

## On the wings of a bird ... from Nishapur to Norfolk

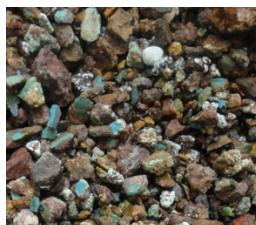
By Carolyn Pottinger

The Middle East has a tradition of ceramic production going back many millennia, but during the period leading up to the manufacture of this bowl (on view in the Islamic Gallery of the Asian Civilisations Museum, Singapore), the ceramic arts there were radically transformed. The 7<sup>th</sup> to the 10<sup>th</sup> centuries saw the burgeoning of an Islamic Empire, first under the Umayyads and later the Abbasids. With this came the development of an artistic and intellectual revolution marked by the nascence of a category of art commonly referred to today as 'Islamic'. This bowl, with a bird at its centre, is a fine example of early Islamic art. It comes from Nishapur, in the Province of Khurasan, Iran.



*Figure 1 Nishapur, Iran, 10th century, image attributed to Roots.sg*

Nishapur lies in a dusty plain protected by mountains along a route linking Afghanistan and Tehran that formed part of the ancient Silk Road. Built originally in Sassanian times, the city fell to the expanding forces of Islam when the Abbasids conquered it in 748. With them came a significant transformation. Archaeological evidence gives no clues to suggest a particularly important role for the city in Sassanian times, but under the Abbasid and later the Samanid empires this was to change. Initially, Nishapur developed as a centre of military and political power, then evolving to become a significant entrepot on the Silk Road, a true hive of activity where trade in linens, cottons and raw silk was robust. Turquoise was famously mined in the surrounding hills as well as, intriguingly, edible earth. This was highly valued for its medical qualities and widely traded, particularly to Egypt and the Maghreb. Nishapur was, and still is, known for the wonderful rhubarb that grows there and is turned into a syrup. Men of letters gathered in their numbers amid a cosmopolitan society which included Sunnis, Shiites, Jews, Christians, Arabs, Turks and others.



*Figure 2 Turquoise of Nishapur*

*image attributed to commons.wikimedia.org*

At this time, Nishapur also developed into a major centre for the production of ceramics. Potters had been making utilitarian wares across the region for millennia, but it was only in the course of the 9<sup>th</sup> century that a new degree of sophistication evolved. With increased trade came the wealth needed to invest in the ceramics industry. With the increase in trade specifically with China came a new impetus to

raise the game in ceramics production. It is possible that one of the earliest spurs for innovation came from a diplomatic gift that was delivered to the Abbasid Caliph Harun al-Rashid (r. 786-809 CE). Said to have astonished its recipients, it included imperial quality *chini faghfuri*, or China-ware, 'the like of which had never been seen at a Caliph's court before'. Among the collection some pieces (possibly from the outstanding Ding and Xing kilns in northern China) showed an extraordinary whiteness quite unfamiliar to its Islamic recipients.

China possessed a much whiter clay than was available locally, as well as a key ingredient called *kaolin*, which combined with advanced technology enabled the production of high-fired fine, white ceramics, including wares which might qualify as porcelain. *Kaolin* was not known in the Middle East, where the clay tended to be anything from egg yolk-coloured to brown. One can only speculate whether the extraordinary gift to Harun al-Rashid triggered a search for the innovations that would follow, but the effect would certainly have been compounded by intensified trading relations between the Tang and Abbasid empires that came with the opening up of a maritime silk road between these two great super-powers, enabling far larger quantities of china to travel across such great distances (as witness the spectacular Tang Shipwreck exhibition on view at Singapore's Asian Civilisations Museum).

One result of the push for innovation was the invention of a new technique in the Middle East, perhaps originally in Iraq but spreading rapidly across Iran and Egypt. Ground glass was added to clay, so that it fused at lower temperatures than it would otherwise. It was not porcelain, but it offered a different way of dazzling the viewer. Called fritware for the 'frit' or ground glass (aka stonepaste or faience), the end result had a strong white body which, when combined with a light tin glaze, looked more like the much-admired Chinese porcelain. True porcelain was not manufactured in the Islamic world until modern times, and most fine Islamic pottery was made of fritware. Frit was also a significant component in some early European ceramics.

The bowl shown is an example of fritware. It dates to the 10<sup>th</sup> century, with its elegant bold foliated Kufic script reading 'Generosity is a disposition of the dwellers of Paradise'. Calligraphy had been used decoratively pre-Islam, but the Islamic Arabic calligrapher was required to transpose the words of Allah as delivered to the Prophet *in all their beauty*. As objects of beauty, and aided by the avoidance of figural art in religious works, Arabic calligraphy became a key component of much Islamic art, both religious and secular. Arabic proverbs often appeared on decorative art works of the Samanid period (891-1005 CE), and this blessing is one of the most commonly found in Nishapur decoration.

If the appearance of a bird in a piece of Islamic art surprises the viewer, it should not. The ban on figural art associated with Islam tended to apply to objects in religious settings, but the bowl was made for eating, the diner seated on the floor, selecting each morsel with his right hand only, and the presence of animals (particularly birds) was very common on Nishapur pottery during the 10-12<sup>th</sup> centuries. Perhaps their soaring flight lent an association with the spiritual world, a metaphor for the Sufi's ultimate goal of achieving unity with God.

The birds of Nishapur were not only found on its ceramic wares but in its poetry. A century or so after this piece was made, Nishapur's still thriving intellectual circles included a poet whose work encouraged the reader to live life to the full for it was but short. Birds feature again and again, as in this example:

"The bird of life is singing in the sun  
Short is his song, nor just begun  
A call, a trill, a rapture, then-so soon!  
A silence, and the song is done-is done"

The poet was the Sufi intellectual, Omar Khayyam, better known in the land of his birth as an astronomer and mathematical genius than as a poet. The hedonistic tone of his poetry ("Wine! Wine! Wine! Red Wine! - the Nightingale cries to the Rose") was not always appreciated by successive Islamic regimes in the area, so it is probably thanks to his other strengths that a tomb to him can be seen in Nishapur today.



*Figure 3 Mausoleum of Omar Khayyam*

*image attributed to Commons.wikipedia.org*

While his name was thus preserved for posterity, it would be known to few today were it not for events many miles away, some 800 or so years after his lifetime, when an English poet from Norfolk named Edward Fitzgerald chose to render a translation of one of his poems, giving it the title *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*. It became Fitzgerald's best-known work, Tennyson later writing in tribute to "Old Fitz",

“... but none can say  
That Lenten fare makes Lenten thought,  
Who reads your golden Eastern lay,  
Than which I know no version done  
In English more divinely well;  
A planet equal to the sun  
Which cast it, that large infidel  
Your Omar ...”

For although Fitzgerald's first version - a penny pamphlet printed in 1859 - was remaindered, the work subsequently sold like hot-cakes and today boasts at least 650 different editions across the world, is translated into over 70 languages, and even put to music by over 100 different composers. Omar Khayyam's sybaritic message seems to sit more comfortably amid a Western audience.



*Figure 4 Edward Fitzgerald*

*image attributed to Commons.wikipedia.org*

Thus the flourishing of Nishapur a millennia ago continues to resonate. Its turquoise, edible earth and rhubarb syrup are available today, its ancient ceramics can be viewed in museums across the world, and its poetry has proved even more pervasive.

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