



Curator's Notes from the July 15th ArtStop

Topic: Persian Ceramics
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Bowl with Bird Design, Iran, Nishapur, 10th century, Gift of Edwin Binney, 3rd, 1971.72

In our Persian art gallery, we are able to represent several of the different kinds of painting and craft-making traditions of the region, and one place we are able to do that in some depth is with ceramics. The museum has a representative collection of ceramics made between the 10th and the 17th century, demonstrating a variety of styles and techniques. And that question of technique is what I'd like to focus on today—because these are not works of high art, but what we appreciate them for today is the fine quality of these essentially utilitarian objects, and the amount of work that went into producing them.

We start with the earliest material: two black-and-white bowls from about the 10th century, attributed to the city of Nishapur in northeastern Iran. Extensive excavations were undertaken at this site—continuing even today—because it was such an important trade center in the 10th, 11th and 12th centuries, a major point for transshipment of goods between the Middle East, Iran, Central Asia and China. Because of that location, Chinese porcelains were available and were much admired in Nishapur, and in fact throughout Iran and the Middle East. As a result, local potters tried to make their own imitations of Chinese wares, but their own clay was much coarser and had a strong color to it (yellow or red) that was quite unlike the Chinese porcelain. One solution was to cover the vessels in a white slip, which gave the general appearance of a white porcelain base that Chinese-inspired designs were then painted onto. In Nishapur this white-slipped base was also the canvas for many other types of slip

decoration—unique to this part of the world—with strong colors and unusual designs.

The two Nishapur bowls on view in this case are experiments with a very modern black-and-white palette that gave rise to many kinds of decoration. One very popular type is adorned only with calligraphy, mostly proverbs. Another major type made use of a bird motif combined with writing. On the example illustrated here, as well as on another bowl in the same case, the Arabic word *baraka* (blessing) is repeated around the rim, but the letters have been almost totally transformed into decorative shapes far removed from the original letter forms. In the center is an equally abstracted bird with folded wings. We wonder why this particular combination became so widespread, but the answer eludes us today.



Bowl (with bird design), Iran, Nishapur, 10th century, Gift of the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim Collection, 2006.213

Over the next many years, potters in Iran developed another way to get the effect of Chinese porcelain, coming up with the solution of enhancing the local clay with ground quartz and a substance called frit, one of the materials for making glass.

This takes us to the next group of objects in the case, the three turquoise-glazed vessels. The new ceramic body was much whiter, and the walls of these vessels were much thinner than the two black-and-white bowls—overall the

effect is much closer to the Chinese originals. Many vessels in pure white were made; these examples show a variant employing a turquoise glaze that was also very popular in Iran. It is made with a copper base that turns blue in reaction with the alkaline glaze in which it is suspended. The objects here show three different approaches—that on the left takes its form from Chinese vessels—small, with sharply slanted sides and a flanged rim—but it has decorative forms found only in Iran, with overglaze colors and gold that were affixed in separate firings. The bowl in the middle is molded and has iconography drawn from ancient sources—including sphinxes and lions—while the ewer is quite simply made, with impressed decoration made probably by applying one’s thumb to the exterior surface.



Bowl, Iran, 11th-13th century, 1959.3.a *Bowl (footed)*, Iran, 12th century, 1964.74 *Ewer*, Iran, 13th century, 1954.15 Gifts of Mrs. Irving T. Snyder

Chinese prototypes—a group of objects decorated with a luster glaze, made with metallic substances affixed to the vessels in a special kiln in which the amount of oxygen is slowly lowered over time. The technique for making objects with this glaze is highly specialized, and we believe that its secrets were carried with ceramicists as they moved from court to court. The technique seems to have arisen as a way to decorate glass, and we find it applied to ceramics in the 8th or 9th century in Iraq; lusterware was then made in Egypt in the 10th and 11th centuries, and by the 12th-13th century was being produced in Iran.

The earliest object in the case is the bowl with a harpy—it relates most



Bowl (with harpy decoration), Iran, 11th-12thC, 1964.133, Gift of Mrs. Irving T. Snyder



Bowl (with figures and serpents), Iran, 11th-13thC, 1964.73 *Jar*, Iran, 13thC, 1964.84 *Bowl (with flying ducks)*, Iran, 13thC, 1964.75 Gifts of Mrs. Irving T. Snyder

dates to soon after the arrival of potters from Egypt in Iran. The next set of works is associated with the site of Kashan in Iran, where a famous family of potters was based. They

signed and dated their works—very helpful for our study—and they were active in making not only bowls and cups but also for creating large architectural tiles such as the *mihrab* tile on loan from the Metropolitan Museum of Art. As that piece well demonstrates, Kashan lusterware is distinguished by the combination of luster glazes with splashes of blue, and the use of a scrawling motif in the background.

The star-shaped tile in this case is also from an architectural setting. The seated figure in the center is dressed in courtly attire, and the writing surrounding him is Persian poetry. On the large surfaces; an interesting work, rather than having a



Tile (with seated figure), Iran, mid 13thC, 2006.229, Gift of the Catherine and Ralph Benkaim

shape. The latest phase of lusterware is represented by the water pipe base on view here. It has a coppery-colored glaze that is typical of the 17th century revival of the technique in Iran, when a whole new set of vessel types and decorative motifs were introduced to the repertoire. Objects like this can often be seen in paintings of the period, also on display in this gallery.

ArtStops are 15 minute, staff-led tours by Museum curators and educators every Thursday and the third Tuesday of each month at noon.