

**Circular Carved Red Lacquer Dish
BATEA 317**

I've chosen this circular carved red lacquer dish from our collection - it's made from many layers of lacquer and has an auspicious bright red colour. The central decoration is a deeply carved imperial dragon chasing a flaming pearl. The dragon is surrounded by clouds against a dark diaper patterned background, encircled by a border of scrolling peony flowers representing nobility and wealth. There is a panel of 6 incised Chinese gold characters on the back. The material, colour, and subject matter of this dish are all quintessentially Chinese.

This dish also has quite a story - in 1976 while on holiday in Florence, Italy and browsing in a local antique shop, Brian (the Museum's founder) spotted the shopkeeper using this lacquer dish as an ashtray to stub out his cigarette!

Later, while closely inspecting it in its distressed condition, Brian found an imperial Ming dynasty mark on its back dating it to 1572 - 1573. This revealed to him that it was made over 400 years ago, in a specialist imperial lacquer workshop for the imperial court. Imperial dragons usually have five claws, but these ones unusually have 4. If you look closely it appears one of claws may have been removed but for what reason we can only speculate. Why do you think they only have four claws?

I have often wondered what stories this dish could tell us of its journey, from its origins as an exquisitely hand-crafted prized object, made for the Chinese Ming imperial court so many centuries ago. Only to being found in a dilapidated condition by Brian in Europe so many miles away from its original location!