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LACQUER PAINTING ON CARDBOARD WITH THE CONSTELLATION
'SAGITTARIUS'

IRAN; 19TH CENTURY

H: 13.5; W: 17.5 CM

Constellations and symbolic depictions of the planets were already found in Islamic art under the first caliphs, but were especially widespread from the end of the 12th century to the early 14th. Both the Arabs and the Persians were splendid mathematicians whose studies were of great importance for astronomy. It is easy to imagine that as more knowledge was acquired about the heavenly bodies, the world of astrology gradually attracted popular interest.

Several of the animals used as signs of the zodiac are depicted in Islamic art as mythical creatures. Sagittarius, which is found here on a lacquer painting from the 19th century, is shown as a centaur with a tail ending in a dragon's head. The dragon motif, which is also found in the sign of Gemini, should be seen as a symbol of a pseudo-planet (*jawzahr*). This "planet," in turn, can be identified with the nodes of the moon, the points at which the orbits of the sun and the moon cross and where solar and lunar eclipses may occur.