



# CERAMICS XV. THE ISLAMIC PERIOD, 16TH-19TH CENTURIES

---

## The Safavid period

Although several European travelers to Persia in the 11th/17th century reported active potteries at Shiraz, Mašhad, Yazd, Zarand, and especially Kermān (see, e.g., Lane, pp. 119-23), there are no detailed records that would assist in attributing specific pieces surviving from the rule of the Safavid dynasty (907-1145/1501-1732) to any one of them. Furthermore, relevant excavations have been carried out only at a few sites, like Marv (Mary; see, e.g., Masson, pp. 7-72) and Qandahar (see, e.g., Crowe, apud McNicoll, pp. 49-50, 60-66). It is thus still necessary to classify ceramics simply by names of provinces, for instance, Azarbaijan, Khorasan, and Kermān, and opinions vary even on these broad attributions. Nevertheless, it appears that both frit bodies (compounded of ground quartz and fine white clay, with a small admixture of ground glass) and overglazes were of better quality in the eastern half of the country.

The relatively few pieces that survive from before the mid-10th/16th century reflect the predominant influence of Timurid (see xiv, above) and Ottoman court designs, with their characteristic fusion of Chinese and Persian motifs (see a blue-and-white flask in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, dated



930/1523; Lane, pp. 93-94, pl. 64B).

Several types of “Kubachi ware,” named after the eastern Caucasian town in Dagestan though probably originally imported from Persian Azarbaijan, were produced continuously from the late Timurid period into the 11th/17th century. So far no archeological evidence for the Safavid period has been found in Azarbaijan. Examples of this ware, heavily potted and with crackled glaze, are still being acquired in Dagestan for the Hermitage Museum in Leningrad (see, e.g., Ivanov, pp. 64-66). The earliest type of Kubachi ware, characterized by black designs under transparent turquoise or green glaze, reflects the influence of Chinese wares from Jingdezhen (Ching-te-chen) in Fukien province and perhaps Cizhou (Tz’u-chou) in Honan province. Almost contemporary was a series of blue-and-white dishes with designs from Ming export porcelains (see, e.g., Lane, p. 79, pl. 21). A third type, with polychrome slip painting and an occasional pink-slipped ground (see, e.g., Lane, p. 80), was introduced in Safavid times. Tiles and dishes of this type, with animal and floral motifs ([Plate xli](#)), as well as stylish figures or busts, can be dated to the late 10th/16th century, in the period of Shah ‘Abbās I (966-1038/1588-1629). The motifs and designs are Persian in origin and owe little to Chinese imports (see, e.g., Lane, pp. 79-81, pls. 53B-56). To this group belongs a dark-blue underglaze-painted zodiac disk dated 971/1563 (Islamisches Museum, East Berlin; see, e.g., Lane, p. 93, pl. 53A), on which the only discernible echo of Chinese designs is in the cloud shape, a motif that had been taken into the Persian repertory at least two centuries earlier.

In 1005/1597 Shah ‘Abbās decided to move the Safavid capital to Isfahan, and shortly after he opened the country to European traders from various East India companies, particularly the Dutch Vereenigte Oostindische Compagnie, which soon came to dominate the trade in Chinese porcelain and celadon (see, e.g., Volker, pp. 16-17). In 1017/1608 Shah ‘Abbās endowed the dynastic shrine at Ardabīl with a large collection of such pieces (see, e.g., Pope), a number of which date from as early as the late 8th/14th century (see [ardabīl iv. ardabil collection of chinese porcelain](#)). This kind of porcelain and later examples were still available on the Persian market in the mid-13th/19th century; some pieces were collected by one Dr. Richard and were later acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (see, e.g., Crowe, p. 109), under the selective purchasing policy initiated by Major Robert Murdoch-Smith in 1873 (see, e.g., Scarce, pp. 70-81). This large assortment of objects was to form the nucleus of the Persian collections in the museum. The finer Persian frit wares



of the Safavid period were never slavishly copied from the blue-and-white porcelain produced during the reign of the Ming emperor Wan-li (1573-1619) or the subsequent “transitional” wares (ca. 1619-59; see, e.g., Lane, pp. 90-91) leading into those of the Qing (Ch’ing) dynasty (1644-1912) and the reign of Kangxi (K’ang-hsi; 1662-1722). Although many Chinese motifs are easily recognizable, they have been adapted and assembled into truly Persian compositions, often with great humor. Dated examples include a “teapot” in the British Museum (1025/1616; e.g., Lane, p. 92), a bowl in the Museum für Islamische Kunst, West Berlin (1037/1628; Lane, pl. 74B), and a *qalīān* (water pipe) base (*kūza-ye qalīān*) in the Victoria and Albert Museum (1051/1641; e.g., Lane, p. 98, pl. 79A) in the shape of a *kendi* (see, e.g., Sweetman and Guérin; Lion-Goldschmidt, p. 30), a Southeast Asian water container produced in China for the export market for two centuries. Shapes range from dishes of all sizes (diam. 10-55 cm) to bowls (diam. 7-50 cm), bottles, vases with multiple trumpet-shaped necks, long-necked *qalīān* bases, sweetmeat dishes, tomb tiles (the latest dated 1083/1672, in the Victoria and Albert Museum), and tile panels like those in the congregational mosque at Kermān.

The most popular Chinese designs are found on *kraak* (the Dutch approximation of “carrack,” referring to the type of Portuguese ship that first brought this porcelain to Europe; see, e.g., Pope, p. 136) ware. The blue-and-white dishes often have brown rims; the usual organization of the surface consists of eight panels encircling a central composition containing a seascape (Plate xlii) or a landscape with decorative motifs including baskets, lotus sprays, birds, insects, deer, and a variety of misunderstood Buddhist symbols. Panels in *kraak* ware with sketchy painting and dark-gray coloring were still popular toward the end of the Safavid period. At times the Persian potter handled his brush with feeling and gusto, and some of the cobalt-blue painting can be compared most favorably with the mechanical brush strokes of his Chinese counterpart (Plate xlii). The earlier square, or “tassel,” marks, Persian imitations of Chinese marks, were painted in blue on the inner side of the base ring, but gradually they were replaced by sketchy marks resembling a capital A or by multiple crosses painted in black (see, e.g., Lane, pp. 115-18 figs. 26-54). The double-recessed base in late dishes and bowls imitated early Qing prototypes and included coarse marks indicating the “spurs” on which the vessels had rested during firing. These marks vary in number according to the size of the vessel (see, e.g., Lane, p. 101).

By the mid-11th/17th century one of two additional colors, a pallid yellow or a



dirty red, was being added to blue-and-white compositions based on well-known Chinese themes. One *qalīān* base in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Plate xliii), dated 1049/1658, has a pattern of white slip with yellow touches on a blue ground. Occasional designs painted in white slip or carved through green or coffee-colored glazes recall Chinese Swatow wares (see, e.g., Lane, pl. 89). Further, new Qing decorative motifs in blue and white and possibly derived from embroideries (see, e.g., Tregear, pp. 149-58), including large blossoms and leafy scrolls, as well as separate stalks of dianthus (see, e.g., Crowe, apud McNicoll, pp. 60, 66), from the last quarter of the 11th/17th century also appeared on dishes and bowls. A greater variety of colors is to be found in tiles on both religious and secular buildings in Isfahan, Kermān, and other provincial centers (see, e.g., Hillenbrand, pp. 792-810), in both  *cuerda seca* (lit. “dry cord”; see, e.g., Lushey-Schmeisser) and  *haftrangī* (lit. “seven-color”; Plate xliiv) techniques, though not in tile mosaics, which had become very costly and time-consuming (Plate xlv). Toward the end of the Safavid period the brushwork on such tiles became sketchy and the coloring dingy (see, e.g., Hillenbrand, p. 810).

Echoes of blanc de chine, a white Chinese ware with incised or molded decoration, appear in delicate ewers and incised dishes perhaps from as early as the rule of Shah ‘Abbās II (1052-77/1642-66), the last strong Safavid ruler. Rich yellow or green glazes also occur on similar shapes and on bottles or rectangular containers with molded figures, animals, or geometric scrolls (see, e.g., Lane, p. 109, pls. 96-97). A short-lived revival of luster painting on bottles (for a sample dated 1084/1673, see Watson, p. 166 pl. 136), ewers, small dishes, and cups may be datable to approximately the same period; the depiction of garden scenes on some of them recalls the gold-decorated margins of contemporary manuscripts. The on-glaze (overglaze) is sometimes tinted blue.

Two large dishes in the British Museum, each with a black inner rim incised in white with a cursive text, one in polychrome (dated 1088/1677; see, e.g., Lane, pl. 60B), the other blue and white (1109/1697; see, e.g., Lane, pl. 72B), demonstrate a more mechanical style of decoration, which characterizes the ceramics of subsequent periods. The latest known date on a Safavid piece is 1134/1722, on a bowl in the Hetjens Museum, Düsseldorf (see, e.g., Zick-Nissen, p. 272 no. 408).

The Zand and Qajar periods

The political upheavals of the 12th/18th century apparently precluded any



significant production of ceramic vessels, though monumental tile panels in the Wakil mosque of Karīm Khan Zand at Shiraz (ca. 1187/1773), the *madrassa* of the Qajar governor Ebrāhīm Khan Ṣāḥīr-al-Dawla (1218-40/1803-24) in Kermān (Plate [xlvi](#)), and the Golestān palace in Tehran (remodeled ca. 1284/1867) attest to a certain continuity in ceramic production. A new pink color in floral compositions recalls Chinese porcelain of the famille rose, which was at its best under the emperor Qianlong (Ch'ien-lung; 1753-96; see, e.g., Medley, p. 247). In contemporary Europe ceramic decoration was being revolutionized by the invention of transfer printing (see, e.g., Osborne, pp. 789-90), a technique that greatly reduced the cost of production and stimulated imports to Persia. The porcelains produced by the Rockingham factory near Sheffield in England and the Gardner factory near Moscow in Russia (Osborne, p. 682), were also great favorites there, and the odd piece could still be found in the *bāzārs* in the 1340s-50s Š./1960s-70s. Few locally produced polychrome enamel-painted bowls have survived; on those that do a casual style of floral painting, well illustrated by a bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum dated 1262/1846 (Plate [xlvii](#)), with naive figures in a landscape, recalls the decorations on lacquer pencases and mirrors, though in a somewhat “chocolate-box” style. Greater attention to detail is apparent in a large ceramic table top in nine sections, one central panel and eight shaped surrounding pieces. This ensemble, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is dated 1304/1887 and signed by ‘Alī-Moḥammad Eṣfahānī.

The walls of fine white stemmed bowls were sometimes pierced with patterns of birds and flowers, and some calligraphy was often added inside the well, as in a bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum dated 1224/1809 (see, e.g., Lane pl. 918). In the 1280s/1860s Meybod near Nā’īn was still producing blue-and-white dishes and bowls (see, e.g., Centlivres-Demont) similar to those collected by Murdoch-Smith; they were decorated with flower sprays (1282/1865; Victoria and Albert Museum, no. 1278 ‘76) or exotic buildings in landscape settings (1296/1878; see, e.g., Centlivres-Demont, p. 130 pl. 29).

In the late 13th/19th century a red-bodied peasant pottery was produced south of the Caspian; the surfaces of bowls and bottles are decorated with spots or runs of white clay slip on a brown ground (see Victoria and Albert Museum no. 1076-1883), producing an effect not unlike that of Staffordshire pottery (see, e.g., Osborne, pp. 746-47). A marbled finish in green, yellow, and brown (see Victoria and Albert Museum no. 1354-1876) also characterizes coarse dishes and bowls possibly from the same area. Throughout the period more



humble, unglazed wares continued to be produced everywhere for daily use, unnoticed and uncollected by connoisseurs.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

- M. Centlivres-Demont, *Une communauté de potiers en Iran*, Wiesbaden, 1971.
- Y. Crowe, "A Preliminary Enquiry in Underglaze Decoration of Safavid Wares," in *Decorative Techniques and Styles in Asian Ceramics*, Colloquies in Art and Archaeology in Asia 8, London, 1979, pp. 104-25.
- R. Hillenbrand, "Safavid Architecture," in *Camb. Hist. Iran VI*, pp. 759-842.
- A. A. Ivanov, "Fayansovoe blyudo XV veka iz Mashkhada," *Soobshcheniya gosudarstvennogo Ermitazha* 45, 1980, pp. 64-66.
- A. Lane, *Later-Islamic Pottery*, London, 1957.
- D. Lion-Goldschmidt, *La porcelains Ming*, Fribourg, 1978.
- I. Lushey-Schmeisser, *The Pictorial Tile Cycle of Hašt Behešt in Isfahan and Its Iconographic Tradition*, Rome, 1978.
- A. McNicoll, "Excavations at Qandahar 1975. Second Interim Report," *Afghan Studies* 1, 1978, pp. 41-66.
- M. E. Masson, ed., *Trudy yuzhnoturkmenistanskoï arkheologicheskoi èkspeditsii II*, Ashkhabad, 1951, pp. 7-72, 147-168.
- M. Medley, *The Chinese Potter*, Oxford, 1976.
- H. Osborne, ed., *The Oxford Companion to Decorative Arts*, Oxford, 1975.
- J. A. Pope, *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine*, Washington, D.C., 1956.
- J. Scarce, "Travels with Telegraph and Tiles in Persia. From the Private Papers



of Major-General Sir Robert Murdoch Smith,” *Art and Archaeology Research Papers* 3, 1973, pp. 70-81.

J. Sweetman and N. Guérin, *The Spouted Ewer and Its Relatives in the Far East*, Brighton, Eng., 1983.

M. Tregear, “Manchu Taste in Ch’ing Porcelain Decoration,” in *Decorative Techniques and Styles in Asian Ceramics*, n.p., n.d., pp. 149-58.

T. Volker, *Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company*, Leiden, 1954.

O. Watson, *Persian Lustre Ware*, London, 1985.

M. D. Whitman, *Persian Blue and White Ceramics. Cycles of Chinoiserie*, Ph.D. diss., New York University, 1978.

J. Zick-Nissen, *Islamische Keramik*, Dusseldorf, 1973.