

20. PAIR OF SUTRA COVERS

Wood and red lacquer

Tibeto-Chinese

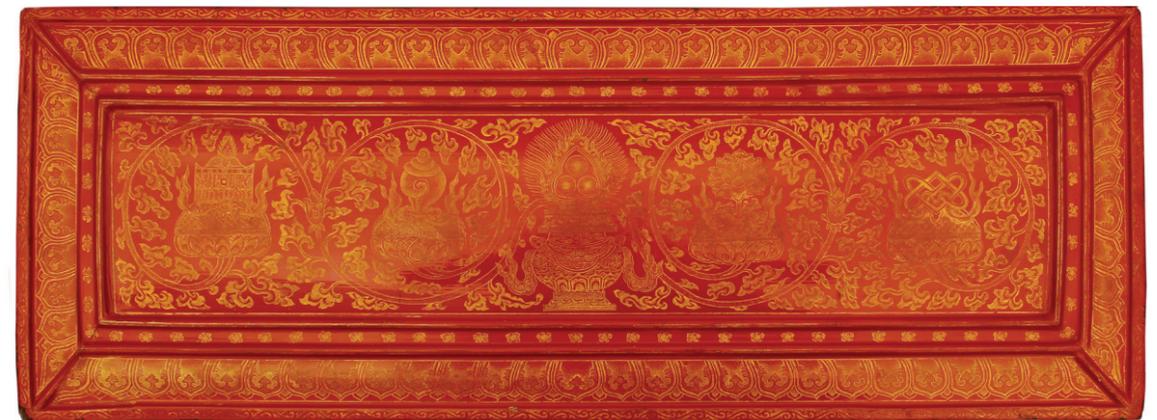
Ming, Yongle Period (ca. 1410 AD)

73 x 28.5 x 3.2 cm (28.74 x 11.22 x 1.26 in.) each

Among the most striking lacquer objects produced during the reign of the emperor Chengzu¹ were the manuscript covers made for the edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, or Kanjur (Tib. *bKa' gyur*; literally meaning 'words of Buddha'), which was printed in 1410 in the new capital Beijing.² One set of the Kanjur was presented to Künga Tashi (Tib. *Kun dga' bkra shis*), abbot of the Sakya monastery, in 1414.³ It is believed that other versions were produced and presented to major Tibetan monasteries.

This well preserved pair of *sutra* covers is of the same type and consists of camphorwood (*cinnamomum camphora*) boards, covered with numerous layers of cinnabar lacquer.⁴ The central motif on both covers is the triple flaming jewel (Skt. *triratna*), symbolizing the three core elements of Buddhism – the Buddha, his teachings and his monastic community, surmounting a richly adorned water pot (Skt. *kalasha*; Tib. *bum pa*). Each *triratna* is flanked by four of the Eight Auspicious Symbols (Skt. *ashtamangala*; Tib. *bkra shis rtags brgyad*), which represent the offerings made by the gods to Buddha Shakyamuni immediately after he attained enlightenment.⁵ The top cover features the Wheel of the Law, the banner of victory, the pair of golden fish and the precious vase. The parasol, conch, endless knot and lotus flower are depicted on the bottom cover. The *triratna* and the auspicious emblems are surrounded by swirling floral scrolls and each of the *ashtamangalas* are placed on lotus bases. The central panels, separated by raised borders and a narrow band of clouds, are framed by rows of lotus petals, and the outer rims feature the characteristic scroll pattern frequently found on Tibeto-Chinese art in the early 15th century.

It is remarkable that not only the wide outer surfaces have been lavishly decorated but the sides as well, again displaying a finely engraved scroll motif. At one end of the covers on the sides, foliate branches issue from the mouth of a *kirtimukha*-mask, while the other end shows a decoration consisting of flowers and scrolls. The interior surface of the top cover is inscribed with a bi-lingual text in Chinese and Tibetan above a lotus base and within a flaming halo, listing the title of the *sutra* that it once contained: "The third volume of the second Prajnaparamita *sutra*, the holiest great wisdom for ferrying across, in 18,000 verses."⁶ This method used for the indication of information relating to the original content of the covers is Chinese and does not correspond to the Tibetan system. Manuscript covers from Tibet are not inscribed on the interior, but usually feature an engraved character on one of the sides of the upper cover (or on both), thus enabling the identification of the *sutra* text.





The *qiangjin* technique employed for the ornamentation of these *sutra* covers was first developed in the Song period and is sophisticated; it uses fine lines incised into the lacquer surface, into which gold foil or powdered gold is pressed into the grooves.⁷

These *sutra* covers are impressive examples of the refined taste, creativity and skill of the craftsmen active in the early Ming imperial

workshops during the reign of the Yongle emperor; even the smallest details were executed with greatest precision and no effort was spared to achieve the best possible artistic result.



NOTES:

1. The posthumous honorific title of the Yongle emperor Zhu Di was 'Chengzu'; see Watt/Leidy 2005, p.9.
2. Stoddard 2008, p.50; Watt/Ford 1991, p.117, 118, no.49; for a detailed discussion on the Sakya Kanjur, see Wen Wu Journal, Issue 9, 1985, p.85-89; the covers were presumably made in Nanjing and were then brought to the new capital.
3. Henss 2014, vol.1, p.242-245, no.364, 365. This set of the Kanjur was preserved in the Sakya monastery until the outbreak of the 'Cultural Revolution' in 1966/67 and was then transferred to the Potala Palace in Lhasa.
4. Several sets of sutra covers in this 'Sakya style' with identical decoration are known in western collections or have appeared on the art market; for further examples see Kotoken, Hirano. Chugoku Urushi Kogei Ten, Tokyo 1991, cat.-no.1-21; Reynolds, Valrae. From the Sacred Realm. Treasures of Tibetan Art from the Newark Museum, Munich/London/New York 1999, pl.2; Watt/Leidy 2005, p.56, 57; Brown 2012, p.198-201, no.49; Clunas/Harrison-Hall (ed.) 2014, p.230, 231, fig.200; auction catalog Sotheby's Hong Kong, Fine Chinese Ceramics and Works of Art, 31 October 1995, lot-no.633; auction catalog Christie's Hong Kong, Arts for the Emperors – Visions of the Buddhist Paradise & Fine Chinese Works of Art, 26/27 April 1998, lot-no.519; auction catalog Christie's New York, Masterpieces of Ancient and Imperial China, 17 September 2008, lot-no.586.
5. For the meaning of the Eight Auspicious Symbols see Beer 2004, p.171-187.
6. The author wishes to thank Simone Griessmayer, M.A. (Zurich) for this translation.
7. Watt/Leidy 2005, p.55; the same technique and a similar decoration representing the Eight Auspicious Buddhist Symbols has been used for a rectangular *sutra* box, see auction catalog Christie's London, Ming – The Age of Refinement, 16 November 1998, lot-no.11.