



The Institute of Ismaili Studies

“Ceramics”

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Around the year 1135 CE, a merchant from Aden wrote the following letter to his counterpart in Egypt: “Please buy me six painted platters, made in *Misr* [Old Cairo]. They should be of middle size, neither very large nor very small; and twenty regular bowls and forty small ones. All should be painted, and their figures and colours should be different.” The history of ceramic production in the medieval Muslim world, from the period of the Umayyads in the seventh century CE to the Ottomans and Safavids in the seventeenth century CE, attests to the superior creativity and experimentation of Muslim potters, demonstrated through their innovations in shape and design, clay recipes, glazes, and techniques of decoration. Glazed ceramics represent a very small percentage of the total ceramic assemblage produced in the medieval Muslim world. The majority of domestic earthen-wares comprised unglazed storage and transport jars - for items such as grain, oil, and water - and unglazed bowls, platters, and receptacles, which were made for the kitchen, pharmacy, or market shop. However, as the letter from the Adenese merchant indicates, glazed and painted ceramics were highly sought commodities in urban as well as courtly contexts. This entry highlights several types of glazed ceramics produced in the medieval Islamic period, although it is in no way comprehensive, and readers are referred to the bibliography for more detailed studies on the subject.

Medieval sources refer to pottery or ceramics as *khazaf*, *fakhkhar*, and *ghadar*, although we often find the generic term *sini* used, particularly for fine glazed ceramics. The term *sini* is derived from the Arabic word for China - *al-Sin* - since both potters and consumers of the medieval Muslim world considered Chinese ceramics the pottery *par excellence*. Chinese wares were imported into the Muslim world by the early ninth century and have been discovered in archaeological sites across Muslim Spain to India. Their influence on Islamic ceramics was immediately felt within the ninth-century CE ‘Abbasid pottery-making industry and their impact persisted as late as the nineteenth century CE. Potters of the Islamic lands, wanting to imitate the whiteness of the elegantly shaped Chinese wares, experimented with specially made tin and alkaline glazes that fired to an opaque creamy-white finish. Around the twelfth century, medieval potters also developed alternative clay recipes by adding large quantities of crushed quartz to produce a hard, white ceramic body, which when thinly potted resembled the translucency of Chinese porcelain. This new ceramic body, known as “fritware” or “stone-paste,” was used for all fine ceramics of the Islamic world from the twelfth century CE onward until the European discovery of the secret of high-firing Chinese porcelain clays in the eighteenth century CE.

With the invention of white ceramic bodies and opaque glazes, Muslim potters were free to experiment with various techniques of ceramic decoration. An exciting decorative scheme introduced by the potters of Samarra and Basra in the ninth century CE was the use of cobalt blue pigments, which they painted as stark epigraphic and vegetal designs onto opaque-white wares, creating the very first “blue-and-white wares.” The Iraqi potters appear to have held a monopoly on cobalt at this time until its appearance on fritware ceramics of the twelfth century CE, and it was later exported outside the Islamic lands to China in the fourteenth century CE. Soon after, cobalt-painted Chinese blue-and-white porcelain arrived in the Middle East and caused a fashion craze in the Muslim markets. By the middle of the fifteenth century CE, potters from Egypt to Central Asia were producing their own varieties of blue-and-white ceramics based on both Chinese and Islamic models.

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Slip-painted pottery, another major type of Islamic glazed ware, did not require special opaque glazes or a fritware body and was produced throughout the Muslim world from the tenth century onward. Slip is essentially semi-fluid clay, and white slip was often used by the Muslim potters to coat the entire surface of an earthenware vessel in order to create a blank canvas for further decoration. Floral, geometric, animal, and figural designs were often incised through the slip coating before the bowl was covered in a transparent clear or coloured glaze and fired. For added drama, copper-green and iron-brown splashes of coloured glazes were also incorporated on slip-covered bowls, with or without incised decoration. Another variety of slip-painted pottery, using primarily black, white, and red slips, achieved great heights of sophistication in the tenth and eleventh centuries CE in the Samanid territories of Eastern Iran and Central Asia. These types of dishes were normally covered in a white slip, and benedictory phrases or proverbs such as, “May everything eaten from this [bowl] be wholesome,” or “Generosity is a quality of the people of paradise,” were painted in sharp, angular scripts along the rims with a black slip. Another type of slip-painted pottery centred at Samanid Nishapur offered a livelier aesthetic by using a riot of colours including green, acid yellow, black, and red to depict stylised figural subjects, such as seated figures, dancers, horses, and other animals, which were surrounded by various floral and epigraphic motifs.

One of the truly great inventions of potters of the medieval Islamic world is lustre-painted ceramics. The technique of lustre decoration on glass was already practiced in Egypt and Syria as early as the fifth century CE; however, Iraqi potters appear to have been the first to experiment with lustre decoration on opaque-glazed ceramics in the ninth century CE. Lustre pigments made of silver and copper oxides were painted in a variety of figural and vegetal designs onto the surface of a glazed vessel, which was then re-fired under special conditions. The results of a successful re-firing created a ceramic ware with painted decorations that gleamed like gold or silver. The highly-sought ‘Abbasid lustre wares were exported across the Muslim world and as far away as India and Thailand. This complex technique of pottery decoration was probably transferred to Egypt in the tenth century CE through the migration of Iraqi potters to Fatimid-governed domains. As lustre pigments were better controlled on a paintbrush, this enabled Egyptian potters to expand their iconographic repertoire of images using more precise line-drawn figures. During the twelfth century CE the technique seems to have spread to Spain, Syria, and Iran, leading to greater variations in styles of painting and the transfer of the technique to Europe.

During the Seljuk period, between the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE in Iran, a new type of glazed pottery was developed, later coined as *mina’i* or enamelled ware, typified by its wide-ranging colour schemes and intricate narrative compositions. The paintings on *mina’i* ceramics attest to the existence of a vibrant tradition of Persian illustrated manuscripts from this period, which is now lost. Indeed, both *mina’i* and Persian lustre portray visual and poetic themes derived from Persian literature, such as the *Shahnama* epic or the romance of *Varqa va Gulshah*, depicting warriors, heroes, lovers, and fantastical beasts. The *mina’i* technique of applying coloured pigments over an already glazed fritware vessel allowed the potter to expand his colour palette to include blue, green, red, purple, brown, black, pink, and gold, which were then fixed by a second low-temperature firing. As with Persian lustre, Kashan appears to have been the main centre of production for *mina’i*, with vessel shapes ranging from bowls, pilgrims’ flasks, ewers, cups, and, in rare instances, tiles.

The Turkish city of Iznik in western Anatolia became the pre-eminent centre of a court-sponsored pottery-making industry during the Ottoman period between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries CE. “Iznik” has come to refer to the distinctive pure-white frit-bodied ceramic vessels and tiles that were covered in a brilliant white slip and then decorated, over the course of time, with various combinations of coloured slips beginning with cobalt blue and turquoise, followed by the introduction of a subtle palette of sage green, manganese



purple, black, and finally the use of a more vibrant colour scheme in blue, green, black, and “sealing-wax red.” Art historians have discerned several chronological and stylistic groups of Iznik wares based on colour and design patterns, and the ceramics are best understood in the context of a larger production program of Ottoman courtly arts including architectural decorations, textiles, and manuscript illumination.

### **Further Reading**

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