

A lustre-painted jug from 12th century Iran



Potters in the Islamic Middle East were hugely inventive between the 9th and 14th centuries, inventing new ceramic bodies, new glazes and new decorative techniques. In this period they developed tin glaze, fritware (a new ceramic body) and lustre decoration. This golden age for ceramics was partly driven by a desire among the ruling classes for ceramics which compared with the much-admired celadons and porcelain imported from China, without having access to the materials and knowledge necessary to make porcelain itself.

This jug, which was made in Kashan in Iran in the 12th century, illustrates all three of these novel techniques. It is 13 cm tall, made with a fritware body, covered in a tin glaze and with an elaborate painted lustre decoration.

A fritware body contains typically only about 8% clay – just enough to give it some plasticity. The rest is almost all ground quartz pebbles selected from a river bed for their whiteness. A small fraction of the ground quartz is melted (fritted) with a source of soda and/or potash to make a glass, which is then ground again and included in the mix to bind the body together when fired. The main objective was to get as white a body as possible and, as the fritware body was stronger than the earthenware previously used for fine pottery in the Middle East, it could also be made thinner and therefore even more like Chinese porcelain. It was such a success that by the 14th century it was used for almost all fine ceramics throughout the Islamic world.

Tin oxide was used to make glazes opaque as long as 2000 years ago, when the Parthians mixed it with their alkaline glazes. However, it became really significant after the 9th century in Iraq, when the potters there started mixing it with lead glaze to produce a smooth white opaque glaze which was ideal for taking painted decoration. The tin oxide also reduced the tendency of lead glaze to run, so avoiding blurring of the decoration in the firing.

The term lustre refers to the production of colours and iridescent metallic surfaces by the chemical reduction of metal oxide in the kiln, producing a fine suspension of the pure metal in the surface layers of the glaze. It started in Egypt and Syria as a technique for decorating glassware and then in the 9th century potters in Iraq began to use it on glazed pottery. In the following centuries it slowly spread throughout the Islamic world (and beyond – particularly in Spain and Renaissance Italy). It was only ever used by a relatively small number of potteries, who jealously guarded their secrets, and the spread of the technique often occurred through the migration of these potters in times of unrest. It is a difficult technique to get right, as the formulation of the base glaze, the compositions of the pigments in the painting and the design and firing of the kiln all have to be just right for it to work. Kiln losses tended to be high and lustre ware was always an expensive luxury.

There are a few practitioners of the art of lustre decoration today, such as Sutton Taylor and Jonathan Chiswell Jones. The modern master of lustre pottery, who reintroduced the technique into the potters repertoire, was Alan Caiger Smith. In his book 'Pottery, People and Time' he writes of his long struggle to get the lustre technique right and how, in the end, it was a 16th century Italian text which led him to the correct firing technique.

The lustre decoration on this pot has a slightly dull gold colour, almost certainly made using, not gold, but silver compounds in the pigment. Around the pot in painted panels there are four figures drawn in the so-called 'monumental' style, which places the making of this pot in the period between 1170 and 1200. These figures reflect the standards of beauty at the time, with round 'moon' faces and long hair.

The interior of the pot is a dark blue cobalt colour. The potters of the Middle East were also pioneers in the use of cobalt in glazes and the Chinese, for their early blue and white porcelain, initially obtained their cobalt from the Middle East, before finding sources in China itself.

A close look at the pot reveals that it has been carefully assembled from broken pieces. There are very few pots which have survived intact from the medieval period in the Middle East and if a pot from this period which has not been broken and reassembled appeared for sale in an auction I would look at it suspiciously. Unusually, the auctioneer I bought this pot from provided the name of the previous owner, who was Mohamed Makiya. Makiya was one of the most prestigious Iraqi architects of the 20th century. He lived in London in his later years and was known for collecting Islamic artworks. I have always felt that owning an old pot gives me a sense of connection with the people who made it and used it, but there is also a feeling of contact with later owners of the piece, who valued it as an artwork or as a piece of history.

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