

Pierced Jug with Harpies and Sphinxes

Historical Analysis of a Collection Object at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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Photo Courtesy of The Online Collection, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

The Iranian ewer, left, dated to the early 13th century or Kashan period, is made of stonepaste with polychrome painted detail under a turquoise glaze. It is identified as an Islamic “Pierced Jug with Harpies and Sphinxes” on the Metropolitan Museum Online Collection catalog (Pierced 2000). An ewer is a specialized pitcher for holding water. Ewers have appeared in many design and served many

purposes through history in domestic, religious, and aristocratic settings. However, the exact function of this ewer is unknown. This report aims to define the historic value of the above ewer and propose preventative conservation procedures taking into consideration the object’s greatest risks of deterioration.

Tombstone

The vessel’s complex structure is composed of an openwork, spherical screen around a tall, solid basin that contributes to the object’s pear-like silhouette. The ewer measures 8” 3/16 inches tall and 6” 5/8 inches in diameter. The harpy, sphinx, quadruped, and scroll motifs, which adorn the openwork exterior, were created using black

polychrome first as an outline. Shading was subsequently applied with cobalt polychrome before the entire vessel was coated in a turquoise glaze.

Along the top rim and very base of the vessel are Persian verses from a love poem attributed to the poet Rukn al-Din Da'vidar Qummi. An accompanying inscription above the poem lists the ewer's date of creation as 1215 A.D. (Pierced 2000). The poem reads:

باش فارغ ام زده سر همان تو بی من
 باش فارغ ام زده بر بهم همواره
 تو سر از دیگری بمهر تو از دست
 باش فارغ ام زده گر شدم بیزار
 Without you, I am depraved; Be free from care.
 Ceaselessly, I am unsettled; Be free from care.
 [Turning] from you, I reach for the kindness of another, because of you.
 Although I have done so, I despised it; Be free from care.

دستم دانی بزلف رسد چو گفتم
 رستم محنت وز ستانم باز دل
 بنشتم رخس پیش در چو لحظه یک
 بستم زلفش سر در دل چو نیز جان
 I said, "[Do] you know, if my hand reaches her tresses,
 I [could] reclaim my heart and be free from suffering."
 One moment, while sitting face-to-face with her,
 I tied my soul, like my heart, to the end of her curls.
 (Pierced 2000)

Context

Islamic cultures notably transcribe inscriptions to vessels that relate to the objects significance or function, yet the love poem on the above ewer sheds no light on the relation of the object to the intended owner, their political leanings, or the vessel's function (Squarekufic 2014). The love poem and the presence of depictions of life on the ewer's surface, however, can help historians identify what the ewer is not. Traditionally, Islamic art, like Jewish art, is banned from depicting living forms. This is because depiction of life is thought to rival creation of life constituting disrespect to the God

worshiped by Muslims and Jews. Therefore, the presence of harpies and spotted quadrupeds eliminates the possibility that the above ewer was used for a religious purpose. It is common however for objects adorned with living forms to be used in domestic settings in Islamic regions (Department 2001).

Other aspects of the openwork design, such as the cobalt arabesques, recall Parthian and Sasanians ceramics. The Parthian and Sasanian Empires in Iran, which preceded the Kashan Empire, are recognized for their adherence to traditional Islamic doctrine. Parthian and Sasanian potters and artisans choose to decorate their possessions with abstract patterns. Their influence can also be seen in the shape of the ewer (Ewer 2000). In this way, the above ewer is categorized as Islamic in origin, despite the numerous, clearly defined and identifiable creatures covering its surface.

Kashan period ceramics are known to have taken inspiration from the ceramics of other cultures including the Chinese Tang Dynasty. Amiable contact between China and Iranian Empires was documented starting in the 2nd century A.D., when the Chinese were searching for a rumored culture with whom they had a common enemy, the Xiongnu. This connection would develop into the eastern half of the Silk Road through which objects and technology were shared (Pulleyblank, Edwin 2006). The Tang dynasty utilized celadon glazes to give their stoneware pale greyish-green monochrome coatings. This technology was in turn imitated by Kashan Iranian potters who began creating turquoise glazes, like the one applied to the entirety of the ewer examined in this report. The later Safavid period in Iran reproduced the celadon glaze made in the Tang Dynasty with more success (Ewer with . . . 1999).

It was also a common practice in the 12th and 13th centuries for Iranian potters to imitate basketry, leather, stone, wood, glass, and especially bronze using clay. Economically, clay was less expensive than these other media, as well as being more versatile. Four categories of ceramic designs from the Kashan period have been identified, all of which have bronze and ceramic examples in the archaeological record. One such category is described as “a wide-mouthed jug with a bulbous body” like the ewer being examined (Tabbaa, Yasser 1987). Thus, the above ewer could be an imitation of a bronze ewer of the same design. If this were the case, the openwork screen would be an imitation of a bronze openwork screen, which would be far easier to make, more practical, and more resilient to damage.

Greatest Risks for Storage and Display

Conservation of other Iranian ceramics from the 12th century revealed that stoneware from this era and region commonly consisted of crushed quartz, glass frit, unrefined, white clay, and sand. This experimental mixture deteriorates rapidly, becoming brittle and prone to shattering with age. Few complete stoneware ceramics from this period remain, making the preservation of the above ewer even more important (Laperouse, Jean-Francois de 2013). In the planning of storage, display, and transportation procedures for the above ewer one should consider the inherent vice of stonepaste deterioration, the weakest areas of the ewer, the fragility of the glaze, and the susceptibility of the ceramic to damage by soluble salts.

Assistants and volunteers must be properly educated in handling procedures. Objects should be held gently and with both hands from the base of an object, not the

handles or the neck. This is because, despite what one might expect, handles and rims are the weakest areas of an object. The weakest areas of the ewer being examined are likely the openwork detailing on the rounded bottom of the vessel and the thin handle attached to the neck of the ewer. It should also be noted that such ceramics were often conserved in the past by filling losses with plaster disguised with paint. Such areas are now controversial and sometimes removed, but also represent areas of weakness in the object's structure (Laperouse, Jean-Francois de 2013). The handle appears to serve only an aesthetic function. Considering the vessel itself is composed of two layers of clay, one lining the interior of the other, it is unreasonable to expect the thin handle to withstand the weight of the entire basin. Thus, contact between the handle and any material or force should be kept to a minimum. Similar guidelines apply to the openwork details which could have numerous, unknown weak areas.

Physical forces including knocks and bumps to the vessel while in transit could additionally cause irreparable damage, due to stonepaste's fragility. For this reason one should consider moving the object using a cart, and placing the object in a padded or specially made compartment or box on the cart. Insulating layers to create shock absorption can be mirrored in permanent storage of the ewer. For example, layers such as plank ethafoam, Volara, and muslin should fit snugly into a sturdy university product or blue-flute corrugated box, that does not put pressure on the widest and most delicate parts of the ewer, the open work decoration and the thin handle.

Permanent storage for the ewer should also take into consideration the fragility of the exterior layers of the ewer, the glaze. The turquoise glaze, essential to the object's historic value, created in imitation of the Tang Dynasty's celadon glaze, is likely made

from lead tin oxide with copper salts (Laperouse, Jean-Francois de 2013). Though the condition of the glazes in the above ewer appears stable, glazes can become iridescent, flake off, or fade (Fehrvri, Gza 2000). Thus layers in direct contact with the object in storage and transportation should be as nonabrasive and nonwoven. Tyvek and Teflon could serve as a barrier between the vessel and a packaging material, for example, to reduce friction and abrasion. If twill tape is used in the packaging and transport of the ewer, it should be placed under the nonabrasive, unwoven layer. Similarly, latex gloves should be used when handling the object as fibers in cotton gloves could catch on flaking areas of the glaze prying them free.

Though the condition of this object would suggest that it is not an archaeological artifact, it could still be at risk of damage from movement of soluble salts. Salts pose a risk in this circumstance because the ewer was created using unknown materials before climate control in an area known for dry conditions. Therefore, movement of the ewer to a location with higher relative moisture content in the air could dissolve the salts causing them to migrate to the surface. Failure to control humidity could result in the formation of salt crystals on the surface of the object which would shatter the openwork and cause the glaze to pop off. To combat this, the object should be kept in an area of constant low relative humidity with very gradual fluctuations if any (Appendix P 2000). Multilayered packaging also serves to create microenvironments less prone to humidity fluctuations. Packaging layers most likely to stabilize interior humidity include muslin and paper.

An object so rare in design and composition must be preserved with appropriate attention to its greatest risks. Though the deterioration of the stonepaste core is not severe, its packaging must account for the weakness in the screen and handle. Similarly,

the glaze's deterioration limits the packaging materials that can be used. And finally relative humidity must be kept in check during transportation, storage, and display. Thus, the ewer's openwork screen and vibrant turquoise glaze, the components that make it a Metropolitan treasure, are also its greatest weaknesses as it ages.

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