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Qajar Tile Depicting Three Wise Men

Iran, 19th century

Fritware with polychrome underglaze decoration

25.5 cm high, 25 cm wide

Stock no.: A5920

Provenance: French private collection since the 19th century.

Fritware tiles with cobalt blue backgrounds, and mauve, yellow, and turquoise highlights painted under transparent glaze, were produced during the Qajar dynasty (1789–1925). The most abundant examples of Qajar tiles are rectangular, with a width of approximately 25cm, as in this example. They typically feature one or two figures. In the mid-19th century, Qajar tiles began to be sold purely for display rather than for use in multi-part friezes. Popular themes included the Shahnameh and Khamsa of Nizami, as well as generic scenes of mounted falconers or women in a garden. Many tiles were made from the same mold so the same scenes recur with only slight variations in colour.

This example, however, features unique decoration, seemingly depicting the Three Magi or the Three Wise Men. Each holds a large gift, and sports a crown, rather than a turban, denoting their royal status. They are dressed in Safavid dress with rich colours and patterns. The background features churches, possibly the Armenian Churches of Isafahan.

The depiction of Biblical scenes, such as the Virgin Mary and Child, were not uncommon on Qajar ceramics, drawing inspiration from the influx of European visual material in Iran. A panel dating to 1887-1888 in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London ([561:1 to 57-1888](#)), features scenes from the life of Yusuf, the Biblical Joseph.