

Ancient Persian Ceramics and Metalwork



Two-handled vessel in the shape of a water skin
Probably 1200–800 BCE
Northern Iran; probably Amlash
Earthenware
The Avery Brundage Collection, B6OP2015



Vessel in the shape of a horned, birdlike creature
Approx. 900–800 BCE
Northern Iran; Amlash
Earthenware
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62P80

Tepe Amlash (*tepe* means “hill”) in northwestern Iran was scientifically explored in the late 1950s and 1960s. In several graves at this site, researchers found vessels like this one that combined various animal forms. This pouring vessel brings together keenly observed features of a bird and a ram. The beak, which serves as a spout, the small feet at the base, and the overall shape resemble that of a bird. However, the addition of ears and horns, which serve as small handles, suggest a ram. It is not known what meaning this combination of animal features held for the people who made and used this vessel.



Vessel in the shape of a stag
1200–800 BCE
Northern Iran; probably Marlik or Kaluraz, Amlash
Earthenware
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62P9+

Vessels of this type, found in graves and identified as burial goods, may have been used to pour offerings or libations. The stag’s face serves as a spout. Although highly stylized and reduced to its most characteristic elements, the animal still possesses a lifelike quality. This particular type of vessel is similar to those found at the archaeological site of Tepe Marlik in northwestern Iran.



Vessel in the shape of a bull
Approx. 900–800 BCE
Northern Iran; probably Amlash
Earthenware
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62P87

Like the other objects nearby, this vessel probably held a liquid used for some ceremony rather than for everyday use. The animals themselves may have had ritual or religious significance. Because so many similar examples come from graves, researchers think that they may have been produced for funerary rites or strictly for burials.

Here the head and mouth of a bull act as the spout. The bull’s hump is shaped into a wide-mouthed vessel with two rams’ head “handles,” into which the liquid would have been poured. Note the straight horns of the bull and the curling horns of the rams.



Footed cup
Probably 4000–3500 BCE
Western Iran; probably Tepe Sialk
Earthenware with slip decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection, B6OP459

This cup—adorned with long-horned goats, ibexes, and simple geometric patterns—is one of the oldest objects in the museum’s collection. It is an example of the sophisticated (and often large) pottery made in central and southwestern Iran during the fourth millennium BCE. The animals, rendered in economically artful brushstrokes, are stylized with simplified bodies and exaggerated horns. Yet they are also realistic—the ibex’s horns are articulated and the goat’s “goatee” defined.

The concentric rings visible on this cup’s body indicate that it was made using a potter’s wheel. There are differing opinions about when and where the potter’s wheel was invented. But, as this example shows, Persian potters were using this mechanical device approximately six thousand years ago.

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Ancient Persian Ceramics and Metalwork



Cheekpiece of a horse bridle in the form of a mythical creature
 Approx. 800–700 BCE
 Iran; Luristan region
 Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B17+

A sphinx with horns and a predator's head on its wing tip tramples a creature that resembles an antelope. The combination of different animal features is characteristic of Luristan bronzes.

This cheekpiece would have been connected to its matching counterpart (now in the Louvre Museum in Paris) by a metal rod that passed through the circular hole.



Cheekpiece of a horse bridle in the form of a wild sheep
 Approx. 800–700 BCE
 Iran; Luristan region
 Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B521



Cheekpiece of a horse bridle in the form of a winged sphinx
 Probably 1000–650 BCE
 Iran; Luristan region
 Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62B90

This winged sphinxlike creature is reminiscent of the human-headed winged bulls of ancient Assyria (approx. 800–600 BCE), which was located in what is today Iraq. Large Assyrian stone examples guarded palace doorways. The horned headdress (a mark of divinity) and the curls (a mark of the hero) are well-established motifs in the ancient West Asian world, dating back almost five thousand years. Whether the winged sphinx had the same meaning for the people of Luristan as it had for the Assyrians is not known.



Two finials for standards in the form of the "Master of Animals"
 Approx. 750–700 BCE
 Iran; Luristan region
 Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62B95.a-.b

The motifs found on Luristan bronzes are surprisingly varied when compared to those of other West Asian cultures. Still, many bronzes from this region, like the finials seen here, feature motifs also seen in Mesopotamia (modern Iraq). In these two finials a central figure grasps the throats of multiheaded beaked creatures. It is likely that the figure represents a "master (or mistress) of animals" who controls nature. While the use of this motif goes back to at least 3000 to 2000 BCE and appears in ancient Mesopotamian and Mediterranean cultures, here it has been interpreted in a new way.



Long-spouted vessel
 Approx. 900–600 BCE
 Iran
 Silver
The Avery Brundage Collection, B62B166

This jar was probably a ceremonial object and may have been produced as a burial offering. It was made using very sophisticated metalworking techniques.



Handled pitcher with animal-headed spout
 Approx. 800–700 BCE
 Iran; Luristan region
 Bronze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60B620

This elaborate vessel was probably used for ceremonial purposes. Many objects of this type, but made of silver, have been excavated.

Coins of the Sasanian Empire



The Sasanian empire (224–651) spanned a territory that included parts of what are today Oman, Iraq, Iran, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Afghanistan. Sasanians controlled the lucrative trade along much of the so-called Silk Road, which connected China to West Asia and the Mediterranean.

Artisans of the Sasanian empire created, in addition to impressive royal palaces and monumental sculpture, a wide range of brilliant silver vessels, textiles, and other luxury goods. Small objects such as coins helped to spread and preserve Sasanian motifs, which would be copied and revived in later periods.

An unusual attribute of Sasanian royal portraits is the elaborate royal crown, as seen in the top object. Sasanian emperors linked themselves with the long heritage of Persian imperial reign, particularly with the much earlier Achaemenid empire (550–330 BCE). Zoroastrianism, one of the world's earliest monotheistic religions, was associated with the Achaemenids, and the Sasanians chose to make it their state religion. Depicted on the lower coin is a Zoroastrian fire altar, of which several Sasanian examples have been archaeologically excavated.

The Art of Elegant Writing in Arabic and Persian Scripts

The Arabic script developed in the pre-Islamic period from the writing system of the Nabatean peoples of Syria, Jordan, Arabia, and the Sinai Peninsula. Arabic is a Semitic language, is written and read from right to left, and comprises mainly consonants and long vowels. Eighteen letter shapes express twenty-eight phonetic sounds, which are distinguishable from one other by the placement of dots above or below the letter. Arabic makes no distinction between upper- and lower-case letters, but a letter's shape changes depending on whether it is in the beginning, middle, or end of a word. Short vowels, indicated by additional marks above or below a letter, are typically only written in the Qur'an, where correct recitation is important.

Persian or Farsi belongs to the Indo-Iranian language family. In use for millennia, Persian has been written over time with characters from different writing systems, including cuneiform, Aramaic, Pahlavi, and Hebrew. The Arabic script began to be used for Persian after 642 CE, following the arrival of Islam to Iran. The Persian language incorporates many Arabic loanwords and its alphabet includes four additional letters not found in Arabic. Classical Turkish and Urdu (used in Pakistan and parts of India) are also written with the Arabic script.

Calligraphy holds the highest status amongst the arts in Muslim societies. Since the revelation from God to the prophet Muhammad — the Qur'an — is in Arabic, its script gives visible form to the divine beauty of God's words. While the main function of writing in many cultures is to convey and preserve information, the religious associations with Arabic spurred its use and elaboration to virtually become the symbol of Islam.

The artworks in this gallery reflect the creative potential of the elegantly-written word. In addition to the sacred word in Qur'an manuscripts, proverbs and poetic inscriptions in Persian and Arabic also adorn everyday objects like bowls, candlestands, and tiles to make the objects "speak."



Islamic Period Ceramics, 800–1100



Bowl with Arabic inscription
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran
Samanid period (819–1005)
Earthenware with slip decoration
under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1862

Calligraphy, or beautiful writing, has transformed this bowl into something quite exceptional. A dynamic rhythm of positive and negative space results from the artistically elongated letters of the Arabic-language inscription: “Take the middle road in [your] affairs; indeed, it is a salvation. Don’t ride a too-gentle mount or a too-obstinate one.” With a spare, black-and-white aesthetic, this bowl exemplifies that such “epigraphic slipware” from the Samanid period (819–1005) are some of the most visually powerful ceramics produced in the Islamic world. Yet they are made from the simplest of materials: earthenware covered and decorated with a watery clay mixture called “slip.”

This bowl’s large size and deep, conical shape suggests that it was used for serving food. One can only imagine the delight with which diners experienced the bowl’s words—which advise moderation in life—as they were slowly revealed as the food was consumed.



Bowl with Arabic inscription
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran
Samanid period (819–1005)
Earthenware with slip decoration
under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P6+

This bowl shows the same characteristic design as that to the left. However, the Arabic here was written in flid *kufic* script, unlike the linear *kufic* on the other object. A central dot gives a focus to the overall design. The fine white lines in the script were added by scratching through the black slip with a sharp instrument. This bowl then received a coating of clear glaze to seal the slip decoration.

The inscription is a proverb reading:
Surely knowledge is the noblest
of the innumerable virtues, and
manliness is the most intricate of
lineages.



**Bowl with design of warrior
on horseback**
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran; probably Nishapur
Samanid period (819–1005)
Earthenware with slip decoration
under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1886

Who is this rider holding a long sword or staff? He could be a descendant of the royal hunters depicted on metal bowls of the pre-Islamic Sasanian empire (224–651). Or he could be a mythical hero of Iranian folklore, or an Arab invader (Nishapur, where the bowl was made, fell under Arab control in the 700s). He is possibly a member of the hunting and polo-loving nobility of the region. As yet researchers have reached no consensus.

Surrounding the rider are birds, rosettes, and abstract *kufic* script, probably an abstraction of the Arabic *al-baraka* (blessings.)



Bowl with bird designs
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran; probably Nishapur
Samanid period (819–1005)
Earthenware with slip decoration
under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1859

Like the other bowls in this case, this one has painted slip decoration. All of these bowls were made using the same technique, but this one has a clear yellow overglaze, which makes the bowl lustrous.

Local artists used this glaze to imitate the metallic oxide glazes on ceramics produced in places such as Iraq and Egypt. The peacocks (or possibly pheasants) and the peacock-eye pattern on the wings of the birds were also copied from the west. In this way the artist created a local version of what would have been an expensive foreign import.

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Islamic Period Ceramics and Metalwork, 800–1100



Pitcher

Approx. 800–1000

Iran

Bronze

Museum purchase, B68B3

The period from 800 to 1000 marked the beginning of a great tradition of Islamic metalwork in which Iran played an important role. This ewer was cast as a single piece using sophisticated metalworking techniques. It is a prototype that became increasingly elaborate in the following centuries. The shape of the vessel, the beading on its handle, and the pomegranate form that served as a thumb rest were repeated in later periods.

The ewer's lack of an inscription and its simple form suggest that it is an early example. This type of ewer was very popular, and similar ones were traded to as far away as Java in Indonesia, where one was excavated.



Bowl with design of two birds

Approx. 1000–1100

Northern Iran; perhaps Sari

Earthenware with painted slip

decoration under glaze

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1854

This type of ceramic was found in profusion in the town of Sari, just south of the Caspian Sea. The birds, possibly a parrot or hawk attacking another fowl, are typical of the decoration found on such bowls. This bowl was produced for everyday use as opposed to export.



Bowl

Approx. 900–1100

Northeastern Iran, Turkmenistan, or

Uzbekistan

Earthenware with slip decoration

under glaze

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1837

A single inscription, the Arabic phrase *al-baraka* (blessings), covers most of this bowl's interior. The inscription, while still readable, was exaggerated for the sake of overall design. It shows the trend toward abstracting script that is a key feature of Islamic design and artwork. The lines of *kufic* script mimic the woven pattern one would find in a basket.

This bowl has been restored by conservators to its original shape. Additions have been left uncolored to contrast with what is original.



Bowl with palmette motif and blocks of script

Approx. 900–1000

Northeastern Iran

Earthenware with painted slip decoration

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1850

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Islamic Period Ceramics, 800–1100



Bowl with geometric decoration
800–900
Iraq; Basra
Earthenware with overglaze copper- and silver-oxide decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OP478

This bowl is an early example of what are termed “lusterware.” The creation of this type of decoration required a sophisticated double-firing process. First, a white glaze background was applied and the piece fired in a high-temperature kiln. Next, designs and figures were painted in glazes containing metal oxides (usually copper and/or silver). The piece was then fired a second time in a low-temperature reducing (oxygen-poor) kiln. The absence of oxygen made the metallic oxides fuse with the surface. The result was a metallic finish that was highly prized. This technique originated in Iraq and Egypt and is an achievement unique to Islamic culture. In the 1400s the technique made its way to Europe, where it was often applied to glass.

The eight-pointed star pattern on this bowl is a very early example of what was later a popular motif.



Bowl with design of wild goats
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran; Nishapur
Samanid period (819–1005)
Earthenware with painted slip decoration under glaze
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OP1897

The interior of this bowl is decorated with four horned animals, probably wild goats, that encircle a central star motif. This artistic conception goes back more than three thousand years to the pre-Islamic period in Iran. Interspersed among the animals is what appears to be writing in *kufic* script, but these marks are known as *pseudo-kufic* because they have no meaning and were used only as a form of decoration.



Dish with design of horse and cheetah
Approx. 900–1000
Northeastern Iran; Nishapur
Earthenware with painted slip decoration under glaze
Museum purchase, B68P7

In Iran and India cheetahs were used in much the same way as dogs for hunting game. Depictions of cheetahs appear on many ceramics, but in this dish the cheetah has been transformed into a fantastic animal. Despite the breakage of this bowl, the cheetah can be reconstructed on the basis of the remaining fragments and by comparing it with other intact bowls of the same type. This cheetah is related to composite creatures depicted in Iran as early as 1000 BCE that combine different animal attributes.



Islamic Period Ceramics and Metalwork, 1100–1400



Lampstand or candlestick holder

Approx. 1100–1200

Iran

Saljuq period (1038–1194)

Bronze

Museum purchase, B68B4.a-b

Openwork in metal was popular on lampstands and candlestick holders like this one. This work was mass produced, as evidenced by its interchangeable, prefabricated sections. This new manufacturing technique contributed to the increased production of various objects of the time. Objects like this were inexpensive enough for everyday use in well-to-do households.



Incense burner

Approx. 1100–1300

Iran or Syria

Bronze

Museum purchase, B69B12

Incense was a part of everyday life in the Islamic world, particularly for the wealthy. Many sorts of incense burners were produced throughout the Islamic world. Egypt in particular made very elaborate burners for both the Muslim and Christian communities.

The incised grape leaves on this incense burner are characteristic of Egypt, though this object was probably produced in Iran or Syria. This work has an unusual shape, with a swelling body and three small, tapered feet. Smoke would have risen through the grillwork to surround the bird at the top of the lid, perhaps to suggest clouds. The burner once had a long handle, which was riveted to the body just opposite the lid's hinge. It allowed the burner to be moved when hot from use.



Star-shaped tile with phoenix design

1292–1293

Iran; probably Sultanabad

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with overglaze luster decoration

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2148

A proud phoenix, surrounded by Chinese-style clouds and enclosed within a band of Persian poetry, spreads its elaborate plumage and takes center stage on this tile. The lyrical poem describes the qualities of the beloved, “whose face is like the sun, if only the sun were adorned with musk.” Dated or signed works are rare in Islamic art, but this tile has the year 691 (of the Islamic calendar, 1292–1293) inscribed in its upper right corner.

Originally a Chinese imperial motif, the phoenix was often combined with a dragon to represent the empress and emperor. As a decorative motif brought from China by the Mongols and used by their successors in Iran, the Ilkhanids, the phoenix lost its original associations and was merged with the simurgh, a Persian auspicious mythical bird.



Star-shaped tile with gazelle design

Approx. 1250–1300

Iran; probably Kashan

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with painted decoration under glaze

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P2036

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Islamic Period Ceramics and Metalwork, 1100–1400



Melon-shaped pitcher

Approx. 1150–1225

Iran

Saljuq period (1038–1194)

Bronze

The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60B461

Contemporaneous with more ornate engraved and inlaid pitchers, this example is notable for its simple lobed-melon shape. This shape was popular for both metal and ceramic objects.

A lightly scratched inscription on one side reads:

Blessings to its owner.



Melon-shaped pitcher

Approx. 1200–1300

Iran; probably Kashan

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with overglaze luster decoration

The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1996

This ceramic pitcher mimics the metal one nearby (B60B461). Notice that this pitcher copies even the rings used to attach a cover from the metal prototype, though they have no practical function here.



Bottle with four-lobed body

Approx. 1100–1200

Iran

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with glaze

Museum purchase, B68P3

This bottle is a curious combination of forms. What starts as a cup-mouthed bottle with a graceful long neck (a common shape in Persian ceramics) divides into a four-lobed body, then ends in a narrow base. The cup at the top of the neck here is adorned with an inscription bestowing blessings and happiness upon its owner.

Typically, cup-mouthed vessels are designed with practicality in mind: the wide cup is convenient for refills, and the long narrow neck makes it comfortable to hold and prevents the user from pouring the bottle's contents too quickly. The four-lobed body of this example appears to be unique, with no prototype in ceramic or metalwork. Perhaps not the most functional vessel, this bottle demonstrates the outer limits of creativity of a medieval Persian potter.



Pitcher with design of musicians and courtiers

Approx. 1200–1220

Iran; Kashan

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with overglaze luster decoration

The Avery Brundage Collection,
B65P58

The painted scene on this pitcher depicts musicians and courtiers among dense foliage. The decoration includes both East and West Asian elements. The Mongol conquests of Persia and China in the 1200s facilitated trade and exchange between the two areas. The East Asian features of the figures show the strong influence of Chinese painting. In contrast, the geometric arabesque designs on the neck of the pitcher are a distinct characteristic of Islamic art. The Persian inscription in *naskh* script is largely illegible.

The creation of this type of decoration required a sophisticated double-firing process. The result was a metallic finish that was highly prized.

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Islamic Period Ceramics, 1100–1400



Large dish with design of rabbits and lotus-like flowers

Approx. 1200–1300
Iran; probably Kashan
Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with overglaze luster decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OP1950

These rabbits flanking a lotus show the influence of Chinese motifs on Persian ceramics of this era. The lotus and other motifs introduced on ceramics at this time can be linked to the influence of Mongol invaders, who ruled both Persia and China in the later 1200s.



Two tiles with calligraphy

Probably 1220–1230
Iran; probably Kashan
Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with overglaze luster decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OP2134.a-b

These two tiles are an excellent example of the artistry and complex designs that were applied to architectural decoration in the 1220s in Persia. The script was molded to give the tiles a three-dimensional effect. Interlacing animal and vegetal forms, called arabesques, were painted in reserve with metallic glazes. Small details were added by means of scratching with a sharp instrument. The interplay between the raised script and the densely decorated background shows an Islamic taste for layering motifs and designs.

The tiles together do not form a single phrase. Their inscriptions, written in Arabic in *naskh* script, read (from right to left):

Servant of God and the weak one, King...



Tile with calligraphy

1275–1325
Iran; probably Kashan
Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with overglaze luster decoration
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B6OP2132

Made during the peak of Kashan tile production, this tile is decorated with bold calligraphy and dynamic designs. The soft, rounded forms of the floral arabesques of its background show the developing Chinese influence.

The decorative style of the calligraphy may link this tile to a group of tiles found in major museums throughout the world. It has been suggested that these once decorated the tomb of 'Abd al-Samad, a religious mystic who died in 1299. These tiles were part of the mihrab, a niche placed in the wall to mark the direction of Mecca, toward which prayer is oriented.

Only a small section of the inscription remains here. Perhaps from the Qur'an, it reads:

In heaven you will have...



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Islamic Period Ceramics, 1100–1400



Bowl with figures

1187

By Abu Zayd al-Kashani (Persian, active approx. 1180–1220)

Iran, Kashan

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)

with underglaze and overglaze

decoration (minai ware)

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1874

For a relatively short period during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Persian potters produced a distinctive type of ware that became known as minai (“enameled”). These elegant, lightweight, and thin-walled dishes, such as the bowl here, were painted in a rich palette of colors. They were typically decorated with scenes of people engaging in leisure activities in pleasant outdoor settings, with poetic verses on their inner and outer rims.

This bowl was made by a well-known potter named Abu Zayd al-Kashani, who signed his name on the outer rim and added the date. His inscription reads, “Written at the start of Muharram in 583 of the Hijri year. Long life to the owner. The reciter is the writer. [A]bu [Zayd].”



Bowl with leaflike decoration

Approx. 1175–1220

Iran; probably Kashan

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)

with underglaze and overglaze

decoration (minai ware)

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1863

Most minai ware has figural decoration, but here is an example of all-over patterning. Intertwined vegetal motifs radiate from the center of the bowl, highlighting and emphasizing its shape. A closer look, beyond the fluidity of the design, reveals the precise and complex geometry underlying the decorative scheme.



Bowl

Approx. 1275–1400

Iran; probably Kashan

Ilkhanid (Mongol) period (1256–1353)

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with

underglaze and overglaze decoration

and gold leaf (lajvardina ware)

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1871

Lajvardina ware (from the Persian *lajvard*, meaning “lapis lazuli” or “cobalt”) replaced minai ware as the preferred decorative ceramic by the early 1300s. Nonfigurative designs like this were the most common. On a cobalt blue background, designs were rendered in white and filled with small white and red details with accents of gold leaf. The use of gold and cobalt, both costly materials, along with the complicated firing process made these objects expensive and difficult to produce. Not many such objects are thought to have been made, both because of the expense and because increasing demand for ceramics with more of a Chinese flavor may have caused lajvardina ware to seem old fashioned.



Bowl with phoenix motif

Approx. 1300–1350

Iran; probably Kashan

Ilkhanid (Mongol) period (1256–1353)

Composite-body ceramic (fritware)

with slip decoration under glaze

(Sultanabad ware)

The Avery Brundage Collection,

B60P1841

This bowl may have been an attempt by Persian artists to copy Chinese celadon wares. Celadon ceramics employed a characteristic translucent gray-green glaze, and today the word “celadon” is used to describe objects having this color. The birds on this bowl are a synthesis of the Chinese phoenix with a Persian mythical bird, the simurgh.

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Islamic Period Ceramics, 1400–1800



Bowl with pierced decoration

Approx. 1600–1800

Iran

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with glaze (Gombroon ware)

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1972

By the 1400s, Persian ceramicists increasingly drew inspiration from Chinese porcelains. For example, they filled small holes in the rim of this bowl with glaze to produce a translucent effect.

During the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722), high-quality ceramics were produced for sale in Europe and other Asian countries. This bowl belongs to a type called Gombroon ware, after the port from which they were shipped (modern-day Bandar ‘Abbas). The Dutch East India company had a trading station at Gombroon and these bowls were exported widely.

The raised knob in the center of the bowl is functional. With the tip of one’s middle finger on the underside of the knob and one’s thumb on the rim, the bowl is easy to hold in one hand.



Bowl with star motif

Approx. 1300–1400

Iran

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with decoration under glaze

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1962

The six-pointed star, sometimes called “King Solomon’s seal,” is a significant motif in Islamic as well as Jewish and Christian art. (The Arabic version of Solomon’s name is Sulayman.) In Islamic tradition, this star was sometimes thought to protect the user from poison.



Elliptical cup

1400–1450

Iran or Central Asia

Timurid period (1370–1507)

Nephrite

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60J160

Some of the earliest jade objects from the Islamic world, like this one, were made during the Timurid period (see also the small white jade cup in the adjacent gallery). The shape and decoration of this cup—which rests on a low ring foot, with an animal handle on its wide side, carved ridges along its rim and sides, and hexagonal ornament in front—are features seen on metal cups, which inspired this vessel. The dragon handle recalls the energetic dragons on Chinese Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and Ming dynasty (1368–1644) jades and resembles the handles of other jade cups, jugs, and sword hilts from the Timurid period.



Dish

Approx. 1600–1700

Iran

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with overglaze luster decoration

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1978

This dish, decorated with metallic glaze, is an example of a ceramic tradition begun centuries before it was made. By the time of this dish, however, production of “lusterware” ceramics had begun to slow. Changing fashion and a decline in the expertise needed to produce such objects were factors in the slowdown.



Dish with flower and leaf designs

1450–1500

Iran; probably Nishapur

Timurid period (1370–1506)

Composite-body ceramic (fritware) with painted decoration under glaze

The Avery Brundage Collection, B60P1799

The artist who decorated this dish created the illusion that the flowers, tendrils, and leaves are spinning like a pinwheel. The work contrasts dark motifs with light backgrounds and vice versa.

In the century after the death of the conqueror Timur (Tamerlane) in 1405, the Persian world saw a fashion for all things Chinese. Chinese ceramics had been imported for hundreds of years, and collections were owned by Persian aristocratic families. Now Persian potters in many manufacturing centers copied or drew inspiration from Chinese wares. The group to which this dish belongs takes many motifs from Chinese Yuan dynasty (1271–1368) and Ming dynasty (1368–1644) Cizhou wares.

Islamic Period Art, 1400–1900



Dish with landscape decoration
1550–1650

Northwestern Iran; probably Tabriz
Safavid period (1501–1722)
Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with painted decoration under glaze
(Kubachi ware)
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1991

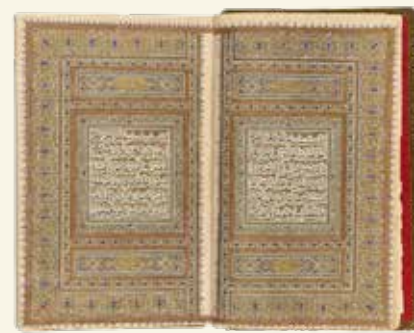
Book production, illustration, and painting flourished during the Safavid period (1501–1722). Many elements characteristic of book decoration can be found on ceramics of this period. Large bowls such as this one provided a good ground for painted scenes.



Dish with figure of a turban-clad youth

1550–1650
Northwestern Iran; probably Tabriz
Safavid period (1501–1722)
Composite-body ceramic (fritware)
with painted decoration under glaze
(Kubachi ware)
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B60P1952

This turban-clad youth—with his long curls, almond-shaped eyes, plump young face, and casual pose—recalls the languorous beauties depicted in Safavid miniature paintings from the later sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. As if taking a cue from miniature painting, some later Safavid ceramics, like this dish, use more colorful palettes and break away from the blue-and-white, black-under-turquoise, and monochrome wares of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and earlier.



Qur'an manuscript

1882
Iran
Leather binding with lacquer and colors; gold and colors on paper
Private collection, R2005.20

As the recitation of the Qur'an is the most important of Muslim practices, the commissioning of copies with elaborate ornamentation and fine calligraphy is common throughout the Islamic world.

The luxurious decoration of this Qur'an—with its golden scroll designs and exuberantly colored floral patterns—is typical of books produced for elite patrons in Iran during the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925). This Qur'an was created for Haj Mirza Nasrollah Mostofi, finance director for the Qajar ruler Nasir al-Din Shah (reigned 1848–1896). Mirza Nasrollah commissioned the book as a gift for his son, who was then only five years old.



Candlestand

Approx. 1575–1625
Iran
Safavid period (1501–1722)
Brass
The Avery Brundage Collection,
B62B34

This candlestand is an example of the high-quality metalwork produced by Islamic artists in the 1500s and 1600s. This specific type, which required time-consuming cutting and etching of the metal, is associated with the reign of Shah Abbas (1558–1629) of the Safavid period. Under Shah Abbas, Isfahan was the capital city. Its factories were famous for fine ceramics, rugs, metal objects, and other luxury items that were exported to locations throughout Asia and Europe.

The inscription, from a poem by the Sufi poet Sa'adi, reads:

One night, I remember that my eyes wouldn't close/I heard a butterfly telling the candle/that I am a mystical lover. If I burn 'tis legitimate/but for you to cry and burn yourself out, what is the reason?



Pendant

1800–1940
Iran; Turkmenistan
Silver, gold, and carnelian
Gift of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian in memory of Dr. Abol Bashir Farmanfarmaian, F1999.50.19



Head ornament

1800–1940
Iran, Turkmenistan
Silver, gold, carnelian, and glass
Gift of Monir Shahroudy Farmanfarmaian in memory of Dr. Abol Bashir Farmanfarmaian, F1999.50.9

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Architectural panel

This panel — once painted in lapis lazuli blue, red, and gold — was one of more than five hundred such panels decorating a palace courtyard. Together they must have created a splendid effect, like “a brocaded surface,” as described in contemporary sources. The marble surface is not smoothly polished because it was originally not meant to be seen under the paint.

A portion of an inscription in Persian, praising the patron Sultan Mas’ud III and his ancestors, appears here and on the other surviving panels (mainly in Rome today). Marble was an uncommon building material during the Ghaznavid period (977–1041), except for royal architecture at Ghazni, where a marble quarry was found. A close study of tool marks on similar panels has revealed that the carving techniques are connected to ancient local stone-carving methods, like those on Gandharan sculpture (see artworks in Gallery 1).



Architectural panel

Afghanistan; Royal Palace of Mas’ud III, Ghazni

Reign of Mas’ud III (1099–1115)

Marble

*Gift of Shawn and Brook Byers and Peter Marks
in honor of Avery Brundage’s Centennial, B87S3*

Mihrab-shaped panel

Mihrabs — which mark prayer direction on the Mecca-facing (*qibla*) wall in a mosque — have a long history in Islamic art and architecture. They commonly appear as recessed niches with pointed arches supported by columns and enclosed by bands of inscription. Mihrab-shaped panels, like this one, were typically commemorative, serving as tombstones or place markers, for example in shrines or mausoleums. As there is no deceased individual's name here, this panel was likely not a tombstone.

The panel's decorative program presents a lot of information on a compact surface. God's majesty and power are described in three Arabic inscriptions (see translations on the reverse side of this placard). The hanging lamp is seen in mosques, mausoleums, and schools (madrasas), where it symbolizes the presence of divine light (while also serving as a practical lighting fixture).

The beauty of the message is further enhanced through four different calligraphic scripts, geometric and vegetal patterning, and *muqarnas* (decorative vaulting), which are seen widely on secular and religious artworks.

Mihrab-shaped panel

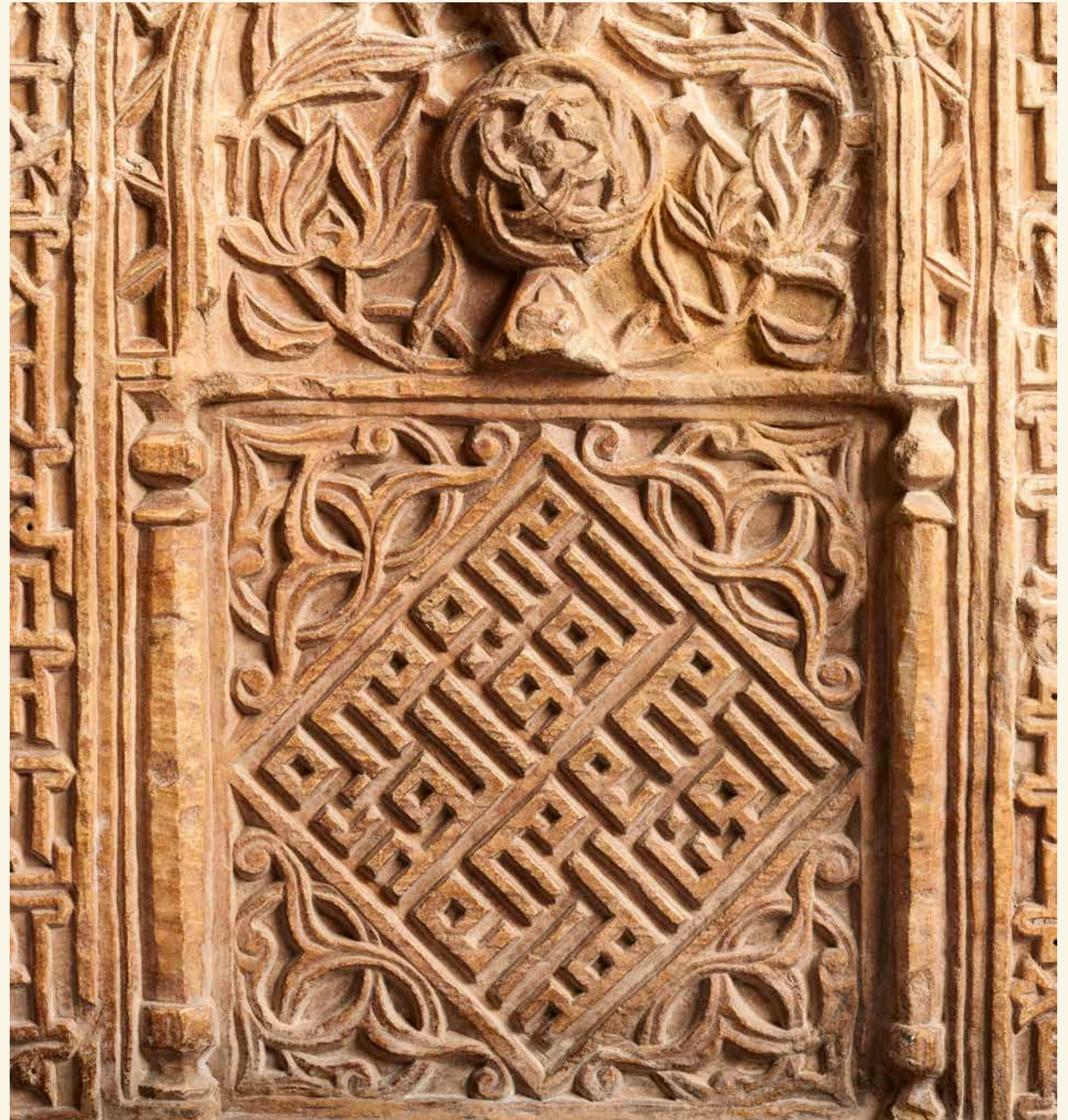
Approx. 1350

Iran

Ilkhanid (Mongol) period (1256–1353)

Limestone

Gift of the Connoisseurs' Council, 2015.71



Inscriptions on the Mihrab-Shaped Panel

- 1 Sympathy is Allah's; Power is Allah's; Strength is Allah's; Guidance is Allah's.
- 2 [Qur'an, chapter 24, "The Light" (Sura al-Nur), verses 35–36]

Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth; The likeness of His Light is as a niche wherein is a lamp (the lamp in a glass, the glass as it were a glittering star) kindled from a Blessed Tree, an olive that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil would shine, even if no fire touched it; Light upon Light, Allah guides to His Light whom He Will [...] [Such niches are] in mosques which Allah has ordered to be raised and that His name be mentioned therein; exalting Him within them in the morning and the evenings.
- 3 [Throne Verse (Ayat al-Kursi) in the Qur'an, chapter 2, "The Cow," verse 255]

Allah! There is no God but He, the Living, the Self-subsisting, the Eternal.
No slumber can seize Him, nor sleep.
All things in heaven and earth are His.
Who could intercede in His presence without His permission?
He knows what appears in front of and behind His creatures.
Nor can they encompass any knowledge of Him except what He wills.
His throne extends over the heavens and the earth, and He feels no fatigue in guarding and preserving them, for He is the Highest and Most Exalted.
Allah, the Most High, speaks the truth.
- 4 The Prophet [Muhammad], peace be upon him, said...



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