



Islamic 'Porcelain'

Examples from the Rijksmuseum Collection

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The Rijksmuseum has a collection of 286 items of Islamic ceramics acquired through legacies, gifts and purchases. Most of them, 187 objects, come from Iran and were donated to the Rijksmuseum by Professor J.A. Oosterbaan (1910-1998) and his wife Mrs R.C. Oosterbaan-Lugt (1910-2000).¹ Looking at the Rijksmuseum's collection, it is clear that the ceramics from areas with an Islamic culture were not isolated phenomena but had undergone a constant interaction with ceramics from surrounding cultures.

What is fascinating is that time and again great changes in the Islamic output of ceramics can be linked to periods in which new types of Chinese ceramics such as stoneware or porcelain were introduced. These Chinese ceramics were exported overland along the Silk Road and by sea, and have been found centuries later during excavations and in the wrecks of sunken ships.² Ceramics were also seized during conquests and given as gifts by Chinese envoys who visited the Islamic courts.³ In countries such as Iraq, Iran and Turkey, Chinese ceramics were very popular because the pieces were harder and less likely to break or suffer damage. Compared with the locally-produced ceramics, porcelain was more durable, and – with walls so thin they sometimes appeared almost translucent – it was aesthetically pleasing.

Detail of fig. 14

During the rule of the Umayyad dynasty (661-750), the ceramics produced in the Islamic cultural areas were predominantly pottery for everyday use that was fired at a low temperature and was quite soft and porous. Decorative pottery was seldom if ever made. This changed when the Abbasids came to power. They founded Baghdad in 762-63.

This city was the political capital of the empire and developed into the most important centre for science, art and literature. China and the Middle East maintained intensive trade contacts, and products like Chinese silk and ceramics, including sancai and Changsha ware,⁴ celadon⁵ and stoneware, were imported. The demand for these Chinese ceramics was probably greater than the supply and from the ninth century onwards this prompted Islamic potters to produce pieces inspired by Chinese export ceramics.

Among other things, the Iraqi potters made china with an opaque white glaze, decorated solely in blue or in a combination of blue and green, and also with a polychrome splatter glaze. But they did not have the materials with which to reproduce the hard body of imported Chinese stoneware. In order to give the soft earthenware the appearance of stoneware, they applied an opaque white tin glaze.⁶ In the Rijksmuseum collection there is a



Figs. 1 and 2
 Fragment of a bowl,
 decorated in
 cobalt blue, Iraq,
 c. 800-c. 900.
 Earthenware,
 diam. 20.3 cm,
 h. 5.5 cm.

Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 on loan from the
 Vereniging van
 Vrienden der
 Aziatische Kunst,
 AK-MAK-1487.





Fig. 3

Bowl, China,
c. 800-c. 900.
Diam. 15.2 cm.
London,
British Museum,
OA 1956.12-10.22
© Trustees of the
British Museum.

fragment of a ninth-century blue-on-white Abbasid earthenware bowl (figs. 1 and 2).

This has a grey to white shard and is covered with an opaque grey-white tin glaze on which a simple decoration of abstract and floral motifs has been painted in cobalt blue. The bowl has a sturdy, opaque wall and a rounded rim. In the Islamic cultural area, as far as we know, blue-on-white ceramics like these were produced exclusively in Iraq and exported from there.⁷ They have been found during excavations in Samarra, Susa, Rey, Nishapur, Egypt and Spain.⁸ If we compare the shape of this bowl with a ninth-century Chinese bowl in the collection of the British Museum in London (fig. 3), we can see a striking likeness in terms of shape.⁹ The blue decoration on Iraqi bowls and Chinese stoneware bowls is also strikingly similar. As far as this painting is concerned, however, it is assumed that the Abbasid blue and white ceramics were the source of inspiration for the Chinese potters.¹⁰

With the shift of power within the Islamic sphere of culture to Egypt, this period of growth in Iraq came to an end around 900.¹¹

The next great change in Middle Eastern ceramic production took place in Iran in the twelfth century, under the rule of the Selçuks (1038-1302).¹² The fine Chinese Song porcelain with thin, hard white walls was an important source of inspiration at this time. The Iranian potters were not able to imitate these thin walls with clay as the basic material, but using the knowledge of refugee Egyptian potters they succeeded in developing a different material. This was a paste consisting of eight parts of ground quartz to one part of ground glass (frit) and one part of white clay. Objects made from this material were known generically as quartz-fritware. This quartz-frit paste was harder to mould than the clay the potters used in the earlier period. First the object was thrown on the potter's wheel and dried. Then the walls were made thinner by placing the object



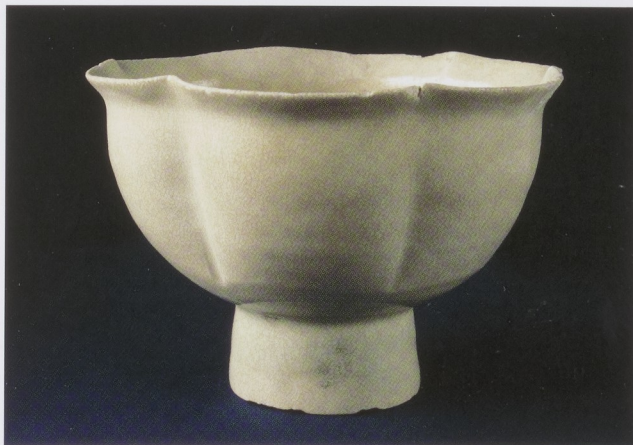
upside down on the wheel and shaving off part of the wall with a sharp implement. This material and technique meant that objects with much thinner walls than earthenware could be made. In addition, if pure clay was used, the body colour was as white as porcelain and no tin glaze or slip had to be applied. The Rijksmuseum has a bowl in its collection with a thin wall like this (figs. 4 and 5), in a lotus shape that was very probably derived from imported Chinese Song porcelain or stoneware (960-1279).¹³ The similarity of the Iranian bowl to a Chinese lotus

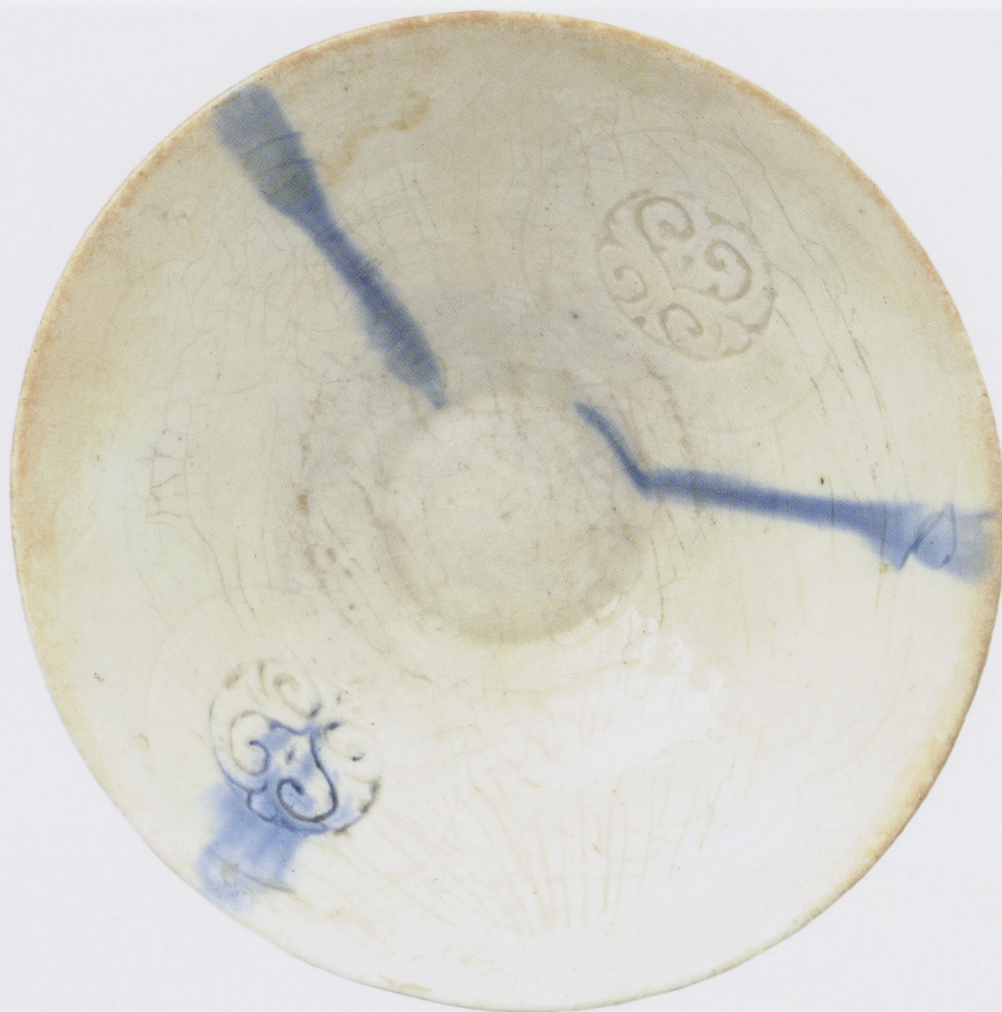
bowl in the collection of the Keramiekmuseum Princessehof, Leeuwarden, (fig. 6) is striking. When experts in Chinese ceramics saw an illustration of this Iranian bowl, they initially assumed that it was made in China, not Iran. However, when one of them actually saw the bowl and was able to hold it in his hands, he conceded that it was not Chinese. The deciding argument for this conclusion was that the Iranian bowl weighs much less than Chinese bowls like the example in the Princessehof collection. As well as the new quartz-frit paste, the Islamic

Figs. 4 and 5
White bowl with
an auricular wall,
Iran, c. 1100-c. 1200.
Quartz-fritware,
diam. 17 cm, h. 7.2 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
gift of Mr and Mrs
Oosterbaan-Lugt,
Heemstede,
BK-1984-174.



Fig. 6
Bowl, China, c. 900.
Stoneware, diam.
12.8 cm, h. 8.5 cm.
Leeuwarden,
Keramiekmuseum
Prinsessehof, no 1816.





potters also used a new glaze. This alkali glaze, which also contained quartz, could be fired at a lower temperature than the glaze from the early period. The great advantage of this was that decorations put on under this glaze no longer ran, and much finer motifs could be used. Down the centuries Islamic potters continued to use cobalt blue, and in Iran it was painted straight on to the body of objects in combination with other colours and then covered with a layer of alkali glaze. This technique of underglaze painting was popular and the Chinese potters learnt to use it too.

The walls of objects made from quartz-frit paste were much softer and more friable than those of Chinese porcelain, and the Iranian potters were not able to achieve the transparency of porcelain with this material. In order to imitate the transparency of porcelain they perforated the walls with fine holes, which filled with the transparent glaze, as can be seen in a bowl in the Rijksmuseum's collection (figs. 7 and 8). This originally Iranian technique was imitated in China in the production of 'rice grain porcelain'.¹⁵

Genghis Khan founded the Great Mongolian Empire at the turn of the

Figs. 7 and 8
 Bowl with incised
 tendrils and blue lines,
 Iran, c. 1175-c. 1225.
 Quartz-fritware,
 diam. 19.5 cm, h. 7 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 purchased with
 the support of
 the Vereniging
 Rembrandt,
 BK-NM-12013.

thirteenth century. Huge swathes of China, Central Asia, Russia, the Middle East and Europe were conquered under his leadership. The Mongolian Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) maintained close trading relations with the Ilkhanids (1256-1353), the Mongolian khanate that was in power in Iran. The Mongols in China wanted to promote export and encouraged the potters to experiment with new shapes and decoration geared to the taste of buyers in the Islamic world, where the preference was for large dishes from which several people could eat. The Chinese potters experimented with the composition of the porcelain clay and by adding the right amount of kaolin (china clay) they were able to produce large objects.

The resumption of trade with the Mongolian Ilkhanids in Iran allowed China to import Iranian cobalt oxide. It came from around Kashan, one of the major centres of ceramics production in Iran. This cobalt had a low manganese and iron content and fired

to a brilliant blue. In China itself, the only cobalt that was mined had a high manganese content that gave a dull blue. From time immemorial, ceramics in China had predominantly been decorated in a simple, austere way. However in order to make Chinese ceramics appealing to the market in the Middle East, the Islamic fondness for geometrical, non-figurative motifs that filled the whole of the available space had to be accommodated. Remarkably, this preference was primarily interpreted in the blue and white porcelain. The way of applying patterns to the metalwork and fabrics imported from the Middle East may have served as an example. Another source of inspiration may have been Iranian lustreware and Sultanabad ceramics, which were produced from the thirteenth century onwards.¹⁶ The production of blue and white Chinese porcelain began around 1325 during the rule of the Yuan dynasty and was continued during the Ming dynasty.







Fig. 11
Dish, China, 1403-24.
Porcelain,
diam. 40.5 cm,
The Hague,
Gemeentemuseum,
0319666.

Figs. 9 and 10
Dish with floral
decoration, Iran,
c. 1400-c. 1600.
Quartz-fritware,
diam. 32.2 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
gift of A. Heppner,
BK-15290.

In the Middle East people were enchanted by the blue and white Chinese porcelain. It was imported and the potters in the Middle East themselves also began to produce blue and white quartz-fritware.¹⁷ Examples made in Mamluk Syria in the fourteenth century bear a striking likeness to fourteenth-century Chinese blue and white porcelain.¹⁸ In the course of the fifteenth century the Islamic potters gradually developed a style characterized by a subtle mixture of Chinese and Islamic elements. This development came about under the rule of the Timurids (1369-1500).¹⁹ There were potters working at the Timurid court in Samarkand who had been taken as prisoners by Timur (Tamerlane) during his conquests in Syria. In a short space of time they produced blue and white ceramics that looked very much like the Syrian equivalent.²⁰ When political unrest

broke out in the Timuridic Middle East in the first half of the fifteenth century, artists and craftsmen moved to safer areas like Tabriz and the Ottoman Empire, where the production of blue and white ceramics got under way in the fifteenth century. The dish in figs. 9 and 10 is an example of blue and white ceramics made in Tabriz. The shape, and motifs like the peony and the wave around the rim, point to Chinese inspiration such as the early fifteenth-century Chinese dish in the Gemeentemuseum collection (fig. 11).

The objects the Ottoman potters made in the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century were not exact copies of Chinese porcelain. The decorations were a combination of abstract, geometrical motifs of West-Asian origin and curling Ottoman floral elements after Chinese examples.²¹ In the sixteenth century the Ottoman potters continued to experiment. For a short time they produced a blue and white ceramic that was more or less an imitation of Chinese porcelain. A dish in the Rijksmuseum collection is an example (fig. 12). The rim is decorated with what appears to be an interpretation of the Chinese rocks and waves motif and the bunches of grapes in the centre are derived from a Chinese example, as we can see on a fifteenth-century dish, also in the Rijksmuseum collection (fig. 13).

The production of blue and white ceramics continued in Iran. In the seventeenth century, during the reign of the Safavids (1502-1732), the potters made objects of such good quality that they were exported to Europe and even sold as Chinese blue and white porcelain.²² There are two seventeenth-century examples in the Rijksmuseum collection (figs. 14 and 15).

It goes without saying that Chinese ceramics played a major role in the developments that took place in the Islamic cultural sphere. But this influence was by no means one-sided, for Islamic ceramics also left their mark in China.

Fig. 12
 Dish with grapes and
 flowers, Turkey (Iznik),
 1550-1600. Quartz-
 fritware with lead,
 diam. 31 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 BK-1960-170.



Fig. 13
 Large dish decorated
 with bunches of
 grapes in blue,
 China, c.1400-c. 1425.
 Porcelain,
 diam. 38 cm.
 Amsterdam,
 Rijksmuseum,
 AK-RBK-1965-89.



Fig. 14
Bowl with a Chinese
landscape in blue,
Iran (Kirman),
1700-1800.
Quartz-fritware,
h. 21 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
BK-1958-77.



Fig. 15
Dish with landscape,
Iran (Kirman),
1600-1700.
Quartz-fritware,
h. 3.5 cm.
Amsterdam,
Rijksmuseum,
BK-NM-12419.

NOTES

- 1 For the Oosterbaan-Lugt Collection, see Agnita van 't Klooster, 'De collectie Oosterbaan-Lugt. Iraanse keramiek van gepassioneerde verzamelaars', *Speciaalnummer Vormen uit vuur*, 195 (2006), no. 2.
- 2 By Chinese ceramics, I mean various kinds of ceramics from different periods, such as stoneware, celadon and porcelain. For the time when Chinese ceramics were first imported, see Agnita van 't Klooster, *Mamlukse en Ottomaanse Tegels uit de vijftiende en zestiende eeuw, gedecoreerd in Chinees-islamitische Stijl*, Utrecht 2002, note 20. One example of a discovered shipwreck is The Belitung Wreck with a cargo of more than 50,000 items of Chinese stoneware, see John Guy, 'Early Ninth-Century Chinese Export Ceramics and the Persian Gulf Connection: the Belitung Shipwreck', *Taoci. Revue Annuelle de la Société française d'Étude de la Céramique orientale, Actes du colloque "Chine – Méditerranée: Routes et échanges de la céramique avant le XVI siècle*, no. 4, Paris 2005, pp. 9-22.
- 3 Lisa Golombek, Robert Mason and Gauvin Bailey, 'Persian Potters in the Ottoman World: New Data from the Timurid Ceramics Project of the Royal Ontario Museum', *9th International Congress of Turkish Art*, vol. 2, Ankara 1995, p. 183; T.W. Lentz and G.D. Lowry, *Timur and the Princely Vision. Persian Art and Culture in the Fifteenth Century*, Los Angeles 1989, p. 229.
- 4 On the import of Changsha ceramics see N. Wood, C. Doherty and M. Rosser Owen, *A Technological Study of Iraqi Copies of Chinese Changsha and Chinese Sancai Wares found at Samarra*, Beijing 2009.
- 5 Fragments of T'ang celadon were found in Samarra, Fustat, Siraf and Suse. See S.J. Vainker, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, London 1995, p. 71; Jeanne Moulérac, *Céramiques du monde musulman, collections de l'Institut du monde arabe, et de J.P. et F. Croisier*, Paris 1999, pp. 76-77; Nanne Ottema, *Chinese Ceramiek*, Lochem 1970, p. 63.
- 6 This glaze consisted of tin oxide mixed with lead oxide. The tin made the glaze opaque.
- 7 Vera Tamari, 'Abbasid Blue-on-white Ware', *Islamic Art in the Ashmolean Museum*, Oxford 1995, pp. 117-45.
- 8 Ernst J. Grube, *Islamic Pottery of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection*, London 1976, p. 37.
- 9 For other ninth-century examples, see Grube, op. cit. (note 8), figs. 7-9. For more information on these Chinese bowls, see Shelagh Vainker, *Chinese Pottery and Porcelain*, London 1991, figs. 68. and 93.
- 10 N. Wood and M. Tite, *Blue and White – The Early Years: Tang China and Abbasid Iraq compared*, 2009, pp. 11-14.
- 11 Grube, op. cit. (note 8), no. 37.
- 12 The Selçuks were originally Turkish nomads who ruled in Iran and Iraq between 1038 and 1194. One particular branch of the Selçuks ruled in Syria and Kirman. In the twelfth century their empire was broken up into different emirates, including the Selçuks from Rum who conquered Anatolia (Central Turkey) and made Konya the capital of their empire. They ruled until around 1302.
- 13 Jean Soustiel, *La Céramique Islamique*, Fribourg 1985, p. 398; Vainker, op. cit. (note 5), p. 129.
- 14 Alkali glaze is made of ground quartz and potassium carbonate.
- 15 Adalbert Klein, Johanna Zick-Nissen and Ekkart Klinge, *Islamische Keramik*, Düsseldorf 1973, p. 10.
- 16 For further information and examples, see John Carswell, *Blue & White. Chinese Porcelain Around the World*, London 2000, pp. 95-99; Van 't Klooster, op. cit. (note 2), pp. 39-40.
- 17 This was imported into Iran, Central Asia and western states such as the Mamluk Empire (1250-1517). Blue and white Yuan porcelain was found in Hormuz (on the Persian Gulf), in Fustat (Egypt) and Damascus and Hama (Syria). See Carswell, op. cit. (note 16), pp. 65-70, figs. 61 and 66.; Venetia Porter, *Islamic Tiles*, London 1995, pp. 93-95.
- 18 This is illustrated by a Syrian dish from the second half of the fourteenth century which was found in Hama (Syria) and is now in the collection of the National Museum in Damascus, and a fourteenth-century dish which was also found in Damascus. For illustrations see Carswell, op. cit. (note 16), fig. 45; Soustiel, op. cit. (note 13), fig. 249.
- 19 At the turn of the fourteenth century the Mongol-Turkish leader Timur (Tamerlane) (1338-1405) conquered Iran, Damascus and Aleppo. In 1402 he went from Syria to Ankara where he defeated the Ottoman sultan Bayezid I.
- 20 Golombek et al., op. cit. (note 3), p. 182.
- 21 Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby, *Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey*, London 1989, pp. 75-100.
- 22 Y. Crowe, *Persia and China, Safavid Blue and White Ceramics in the Victoria & Albert Museum 1501-1738*, London 2002, p. 21.

