

Chapter XIX

Notes on the Decorative Composition of a Bowl from Northeastern Iran*

Much has been written about the art of medieval Near Eastern ceramics, and a number of conclusions may be taken as reflecting a consensus of scholarly opinions and as corresponding to much of the objectively known evidence.¹ At the same time, troublesome questions constantly arise as one attempts to understand any one apparent conclusion in depth or as one investigates what may be called the epistemological borders of an accepted statement, the fascinating gray area in which a generalization is true and yet not entirely satisfactory, either because it does not seem quite to account for all available information or because it raises too many additional problems. For instance, it seems fairly clear that Iraq, Egypt and northeastern Iran were the three major areas in which a new art of luxury ceramics developed in early Islamic times, and the time of the formation of this new art may have been as early as the last decades of the eighth century. While a certain number of common features and reciprocal influences can be shown to have existed in the decorative themes, the techniques and the functions of pottery in all three areas, the differences are on the whole far more striking, and, with the exception of one or two rather uncertain groups, the major types belonging to each region are comparatively well known to the student of Islamic art, even though there is no published systematic description of each series. What remains unclear, however, are the reasons why these particular provinces witnessed a major development in the art of ceramics while others did not. Is it simply a matter of insufficient exploration in other areas? Or are there some more fundamental regional differences in the artistic growth

* First published in *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art* (1971), pp. 91–8.

¹ This state of affairs is symbolized by the fact that for pottery we do possess several introductory studies, of which the most up-to-date and useful one is A. Lane's *Early Islamic Pottery* (London, 1948). Like most similar studies it deals with a pottery that has primarily an aesthetic merit, i.e., with luxury or semi-luxury objects. The same apparent clarity is far from obvious when one turns to an archaeologically defined pottery, i.e., when the sum total of a moment's ceramic production is considered. See, for instance, J. Sauvaget, "Introduction à l'étude de la céramique musulmane," in *Revue des Etudes Musulmanes*, 33 (1965).

of various Islamic provinces? Furthermore, if the development of an art of ceramics in eastern Iran, Iraq and Egypt can be shown to be related, why are the ceramic series different from each other? If, on the other hand, there is no significant relationship between the pottery of the three areas, why is it that at approximately the same time the same technique exhibited such remarkable changes?

Another kind of problem occurs when one attempts to date ceramic series with any degree of precision. Almost all museum labels and publications tend to put objects over a period of two centuries, e.g., ninth–tenth or twelfth–thirteenth centuries. While archaeological expeditions may provide occasional *post quem* or *ante quem* dates for certain groups, the very nature of medieval sites, even when they are untouched by contemporary robbers and excavated with appropriate care, usually precludes more precise dates. Even when a precise date can be given to some group of objects (as has been the case in a number of Fustat pits),² archaeological evidence cannot limit the group to this date only. Thus for any one type we are compelled to accept, at least *a priori*, a comparatively long period of manufacture and utilization. But this very hypothesis of longevity makes both the formation of the type, and especially its decadence, abandonment, and replacement by another type, a particularly important problem for the solution of which appropriate mechanisms have not yet been developed. The difficulty is compounded when one considers the origin of most of our information. It consists on the one hand of masses of sherds, each of which provides only partial evidence about the finished object but can usually be fitted in coherent chronological or technical series, and, on the other hand, of more or less complete objects, often of uncertain origin. Although attempted in a few cases,³ the systematic correlation of these two sources of information is still in its infancy.

Finally, a third kind of problem can be brought out. There is general agreement on the main techniques of Islamic pottery as well as on the curious fact that the luxury wares of the early centuries tended to be a production of bowls and of plates, i.e., of open shapes which emphasize a single circular surface to be decorated. It has also been generally recognized that interest in surface decoration [92] over generally indifferently shaped bodies is a major characteristic of Islamic ceramics. But comparatively little attention has been given to the themes of decoration themselves. Or rather, even if a number of individual topics have been studied, as in the instances of a celebrated plate in the Freer Gallery⁴ or of a specific type of

² G. T. Scanlon, "Ancillary Dating Materials from Fustat," in *Ars Orientalis*, 7 (1968).

³ P. J. Riis and V. Poulsen, *Hama, Les Verreries et Poteries Médiévales* (Copenhagen, 1957); or, in a less systematic way, C. Wilkinson, "The Glazed Pottery of Nishapur and Samarkand," in *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (November 1961).

⁴ R. Ettinghausen, "The Iconography of a Kashan Luster Plate," *Ars Orientalis*, 4 (1961).

Kufic inscriptions,⁵ there is nothing even approximating a corpus of ceramic designs; nor has there been any attempt at suggesting the formal processes by which artisans and painters organized the circular or other shapes they used. Yet, if we are to consider and understand some if not all the ceramic series of the Muslim Middle Ages as works of art to which the culture gave more than a utilitarian function, we should be able to present some hypotheses about the ways in which their decoration was organized, and about the aesthetic or iconographic meanings to be attributed to such themes as can be identified.

It would be easy and in the context of this essay quite idle to multiply examples of apparently accepted conclusions whose implications or premises have not yet been worked out. And it is only proper that it be so, for any conclusion automatically becomes a hypothesis for further research and, tenuous though it may be at any one time, a conclusion must also consist of some sort of equilibrium between a concrete object and general hypotheses. It is with the aims of suggesting a few directions in the search for this balance and of proposing some hypotheses concerning the problem of defining ceramic decoration that this essay was undertaken. It will attempt, first of all, to describe and to explain the decorative composition on one recent acquisition of the Islamic department at the Metropolitan Museum. Then it will seek to widen the conclusions one may reach about this one object into broader considerations of the aesthetic principles involved in the art of Iranian ceramics in early Islamic times.

The object involved (Fig. 1)⁶ is a deep bowl, 12 cm in height, 35 cm in diameter at the top, with a base diameter of 14.5 cm. The shape of the object is quite common; its size is somewhat larger than is usual, although parallels for such larger bowls can be found in eastern Iran, in Iraq, and in Egypt. The object is complete for the most part, and it is only in such places where the fragments were put together that there are traces of modern additions, but these do not affect the character of the decoration in any significant way. The technique of the object – design in brownish pigment painted over a yellow slip and under transparent glaze – is fairly typical of ceramic techniques of northeastern Iran. The technique and especially its color scheme suggests that the luster ceramics of Iraq were being imitated. Although it is not possible for the time being to prove that this particular object was actually made in Nishapur,⁷ such an origin is likely enough, as we shall see later on. But its point of origin is not important for our purposes, and it is simpler to consider it as one of the many ceramic types developed in northeastern Iran

⁵ L. Volov, "Plaited Kufic on Samanid Epigraphic Pottery," *Ars Orientalis*, 6 (1966).

⁶ It was first published by E. Grube, "The Art of Islamic Pottery," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (February 1965), p. 213, figs 5, 6.

⁷ For the distinctions between Nishapur and Afrasiyab, see Wilkinson's article and K. Erdmann's earlier "Ceramiche di Afrasiab," *Faenza*, 21 (1937), largely superseded now by Sh. Tashhodjaev, *Hudozhivstvennaia Polivnaia Keramika Samarkanda* (Tashkent, 1967).

1 and 2 Bowl,
painted and
glazed
earthenware.
Persian, from
Nishapur, ninth–
tenth century



between the ninth and the eleventh centuries, more probably toward the end of that period.

Like practically all these ceramics, the Metropolitan plate is decorated. On the outside (Fig. 2) groups of three vertical strokes divide the side of the bowl into five compartments, each compartment being then occupied by a roughly elliptical shape filled in desultory fashion with oblique strokes suggesting a sort of hatching. Although not the only type of design apparent on the sides of ceramic objects from early Islamic times in any one of the three major centers of production, it is a very common one. Its purpose is essentially that of emphasizing the shape of the object, but the more curious feature of this design – here and on many other objects – is its apparent carelessness, as though the decorator felt freer with his brush-strokes on the outer sides of his objects than on the inside. Whether this freedom of execution should be understood as an indication of the lesser importance medieval ceramicists gave to the exterior of their objects, or whether these marks in which one can observe rather curious variations in the number of strokes found in ellipses or circles should be interpreted as atelier marks with some internal significance, cannot be answered for the time being, and arguments exist for either interpretation.

In any event the most important design on the object occurs inside the bowl, as is typical of almost all objects of that kind and time. If one [94] excepts a narrow border consisting of a much-simplified festoon typical of a large number of plates and bowls, this design consists of a unified composition set against a neutral background and framed in a single continuous circular edge. Seen as a whole, the bowl's composition is not unique, but it is clearly distinguishable from several different compositions known in early Islamic pottery. It is quite different from such extraordinary designs as are found on a celebrated bowl in the Freer Gallery (Fig. 3), in which the background of the border becomes the design of the center.⁸ It is also different from designs which forcefully separate a wide ring-like border from a central medallion, as occur on many objects from northeastern Iran and from Egypt, for instance on a well-known bowl in the Metropolitan Museum (Fig. 4).⁹ In most of these objects the central medallion is composed around one or more axes, while the side border has a generally clockwise movement, especially when it involves writing. The composition of our object is also different from a third major type of composition found on early Islamic ceramics from all major areas, the single subject – an animal, a human figure, a scene, writing – set on a variety of backgrounds, from simply monochrome ones to a cluttering of themes from many origins as in a celebrated Nishapur group.

⁸ The object has been published by R. Ettinghausen, *Medieval Near Eastern Ceramics in the Freer Gallery* (Washington, 1960), figs 6, 7. A similar effect occurs also on Egyptian ceramics, Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 24 and, in a different way, pl. 25B.

⁹ Lane, *Early Islamic Pottery*, pl. 15B; for Egyptian examples see pls 22B, 23A, etc.

3 Deep bowl,
painted and
glazed
earthenware.
Persian, from
Nishapur, tenth
century



Finally, it is different from a somewhat smaller number of designs which consist of an all-over pattern of a single motif repeated in more or less organized fashion.

Yet, as I shall try to demonstrate, almost every one of these ways of composing on the circular shape of a bowl has affected the design of our object. In order to make this particular point clear we must first identify the individual elements which went into the making of the composition. First we have lines. These are of two kinds, a thick line that is always drawn directly on the neutral background and a thinner line generally used as a border or as an edge for some other unit. Second, we meet with a roughly circular element with a number of dots set on or just outside of the circle's line and with a V-shaped, chevron-like unit in the middle. While one may imagine that the latter is a simplification of a natural subject like birds in flight, it is perhaps more accurate to interpret the whole motif as the breakdown into smaller units of a vegetal rinceau. This seems all the more likely since in three or four places on the bowl itself the circular units still seem to grow from each other, and also since there are a few fragments excavated in Nishapur that illustrate a number of intermediary steps from a real rinceau with buds and flowers or leaves to our schematic representation. The third element found on the Metropolitan plate has usually been called a



4 Bowl, painted and glazed earthenware. Persian, from Nishapur, tenth century

“peacock’s eye” because it does occur occasionally on wings of birds.¹⁰ Whatever the origins of the motif, it has become a vaguely circular form with a single darker dot somewhere inside the circle (but never in its center); on the Metropolitan object the peacock’s eye is always set in a field of stippling. Fourth, we encounter six silhouettes of birds. However simplified the silhouettes may be, they are clearly recognizable as birds and, while their outlines are very much alike, it should be noted that the two birds which are on either side of the main axis of the bowl have only four projecting prongs symbolizing both wings and tail, while the other four have five. Fifth, there are six units consisting of a stem crossed by two hatches and two or three small nodes or knobs; this stem divides itself [95] into three parts, and each part ends with a sharply pointed chevron made of unusually thick lines; there are some variants in the number of hatches and nodes. While here

¹⁰ For instance M. Pézard, *La Céramique archaïque de l’Islam* (Paris, 1920), p. cxix.

again we are dealing with a much-schematized and simplified motif, there is little doubt that it has a vegetal origin and that it derives from a rather common theme of a stem ending with three leaves, buds, or flowers. Finally, the sixth element of our bowl's decoration consists of several letters in the center of the object; these letters are arranged in one combination repeated twice and in a small unit which could be understood as a *ta' marbutah*; according to what has become a sort of conventional explanation of these letters, we have here either a repetition of a shorthand version of *barakah* or a simplification of *barakah li-sahibih*.¹¹

None of these six "phonetic" elements found on the Metropolitan Museum bowl is original, and numerous parallels can be found for any one of them on a large number of objects from northeastern Iran and from Iraq; some of them are even found in Egypt. It would be interesting to trace the growth and development of each of these features and to investigate whether they are of local origins or brought in from the West together with the luster technique which was imitated. But this is not our concern here and the only point of significance is that the specific combination of these themes which occurs here is not very common. It is known mostly on a small group of sherds and on one complete object found in or near Nishapur, of which, to my knowledge, only two have been published so far.¹² Although it may be possible to reconstruct the exact compositional pattern found on the objects from which fragments only remain, the newly acquired Metropolitan bowl is only one of two in which this pattern is preserved in its entirety, and it is far more elaborate than the one published in 1937. This is especially so when one considers that element which gives to the object its greatest originality, the composition of its decoration.

The center of the composition consists of a medallion in the middle of which a single band contains writing going from right to left. Above and below the inscription are found seven of our circular units with chevrons. The latter are so arranged that the ones above the writing point to the right whereas the lower ones point to the left. The circle is enclosed in an octagon and the area between the two geometric forms is filled with a single row of peacock's eyes which acts as a sort of ring moving around the circle. The central medallion is thus an essentially geometrically conceived unit made of a circle and of a polygon; several movements or directions are given to this geometric unit, a circular one and two horizontal ones, from left to right and from right to left. Among the latter, however, the primary one is from right to left because it occurs twice and because it is the movement of the writing.

From each of the hexagon's six angles two thick lines are generated. One line leads all the way to the outer circle of the design; the other one stops

¹¹ S. Flury in A. U. Pope, ed., *A Survey of Persian Art* (London, 1939), pp. 1748 ff.

¹² C. Wilkinson, "The Iranian Expedition, 1936," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* (October 1937), fig. 18 and p. 18; see also *idem* (November 1961), fig. 16.

about two-thirds of the way, then turns back toward the first line so that, together with several thick lines coming from the outer circle and from the first line, it forms a rough and elongated diamond shape containing one of our tripartite stems. This diamond shape is itself surrounded by two areas filled with peacock's eyes. What we have in this fashion is, repeated six times and apparently generated by the central hexagon, a vaguely geometric entity – a sort of panel – utilizing [96] one major new theme – the tripartite stem – and a fill already used in the medallion. This entity is given a counter-clockwise direction by the thick points of the stem, but a clockwise direction is suggested by the position of the dots inside each peacock's eye which *tend* to be at the same end of the eye. While the evidence for a clockwise movement by the peacock's eyes is not systematic enough to be totally acceptable by itself, the intention for such a direction is confirmed by the chevrons which fill the spaces between our diamond-shaped entities and by the birds which are found in small triangular spaces at the edge of the design. Both birds and chevrons definitely indicate a clockwise movement for the whole design. At the same time, as was already pointed out, the two birds which are on the axis of the design (the axis being defined by the position and direction of the writing in the central medallion) differ from the rest of the birds. It is even possible, although less likely, that the smaller number of hatches and nodes found on the central tripartite stem is also to be related to an emphasis on the axis of the design as it is suggested by the central medallion.

We can thus interpret the composition of our object as consisting of a central unit which generates a counter-clockwise whirl-like movement based on six vector-like – i.e., provided with a direction – units; these, however, contain in themselves or are set against an opposite, secondary clockwise movement. At the same time, to the predominant circular pattern there corresponds a horizontal axis emphasized by the writing and by minor modifications in the detail of both the clockwise and the counter-clockwise directed elements. Not one of the various aspects of this compositional pattern is unique in the bowl in the Metropolitan Museum, and one can easily find parallels to a relationship between central medallions with clear axes or with circular movement and clockwise (or even more rarely counter-clockwise) borders (Figs 3 and 4), or to axially composed objects, or else to whirls generated from a center.¹³ But few if any examples show all these compositional devices at the same time and the other almost complete bowl done in the same technique has a far less sophisticated composition. Thus,

¹³ For the whirl and its possible symbolic meaning see R. Ettinghausen, "The Wade Cup," *Ars Orientalis*, 2 (1957), pp. 341–56; examples of designs can be found in most of the numerous picture books dealing with Iranian ceramics. A convenient summary of drawings occurs in Tashhodjaev's book; it is limited to material from Samarkand, but it does seem that Samarkand ceramicists were particularly fascinated with compositional problems of this order.

imperfect though it may be in many details – and I shall return to this point presently – the newly acquired Metropolitan bowl may serve as a particularly brilliant and complex example of the fascination exercised on early Islamic pottery painters, especially in northeastern Iran, by the problem of composing a decorative design inside a circle. Considering the nature of these objects, this concern is natural enough and it would be of considerable interest to pursue for other series in Iran and elsewhere the analyses of decorative compositions made so far only for Samarkand ceramics. Such a study would acquire particular significance if it could be shown that certain compositional devices tended to predominate in certain techniques or that decorative principles were only secondarily affected by techniques. We might then be able to determine far better than we can at the moment the sources of the taste which produced these ceramics.

But two further conclusions are suggested by our brief analysis. The first one is of a rather abstract nature. Except for the silhouettes of the birds and, to a much smaller degree, the writing, none of the elements of decoration we have defined is by itself responsible for the composition it creates. Or, to put it another way, none of them contains in itself the form it gives to the design, in opposition, for instance, to concrete subjects like houses, personages, or whole scenes, which, because of the precise meanings presumably associated with them, tend to lead to simpler compositions.¹⁴ It is thus only when they are put in a certain relationship to each other that the various elements of our bowl acquire compositional sense. The patterns and purposes of the relationship between features, meaningless in themselves, are what determines the structure of the design or what we may call its grammar, that is the way in which an understandable sense can be given to an amorphous and finite number of individual signs. The great originality of our object lies in part in the fact that its grammar is of particular complexity and subtlety, while its “phonetic” elements are not only very few and very simple but also very roughly executed and at times downright careless. It is impossible, on the basis of one object alone, to say whether this carelessness was a wilful one serving to emphasize the “grammatical” structure and possibly the decorator’s poetic license in using the themes he had chosen or whether one must imagine behind our object a complex model comparable in both grammatical and phonetic subtlety to the Freer Gallery bowl [97] (Fig. 3).

Until such time as more numerous specific studies of individual objects or of series of objects have been made, one may perhaps conclude more modestly that the dematerialization and the deconcretization of individual elements

¹⁴ This point is particularly apparent as one looks at Fatimid ceramics that developed a complex iconography or at the twelfth- and thirteenth-century pottery from Iran. Exceptions exist, of course, and it may be significant to note that an unclear presentation of concrete subjects occurs particularly frequently in Iraqi and northeastern Iranian pottery from the first period.

which characterizes the Metropolitan bowl should merely be used to illustrate a very characteristic aspect of early Islamic decorative art: the predominance of abstract axes and movements over specific motifs.

The second conclusion concerns the nature of these motifs. What is striking, beyond their dematerialization, is what may be called their humility. These are not, even in their origin, heroic themes or noble floral compositions with demonstrable aesthetic or iconographic purposes; they are rather the small details of decoration, lines or fills and backgrounds found on other objects. Even letters and birds with which clear and precise meanings can be associated appear in a sort of casual and almost unreadable way. The transformation of these details into the main subject-matter of a design was perhaps one of the most original features of much of early Islamic art, especially in Iran. It may be compared to the way in which the architects of the Samanid mausoleum in Bukhara transformed the lowly brick into the main vehicle of the monument's decorative design. There again, as we are only beginning to understand, very abstract geometric patterns of growth from a small number of basic principles were involved.¹⁵ We may then perhaps suggest that in much of early Islamic art – in Iran and elsewhere, with obvious differentiation due to a variety of factors – at least two formal languages were being created. One, concrete and precise like the writing of the most celebrated series of northeastern Iranian ceramics, tended to stress specific subjects, however complex may have been the compositions used for them. The other, looser and less particular in either details or in the choice of subjects, preferred to provide general impressions and general effects, usually of an abstract character, rather than to stress individual details. The Metropolitan bowl would be an illustration of this second tendency.

It is obvious enough that much research must still be devoted to the vast number of objects available from the early medieval period in Iran before any of these conclusions, except perhaps the first one, can be anything but working hypotheses. Furthermore, the full understanding of the bowl itself requires a number of additional investigations that were beyond the purpose of this essay, whose objective was merely to draw attention to one of the several kinds of analyses with which we must approach the rich field of Islamic pottery. One last conclusion may, however, escape this hypothetical state. It is that the newly acquired bowl in the Metropolitan Museum is not only useful in defining the variety of ways in which early Islamic ceramicists ordered designs on the circular shape of their creations, but may occupy a significant place in our eventual understanding of how Islamic art was formed and what the modalities and rhythms of its growth have been.

¹⁵ The only study devoted to this problem is that of L. Rempel and G. A. Pugachenkova, *Arhitekturnyi Ornament Uzbekistana* (Tashkent, 1961).

