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METALWORK

METALWORK. Metalwork is perhaps the most continuous and best-documented artistic medium from Iran in the Islamic period. It survives mainly in brass (see BERENJ) and bronze. Most gold and silver wares, better known through literary accounts, were likely melted down (Ward, pp. 10-11). At times, echoing the forms of more ephemeral or less costly materials such as ceramics, metalwork from Iran and adjacent lands served a wide variety of utilitarian functions. These were nonetheless luxury wares that absorbed the creative energy of some of the best artists and reflected the main artistic trends and the tastes of successive dynasties. Written sources are an important means of documenting this medium. In addition to literary works, primarily geographical texts in Arabic and Persian, which provide information on centers of production and sources of metal ores (Allen, 1979, pp. iv-viii), the objects themselves often supply internal documentation through their inscriptions. Iranian metalwork is therefore an important resource for understanding the art Iran in the Islamic period in particular and the history of Islamic art in general.

Early Islamic metalwork. Silver and gold plate, especially the former, provide a well-documented art form in Sasanian Iran and in pre-Islamic western Central Asia. Sasanian silver vessels (bowls, dishes, cups, ewers, and bottles), often decorated with imperial symbolism such as the royal hunt (Harper and Meyers, pp. 40-98), must have appealed to the new Muslim rulers, who sought to emulate the traditions of Persian kingship. This can explain the existence of a large group of mainly silver gilt objects that continue and readapt the

Sasanian style. They are often characterized simply as “post-Sasanian,” but the issue of their provenance and dating remains uncertain (Harper, pp. 24-78; ART IN IRAN v. Sasanian, sec. “Silver plate”).

As the new Islamic polity asserted control over Iran and the territories to its east, many of the same metalwork forms and techniques continued to develop and evolve, while much of the representational imagery gradually lost its original meaning. It seems likely that objects fashioned of both silver and gold persisted as status symbols for the new aristocracy. It is therefore often difficult to pinpoint where Sasanian art ends and Islamic art begins in the first centuries of Muslim rule. The situation with contemporary base metal is similar, but these objects also stand more obviously in a definable relationship to Islamic art. For example, a tall, pear-shaped cast bronze ewer, in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, and set on a high foot with handle in the form of an elongated panther exemplifies the transition from the Late Antique to the early Islamic period (Figure 1). Abstract ornament on the body of the vessel combines vegetal designs with a highly stylized version of the paired wings and central orb of the Sasanian royal crown, while the pattern of overlapping floral petals on the foot and the feline handle hark back to the classicizing influence in Parthian art (Harper, pp. 60, 66). On the other hand, the stylization and abstraction of the decoration and the proliferation of repetitive surface decoration are singular features of Islamic art.

Medieval metalwork. During this period Iranian metalwork underwent considerable modification in terms of technical, iconographic, and aesthetic standards. Although the mechanism for transmission is not always clear, it is apparent that Jaziran (i.e., of Upper Mesopotamia) and Syro-Egyptian metalwork of this period also benefited from as well as contributed to these developments in Iran (Ward, pp. 71-91).

Sometime toward the middle of the 12th century, the metalwork industry in Iran underwent a major transformation that was to be of signal importance for its history. Bronze and brass objects, some of them copying shapes in precious metal, were inlaid with silver and copper or gold. At roughly the same time, hammered brass began to replace cast brass in the manufacture of luxury metal-ware. Khorasan has long been recognized as the center for the production of these wares. Two key pieces whose inscriptions provide evidence for an attribution to Khorasan, and more specifically to the city of Herat, are the so-called “Bobrinski Bucket” dated 559/1163, in the Hermitage, St. Petersburg (no. CA-12678), and a faceted ewer of 577/1181-82, in the State

Museum of Georgia, Tbilisi (Kana'an, pp. 198-201; Ward, p. 77). There is also a reference in Qazvini's late 13th-century geographical treatise indicating that Herat was renowned for its brass vessels inlaid with silver (Qazvini, p. 481). Other cities in Khorasan such as Nishapur also may have had their own luxury metalwork industries (Allan, 1982a, pp. 22-25). Khorasanian inlaid wares are notable for the wide variety and virtuosity of their shapes: faceted or fluted ewers, candlesticks whose bulging sides are defined by rows of hexagons worked in relief, and circular inkwells (see DAWĀT) surmounted by melon-shaped dome-like covers. Their largely figural decoration is likewise wide-ranging, including scenes of pleasure and pastime, astrological symbols, zoomorphic inscriptions, and plastically rendered figures of animals, especially lions and birds (Ward, p. 78).

This florescence of Iranian metalwork in the 12th and early 13th centuries was part of a larger period of creativity in the so-called decorative arts, one that changed dramatically with the Mongol invasion, which brought to an abrupt end the important metalwork centers in Khorasan. Post-Mongol metalwork, largely attributable to Azarbaijan and Fars, exhibits simpler and less varied shapes. Bowls, deep basins, flat trays, and tall bell-shaped candlesticks predominate. The decoration is largely figural and often closely follows the style of contemporary manuscript illustration, especially in the first half of the 14th century. Some of the figural scenes are as ambitious as contemporary painting (Komaroff, 1994, pp. 11-20). Their inscriptions provide the first extensive evidence of royal patronage of base metalware inlaid with gold and silver (Komaroff and Carboni, eds., pp. 277-80, Cat. nos. 159-66, 169).

Several examples of inlaid brass objects are inscribed with the names of members of the Il-khanid dynasty, the most impressive of which is an unusual composite vessel known as the Nisan Tasi, in the Mevlavi (Mawlawi) Tekke Museum in Konya, of which its basin and support stand bear the name and titles of Abu Saʿid Bahādor Khan (r. 1317-35; Baer, pp. 3-7). These pieces are more closely related to Mamluk metalwork rather than to other contemporaneous objects from Iran, although this does not rule out an attribution to Azarbaijan.

A number of examples of luxury metalwork can be linked to Fars on the basis of their inscriptions, for example a candlestick dateable to ca. 1343-53, in the Museum of Islamic Art, in Doha (Qatar), inscribed with the name and titles of the Injuid ruler Abu Esḥāq (r. 1321-59; Komaroff and Carboni, eds., p. 278, Cat. no. 162; Figure 2). The candlestick carries depictions of the enthroned ruler

and his consort in Mongol attire, which have analogues in contemporaneous illustrated manuscripts (Wright, pp. 60-67) suggesting that metalworkers and manuscript illustrators may have shared a common iconographic source in the form of drawings (Komaroff, 2002, pp. 189-91). A bowl in the Hermitage Museum is likewise inscribed to Abu Esḥāq Inju, while an inlaid bucket in the same museum dated 733/1332-33 was made for his father Maḥmud Shah (Gyuzalyan, pp. 175-78; Komaroff and Carboni, ed., p. 278, Cat. no. 161). Based on these and several other related objects, Fars seems to have been an important center for inlaid metalwork. The prominence of figural imagery declined in the second half of the 14th century, giving way to abstract designs inspired by Chinese blue-and-white porcelains (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 3-4).

Late medieval metalwork. By the end of the 14th century, following Timur's invasion of Iran during the last decade of the century, the focus of royal patronage, including metalwork, shifted eastward, first to western Central Asia and then to Khorasan. The earliest metalwork produced under Timurid patronage, a bronze basin and six brass oil lamps commissioned by Timur, are mainly preserved at the shrine of Sufi Shaikh Aḥmad Yasavi (d. 562/1166) in Yasi, Kazakhstan (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 17-43). The basin, notable for its enormous size (ht. 1.58 m, diam. 2.43 m) was specifically made for the Yasavi complex in 801/1398-99 according to its inscriptions, which suggest that this was a water vessel for pilgrims to the shrine. The oil lamps, also large (average ht. 90 cm) can be dated between 1401 and 1405 and are likewise associated with the shrine. Their form, function, fine gold and silver inlaid decoration, and epigraphic style combine different artistic traditions from Iran and elsewhere, which must have been brought to western Central Asia as a direct consequence of Timur's victorious campaigns.

A distinctively Timurid style of metalwork emerged by the second quarter of the 15th century and continued into the 16th century. It is documented by some twenty-five signed and/or dated objects. Among the signed objects, several include affiliations (*nesba*) formed after place names near Herat, which must have been the main center of production. A larger group can likewise be attributed to Khorasan in the 15th-16th centuries by analogy with the signed and dated wares (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 51-105). Primarily cast in brass, these objects can be divided into two general types: one inlaid with precious metal, the other engraved and tinned. Both are distinguished from earlier Iranian metalwork by their shapes, techniques, inscriptions and decoration. A type of pot-bellied jug with a dragon handle was especially

common (Figure 3). Other shapes include shallow dishes, deep basins and covered bowls, and candlesticks that occasionally preserve sockets in the form of a pair of entwined dragons. The inlay technique is much finer than earlier, using slender strips of sheet metal and wire. Engraved and tin wares represent a long standing technique, but their higher quality and greater quantity show that they were now produced as luxury wares. Tinning was used externally to create a silvery surface and color, and contrast was added to both inlaid and engraved objects by filling the backgrounds with a bituminous black material. Epigraphy and floral and vegetal motifs are the primary means of decoration; figural imagery is rare (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 147-249).

The inscriptions frequently consist of Persian poetry, generally well inscribed well and free of mistakes, and at times reflecting contemporary developments in calligraphy, such as the new *nastaʿliq* script. The texts usually allude to the objects on which they are inscribed and often quote earlier poets such as Saʿdi and Ḥāfeẓ, as well as poets active in 15th-century Khorasan such as ʿAbd-al-Raḥmān Jāmi, Qāsem-e Anwār, and Saliḥi (Komaroff, 1992b, pp. 144-46). The appearance of the latter's verses on metalwork produced during their lifetimes often helps to confirm the attribution of these pieces to Khorasan. Two dragon-handled jugs, one in the British Museum, London, dated 903/1498, are inscribed with the name and titles of the Timurid ruler of Khorasan Sultan Ḥosayn Bāyqarā (r. 875-912/1470-1506; Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 179-80).

Only a few wares can be attributed to western Iran in the late 14th and early 15th century. These demonstrate that the metalworking centers in Fars and Azarbaijan continued to work in the manner established earlier. A pen-case in the Musée des Beaux-Arts, Lyon, and a bowl in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, can be attributed to Azarbaijan during this transitional period (Komaroff, 1992a, p. 30). The only object from the later 15th century that can be ascribed with certainty to western Iran is a tall oil lamp in the David Collection, Copenhagen, inscribed in the name of the Āq Qoyunlu ruler Uzun Ḥasan (r. 1453-78; Melikian-Chrivani, 1987, pp. 126-31).

Metalwork from the first decades of the 16th century under the Safavid dynasty continued the forms, techniques, and styles that had evolved in the preceding century in eastern Iran. Such wares can only be distinguished from earlier Timurid examples on the basis of the dates or the content of their inscriptions. As in the preceding period, the most frequent type of dated object is a pot-bellied jug with dragon-shaped handle inlaid in gold and silver. Another common form perhaps newly introduced is a small, cylindrical

inkwell with dome-shaped cover. Unlike the Timurid wares, these works frequently bear prayers in Arabic. An inkwell dated 919/1513 in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London, is inscribed with two prayers, one invoking the names of the Prophet and the Twelve Imams, the other addressed to Imam ʿAli (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 255-56). The Shiʿite nature of these inscriptions does not necessarily place the object within the milieu of the Safavid dynasty, but the specific prayer to Imam ʿAli, seems first to have been inscribed on the coins of the dynasty's founder, Shah Esmāʿil I (Komaroff, 1992a, pp. 123-24).

Metalwork production at the first Safavid capital Tabriz is attested by three cylindrical, dome-covered inlaid inkwells, all signed by the same artist Mirak Ḥosayn Yazdi (Komaroff, 1992a, p. 125; Thompson and Canby, eds., p. 219, Cat. no. 8.14). This shape is also documented in contemporary manuscript illustrations from Tabriz. The inkwells are decorated with medallions filled with radial designs of stylized cloud scrolls and the overall scheme is more spacious and rhythmic and less rigid than the precise, crowded designs typical of 15th-century wares.

In the second quarter of the 16th century the decoration became stiffer and more schematized. This transitional style is found primarily on engraved and tinned wares. On a bowl dated 942/1535-36, kept at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, the traditional decorative vocabulary, vegetal and abstract ornament divided among interlocking and overlapping compartments, is maintained, but the motifs are abstracted and the calligraphy is more prominent (Thompson and Canby, eds., p. 212, Cat. no. 8.7). This type of metalware continued to be produced in a provincial style in Khorasan and western Central Asia well into the second half of the 16th century. Other objects can be attributed to western Iran such as a jug, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which maintains the traditional pot-bellied shape and decoration divided among medallions and cartouches, but the design is more sharply defined, and less linear and compact (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 287-88).

Several objects demonstrate the arrival of a new style of metalwork in western Iran around the third quarter of the 16th century. This novel aesthetic is characterized by sleek, tapered forms, while engraved (non-inlaid) figurative decoration reappeared but remained less important than vegetal and abstract ornament, and inscriptions in *nastaʿliq* proliferated (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 263-66).

The most important one among the newly introduced shapes is a columnar lampstand in the form of a tapered cylinder with a chamfered or faceted middle section and a flared base. The earliest dated example is one that was endowed to a shrine in Sāmarrāʾ, Iraq, in 959/1561-62, but the shape may have been introduced earlier from India in the second quarter of the century (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 263-64). There are several closely related examples, including one in the Hermitage Museum dated 987/1579-80, which preserves its lamp in the form of a footed cup (Thompson and Canby, eds., pp. 216-17, Cat. no. 8.12) and a similar but undated lampstand in the Museum of Islamic Art, Doha (Figure 4). Such objects are engraved all-over with patterns of spiraling split-leaves or zigzag bands and with lozenge-shaped cartouches filled with vegetation arranged to emphasize the sleek contours of the form. Other wares, such as globular-shaped, slender-necked ewers with thin, curved spouts and buckets with slender bases and upward curving sides, can be dated to the same period because of their similar decoration and characteristic *nastaʿliq* inscriptions with Persian verses. Dates and owners' names are often inscribed in cartouches, but the number of such empty cartouches suggests that owners' names were added after the object was purchased (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, p. 293).

The same shapes and decorative vocabulary continued into the early 17th century under Shah ʿAbbās I (r. 996-1038/1588-629). A common type from this period is a wine bowl with shallow foot and flaring lip. Lamp-stands, bowls and other vessels were typically decorated with repetitive vegetal and abstract patterns similar to those found in contemporaneous manuscript illuminations and bookbinding or on carpets. Human and animal figures are once again a primary means of decoration and are comparable to contemporary drawings and illustrated manuscripts. Such engraved pieces occasionally bear Armenian inscriptions alongside the more common Persian verses; they probably belonged to members of the Armenian community established by Shah ʿAbbās in New Julfa (see JULFA) on the southern edge of Isfahan (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 272-73).

The style associated with the reign of Shah ʿAbbās lasted throughout the 17th century, as demonstrated by several objects, including a covered bowl dated 1089/1678-79 in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 336-37). These wares are usually attributed to western Iran, more specifically to Isfahan, because of their similarity to other arts produced there or on account of their Armenian inscriptions. Some engraved and tinned wares

dateable to the late 16th century or the early 17th century have been ascribed to Khorasan, as their inscribed owners' names include references to places in that region. They are decorated with the same type of abstract and figural ornament found on objects from western Iran, but the design is organized in a more spacious manner and always includes cross-hatching. The dates and attributions for many later 16th- and 17th-century wares are open to question. In contrast to the 15th- and 16th-century pieces, their inscriptions often supply the name of the owner but rarely contain artists' signatures or clues to the provenance (Melikian-Chirvani, 1982, pp. 303-55).

A group of cut-steel objects overlaid with gold can be associated with western Iran in the 16th and 17th centuries. Beginning in the 16th century, cut steel was used to make vessels and especially pierced plaques, medallions, and standards. The decoration of such objects is better related to contemporary cut and gilded armor than to engraved brass and tinned wares of the same period (Allan and Gilmore, pp. 253-81, 294-97).

Early modern metalwork. Thousands of pieces of metalwork produced under the Zand and Qajar dynasties have survived, but they are of modest merit, generally utilitarian brass and copperwares with the exception of some fine examples of cut-steel, including copies after 17th-century pieces (Allan and Gilmore, pp. 319-20).

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