



HERMITAGE MUSEUM II. COLLECTION OF THE ISLAMIC PERIOD

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Persian art from the advent of Islam until the beginning of the 20th century is well represented in the State Hermitage Museum. The total number of artifacts is not known precisely, because the collection has never been fully documented; only two specialized catalogues have been published so far.

However, not all periods in this 1400-year time-span are represented equally well, because of the way the collection developed. It was put together only after the establishment of the Oriental Department in 1920. At that time the museums in St. Petersburg underwent a thorough process of reorganization and specialization, in the course of which the medieval Persian collections were consolidated at the Hermitage. The museum also acquired Persian artifacts from Dāġestān (the Kubachi settlement), but no archeological excavations were undertaken, nor were purchases made of objets d'art in Persia itself.

Plate I. Figure of a horse, 10th century. Bronze/brass, height 36 cm, length 42



cm.

Plate II. Ewer, 12th-early 13th century. Bronze/brass, silver, height 36.5 cm.

During the first two and a half centuries after the spread of Islam, a new form of art was beginning to take shape in the lands under the rule of the Omayyad and the 'Abbasid dynasties, whose major political centers lay to the west of Persia. There are very few examples from this period at the Hermitage, but silver artifacts from the 7th-9th centuries testify to the continuity of a strong Sasanian artistic tradition within Persia. The earliest examples of Islamic art as such in this collection are from the 10th century.

The history of Persian art between the 10th and 19th centuries is usually classified according to dynasty, rather than stylistic evolution. Although this type of classification is becoming outdated and has its shortcomings, no other system has yet gained wide acceptance. In this article the objets d'art in the Hermitage collection are reviewed, in turn, according to their medium and material as well as their age.

Plate III. Water jug, early 13th century. Bronze, silver, height 35 cm.

Plate IV. Eight tiles, early 14th century. Faience, each tile height 15 cm, width 15 cm.

Plate V. Dervish's kaškul, 19th century. Faience, glaze-painted with blue, brown and black paint, height 12 cm, length 22.5 cm.

METALWORK

This is the best collection of Persian artifacts at the Hermitage, covering the entire period from the 10th to the beginning of the 20th century.

Bronze/brass. The items made of bronze or brass (no laboratory analysis of the alloys has been conducted so far) make up the core of the metalwork collection, numbering more than 650 items in total, including fragments. The group of Khorasan bronzes produced between the 11th and the beginning of the 13th century is the most numerous, consisting of more than 220 items, many of which are embellished with inlaid designs in copper and silver. It includes such well-known objets d'art as the 542/1148 pen-case (*qalamdān*) produced by the master craftsman 'Omar b. Fażl b. Yusof al-Bayy, which is inscribed with verses of Persian poetry; the famous vessel from Herat, made in



559/1163 by the craftsmen Moḥammad b. ‘Abd-al-Waḥid and Mas‘ud b. Aḥmad Naqqāš; the 11th-century lynx-shaped, open-work incense burner, which is inscribed with the name of the craftsman (or owner?) ‘Ali b. Moḥammad Tāji; the famous water vessel in the shape of a female zebu with its calf and a lion, which was cast in 603/1206 by the master craftsman ‘Ali b. Moḥammad b. Abu’l-Qāsem Naqqāš.

The next chronological group comprises about 80 artifacts from the second half of the 13th to the beginning of the 15th century, with inlaid designs in gold and silver. Noteworthy among these is a candlestick from 725/1325, which is the work of the master craftsman Ruḥ-al-Din Ṭāher, a vessel from 733/1332-33 made by Moḥammad-Šāh Širāzi, and a vessel made in the 1340s for Abu Eshāq Enju. Most of the items in this group were probably made in Širāz during the 14th and 15th centuries, although future investigations might attribute some of them to other centers of production.

The third group, which is catalogued, consists of 172 copper and bronze/brass items dating from the mid-14th to the mid-18th century. It is the largest museum collection of artifacts from this period in the world. During that time gold and silver inlaid designs gradually disappeared, and Arabic inscriptions were replaced by verses of the Persian verse of Sa‘di, Ḥāfez, Qāsem-al-Anwār, and Kātebi Toršizi, as well as less famous poets. Nineteen of these artifacts bear the exact date of their production, and five are inscribed with the names of the craftsmen who made them. One set of items in this group was made in Khorasan between the 1450s and the 1530s, but in most cases the place of production has not yet been determined.

Plate VI. Feast in the Open Air, by Rezā ‘Abbāsi, early 17th century. Two miniatures, both enclosed in a yellow frame and backed on pink card; paper, gouache, gold, left half 26.2×16.5 cm.

The fourth group represents the period from the second half of the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century. There is a sharp decline in the quality of copper and bronze/brass items produced after the mid-18th century, and a marked change in their form and design, as well as in their ornamentation and the type of inscriptions that were made. The Hermitage has more than 200 such items, which still await serious study, as is the case with other collections of this kind around the world.

Silver and gold. Very few artifacts of precious metals have been preserved. In



the Hermitage collection there is a small silver plate from the beginning of the 11th century, six silver vessels from the 11th-12th centuries, five silver bracelets from the 12th century, gold and silver jewelry from the 13th century (found in a hoard in the Gorgān region at the beginning of the 20th century), a silver medallion from the second half of the 16th century, a zinc basin embellished with precious stones and gold inlays from the second half of the 16th century, a small golden cup and trays with enamel ornamentation from the first half of the 18th century, twelve gold and enamel artifacts from the 19th century, a small group of silver objects from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, some of which were produced by the master craftsman Ja'far, and a large silver tray made by the master craftsman Ḥāj Sayyed Moḥammad 'Orayzi Eṣfahāni and presented to the Hermitage on the occasion of the Third Congress on Iranian Art and Archaeology held in Leningrad in 1935.

Steel. The museum has steel open-work door decorations from the 17th century, which feature quotations from the Qur'ān (13:24 and 10:63), as well as a group of about twenty items from the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, all of which were either made by Ḥājī 'Abbās or produced at his workshop.

OTHERWORKS

Ceramics. This Persian art form is represented very unevenly in the collection of the Hermitage. There is almost no pottery dating from the 10th to the beginning of the 13th century. The Mongol era (1256-1335 C.E.) is represented only by some 20 objects, which include a few items and fragments of lusterware, and utensils with enamel decorations. However, there is a very good collection of luster tiles, like the specimens from the Emām-zāda Yaḥyā mausoleum in Varāmin (more than 1,000 items, although most of them are only fragments), as well as tiles tinted with cobalt and other colorants.

There are very few examples of fourteenth-century ceramics, but the museum boasts a magnificent collection of pottery from the period between the 15th and the beginning of the 18th century. This group is remarkable for both the quality and the quantity of the artifacts, which number around 1,000 items. Only the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has a collection to rival this one. The exhibits of the so called "Timurid era," dating from the period between the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century, are also worthy of note; they include a dish from Mašhad, dating from 878/1473-74, which is



inscribed with Persian verse. There is also a good representation of the various ceramic production centers of the Safavid period (16th-17th centuries).

Plate VII. Dagger with sheath, early 17th century. Steel, gold, enamel, precious stones, emerald, length 42.8 cm.

Plate VIII. Reservoir for a water pipe (qaliān), 19th century. Gold, enamel, height 20.2 cm.

Pottery from the 19th century, or “the Qājār era,” is also well represented. This group numbers more than 100 items, but research on it is yet to begin.

Manuscripts and miniatures. The manuscript collection comprises thirty-two volumes, dating from the 15th to the 19th century. Thirteen of them are illustrated, but there are no rare literary works among them. The most famous one among them is the manuscript of Neẓāmi’s *Ķamsa* which was copied for Šāhroḵ by the calligrapher Maḥmud in Herat in 835/1431.

The collection of individual miniatures and drawings totals 144 items and spans the period from the 15th to the beginning of the 19th century. Most remarkable among them are the following works of Reẓā ‘Abbāsi: “Youth with a Jug,” “Girl in a Fur Hat,” and “Feast in the Open Air.” Finally, it is worth mentioning the 15 oil paintings, from the end of the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century, which include two large canvases of rare battle scenes: “The Battle Between the Persians and the Russians” and “Fatḥ-‘Ali Shah Inspects the Persian Armies.”

Plate IX. Book rest, 17th century. Wood, paint finish, height 58 cm, width 20 cm.

Lacquer-work. This collection of 295 items is considered to be one of the largest museum displays of such artifacts. It consists mostly of pen-cases (*qalamdān*), mirror-cases, and boxes of different shapes and sizes, and it also includes 184 playing cards. The earliest specimens date from the 17th century, but most were produced in the 19th century. Among the rare exhibits are the manuscript stand (*raḥla*) from the mid-17th-century, the pen-case made by Moḥammad-Ebrāhim b. Ḥāji Yusof Qomi in 1092/1681, and the box of Moḥammad-‘Ali b. Moḥammad-Zamān, which was made in 1112/1700-01.

Textiles. This art form is represented very unevenly by the collection’s approximately 150 textile items, most of which date from the 16th to the 19th



century. For instance, to represent the 11th and 12th centuries there is only one fragment of a silk fabric. The collection also comprises some nineteenth-century embroideries. A few of the textiles and embroideries bear the name of the weavers. It is difficult to say how many of them are Persian, since they have never been catalogued. Among the rarer items is a cloth fragment from the 16th century depicting the lover Majnun among wild beasts, a silk textile with garden scenes from the same period, and a fragment of a fabric from the time of Nāder Shah (1730s-40s).

Carpets. This Persian art form is also unevenly represented by this collection. The earliest specimen is a fragment of a flatweave rug (*zilu*) from the 16th century. There are also twenty carpets and fragments of carpets dating from the 16th to the beginning of the 18th century, which include among them half of a carpet from the 16th century with animal motifs, a 17th-century silk carpet woven with silver thread, which has an asymmetrical design in the center, and a fragment of a 17th-century carpet from the Kermān group. There are more than 100 carpets from the 19th century, but none of them is particularly outstanding.

Seals and amulets. These artifacts have attracted the attention of researchers only in the last twenty years. Most are made of semi-precious stones, although there are some silver and bronze/brass ones. The specialist catalogue of the collection lists 158 Persian seals dating from the 16th to the beginning of the 20th century, as well as 300 older ones, from as far back as the 14th century. The older seals usually bear Kufic inscriptions, and their origins are more difficult to identify. It can be no more than assumed that most of them are of Persian origin. Among the rare specimens are the seal of Timur's son Mirān-šāh, dated 802/1399-1400, and the seal of Gowhar-šād, the wife of Šāhroḡ. The collection comprises 161 amulets, most of which are presumably of Persian origin.

Arms and armor. Arms and armor at the State Hermitage are assigned to the Arsenal. The Oriental Department displays only weapons inlaid with precious stones, the majority of which (sixteen) were transferred to the Hermitage from the Tsarskoe Selo arsenal in 1886. A few additional items came from the collection of Ivan Fyodorovich Paskevich.

Plate X. Small table, 19th century. Wood, paint finish, on three legs with a round top, diameter of top 52.5 cm, height 77 cm.



It is difficult to estimate the number of weapons at the Arsenal which are Persian in origin, because they are very similar to items of Turkish and Indian origin. Most date back to the 18th and the beginning of the 19th century. The oldest items in the collection are seven daggers dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, and several sword blades which might be from the same period. Some recent studies have classified the collection of so-called “Turkish helmets” from the 15th and the beginning of the 16th century as being of Persian origin, but this attribution requires further investigation.

Coins. All coins at the Hermitage are assigned to the Numismatics Department, which was enriched in the 1920s with contributions from the Asiatic Museum of the Academy of Sciences and from a few major private collections, such as the collection of Vladimir Vladimirovich Vel’yaminov-Zernov. Presently, the numismatic section boasts exhibits from almost all of the major Persian dynasties from the advent of Islam until the 20th century. They include many rare coins and some excellent specimens of gold and silver, as well as copper coins minted in different Persian towns. The collection contains about 5,000 items in total.

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