

# shaping history

pottery from the  
nasser d khalili  
collection of islamic art

The Nasser D Khalili Collection contains nearly 2000 examples of pottery from the Islamic world. Ranging from everyday objects in unglazed earthenware to luxurious wares produced for court patrons, and tiles from monumental architectural friezes, the collection provides unparalleled insight into a unique period of the region's history.

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOPHER PHILLIPS AND COURTESY OF  
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The rapid early expansion of Islam brought the adherents of the Islamic faith into contact with the artistic heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean and the Near East, and more particularly, with that of Byzantium and of Sasanian Iran. This heritage included, among other things, a tradition of pottery manufacture stretching back more than a thousand years.

It should not be surprising then that forms and techniques were often adopted from existing, local or regional traditions; in other cases, completely new forms and techniques were introduced. Furthermore, the same forms are often found across a variety of media - for example, the shape of a pottery flask may parallel that of a glass one, the form of a pottery jug may mirror that of a similar object in metal or jade. This is particularly true of objects made in moulds - including stonepaste pottery, glass and metal.

Pottery is by its very nature fragile - in many cases extremely so - and therefore what has survived to the present day may not be entirely representative of a given historical period or style. But this is the case when discussing the great majority of art

dating from before the modern period; and in many instances our knowledge is supplemented by references in other sources, such as historical texts or contemporary miniature paintings. It was in ninth-century Iraq that some of the most remarkable developments in early Islamic pottery took place, including an incredible variety of glaze effects, among these both monochrome and polychrome lustre. Lustre-

painted objects have a characteristic, metallic 'sheen'. This effect is achieved by painting metallic pigments onto the surface of an object which has first been glazed and fired, then firing the object a second time. The technique had in fact been used earlier on glass (examples are known from at least the eighth century in Egypt), but was first applied to pottery during this period.

One of the greatest innovations of the potters of this period was the development of an opacified white glaze which disguised the red or buff earthenware body of an object - enabling them to imitate Chinese stone wares of the Tang dynasty, the bodies of which were white. This white glaze was often decorated in cobalt blue; imitations of splash-decorated Tang stone wares were also produced.



Facing page: Abbasid lustre-painted jug. Iraq. Dated ninth century. Buff-bodied earthenware, painted with polychrome lustre on an opacified white tin glaze. Height (to top of handle) 29 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Below: Lustre-painted bowl. Syria, probably Euphrates potteries. Dated 12th century. Stonepaste, with lustre-painted decoration over a colourless transparent glaze. Diameter 36 cm. Height 10.5 cm. © The Nour Foundation.



These new styles and techniques soon spread to Iran and to North Africa, where they developed their own regional variations. For example, lustre-painted pottery shards have survived from Fatimid Egypt, often decorated with human figures and animals.

During the 10th and 11th centuries, the city of Nishapur in Northeast Iran was responsible for the production of a highly distinctive style of pottery. The plates and bowls produced by

the potters of Nishapur (and, to a lesser extent, Samarkand) during this period are characterised by bold inscriptions in *Kufic*, often highly stylised and in content typically benedictory in nature. Figural decoration also features on many of these wares, usually fantastic or imaginary beasts which appear to draw upon Sasanian tradition and the region's pre-Islamic past.

The Seljuk period in Iran (11th-13th centuries) was marked by an explosion of new pottery techniques and forms. Not least among these was the introduction of frit ware, or stonepaste pottery. Frit ware has a hard white body, produced from a mixture of quartz, white clay and glaze frit, and was usually formed in moulds. The introduction of stonepaste wares allowed much finer potting than traditional earthenware, and many objects are translucent, like Chinese porcelain.

The city of Kashan emerged as the most important production centre for pottery in Iran during the Seljuk period - a pre-

eminence underscored by the fact that numerous potters took the epithet *Al-Kashani* ('of Kashan'). One such figure, Abu'l-Qasim Al-Kashani, wrote a treatise on the manufacture of tiles and other ceramics, which provides a valuable record of pottery production of the period.

The Kashan kilns were responsible for a variety of wares, not least among these lustre ware which attained new levels of refinement, with decoration including exquisitely drawn figures and lines of Persian verse.

Among the most remarkable achievements of the potters of 12th-13th century Iran are double-shelled jugs and other vessels, a ware known as reticulated pottery. Such objects are technically extremely difficult to make, with an exterior 'shell' cut away in openwork to reveal a second layer beneath. No less remarkable is the survival of some particularly fine examples of this fragile ware to the present day.

Another highlight of the pottery of the Seljuk period was the

introduction of *mina'i* ware. *Mina'i* ware requires two firings, since the decoration is painted both under and over the glaze, in a technique similar to enamel. Decoration typically consisted of figural scenes, including episodes from court life, and less frequently scenes drawn from the *Shahnameh* (the great epic written by the poet Firdawsi in the late 10th-early or 11th century).

In Syria, some very fine wares were produced at Raqqa and other centres on the Euphrates during the 12th-13th centuries. These included *laqabi* ware, in which painted decoration is combined with carved areas, which prevent colours running into one another during firing; it is usually decorated with the figure of a single animal or bird. The Euphrates potteries were destroyed by the Mongols in the 13th century, and never recovered.

Despite the immense destruction wrought throughout Iran by the Mongol invasion during the first half of the 13th century,

Left: *Mina'i* ware bowl with a royal couple seated under a tree in a garden. Iran. Dated 12th or 13th century. Stonepaste, painted underglaze or in-glaze with cobalt blue and turquoise and overglaze in red and black enamels. Diameter 21.7 cm. Height 9 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Middle: *Laqabi* ware dish. Syria. Dated 12th century. Stonepaste, with carved decoration under a slightly opacified white glaze, stained cobalt blue, manganese, yellow and green. The design of a bird was a favourite subject in this style of pottery. Diameter 29.7 cm. Height 6 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Right: Underglaze-painted dish. Iznik, Ottoman Turkey. Dated 16th century. Stonepaste body, underglaze-painted in blue. The three bunches of grapes follow an early Ming prototype. Diameter 39.4 cm. Height 7.7 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of Paradise.  
*Inscription from a slip-painted pottery bowl.*  
 Iran, Nishapur, 10th century.

the stability and increased trade which followed allowed artistic traditions to continue, and in many cases to flourish. Kashan, for its own part, had ransomed itself off and the continued production of its kilns was thus ensured.

Lustre decoration continued to figure prominently in the pottery produced in Iran during the Mongol period. Particularly noteworthy is the tile work, which was used extensively in architectural decoration. These tiles varied considerably in size, from small six- or eight-pointed star tiles which were grouped into panels with hexagonal or cross-shaped tiles, to large frieze tiles with raised inscriptions, and moulded *mihhrabs*. The decoration included (depending on whether the building was religious or secular) verses from the Qur'an and from poetry, in particular the *Shahnameh*, as well as human figures and beasts.

The Mongol period was marked by a more widespread introduction of Chinese motifs into Islamic art. Among the earliest recorded examples of the use of designs from Chinese sources are tiles from the palace at Takht-i Sulayman in Western Iran, built by the Il-Khanid ruler Abaqa Khan between 1270 and 1275.

The use of tiles in architectural decoration continued into the Timurid period on a hitherto unprecedented scale. The Timurid architecture of Central Asian cities such as Samarqand

is sheathed in tile work, in which a number of techniques including underglaze,  *cuerda seca*, and mosaic tiles are used to dazzling effect. In the  *cuerda seca* (meaning 'dry chord') technique, lines of manganese pigment mixed with a greasy substance, which disappears during firing, are used to divide areas of different colours, leaving them clearly defined; mosaic tiles are composed of closely-fitting pieces of tile, of various shapes and sizes and with different coloured glazes, which make up an inscription or decorative motif.

Almost certainly the most familiar type of pottery from the Ottoman period is that known as Iznik. Iznik pottery was produced from at least the 1470s at the city of the same name (ancient Nicea) on the Sea of Marmara, and, at least initially, at Kütahya in Western Turkey. The exceptionally fine, white body of Iznik wares was achieved through the use of a newly developed lead-soda frit for both body and glaze. Early Iznik production consisted predominantly of blue and white wares, however around the mid-16th century the colour scheme changed dramatically, to include sage green, manganese purple and later the highly distinctive bole (or 'Armenian') red, which stands up in slight relief. Flowers including tulips, hyacinths and chrysanthemums, feathery saz leaves, and billowing cloud scrolls figure prominently in the decoration of Iznik wares from this period. From the mid-16th century, beginning with the decoration of the Süleymaniye Mosque in Istanbul, the emphasis of Iznik production shifted increasingly to tiles. Around 1700 the tile workshops were moved from Iznik to Istanbul, and in general from this date the quality of Iznik vessels begin to decline.

Ironically, despite its luxurious appearance, it was not Iznik pottery but Chinese blue and white porcelain which was the most highly prized at the Ottoman court. As a result, the extremely valuable Chinese wares were stored in the treasury

Facing page: Double-shelled ewer. Iran. Dated early 13th century. Stonepaste, underglaze-painted in black under a turquoise glaze, with a pierced outer shell. Diameter 14.3 cm. Height 28.2 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Following pages  
 Left: Mamluk blue and white jar. Egypt or Syria. Dated 15th century. Stonepaste ware, painted in blue under a colourless glaze. Diameter 27 cm. Height 38 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

Right: Iznik flask. Iznik, Ottoman Turkey. Dated circa 1560-80. Stonepaste body, underglaze-painted in black, blue, green and bole red, with alternating sprays of hyacinths and prunus blossom. Height 46 cm. © The Nour Foundation.



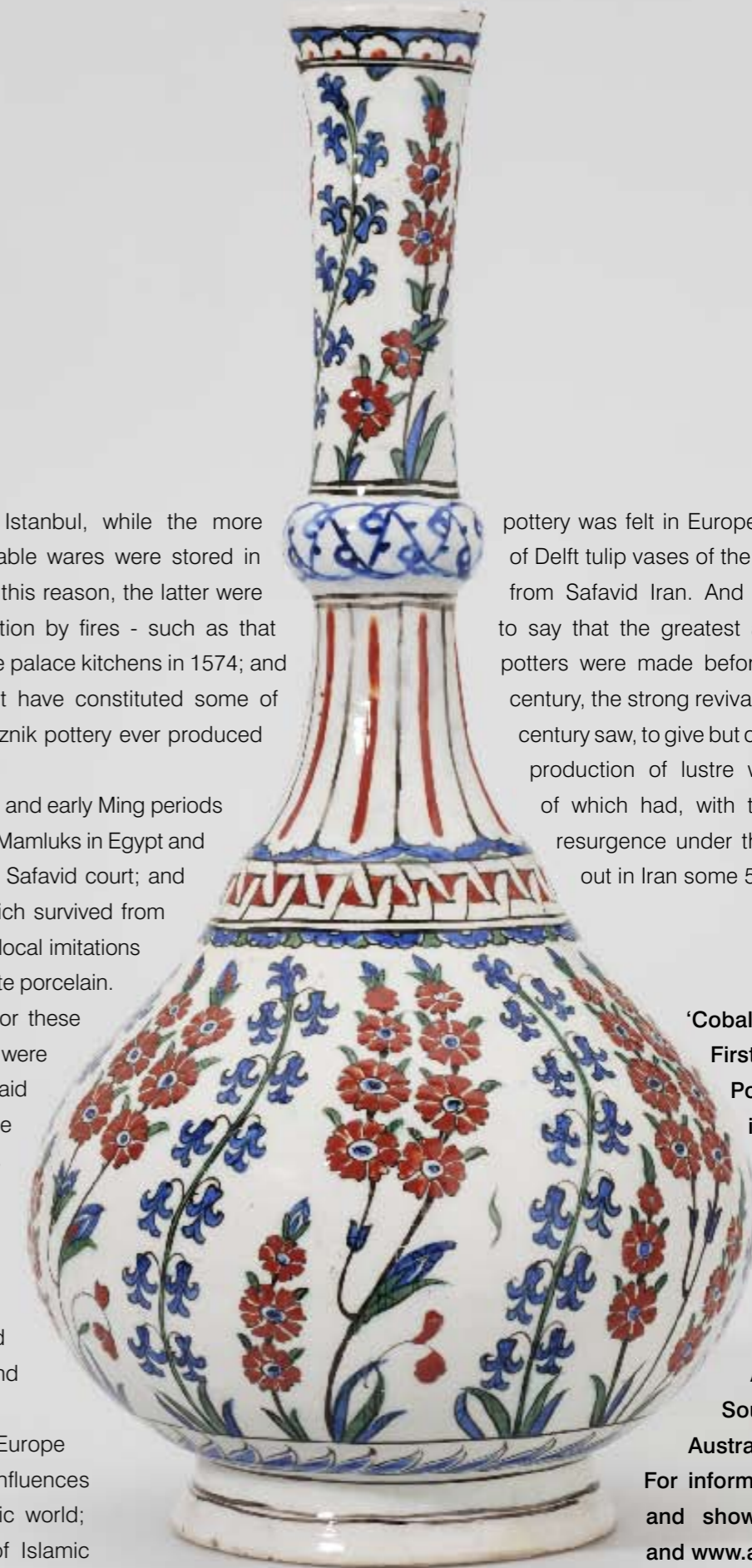


at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul, while the more 'everyday' royal Iznik table wares were stored in the palace kitchen. For this reason, the latter were more prone to destruction by fires - such as that which swept through the palace kitchens in 1574; and undoubtedly what must have constituted some of the finest examples of Iznik pottery ever produced were lost.

Chinese imports of Yuan and early Ming periods were also valued by the Mamluks in Egypt and Syria, and in Iran at the Safavid court; and much of the pottery which survived from Safavid Iran consists of local imitations of Chinese blue and white porcelain.

Demand was so high for these wares that stencils were introduced to aid production. Meanwhile large scale compositions in *cuerda seca* tiles formed a distinctive part of the decoration of Safavid palaces during the 17th century, painted with flowers, animals, and figures in costume.

Increased contact with Europe brought a new set of influences to pottery in the Islamic world; equally the influence of Islamic



pottery was felt in Europe, for example the shape of Delft tulip vases of the late 17th century derives from Safavid Iran. And while it is probably fair to say that the greatest achievements of Islamic potters were made before the close of the 17th century, the strong revivalist movement of the 19th century saw, to give but one example, the renewed production of lustre ware - the manufacture of which had, with the exception of a brief resurgence under the Safavids, all but died out in Iran some 500 years earlier. □

**'Cobalt and Lustre: The First Centuries of Islamic Pottery'** by Ernst Grube is volume nine of **The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art.** 'Arts of Islam: Treasures from the Collection of Nasser D Khalili' is at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia until 23 September.

For information on the collection and show, visit [www.khalili.org](http://www.khalili.org) and [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au)