William B. Sutherland (d. 1945)

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INTRODUCTION

William Sutherland’s name may be familiar to museum visitors in England interested in Japanese art, as he was a benefactor of the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and of the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth, dividing his collection of Japanese lacquer between those two institutions.¹

The best-documented period of William Berriedale Sutherland’s life and his lacquer collections runs from the early 1910s to the late 1920s. His letters and archival material for that period are preserved at the V&A and the Russell-Cotes Museum. Unfortunately, no detailed biographical records have come to light.

From several letters and the museum records, it is evident that he lived for many years in China and Japan, mostly in Kobe, and collected lacquer in Japan. A letter by William Sutherland dated 21 June 1918 and posted from Kobe is written on the official letterhead of ‘The Chartered Bank of India, Australia and China’.² The *Japan Directory*, which was issued for every year from 1861 through 1912 indicates that William Sutherland started to work for the Kobe branch (located at 26, Naniwa-machi) of The Chartered Bank in 1901, as sub-accountant.³ From 1903 through 1905, he was away from Kobe, working, it is assumed, for one of the Chinese branches of The Chartered Bank. In 1905, Sutherland is recorded again among the Kobe employees of The Chartered Bank,⁴ promoted to acting accountant. From 1906 through 1909, he worked in Kobe for The Chartered Bank, from 1907 as an accountant. From 1909, he is no longer recorded in the Japan Directory, but he is registered in the Hong Kong Jurors list in 1912, 1914 and 1916, working for the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank (present HSBC Bank) as an assistant.⁵ In 1914, he returned briefly to England, but was back in Kobe in 1915. From then up to 1921, he was working in Kobe and China. In 1920, he returned to Europe with his wife, where they
divided their time between England and Switzerland. From 1921 they lived in Parkstone, Dorset, and every year spent several months in Switzerland, in Montreux at the Hotel Joli Mont. William Sutherland’s last letter preserved in the Russell–Cotes Museum’s archives dates from 1927. Sutherland died on 7 May 1945 in Silverdale, Penn Hill Avenue, Parkstone (Dorset).

The first record of the Japanese lacquer collection of William Sutherland dates from 1912, when Lady Dorothy Nevill brought it to the notice of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Lady Dorothy Nevill (1826–1913) wielded considerable influence in English society and numbered among her friends Lord Palmerston, the Duke of Wellington, Benjamin Disraeli, Lord Randolph Churchill, James McNeill Whistler, and others of equal eminence in politics, diplomacy, art and literature. For many years, her Sunday luncheons were famous social events. She was also an art collector. At the request of Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke (1846–1911, from 1896 director of the Victoria and Albert Museum), she presented her collection of Sussex ironworks to the V&A, reflecting a contemporary nostalgia for English folk life and old crafts. In her reminiscences, Leave from the note-books of Lady Dorothy Nevill, a chapter is devoted to art collecting and collectors. Her acquaintance with Whistler might have directed her attention to Japanese art.

THE SUTHERLAND LACQUER COLLECTION AT THE VICTORIA AND ALBERT MUSEUM

Minutes dated 7 December 1914 addressed to the Director of the Victoria and Albert Museum, Sir Cecil Harcourt-Smith (1859–1944), signed by Oliver Brackett (1875–1941, specialist of furniture and woodwork at the V&A), reveal that William Sutherland had formed a large collection of Japanese lacquer (stored in Japan), which he offered to loan to the Museum, with the ultimate aim of making it a bequest. In 1912, when Lady Dorothy Nevill introduced the lacquer collection to the Museum, photographs of some of the objects were provided by Sutherland, and based on these, the collection was judged to be mediocre. The minutes continue that William Sutherland had recently come to England from the Orient and had brought thirty-two lacquer pieces to the Museum for examination. Harold Clifford Smith (1876–1960, a specialist of woodworks at the V&A), selected sixteen objects, mainly maki-e decorated saké cups, for ultimate bequest. The remaining sixteen pieces were returned to the collector. Judging from the correspondence, in 1914, after his return, William Sutherland remained in London for some time, living near Clapham Common. In his answer to the letter of acceptance from the Museum, he wrote ‘When I return again to England in a few years time,