

Annabelle COLLINET, David BOURGARIT
*Précieuses Matières. Les arts du métal dans
 le monde iranien médiéval x^e-xiii^e siècles*

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The volume presents the results achieved by Annabelle Collinet (responsible for the Iranian medieval collections in the Département des Arts de l'Islam, Musée du Louvre) and David Bourgarit (archaeometallurgist and engineer at the C2RMF - Centre de Recherche et de Restauration des Musées de France) in the framework of the *Islametal* Project (2013-2017) on Iranian metalwork dating from the 10th to the 13th century. A second volume devoted to later specimens (13th-15th century) is envisaged. In the Preface, Yannick Lintz (director of the Département des Arts de l'Islam, Musée du Louvre) highlights the key point of this study: "l'observation du visible et de l'invisible grâce aux technologies les plus récentes". Profiting from a deep examination of the objects through detail observation, microscope, radiographs, and archaeometallurgical analyses, the authors address art historian's constantly open questions about alloys, ateliers of production, manufacturing and decorative techniques, and most of all provenance and regional diffusion.

It is a book of the highest quality, enriched by marvellous figures including colour photographs, detail enlargements, and radiographs. The Introduction presents the Iranian metalwork belonging to the collection of the Musée du Louvre and that of the Musée des Arts Décoratifs, housed together since 2006. The objects entered the collection through purchases, donations, and bequests: the first (two inkwells) in 1893 and the last (a pencase) in 2010, perhaps not by chance, belong to the same functional class. The history of the major collectors and dealers involved – mostly acting from the late 19th century to 1920 – is retraced. Interesting as well is recalling how and when the concept of an Iranian area, distinguished from the Arabian one, was shaped. As it often happens with metalwork collections, objects provenance is uncertain or limited to a regional indication in most cases, with the exception of some specimens brought to Paris by Joseph Hackin. Though two thirds of the collection had already been published

as single specimens or small groups, in particular by Melikian-Chirvani during the Seventies and Eighties, a whole catalogue makes the difference allowing a broader view. The metalwork are for the majority reception tableware, lighting and perfuming devices.

Structured in five chapters, the volume starts providing the geographical, historical, and cultural framework (ch. 1) and the technical aspects of medieval metalwork production (ch. 2). Then the catalogue presents 84 metalworks according to their specific production centres (Herat in ch. 3, Ghazni in ch. 4) or the functional contexts for those specimens whose provenance cannot be defined better than Khurasan (ch. 5). The catalogue encompasses renowned objects as the inlaid masterpieces from Herat, but it also discloses that this centre of excellence was not the only one capable of refined inlay and was not exclusively devoted to high-end production. Sometimes, metalworks were made in one city and decorated elsewhere. This and further aspects shed a light on the labour organization and the number of artisans involved in the process.

The inkwells coming from Herat and Ghazni (respectively cat. 5-6 and cat. 12, 17) propose an interesting figurative repertoire of dancing dervishes and banqueting personages. They also confirm the usual combination of cursive and Kufic scripts attested on the coeval inkwell with scribes excavated from the Ghazni royal palace and one further specimen from Gardez (both part of the documentation gathered by the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan). A further specimen of comparison can be added for the zoomorphic incense-burner with three caracals (cat. 54): the object may be less known since the collection of the Museo d'arte orientale "Giuseppe Tucci", now housed in the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome, has been hardly accessible during the last years. The obstacle has been recently overcome thanks to the publication in G. Di Flumeri Vatielli, R. Giunta, *I metalli islamici. La collezione del Museo delle Civiltà Museo d'Arte Orientale "Giuseppe Tucci"*, Rome 2022 (cat. 69).

Some forgery and manipulation have been unveiled: the so far unique signature by 'Alī ibn 'Umar al-Isfarā'inī has proved to be much later than the manufacturing of its ewer (cat. 7).

The study focus is on the manufacturing and decorative processes, revealing the features that consent to relate one object to the other as, for instance, an inkwell (cat. 12) and a bucket (cat. 16) from Ghazni. Though the two metalworks differ significantly in size, shape, and function, and were destined to quite different decorative treatments, they were cast during the same session. Other

technical insights involve the cauldrons, reckoned to be cast on the reverse after including the already cast handles in the mould, and the baluster elements of lampstands, that may be cast individually or in pairs. A smaller space is devoted to the epigraphic analysis, though entries provide the inscriptions in the original version, in transcription and translated, thanks to the deciphering or review (for those read before) by Viola Allegranzi.

The Annex illustrates the analyses performed on the collection through concise captions and a wide graphic apparatus. Following the identification of the five main alloys – brass, leaded brass, high lead brass, high lead copper, and high tin bronze – emerges the prevalence of objects made of high lead brass and high lead copper. The chemical features consent the comparison with metalwork either housed in the Louvre (such as the finds from Susa, western Iran, or the Near East) or in other museums, and with other Iranian materials such as pottery and stucco. The relation between the alloys and the techniques adopted allows to gather similar objects together, as well as to distinguish common productions from commissioned objects often lavishly inlaid. The analysis of the impurities detected in copper ascertain that more ateliers shared the same raw supplies, but the manufacturing methods and tools' traces can reveal working differences between the ateliers. Considering several factors, objects are classified in five quality categories, on top of which there are brass metalworks followed by leaded brass ones.

The number of pre-Mongol metalworks preserved to date is remarkable, if we consider how many must have been melted across time: this provides wide opportunities of research. As the need for archaeometallurgical analyses is felt increasingly stronger, the volume by Collinet and Bourgarit is

likely to become a reference point for the studies to come. Applying a homogenous method of examination to an even bigger number of metalworks, and in particular to the few specimens coming from excavation, could validate the results as universal rules and bring to a review (or a confirm) of the chronological attributions ascribed so far, as it happened with the Louvre metalwork. Provenances that today can be only alluded to in many public and private collections, may find grounded bases.

The attention to the cultural *milieu* that issued these objects is appreciable, as not only artisans' hands and their labour organization but also those who ordered and patroned such works, and those who received them, concurred in building the techniques and trends that shaped the Iranian medieval metalwork as we know it. Objects were not just required to be beautiful, they performed a role in wealthy houses of the time, being part of their owners' daily life – that “cultivated urban élite composed by intellectuals and merchants”. Picturing the objects in their original social context, during *bazm* ceremonies and Iranian festivities, according to what written sources narrate, enlarges our understanding as much as observing the same rules of polychromy applied on metalwork, manuscripts and elements of architectural decorations (see the marbles, bricks and stuccoes from the Ghazni royal palace for a comparison) let emerge the mutual influence linking artworks to poetry.

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