

OBJECT IN FOCUS

Box decorated with images of spring and longevity



China

Qing dynasty, Qianlong reign, 1736–95

Carved red, green, and yellow lacquer on wood core

6 1/2 x 17 5/16 x 17 5/16 in

Purchase—Charles Lang Freer Endowment. Freer Gallery of Art, F1990.15a-e

Describe

This round box is an amazingly intricate and refined object. It has a flat top and bottom as well as gently sloped sides. The large character on the lid means “spring,” a metaphor for eternal youth. Placed over the character is a circle containing a long-bearded old man accompanied by a deer. No, he is not a Chinese Santa. He is the God of Longevity. The deer, one of his attributes, is a symbol of long life and prosperity. Bands of colored light shine from the dish below. The dish is filled with symbolic treasures, including coins, coral, and the endless knot of longevity. Two auspicious dragons flank the central character. They are surrounded by stylized clouds. Taken together, these design elements convey the message “May you be forever young!”

Analyze

Layers of red, green, and yellow lacquer cover the surface of the box. Lacquer is a resin obtained from the sap of a type of tree that grows in northern Asia, including China. Objects covered with lacquer from as early as 1300 BCE have been found in China. Carved lacquer, a uniquely Chinese achievement in lacquer art, flourished from the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries. After the fall of the Ming dynasty (1368–1644), carved lacquer declined until a revival during the Yongzheng reign (1722–35) of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911). Skill and interest in carved lacquer reached a new peak during the Qianlong period (1736–95).

The lacquer on this box is nearly a quarter of an inch thick in some places and thinner in other places. However, all the work required building up the lacquer in multiple layers and possibly even a hundred layers where it's thickest. Before



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applying a new layer of lacquer, the previous one must be completely dry and polished smooth. It must have been incredibly time consuming and expensive to make this box, the design of which, with its bright colors and three-dimensional imagery, is exceptionally vibrant.

Interpret

The design of this box originated under the patronage of the Ming dynasty Jiajing Emperor (reigned 1522–66). About two centuries later, the Qianlong Emperor ordered his artisans to copy the design and make boxes for presenting food or other ceremonial gifts on birthdays or the Chinese New Year. The Qianlong palace commissioned a number of boxes of different sizes and shapes with the same design, but the unusually large size (nearly 17.5 inch diameter) and high quality of this box may suggest that it may have been used by the emperor, or given by him to someone he highly valued.

Inquire

- Look carefully at this object. What do you notice about it at first glance? Does it remind you of anything you have seen before?
- Research Chinese celebrations of the Lunar New Year, or Spring Festival. What are the most important elements of this holiday? How do you think this box may have been used in a celebration?
- Write a story involving this box. Who might have owned it and what might it have contained?

Resources

View this object online at <https://asia.si.edu/object/F1990.15a-e/>

Learn more at <https://asia.si.edu/teachingchina>

