
Islamic Art and Material Culture Subject Specialist Network

1. An Introduction to Islamic Ceramics: Lustre across Time

Ceramics with metallic glazes imitating precious metal, known as lustreware, was a Middle Eastern invention. The technology was adapted from the lustre decoration used on Egyptian and Syrian glass in the eighth century (Fig. 1). It was first used on pottery produced in Iraq during the Abbasid dynasty in the ninth century. The earliest was pottery or fired earthenware covered in a white tin-glaze. This was a lead glaze to which a small amount of tin (imported from South East Asia or Europe) was added. The tin opacified the glaze, turning it white during a second firing. The result was a vessel with a superficial resemblance to Chinese porcelain.



Fig. 1 Cup, glass, Syria, 8th century
V&A, C.24-1932
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O3667/cup-unknown/>

To make lustreware, potters painted the white glazed surface with a clay-like mixture containing powdered metallic oxides from silver and copper. This was placed in a partially oxygen starved or reducing atmosphere - a third firing - executed at a much lower temperature (about 500-600°C). The heat leads to the formation of microscopic metal particles which remain imbedded on the surface, this is then burnished or rubbed to bring out the lustrous reflective painting.

The knowledge of this costly technique used on elite ceramic ware was probably spread by the movement of potters throughout the Middle East; when one centre declined, another became more prosperous, attracting artisans looking for new patronage. From Iraq the technology spread to Egypt, in Fustat (old Cairo), where it was used to decorate fritware (also called stonepaste), an artificial ceramic body developed by Middle Eastern potters around the middle of the 11th century. This body imitated the hard, bright white body of imported Chinese porcelains. The main ingredient in fritware was fine crushed quartz powder, which was mixed with white clay for plasticity and a glassy substance known as frit (powdered glass) that fuses the materials. The ratio of ingredients was 10:1:1, respectively.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, potters moved to centres in Syria and Iran (especially Kashan), and developed the lustre and fritware technology to produce an astonishing range of styles. It continued to be produced in Iran, primarily for tiles, into the fourteenth century, and it was revived in the Safavid period in the 1670s. Islamic potters took the lustre technology with them to Muslim Spain, but never employed the fritware body continuing to work in tin-glazed earthenware. It flourished in the 14th and 15th centuries, in the Muslim industry at Malaga and the Christian region of Valencia. Lustreware made in medieval Spain is now widely known as 'Hispano-Moresque' ware. In the 16th century, lustre spread to Italy, which caused the decline of the Spanish industry. It was revived in various centres in the 19th century, and had particular appeal in the English Arts & Crafts movement (see Toolkit 4).

Further Reading

<http://islamicceramics.ashmolean.org/Abbasid/pottery.htm>

http://www.lacma.org/islamic_art/eia.htm

http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/slpg/hd_slpg.htm

<http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/research/lustreware>

Mariam Rosser-Owen, *Islamic Arts from Spain* (V&A Publishing, London, 2010)

Mariam Rosser-Owen, 'Lustre: the First Global Technology', *Arts of Asia*, 41, no. 6, Nov-Dec 2011, pp.123-132.

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Bowl with Arabic inscription
Earthenware, tin-glazed, painted in lustre
Basra, Iraq, 900-950
Diameter 22 cm
C.99-1929

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O427134/bowl/>

The white surface of this earthenware bowl resembles Chinese porcelain especially on the plain underside. The decoration is an early adaption of the lustre technique invented by glassmakers. Here, the effect is thought to imitate the lustrous appearance of objects made in precious gold. Valuable gold and silver from this period rarely survives, as it was melted down and reused. Consequently, the decoration may reflect contemporary metalwork, perhaps resembling the Tang dynasty gold vessels from the Belitung shipwreck sunk around 830 AD.



Fragment from a bowl with a depiction of a hare
Earthenware, tin-glazed, painted in lustre
Probably Fustat, Egypt, 1000-50
Diameter 17.5 cm
C.745-1920

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O301572/sherd/>

The white glaze on this bowl-fragment disguises the very red earthenware, creating a blank canvas. It was painted in Egypt during the Fatimid caliphate. The technique was transferred through the movement of skilled potters. Designs on Fatimid lusterware tended to be more sophisticated than in the earlier Abbasid period. This fragment depicts a running hare within an interlaced scrollwork border. This new courtly taste was possibly inspired by inlaid or engraved metalwork in royal treasuries.



Fragment with carved Kufic inscription
Fritware, under a green-tinged glaze, with a turquoise spot.
Probably Fustat, Egypt, 1100-1200
Diameter 11 cm
C.1075-1921

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O338387/fragment/>

This fragment, known as 'fritware', is in a new very refined, white ceramic body imitating Chinese porcelain, known as Qingbai ware. It was probably invented in Egypt. The carved decoration includes the inscription 'baraka' meaning blessing. The glaze pools and the colour deepens in the carved recesses, enhancing the design. The turquoise drip, which has fallen on to the bowl during firing, is evidence that it was made in a workshop where turquoise-glazed fritware was also produced.

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Bowl
Fritware, underglaze blue and lustre painted
Probably Kashan, Iran, 1175-1225
Diameter 14.6cm
C.62-1953
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O279505/bowl-unknown/>

With the decline of the Fatimid Empire, potters found new patronage in Syria and Iran, where they established potteries. They produced elite wares decorated in lustre (here, applied with a fine brush) in combination with solid underglaze cobalt blue ground. The Iranian potters continued to refine the fritware, as may be seen in the lustrous sheen on this vessel.



Bowl with inscription
Fritware, underglaze blue, turquoise and lustre
Probably Kashan, Iran, 1200-1220
Diameter 21.3 cm
C.428-1940
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O279510/bowl-unknown/>

Painters created the design on this bowl in two stages. Firstly, it was outlined in cobalt blue, glazed and fired. Secondly, it was painted in lustre. The effect gave the design more definition, resembling perhaps coloured metal inlay on gold and silver. The lustre has worn away over time, leaving the blue lines, revealing just how fine a layer it forms on the surface of the vessel.



Bowl with a bird motif and poetic inscriptions
Fritware, underglaze blue, turquoise and lustre
Probably Kashan, Iran, 1200-1220
Diameter 21.9 cm
C.157-1977
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O86485/bowl-unknown/>

This bowl survives intact as it was found in a hoard, known as the Jurjan Hoard, buried for eight centuries. One piece is dated 1217. In addition to the underglaze blue painted outlines and lustre overglaze, there is a turquoise spot in the centre. It was deliberately added and enhanced with lustre as a bird motif. The inscriptions have been finely incised into the solid lustre with a sharp tool.



Tile, star-shaped
Fritware, lustre painted
Probably Kashan, Iran, 1262
Width 28.9 cm
1837L-1876
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O427125/tile-unknown/>

This star-shaped tile was designed to alternate with a cross-shaped tile on a wall panel – this system is found on several buildings from this period. The design, however, is unique to the shrine of Imamzadeh Yahya in Varamin (south of Tehran). Each hand-painted tile is slightly different. Following the Mongol invasion, there was much re-building and tile production became the predominant luxury output for ceramics.

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Tile, moulded
Fritware, underglaze blue and lustre
Probably Kashan, Iran, 1300-1325
Dimensions 25.4 x 26cm
1491B-1876

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O202826/tile-unknown/>

Moulds helped to streamline production. A series with relief-moulded texts, mostly from the Qur'an, were made for use in partially cladding interior walls in high status buildings. Moulds minimized the need for skilled painters to create unique designs or execute the calligraphy. Painters simply followed the relief patterns, which were painted in cobalt to be more legible from a distance.



Bowl
Earthenware, tin-glazed, underglaze blue and lustre
Manises, Valencia, Spain, 1486-7
Diameter 24.1 cm
C.2047-1910

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O124976/bowl-unknown/>

This bowl, once part of a large set, depicts the arms of the Gondi family of Florence. Documents in the Florentine archive allow us to date its production precisely. It illustrates that the Islamic technique of lustreware had spread to Europe through the migration of potters to Spain. Spain became the major global production centre of this luxury ware. Its potters received commissions from wealthy families in Italy, which is reflected in the high quality of the lustre on this bowl.



Large dish with shield (the rim cut down)
Earthenware, tin-glazed with underglaze blue and lustre
Manises, Spain, 1450-1475
Diameter 37.2 cm
43-1907

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O160504/dish-unknown/>

The rim of this large dish may have been broken, and then trimmed down to create a new shape with a flat handle at the side. It also combines the traditional techniques of underglaze blue and lustre painting with European heraldic shields, although the arms of this noble European family have not been identified. While the stylized plant motifs on the front of the dish are still in the Islamic mode, the eagle on the reverse (below) is much more 'Gothic' and European in style. The eagle was probably visible when the dish was hung on a wall, suspended by rope or fine wire through holes in the rim, both for storage and display.

