

Islamic Art and Material Culture Subject Specialist Network

5. An Introduction to Islamic Ceramics: **Fakes and Forgeries**

The subject of fakes and forgeries in the study of Islamic ceramics is of major concern, particularly when considering acquisitions. There are straight forward imitations or copies, such as those made in the nineteenth century by the French manufacturer Edmé Samson and Cie., and the Italian firm Cantagalli. These are now considered of historic interest and acquired as examples of the history of collecting. However, they are not always marked as such, and the accuracy and quality of their workmanship has allowed them to enter museum

collections as genuine artefacts of earlier periods. Unscrupulous merchants have often removed the marks, employing acid or an abrasive. A network of unexplained scratches on a base is often a tell-tale sign of the deceit. Spurious marks may, of course, also be added to an object.

An object may have begun life as an authentic object, and have been “improved” by an unscrupulous owner to enhance its value. Repainting and adding signatures or dates is a common deception. Missing parts may be replaced to form a whole object, or parts of old objects combined to form one object, known as a “marriage”. “Improvements” to original objects are fakes, but when an object is made deliberately to deceive from the moment of its conception it is then known as a forgery.

Excavations produce numerous pottery sherds. A skilful restorer with access to these sherds can piece together a complete bowl formed of numerous pieces from unrelated vessels, of the same date with similar decoration (fig. 1). These sherds are sometimes “inlaid” with pieces from another vessel with more desirable details, such as figures or animals, which are rare. Alternatively, missing parts are sometimes

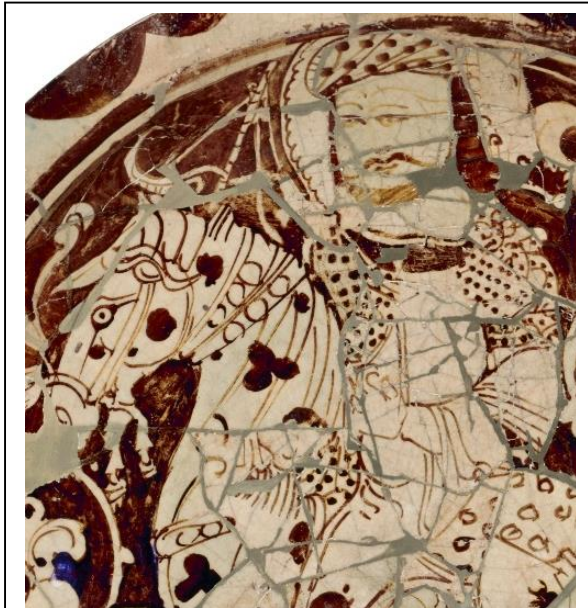


Fig. 1 Bowl with lustre decoration
Fritware, glazed and lustre-painted
Rayy, Iran, 1175-1200
Diameter 36.5 cm
C.7-1947
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85413/dish-unknown/>

created from plaster and painted to match the original parts by extending the decoration over the restored areas. Some of these restored objects of authentic date are enhanced with dates or figures, which are presumed to add value to an object. To quote Oliver Watson : ‘the student of Islamic ceramics needs to be wary about accepting unquestioningly what he or she initially sees’ and such unethical restorations may ‘be retained as part of a collection’s history’ with any interventions recorded by a professional conservator.

Further Reading

Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands*, London, 20014

Oliver Watson, ‘Fakes and Forgeries of Islamic Pottery’, *V & A, Album 4*, 1985. Figs 8-9.

Oliver Watson, ‘Fakes and Forgeries in Islamic Pottery’, *Oriente Moderno, Nuova serie, Anno 23 (84), Nr. 2, Kunst und Kunsthandwerk im Islam 2. Bamberger Symposium der Islamischen Kunst 25. - 27. Juli 1996 (2004)*, pp. 517-539 Istituto per l'Oriente C. A. Nallino

<http://www.jstor.org/stable/25817948> Accessed: 31-03-2016 16:49 UTC

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Bowl with mina'i decoration
Fritware, polychrome painted over the glaze painted, gold
Kashan, Iran, 1180-1220

Diameter 21.8 cm

C.81-1918

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85594/bowl-unknown/>

This bowl is authentic, however, it has been improved with a date of 640AH/1242AD to make it more desirable and valuable. Following its excavation, the bowl was restored and a missing area of the wall was filled in. Significantly, the date appears on the modern patch, rather than the original rim. The date is also late for the mina'i (overglaze enamel) technique.



Bowl with lustre decoration

Fritware, glazed and lustre-painted

Rayy, Iran, 1175-1200

Diameter 36.5 cm

C.7-1947

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O85413/dish-unknown/>

This bowl is authentic, however, close examination of the face after cleaning revealed that it is constructed from a mixture of sherds from at least two separate but similar dishes. There is perhaps no intention to deceive as the joins between the fragments have not been touched in the restoration process.



Bowl with bird-woman (harpy), copy left side

Fritware, painted in black under a turquoise glaze,
Iran, probably 1960-70

Diameter: 25.5 cm

C.179-1984

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84918/bowl-unknown/>

This bowl is a modern copy of an early thirteenth century bowl. The painting is stiffer and lacks the spontaneity of the original. Similar copies have been acquired by museums as authentic medieval objects.



Bowl with bird-woman (harpy), authentic right side

Fritware, underglaze blue and black

Iran, 1200-1220

Diameter 20.3 cm

C.80-1918

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O84916/bowl-unknown/>

It is likely that the copyist based the copy on a photograph of this authentic bowl published in Arthur Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, 1947, pl 85B.

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Bowl copying "Garrus" ware (left)
Red earthenware, covered in slip and carved, green-tinged glaze
Unknown c. 1900-1925
Diameter 24.1 cm
C.211-1926
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O221259/bowl-unknown/>

The earthenware bowl may be old, but in the 1920s, when "Garrus" ware was first collected by Europeans, it was improved. The plain surface was carved with an atypical figural design, then re-glazed and fired. Its deceit was only discovered by curators in the 1970s. The smaller bowl is an authentic twelfth century "Garrus" type bowl (C.285-1927).

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O86737/bowl-unknown/>



Dish, "*lajvardina*" ware
Fritware, blue glaze, overglaze enamels and gold
Iran, 1275-1400
Diameter 13 cm
C.52-1955
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O340242/dish-unknown/>

This blue glazed dish is authentic, but it was later enhanced with overglaze enamels and gold leaf. It now imitates *lajvardina* ware, a more valuable ware from the Ilkhanid period. This new decoration may follow an original pattern which had largely worn out.



Large jar after a fourteenth-century jar
Earthenware, underglaze painted in blue and black
Unknown location, mid-twentieth century
Height 20.3 cm
C.176-1980
<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O332157/vase-unknown/>

This jar is a copy of a fourteenth-century Syrian jar. The material is crude as is the painting. The Arabic inscription is also poorly executed. The foot and sides have been deliberately blackened to appear ancient. If the jar was made as a tourist object, there are no marks to indicate it was sold as a commercial copy. Hence, it suggests it was made to deceive.

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Spittoon, copy, right side
Earthenware, painted in lustre
Possibly Iran, 1850-1909
C.797-1909
Height 12.4 cm

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O340221/spittoon-unknown/>

Both vessels are in the shape of spittoons, a popular form in Safavid fritware. It is possible this shape was used by scholars as a sand sprinkler to dry ink when writing, rather than for spitting. The real spittoon is a standard shape with typical lustre decoration made around 1675 (959-1876)

<http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O199475/spittoon-unknown/>

The spittoon on the right was made for the collector market in the later nineteenth century when lustreware was very popular. The dense painting of harsh brown lustre is atypical, as is the shape and material, when compared with the authentic fritware spittoon on the left.

Marks



Examples of the Cantagalli singing rooster. The Samson mark is less easily identified, often resembles the marks of the ware it copies.