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DMA INSIGHT

The Arts of India, Southeast Asia, and the Himalayas at the Dallas Museum of Art: An Overview

Overdoor from a Shiite mosque

DATE:

1870

MATERIAL AND TECHNIQUE:

Wood and paint

CLASSIFICATION:

Sculpture (/search/?facet_classification=sculpture)

DIMENSIONS:

Overall: 52 x 80 3/4 x 5 3/4 in. (132.08 x 205.1 x 14.6 cm.)

DEPARTMENT:

Arts of Asia (/search/?facet_department=arts+of+asia)

LOCATION:

303 ISLAMIC GALLERY (/search/?facet_location_on_view=303+islamic+gallery)

CREDIT LINE:

Dallas Museum of Art, gift of Ann L. Gray

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Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art

OBJECT NUMBER:

1993.87

GENERAL DESCRIPTION

This semicircular wooden panel was probably centrally placed over the entrance to a mosque, a Muslim house of prayer. The content of the Arabic inscription indicates that this mosque was built by Shiite Muslims, for it invokes the family of the Prophet Muhammad: Khadija, his first wife; Fatima, Muhammad's daughter; Ali, his cousin and son-in-law; and the Prophet's grandchildren, a phenomenon found only in the texts and inscriptions of Shiites. The two major Islamic groups are Sunnis and Shiites. The majority of Muslims are Sunnis, who accept historical developments in the Muslim world concerning Muhammad's successor as head of the Islamic state and religion. The smaller of the two groups are Shiites, who reject the authority of the historical caliphs, once heads of Muslim states, and instead believe that members of the Prophet Muhammad's family should have been his rightful successors. There are several branches within Shiite Islam; however, there is no way of knowing to which branch the members of this congregation belonged.

The naturalistic floral imagery surrounding the inscription's cartouche consists largely of trees and their foliage. Particularly distinct are the fronds of the palm trees. The carving on this panel, dated to 1870, appears to be inspired by a similarly shaped panel on a 15th-century mosque in Ahmedabad in the western Indian state of Gujarat. There the solid stone is carved to form a screen, but here the wooden background remains solid, although the profuse carving of the trees and leaves creates a tropical atmosphere. Assuming this panel comes from Gujarat, one of India's most arid regions, the profusion of trees would serve as a welcome visual respite from the actual environment. The trees depicted in the panel are also a reference to the paradise promised to all believers on the Day of Judgment. The Quran, the holy book of Islam, describes paradise as replete with trees, water, and mansions.

While Shiites are found throughout India's Muslim communities, they are a particularly large presence in Gujarat. Perhaps this panel came from one of the Shiite mosques in this area of western India.

Adapted from

Catherine Asher, "Overdoor panel from a Shiite mosque," in *The Arts of India, South East Asia, and the Himalayas*, Anne R. Bromberg (Dallas: Dallas Museum of Art; New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 111.

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