Openwork metal incense burners in the form of felines have long been known and are represented in several private and public collections in Europe and North America. They vary considerably in structure, dimensions, and decoration. Among the several vessels of this type in the Khalili Collection, a recently acquired example (MTW 1525) is outstanding for the fineness of its decoration, the elegance of its proportions, and the naturalism of its stance (figs. 1 and 2). From its ears the feline represented is readily recognizable as a caracal (Persian, siyāh gūš), a species of lynx widely used as a hunting animal in the Iranian princely tradition.

The animal, 27 cm in height and 24 cm in length, is an affectionate portrayal based upon careful observation from nature, though with much decorative stylization. It has exaggeratedly large paws (in other examples these are treated almost as hooves) and an upraised tail terminating in a half palmette. Its head is slightly raised and its hind legs slightly bent, giving it the appearance of a creature pawing the ground and about to jump, as if to capture its prey on the wing—an ability for which, according to the classical Arabic authors, the caracal was especially prized. The modeling of its features is particularly crisp. Its broad, luxuriantly whiskered face and slightly parted jaws with protruding canine teeth convey an impression of good humor, almost as if it is smiling (fig. 3). Its nose is faceted, and the nostrils are pierced. Its large, pointed oval eyes, which terminate elegantly in engraved scrolls, may once have been filled with turquoises, as was often the case with other felines of this type. Its ears, with their schematically rendered black tufts, are concave and pierced; its eyebrows are lightly engraved; and its forehead is an openwork lozenge. Eyebrows and ears are contoured by rouletted braids, and the creature’s elaborately plaited mane falls to its shoulders (fig. 4).

The tail, while immovable, is otherwise incongruous as a handle: although pierced with an undulating scroll, it would have been too hot to hold with comfort were the body filled with burning coals. Thus the vessel would most probably have been carried on a tray. The head is now removable but was originally attached by a hinge. Like the body it is most probably of quaternary alloy and was piece-cast. Both head and body bear panels of interlacing decoration filled with trefoil- or palmette-scrolls, their backgrounds pierced. These panels are in the form of almond-shaped medallions to either side of the creature’s mouth and roundels, each with a six-fold knot pattern, below its ears. After casting, the holes were drilled and the decoration enhanced by engraving and polishing, possibly with the addition of some inlay in black composition. At the base of the head is a short Kufic inscription reading al-mulku li ’llāhi ‘l-wāhid (Dominion belongs to God,
the One), a formula characteristic of Shi‘i seals, and a longer inscription in rather crabbed script, which appears to read “O Muhammad, may we ask you, as a nation and as a tribe. Affliction is the guardian of him who is victorious.”

Strikingly, given the masterly workmanship, the piece does not seem to bear either a signature or a date.

To the best of my knowledge, only one published feline incense burner has an archaeological provenance—a rather incongruous lion figure from Khul‘buk in Tajikistan (all the other extant examples are of the caracal or lynx type). Nor have any excavated fragments been published. Scholars generally concur that these objects were made in Khurasan (the present piece is thought to be from Afghanistan), and on the basis of the enormous and finely decorated but ungainly creature in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, which is dated 577 (1181–82), they are generally attributed to the later twelfth century. According to its inscription, the Metropolitan Museum example was made for an amir, Sayf al-Dunya wa’l-Din Muhammad, by Ja’far b. Muhammad b. ‘Ali. James Allan has suggested that it is a copy of an earlier piece, and that incense burners of this type were falling out of fashion by the later twelfth century; in any case the taste for them did not survive the Mongol invasions. Two other pieces that are somewhat closer to the Khalili caracal are in the Cleveland Museum of Art and the Hermitage. The former is
for the jugular was seen by the ulema as a prototype of *halāl* slaughter and led to their sanction as hunting animals, in accordance with the Qur’anic precept (5:4): “...Reply [to them]: lawful are foodstuffs good to eat and any [game] that, at your wish, is captured by beasts of prey which you have trained as you do dogs, according to the method which Allah has taught you, after you have spoken the name of Allah over it... .” The choice of caracals as models for incense burners doubtless relates to their status as pets.12

The Khalili caracal is a masterpiece of metal casting.13 Its clarity and crispness suggest that the mold used to cast it was in mint condition. However, the absence of a patron’s or a craftsman’s name suggests that, fine as it is, it was not manufactured as a unique object, and the fact that the mold was very probably of stone reinforces this. It would be an exaggeration to speak here of mass production, but the patent resemblances between vessels of this type suggest either centralized production or a workshop in continuous production, perhaps over two or three generations, that was able to vary and develop earlier models.

*The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art*  
London

**NOTES**

1. Rather than incense burners, these may possibly have been intended as pomanders—pierced vessels made to contain a fragrant paste of ambergris and other scents.

2. It is, for example, difficult to decide whether the flanges above its paws represent anklets (something of a hindrance to a hunting animal) or are of purely decorative significance. For what it is worth, however, the feline in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, certainly appears to have decorative anklets.

3. Dr. Pedro Moura Carvalho draws my attention to an Anglo-Norman or Romanesque lion surmounting a buckle, its tail ending in a similar half-palmette, that can probably be attributed to an Islamic prototype. (Reproduced in Janet Backhouse et al., *The Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon Art*, 966–1066, cat. of an exh. at the British Museum and the British Library, London [London, 1984], cat. no. 271.) The only other incense burner with a comparable tail appears to be a piece of much coarser quality sold at auction in London in 2001: Bonhams and Brooks, sale of October 17, 2001, lot no. 349.

4. Believed to have been the legend on *ʿAli*’s seal, this formula is common on pottery from Nishapur, where there was a large Shiʿi colony, and also occurs on Fatimid coinage.

5. The language of the inscription is highly ambiguous and the interpretation therefore provisional. I am grateful to Manijeh Bayani and Nahla Nassar for their help in deciphering it.


(Erevan, 1963), pp. 342–46 and pl. 51. The latter refers to a fragment, still unpublished, of a small incense burner of this type found in excavations at Dmanisi in Georgia.


10. E. Kühnel, Islamic Arts (London, 1963), p. 161, fig. 127, inv. no. 48.308. The head here seems to have been attached to the body by a bayonet fitting.

11. Allan, “Metalwork,” fig. 4; Orbeli “Bronzovaya kuril’nitsa” and Izbranniye trudy, inv. no. Iran 1565. The craftsman’s name, which is now invariably cited as al-Taji (sometimes followed by a question mark), is given by Orbeli as al-Taki/al-Tagi.

12. Compare the red-legged partridge (chikor), which was also a favorite pet and served as a model for incense burners. This handsome bird was even more appropriate, for it was popularly believed to eat fire.

13. It is difficult to specify the technique. Cire perdu casting was widespread in the late antique and early Islamic periods, but it may be no coincidence that al-Jazari’s treatise on automata, Kitāb fi ma’rifat al-‘iyal al-handasiyya, describes a process of sand casting that, he states, was used to make the facing and dragon-knockers of the doors of a mosque. Al-Jazari was in the service of the Artuqids of Diyarbakır in the final decades of the twelfth century, and the earliest known copy of this work (Topkapı Saray Library A. 3472) was completed in Sha’ban 602 (April 1206). See Rachel Ward, “Evidence for a School of Painting at the Artuqid Court,” in The Art of Syria and the Jazira 1100–1250, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 1 (Oxford, 1985), pp. 69–83.