

AMIR MOHTASHEMI



Enamelled Spice Box

Lucknow, 18th century

Silver-gilt, enamel

10.5 cm high, 14cm diameter

Provenance: North American family collection for several generations.

Stock no.: A5698

Spice boxes appear in Mughal miniatures, from the late 16th century onwards (see accession no. [1999.1202.0.5.2](#) in the British Museum, London). The individual compartments of this box would have been used for storing chopped betel nuts, mixed spices, slaked lime, tobacco, and betel leaves, which the heart-shaped lids of this box resemble.

Of silver-gilt, enamelled in blue, green, and red, the ornamentation of this spice box closely resembles the renowned champlevé and basse-taille enamelware made in 18th century Lucknow, in the state of Uttar Pradesh. When the central knob, itself resembling a vase of flowers, is unscrewed and removed, each of the heart-shaped lids is free to open. An ogival pandan in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (accession no. [AC1993.137.1.1-2](#)) has similarly brightly coloured floral sprays, and mostly notably, both have two birds with maroon bodies and blue wings standing aspectant.

A significant part of Lucknow's vegetal imagery was the acanthus leaf, a decorative motif originating in Corinthian capitals around 9000 years ago, which assimilated into Asian art.¹ The acanthus bract, pairs of leaves branching from a stalk, can be seen throughout this spice box. Similar use of this motif is seen on a tray made in Lucknow in the LA Country Museum (accession no. [M.76.2.27a-L](#)). The underside of the box is decorated with a large floral rosette, inside an ornamental cartouche formed from split

acanthus leaves.

A silver enamelled spice box of similar form and ornamentation, originating from mid-19th century Lucknow, can be found in the collection of the V&A (accession no. [131-1852](#)). This form takes inspiration from Rajasthani prototypes, such as those on pages 158-161 of *Mughal Silver Magnificence*.²

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

¹ Markel, Stephen. *India's Fabled City: The Art of Courtly Lucknow*. Los Angeles: DelMonico Books and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2010.

² Terlinden, Christiane et al. *Mughal Silver Magnificence (XVI-XIXth C)/ Magnificence de l'Argenterie Moghole (XVI-XIXème S.)*. Geneva: Antalga for the Museum of Art and History of Geneva, 1987.