

Inscribed Panel

33.7 x 95.7 cm (13 $^{1}/_{4}$ x 37 $^{5}/_{8}$ inches)

Wood
Egypt Mamluk
14th to 15th Century

A rectangular wooden panel formed of three planks and carved with an Arabic inscription in bold naskh script within a border of interlinked trefoil motifs. The inscription reads: ‘ana bab al-dukhul li’l-tabakh [li'l-matbakh?] fi-ma yashtahi al-mar’ min ladhidh al-ta’am’ [‘I am the entrance to the kitchen(?) in which one craves delicious food’]. The work was painted in bright blue, red, and white.

The majority of carved wooden Mamluk inscriptions feature royal or religious texts, making this a rare example of a culinary subject. This panel must, therefore, have been designed for the kitchen of a wealthy household. Wood interiors were a great luxury in Mamluk Egypt as the scarcity of timber within the country meant it had to be imported from Anatolia, India, and Africa, at high cost. It tended to be used primarily for ceilings, door frames, and door leaves. A very similar contemporaneous panel with the same provenance and still with the Toledo Museum of Art (1925.137) holds another food-related inscription that has only been partially deciphered: law ya’lamu al-dud ma fi al-nahl min ‘asal …, [‘If the worm knew what the bee contained by way of honey …’]. These are the only two known architectural examples with inscriptions of this kind.