



PERSIAN TREASURES

Islamic Ceramics from the William Bowmore Collection

4 November 2004 - 30 January 2005

EDUCATION PACK

Introduction

This exhibition showcases the Bowmore Collection of Islamic pottery, tiles and the 'Polonaise' carpet. The exhibition covers seven centuries of Islamic art in its collection of over forty ceramics from Iran, Turkey, Syria and Morocco. It is the largest single collection of its kind in an Australian public institution. The splendid works in this collection are testament to the importance placed on beautiful and exquisite forms by Islamic society. The skill and inventiveness of Persian craftspeople can be appreciated in the bowls, plates, tiles, magnificent tiled fireplace that dates back to the nineteenth-century Ottoman period, as well as the exquisite Yacob Polonaise carpet (c. 1625- 1630).

Foreword

Dr William Bowmore OML OA OBE has presented many gifts to the Art Gallery of South Australia and his extraordinary collecting and kindness has extended to the donation of over forty ceramics, two glazed tiles, one fireplace and the Yakob Carpet. The collection has gained momentum over recent years with further purchases, gifts and bequests.

Historical background on Islamic Art

It is important to understand that from a cultural context, Islam was firstly a religion and an ideology, which later expanded to become a militant Arab state. Islam transformed into a civilization shared by many territories that were conquered in its name and then united as Muslim. The Islamic era dates from 622 when Mohammed and his followers fled from Mecca to Medina. Eight years later, Mohammed returned and occupied Mecca, establishing it as the Holy City and the spiritual centre of the Islamic world. Persian pottery belongs to the larger world of Islamic art and culture, where artists during this time moved freely from court to court throughout the Near and Middle East, gaining knowledge and skills from new sources and influences.

Historical overview

Islamic pottery from Persia has a long tradition, beginning in Prehistoric Iran. The early ceramics, while not as sophisticated as they would later become, reflect a wonderful feeling for design, with a folk art quality. The wares during this time consisted mainly of bowls, plates and dishes made of soft reddish earthenware that was covered in a white slip and painted in bright colours. Another characteristic of Islamic ceramics from Persia are the Nishapur bowls decorated in yellow, black, green and purple, with delightful Persian motifs, human figures, birds and animals. After the unification of the tribes to become one under Islam, religious factors needed to be considered in the decoration of pottery. It is a commonly accepted notion that Islam forbade the representation of living beings - hence such a representation by an artist would be interpreted as an imitation and the greatest of all sins. Having said this, it is also known that not all artists or all Muslims accepted this prohibition, especially in the light of the creative abilities and imagination of the artists. Evidence of the representation of human and animal figures appears in frescoes, metalwork and miniature painting throughout the Islamic period, but as a rule they were not permitted in religious buildings.¹

It is believed that the Islamic potters were not affected by this ruling, since their work was primarily for secular purposes, at least until the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. After this time, tiles were used for prayer niches and featured geometric and floral designs, with many artists using the Islamic script for inscriptions.

The Islamic world experienced many changes and shifts of power, as different groups fought for supremacy. The different influences and sources included Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Mesopotamian and Chinese. Chinese stoneware and porcelain reached the Near East as early as 800 A.D and their various wares continued to inspire and influence Islamic potters. The white glaze used by the Islamic potters originated as a result of their desire to imitate the Chinese white porcelain. Despite the many changes, the great diversity of ideas helped Islamic arts and sciences to prosper.

Islamic Script

Islamic script is a unique form of decoration on pottery and easily applied in a continuous manner over the curved surfaces. The script appearing on the pottery often relates to literary content. There are two different types of Islamic scripts that are used on pottery: the more linear and angular is *Kufic* (also referred to as *Kufi*), while the other is a more rounded style called *Neskhi*, which is a more calligraphic style of writing. The use of script on ceramic work usually suggests some link with the Koran or is added as a form of blessing and prosperity for the owner. An example of this type of script, used in a literary and moral nature, has been applied to a Kashan bowl. It reads: "Planning before work, protects you from regret. Prosperity and Peace".²

The Golden Age of Islamic Ceramics (1000-1400)

With the decline of the Roman Empire around the year 500 AD, European ceramics went into a hiatus. The Near East however, appeared as a major centre for the production of ceramics. In Persia, under the Islamic rulers, a new interest in ceramics emerged. This particular time is often referred to as the Golden Age of Islamic pottery (1000-1400). During this period, Islamic rulers forbade the use of precious metals and the making of images thus opening the way for the growth and development of ceramics. The most important cities in Persia for the production of ceramics were Ravy, in Northern Persia and Kashan in the South. Kashan is noted for the production of beautifully inscribed tiles. The production of these tiles ended around the middle of the fourteenth century. Another important centre for Persian ceramics was Sultanabad.

There were two major technical innovations during this golden age. The first was the rediscovery of tin glazing and the second was the development of lustre ware. Tin glazing was used to make an opaque white surface, while lustre ware produced a surface with a dull metallic sheen, to give the appearance of metal, whose use had been discouraged by Islamic rulers.

The Bowmore Collection placed in a cultural and chronological context

The Bowmore collection's earliest ceramic works date back to the ninth century, from Iran and Turkey, and were made for the local market. Two white plates decorated with birds and calligraphy, and two other plates featuring boldly coloured exotic figures, form part of the collection originating from Nishapur (an Eastern Iranian town). The collection also contains wares from other Iranian centres, such as Kashan, that date back from the ninth through to the thirteenth centuries. The ceramic schools of Kashan, while playing a leading role in the early development of *Saljug* pottery (Persian white wares), are better known for the manufacture of wall-tiles painted in lustre, and the use of relief modelling combined with blue glaze to highlight the inscriptions. The wall tiles were used in mosques or shrines to indicate the direction of Mecca for Muslims praying to Allah. Kashan is also famous for its thirteenth century series of wares painted in black and blue under a colourless or turquoise glaze. One particularly fine example of a fourteenth century ceramic piece is a Kashan underglaze-decorated bowl with black fish swimming in concentric circles under an exquisite turquoise glaze.

A strong link can be established between the Iranian underglaze blue and white ceramics in the collection and early Chinese porcelain. Chinese ceramics in the form of stoneware and porcelain first reached Persia around 800 AD and was later reintroduced in the twelfth and fifteenth centuries. The imported Chinese wares rekindled the imagination and inspiration of the Islamic potters, and while they may have been drawn to the technical qualities of Chinese ceramics, the shape and decoration of the wares was very much the work of Islamic potters. It is interesting to note that each of the three main periods of Islamic pottery was initiated by recurring waves of Chinese influence.³ *T'ang* white porcelain and stoneware inspired the first period from the ninth to the eleventh centuries. *Sung* white wares influenced the second period, called the medieval period, from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries. The blue and white wares of Ming China inspired the final period from the fifteenth to the nineteenth centuries.

Turkish ceramics are also represented in the collection, originating mainly from the sixteenth century. These pieces are very strong in colour and feature exquisite designs of flowers and trees. A large Turkish nineteenth century *Isnik* stove covered with richly decorated tiles reflects the importance of ceramics in architectural embellishment. The designs on the tiles feature stylised leaves, lotus blossoms and other flowers, arabesques and geometric motifs. The conical chimney is decorated with a vase of tulips and leaves surrounded by arabesque forms. The arabesque forms originated from designs of stems and leaves and the palmette. The palmette was a favourite motif inherited from the ancient east of Assyria and Babylon; it was later modified to a stylised half palmette that was often repeated on pottery surfaces.

From central Iran comes the Yakob 'Polonaise' carpet. Created around 1625-30, it consists of silk pile with brocading in silver thread. This beautiful Persian carpet is one of a group called 'polonaise' carpets since a number of them were borrowed from aristocratic Polish families for the Paris *Exposition Universelle* of 1878. Because the construction and appearance of the Polonaise carpets were sufficiently different from most Persian carpets, they were initially mistaken as the work of Polish weavers.

In the 1980's William Bowmore had the carpet specially cleaned in London. After the cleaning the carpet revealed two inscriptions in classical Armenian lettering located in the pink cloud bands at the top right and bottom left of the long axis in the main field of the carpet. They provide the information, which alerts us to the name of the maker, *Yacob*.

The Yakob carpet has a number of distinct characteristics in its construction and design that are common to the Polonaise group of carpets: the use of metal brocading to create a dimension of depth in the ground and the use of floral motifs, arabesques and cloud bands.

Sources

Radford R, *The Fine Art of Giving: 90 Masterpieces from the Bowmore Collection*, Art Gallery of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia, 1999

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Lane, A., *Early Islamic Pottery*, Faber & Faber, London, U.K., 1947

Lane. A., *Later Islamic Pottery: Persia, Syria, Egypt, Turkey*, Faber & Faber, London, U.K., 1957

¹ Charleston R.J, *World Ceramics: An illustrated history*, 1975, p.198

² Munsterberg H. & M., *World Ceramics*, 1998, p.64

³ Charleston R,J, *World Ceramics: An illustrated history*, 1975. p.70

SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Education resources: Education Pack

Schools admission: \$20 per class size group. Supervising teachers/adults free admission.
DECS Classified 1 - 4, AISS listed disadvantaged schools and all country schools free admission.

All group bookings: 8207 7033

Types of Ceramics

TYPE	DESCRIPTION AND ORIGINS
Glazed quartz fritwares	Roman Egypt. Made of a powdered quartz body with the addition of water and natron. Usually turquoise with copper, blue with cobalt or purple with manganese.
Alkaline glazed pottery	Glaze compound made of sand, soda or potash laid on a paste body. Pre-dynastic times in Egypt.
Lead glazed wares	Brilliant and luscious in quality and readily coloured with other metallic oxides. Fuses at 800°C. Roman Empire
Slip-painted ware	Iran and Afghanistan 9 th century. Fine-grained buff or sandy earthenware clay base (Nishapur and Southern Persia) or red (Samarquand). Most popular slip - white slip under transparent colourless glazes.
Sgraffiato ware	North and North-West Iran 11 century. Incised decoration into the clay under the glaze or incised in lines into the slip.
Lustre ware	Metallic pigment after firing gives an iridescent effect. Lustre ware is particularly precious as it is fired twice. It reached a peak in Iran around 1200.
Polychrome luster	Metallic pigments of many colours.
Blue and white wares	Tin glazed cobalt blue pottery of the Near East (9 th century Mesopotamia)
Porcelain	Fine clay made from granite rocks fusing with Kaolin at 13000 - 1400°C
Fritware	A pottery made of a powdered quartz body made plastic by addition of water and natron.

LOOK AND LEARN (Primary students)

1. Look at the rug in the centre of the gallery. How many different colours have been used in the weaving?
If you move your head slowly from side to side you can see tiny sparkles in the rug. The weaver has used a special metal thread – what do you think it is?
2. There is a beautiful round turquoise bowl from Kashan or Sultanabad with circles of fish. How many fish can you count? The artist has made the bowl look like a pool of clear water. From which direction has he painted the fish to make them look more realistic?
3. The magnificent tiled Turkish fireplace was designed to be placed in a large European house. The Turks used them to cook their food and warm their houses. Do you think this piece would have done the same job, or is it mainly for decoration?

STUDY ACTIVITIES (Senior students)

Consider:

1. Look for a bowl from Nishapur dating back to the 9th-10th centuries. The bowl is made from earthenware and features the application of script for decoration. Notice how the calligraphy forms a part of the decoration.
★ What type of script has been used on this bowl, the *Kufic* or *the Neskh*? What do you think is the main difference in the type of script used on the different ceramic ware?
2. Look for the twelfth century Kashan underglazed ceramic bowl, decorated with the image of a man with a halo, holding a child and riding a camel. A dog runs ahead of the camel. Describe the colours and the use of lines.
★ Are there any floral motifs evident on this bowl? Describe what you can see.
3. Figurative work was a popular form of decoration on Islamic ceramics.
★ What do you think the figure that appears in the 11th–12th century underglazed earthenware bowl is holding up in his right hand?
4. Repeated images and motifs were a common technique used in the decoration of Islamic pottery. Look for the 13th century lustre ware bowl and observe the repeated forms.
★ The face is repeated several times on the interior of the bowl. What can you see around each head and where else have you seen this symbol around heads?
5. A number of the ceramic forms in the Bowmore collection have incised and pierced decorations. What visual effect does this add to the work?
★ What type of decorative treatment exists on the 17th century bowl, and how is this decoration different from that which appears on other incised and pierced bowls in the collection?
6. Find two examples of iridescent glaze ceramic ware (lustre ware) Describe several of these works and give details about their origins and time of creation.
★ What type of design can you see inside the 12th century lustre glaze earthenware bowl?
7. What does the technique of underglazing involve and how does it differ from other types of glazing?
★ Find the large decorated, 19th century tiled stove, and describe how the tiles have been decorated.
8. Look for the remarkable Iranian 'Polonaise' silk-pile carpet made around 1625 in New Julfa or Isfahan. Investigate the word 'polonaise' and where it comes from?
★ This carpet is inscribed in Armenian with the name, 'Yakob', (possibly the name of the maker). Search the carpet for this name. What material is the brocading made from and what colour is it?
★ Try to discover the main characteristics of the design of 'Polonaise' carpets that distinguishes them from other carpets of the region and time.
9. Birds with upright tails are a strong characteristic of Nishapur pottery.
★ Look for the 9th-10th century underglazed decorated bowl and describe the bird used in the decoration of this ceramic work. What type of bird do you think it is?

10. Stippling (short strokes or large dots) is a common feature of Islamic pottery produced during the 10th-13th centuries, especially from the Nishapur region.
- ★ **Look for a Nishapur bowl in the exhibition that has evidence of the stippling technique and describe the decoration of this work.**
11. Conical shaped bowls with blue and black decoration applied on a white ground, covered with a transparent glaze, were very popular at the beginning of the 13th century.
- ★ **Try to find an example of this type of bowl in the exhibition and give an account of the decoration used.**
12. Jugs, bottles and similar vessels were also common pottery forms created in Iran.
- ★ **Look for the ewer made in the 11th century from glazed earthenware. What do you think was stored in this vessel?**
13. Pottery from Turkey (Iznik) is also in the exhibition. Some of the features of this type of ceramic include square tiles with blue, turquoise, green, red and black decorations on a white ground covered with a transparent glaze. Palmette flowers, sickle-shaped leaves and arabesque forms also appear as typical features in the tiles and pottery.
- ★ **Select one piece of Iznik pottery in the exhibition and describe the appearance of this ceramic work.**
14. Animals are often depicted on Islamic pottery. Leopards hunting, greyhounds (saluqi) and hares running are examples of animals used to decorate the surface of pottery.
- ★ **What type of animal is depicted on the interior of the 10th –11th century underglazed decorated bowl ?**
15. Almost all Islamic vessel forms reveal glazes that end well above the foot-ring. The earthenware jug produced in the 12th century also reveals this technique. Why do you think the potters exposed this amount of clay?
- ★ **This vessel does not have a pouring lip, what purpose do you think it served?**
16. Flowers are a popular motif used in the decoration of Islamic pottery. Find the 19th – 20th century Iznik revival bowl and look closely at the decoration on the interior of this pottery.
- ★ **What eastern flower do you think the design has been derived from?**

Text by Ann Preston Flint and Liz Wedge

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