

Treatment of Persian Lacquer Bindings

ABSTRACT

Persian lacquer work is a method of decorative painting on a prepared surface and involves the use of shellac. From the 14th century onward a variety of decorative objects were lacquered in the Persian speaking world, most commonly pen boxes, mirror cases, and bookbindings.

The production of a Persian lacquered bookbinding is a laborious process. Layers of ground are applied by brush on the pasteboard substrate, followed by a coating of shellac. After the design is laid out, the painting is blocked out in layers of opaque paint consisting of pigments bound with animal glue. Intricate details are painted on these blocks of color. Upon completion of the painting, the entire surface is coated with shellac. Any gilding or metallic decoration is laid into this tacky shellac. The piece is finished when a smooth homogenous surface is attained after repeated applications of shellac interspersed with sanding.

The nature and construction of these materials creates many challenges for the conservator. Because the underlying structure is often misunderstood, many traditional paintings, objects, and book conservation techniques could be detrimental to the delicate painted surface. This presentation will share preliminary observations and analytical findings concerning the structure and materials used to produce Persian lacquer objects, chiefly bookbindings, and share a number of treatment approaches for the various damages associated with Persian lacquer bookbindings.

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