



LACQUER TRAY

China • Carved black lacquer

First half of the 14th century, Yuan Dynasty (1279–1368) • 80.25

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This intricately carved tray represents the height of the lacquer-making tradition in China. Lacquer wares were luxury items decorating the tables of emperors, princes, and court nobles. Wealthy Buddhist temples in China and Japan received such objects as gifts. Tea enthusiasts at temples and palaces enjoyed using them to hold items such as sweets.

The design on this tray, known as a “two-bird” motif, shows cranes amid chrysanthemums. The long life span of cranes earmarks them as symbols of longevity and endurance that arrive in winter just before the ground begins to warm. The name for crane (*he*) is also a homophone for “harmony;” two birds double the lucky message. Chrysanthemums are symbols of autumn, blooming in chilly winds and frosty weather. Their health-giving nutrients make them symbols of long life.

Chinese artisans were the first to perfect the art of lacquer, making use of the sap of the lac tree as early as the Warring States period (450–221 BCE). Lacquer, clear when originally collected, was colored with mineral pigments (iron for black and cinnabar or vermilion for red). Painstakingly, hundreds of layers were applied over a cloth-covered wooden core. Sets of dishes, lightweight and graceful, were created in state-controlled workshops where labor was divided, each craftsman performing one step of a lengthy production process, such as making the base, applying each layer of lacquer, polishing, or carving.