



Lacquer Book Cover with Flowers

India, 17th / 18th century

18cm high, 29.5cm wide

Stock no.: A4631f

This lacquer book cover depicts various species of flower in efflorescence. They grow from elegant stems into purple, burgundy and pink-red flora, while many leaves, depicted in shades of dark and light green, surround the blooms. They are all outlined in gold against an ochre background. A slender border frames the scene and features a florid, gold scrolling pattern upon a black ground. Following the invention of bookbinders' lacquer in 15th century Persia, knowledge and expertise of this craft was passed to artists hailing from other parts of the Islamic world, and especially (what is now) Turkey and India. We know that lacquer was introduced to the Mughal court in India in the 16th century, especially during the reign of the Emperor Akbar (1555-1605). He commissioned manuscripts of Persian poets, such as the *Khamseh* (Quintet) of Nizami (d. 1209), which were bound together with painted and lacquered covers (Robinson and Stanley, p. 234). Although it is often difficult to distinguish Indian lacquer of the 17th century from that produced in Iran, due to the constant movement of artists between these two countries, it appears that this piece may be of an Indian origin. The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art has a pair of Mughal book covers that are similar to ours in both form and decoration (Accession Number LAQ291). The pair has been dated to the 18th century and depicts a parrot perched on a stump amongst flowers, butterflies and a small bird. Like our cover, they are all outlined in gold against an ochre background, which is also streaked with gold. Although devoid of animals and insects, the shape and style of the flowers in our lacquer book cover are striking in their resemblance to the Khalili example. Similarly, unlike many Iranian or Ottoman lacquer wares, in both instances the different pictorial elements are arranged relatively sparsely. This seems characteristic of Mughal lacquer painting and its compositions. Another pair of book covers in the Khalili Collection, attributed to 17th century India or Iran, features a gold scrolling flower motif on a black ground, surrounding the painting (Accession Number LAQ279). It is visibly related to the border that frames our cover, which suggests that Mughal artists most likely worked on this piece in the 17th or 18th century.

Robinson B.W. and Stanley T. Lacquer of the Islamic Lands, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1996, p.
234.