



OX HORN BOX

Korea • Ox horn mounted on wood

Made in the 18th century, Choson Dynasty (1392–1910) • 1986.3



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Ox horn covered boxes like this were the treasured possessions of upper-class Korean women. Following the Confucian principle that men and women had different roles to fulfill, they conducted their daily activities in separate quarters in traditional Korean houses. Boxes such as this one were generally housed within the women's quarters. The boxes stored sewing equipment and clothes, which were perhaps part of a young woman's dowry, the gifts and household items that accompanied a bride to the groom's house.

Traditional Korean weddings took place outdoors in the main courtyard of the bride or groom's family home. Motifs suggesting long life and a happy marriage would have decorated bridal furniture, and they are found in abundance on the painted red panels of this box. The dragon and phoenix stand for masculine and feminine—a balance of opposites central to Taoist beliefs of harmony. Taoism,

developed by Chinese philosophers in the fourth century BCE, also built up the hope for immortality. Paired birds and butterflies stand for happiness and the related wish for many sons, which would secure the bride's status within her new home. The deer, crane, and tortoise are symbols for long life.

The ox horn technique was uniquely Korean. Horns from the field ox were soaked in warm water and separated into thin layers, which were flattened, cut into rectangles, painted on the reverse side, and glued to a wooden frame with the painted side facing inward. The ox horn's translucency allowed the images to be seen in reverse. The outer surface was polished to a high luster, which on this box has mellowed over time to cast a warm yellow glow over the brilliant colors underneath.

Notes:

For another example of an eighteenth century storage chest, see *Auspicious Spirits: Korean Folk Paintings and Related Objects* by Robert Moes, p. 157, plate 90.