



Large Ottoman Mother of pearl and tortoiseshell inlaid scribes box

18th century

Wood, mother-of-pearl and tortoise shell

47.5 cm high, 72 cm wide and 40 cm deep

Stock no.: A4138

This item contains less than 10% ivory and has been registered with Defra.

This rectangular desk is supported by four elaborate bracket-style feet. The front side has three lockable drawers, two square ones on either side and a rectangular one in the centre.

The desk is elaborately decorated all over in mother-of-pearl and tortoise shell. The elaborate brackets of the feet are entirely inlaid with mother of pearl, while the horizontal parts of the feet are inlaid with alternating small triangles.

Each drawer at the front side has the designs of cartouches bordered by small triangle bands; the cartouches are of symmetrical foliage motifs. Beneath the three drawers is a long, narrow cartouche of palmette leaves. All cartouches are framed by a border of tortoiseshell circles complemented by mother of pearl. The centre of the top side is a geometrical medallion that radiates into a geometrical pattern. All other sides are made up of the geometric design known as the girih pattern, framed by a border of triangle mother of pearl complemented by tortoiseshell. Some six-petal flower and palmette patterns embellish the geometrical designs.

This desk would have been used by scribes for producing calligraphy, which was highly valued art forms in the Ottoman period. The style of this desk is similar to a group of Ottoman scribe desks and boxes from the 17th and 18th century in Turkey, most specifically the scribe's desk at the British Museum (1991,0717.2). The same geometrical pattern carried out in the same mother of pearl and tortoiseshell inlay can be found on the doors at the Baghdad Pavilion of Topkapi Palace, Istanbul.

Reference:

McWilliams, Mary and David J. Roxburgh, *Traces of the Calligrapher, Islamic Calligraphy in Practice, C. 1600 -1900*, The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, USA, fig.30-34, p.49-51