

# Islamic Art and Material Culture Subject Specialist Network

## 3. An Introduction to Islamic Ceramics: Safavid Ceramics and Chinese Inspiration

Chinese porcelain was imported into the Middle East almost from its inception. Porcelain — a translucent, white-bodied ware made from kaolin (china clay) and *baidunzi* (*petuntse*, a feldspathic rock) — arrived in waves, dictated primarily by isolationist policies in China, which fluctuated during the Ming and early Qing dynasties, when trade ceased. The brilliant blue-painted porcelain was imported from the early fourteenth century. Its production was perfected in the 1320s, in Jingdezhen, south China. The blue derived from cobalt oxide, which was black when painted on the unfired body, but turned the distinctive blue, when fired under a glaze.

In the Middle East, the production of blue-painted ceramics was dictated by whether there was a dearth of Chinese porcelain in the bazaars. From the 1550s until the 1650s, Chinese blue-painted porcelain was mass-produced for export markets in the Middle East, India, Europe, Japan and the Americas. However, from the mid-1640s, because of the fall of the Ming dynasty, exports were reduced and officially ceased in 1657. During the Safavid dynasty (1501-1736), a period of great economic reform and art patronage in Iran, this provided an impetus for potters in Kirman and elsewhere to fill the gap in the marketplace with similar wares in fritware.



Fig. 1 Knop-necked bottle for the Middle Eastern market, China, c. 1640.

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O33589/bottle-unknown/>

The Chinese exported shapes were primarily generic, large dishes or plates, bowls, ewers and bottles; however, one shape - the tall narrow-necked flasks with knopped necks - might have been made specifically for the Islamic market (fig. 1). Many of the generic shapes were imitated convincingly by Iranian potters. They often added a stylized mark on the base in the form of squares or 'tassel'-shapes copying Chinese reign marks or inscriptions. Only a handful of Safavid fritwares have dated inscriptions.

The Iranian potters were not able to control the blue so used a black for outlines and to add definition. In the second half of the seventeenth century, the black was abandoned for a looser, more fluid blue. At mid-century, Iranian painters mixed design elements from various historic wares, borrowing from both fourteenth and seventeenth century sources, on single vessels. Like Iznik wares (See Toolkit 2, [Iznik and its Imitations](#)) large dishes were especially common, many are now stained from serving rice dishes with greasy meats.

The influence of colourful Japanese and Chinese porcelain is also evident in the introduction of polychrome wares painted in red and an olive green slip in combination with cobalt blue. Gradually, potters

adapted foreign vessels, such as *kendi*, drinking vessels for the domestic market, refining their shape for local use as water pipes for tobacco. In the 1680s, Kangxi, the Chinese emperor, encouraged international trade, and again, by the 1690s, Iran was flooded with Chinese porcelain imports. This eventually marked the end of a great period of ceramic production in Iran.

### Further Reading

The Arts of Iran, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, [http://metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa\\_2/hd\\_safa\\_2.htm](http://metmuseum.org/toah/hd/safa_2/hd_safa_2.htm)

Shah' Abbas and the Arts of Isfahan, Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History, [http://metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shah/hd\\_shah.htm](http://metmuseum.org/toah/hd/shah/hd_shah.htm)

Crowe, Yolande. *Persia and China: Safavid Blue and White Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1501-1738*, London (Thames & Hudson), 2002

Golembek, Lisa, et al. *Persian Pottery in the First Global Age : the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Brill, Leiden) 2014

Lane, Arthur. *Later Islamic Pottery*. London: Faber and Faber, 1957

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Dish, *Kraak* ware  
Porcelain, cobalt blue underglaze painted  
Jingdezhen, China, 1600-40  
FE.23-1970

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O496842/dish-unknown/>

*Kraak* ware is the Western name given to thin-bodied Chinese export ware, characterized by radial panels in the decoration. It is named after the seafaring Portuguese vessels, carrack, which transported these less refined wares all over the world.



Dish, after a Chinese original  
Fritware, cobalt blue and manganese black underglaze painted  
Kirman, Iran, 1640-60  
483-1878

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O199529/dish-plate-unknown/>

Iranian potters were able to imitate the *Kraak* designs, especially the panelled borders with plants alternating with Asian objects – fans, scrolls and tassels - without understanding what they were. However, they had trouble creating details with the fugitive cobalt. They combined it with black created from manganese to add definition to the designs. Typically, the Iranian cobalt was a more brilliant blue.



Reverse of a dish, *Kraak* ware  
Porcelain, cobalt blue underglaze painted  
Jingdezhen, China, 1600-40  
FE.23-1970

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O496842/dish-unknown/>

Chatter marks often appear on the underside of Chinese *Kraak* ware vessels. They are left by the wooden tool used by potters to flatten the surface and often hidden by the glaze on better quality wares as on the left. Another feature is the sandy kiln grit on the foot rim.



Reverse of the Safavid dish, after a Chinese original  
Fritware, cobalt blue and manganese black underglaze painted  
Kirman, Iran, 1640-60  
483-1878

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O199529/dish-plate-unknown/>

The Iranian potter has very carefully copied the decoration on the back of an earlier Chinese *Kraak* dish. The pattern is probably diagnostic of a particular workshop or painter. The dish also has a square seal mark, imitating Chinese reign marks.



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Kendi, drinking vessel  
Porcelain, cobalt blue underglaze painted  
Jingdezhen, China, 1600-40  
1571-1876

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O33603/kendi-unknown/>

This is a *Kraak* ware communal drinking vessel made for Islamic communities in South East Asia, known as a kendi. The mammiform spout was held up high and spurted water so the spout was never contaminated. Typically, the painting is slap-dash and within panels. Significantly, it was acquired in Iran, where it was perhaps used as part of water pipe.



Kalian (water pipe), after a *kendi* shape  
Fritware, cobalt blue and manganese black underglaze painted  
Kirman, Iran, 1640-60  
998-1876

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O176033/kendi-unknown/>

This water pipe imitates a Chinese *kendi* or drinking vessel. The decoration is a very convincing imitation, but again it uses black outlines and a much brighter cobalt blue. The cobalt is fugitive and tends to flow, resulting in the fuzziness of the painting. The fritware body is also sugary in appearance and not smooth or refined, like the well-leveled Chinese porcelain body.



Kalian (water pipe)  
Fritware, cobalt blue underglaze painted with red and green slip  
Kirman, Iran, 1650-1700  
420-1878

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85915/kalian-unknown/>

In the 1670s, Iranian potters slowly moved away from direct imitation and became more inventive. The water pipe form was streamlined according to local use with a less obtrusive spout. A new palette of red and green was also introduced, perhaps inspired by Chinese polychrome ware, known as *wucui*, or colourful Japanese Kakiemon-style wares.



Large dish for serving food  
Fritware, cobalt blue underglaze painted and incised  
Kirman, Iran, 1650-1700  
890-1876

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O80975/dish-unknown/>

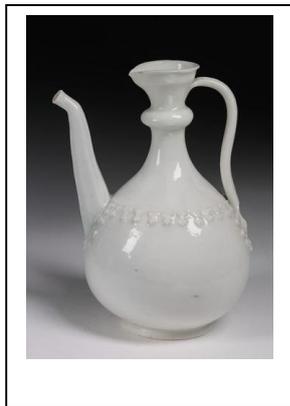
The geometric decoration on this dish represents a return to traditional Islamic design, incorporating split palmettes and flowers in trellis patterns, on a wave-incised ground. The style would have appealed to the Safavid as well as Mughal elite.

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Flask, with Iranian metal collar  
Porcelain  
Dehua kilns, Fujian province, China, 1620-1720  
1649-1876  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O183457/vase-unknown/>

Porcelain objects made in Dehua, on the southern coast of China, were also imported into Iran. The bottle decorated with raised blossoms was acquired in Iran, where it was repaired with an engraved metal collar. This ware has been known by a collector's term, 'blanc de Chine', since the 1860s.



Ewer  
Fritware  
Kirman, Iran, 1650-1725  
576-1889  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O185857/ewer-unknown/>

This white ewer imitates the white Chinese porcelain of Dehua, especially in the applied decoration. Unlike Chinese porcelain which can withstand hot liquids, fritware, an artificial porcelain, cracks if filled with hot water. Dehua (commonly known as "blanc de Chine") was often used for teawares, but Safavid whitewares were not used as such. Instead they were used for wine and cold delicacies (sweetmeats). Historically, in England, Safavid wares were known as Gombroon ware, after the Iranian port of Bandar Abbas, then known as Gombroon.



Bowl with 'pierced' decoration  
Fritware, painted in manganese black and cobalt blue  
Kirman, Iran, 1650-1725  
1399-1876  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85377/footed-bowl-unknown/>

The rim of this bowl was pierced before being glazed, and the glaze has subsequently filled in the holes with transparent windows. It was perhaps invented to imitate the translucency of porcelain. Remarkably, the technique was first used in the Seljuk period, in the late twelfth century.



Dish with Iranian design  
Fritware  
Isfahan, Iran, 1600-50  
1456-1904  
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O340334/dish-unknown/>

The dish reveals the influence of Kraak ware in the panelled decoration and Chinese polychrome ware in the palette. It was made near the court in Isfahan. However, the decoration of a swaying willow is from Persian painting. This ware was thought to have been made in Kubachi, Daghestan, following the discovery in the nineteenth century of a large cache of similar wares in the town. In fact they were made near the court in Isfahan.