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Painted wooden chest  
102 cm x 70 cm x 36 cm 19th century

A striking tiger-skin design appears to be draped over this chest. The pelt is depicted as completely covering the lid and upper part of the chest. The left-hand side of the chest (not shown) is painted with a leopard-skin pattern inside a plain border, while the right-hand side of the chest is undecorated.

The chest is constructed of comparatively thick and heavy boards, reinforced at the front and back edges with a few plain metal straps. These straps have been added purely to strengthen the chest and were not intended to be a decorative feature. The solid construction, the design, and the proportions of the chest, which is relatively tall in relation to its width, point to an eastern Tibetan origin.

Tiger-skin designs are a characteristic of furniture as well as other objects from eastern Tibet. The addition of a panel of leopard-skin pattern on one side of the chest is not merely decorative but has deeper sig-

nificance. The tiger and leopard combination is associated both with the Chinese idea of a harmonious balance between yin and yang. In a Tibetan context it is even more specifically associated with the Tantric Buddhist notion of the union of wisdom and compassion. It is probably not an oversight that only one side panel of the chest has been painted: a single panel of leopard-skin design may have been all that was required to create the symbolic balance. An alternative explanation is that the chest was originally one of a pair of chests that were made to stand side by side. In such cases it is not unusual for the painter to decorate only the outer side faces of the chests.

Assigning a date to this type of eastern Tibetan chest is difficult since there is little comparative material from other fields to help. However, from the condition of the chest and the colors used a nineteenth-century date seems likely.

