collection is that it probably dates from around 1900.

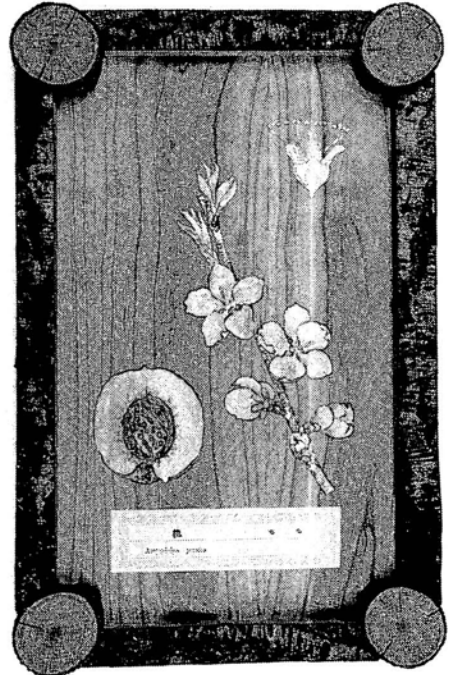


Fig. 3. Japanese wood specimen of the Botanical Museum, Berlin-Dahlem.

The three examples are very different from what we are used to at present in institutional wood collections. The predecessors of our standard size samples, curly dried slashes, or segments of thick branches were clearly not intended for wood anatomical research. This is hardly surprising, because wood anatomy in a comparative sense would not have its serious beginnings until the middle and end of the 19th century, when its pioneers like for instance Solereder resorted to herbarium twigs more often than to samples of mature wood. Apparently the late 18th and most of the 19th century wood collections were for display purposes, and typical for a time when natural curiosity cabinets were still popular in Science.

The author would be grateful to receive any additional information on collections of the types pictured and discussed in this note.

Acknowledgements

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ASSOCIATION AFFAIRS

Financial Report 1980

Debit		Credit	
Balance December 21, 1979	Dfl. 16,982.69	IAWA Bulletin*	Dfl. 10,729.92
Glossary and Directory sales	Dfl. 44.00	Wood Identification	
Dues and subscriptions	Dfl. 11,852.55	Bibliography	Dfl. 1,476.00
Reprint sales	Dfl. 3,541.89	Stationary	Dfl. 985.45
Bibliography sales	Dfl. 1,462.00	Publicity leaflets	Dfl. 649.04
Interest	Dfl. 985.41	Postage	Dfl. 18.30
		Banking costs (extra)	Dfl. 66.47
		Balance	Dfl. 20,943.36
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	Dfl. 34,868.54		Dfl. 34,868.54

* Issue 4 of Volume 1 (n.s.) had not yet been paid on 31 December 1980.

Statements of account:

December 31, 1980. AMRO Bank, Account No. 45.13.20.352 of IAWA (address of bank: Rapenburg, Leiden, The Netherlands; postal giro of bank: 9200).

Checking account: Dfl. 9,435.99.

High interest savings account (No. 45.14.36.067): Dfl. 11,507.37.
