

Persian art



The Persian Samanid dynasty (AD 819–1005) ruled the territory of eastern Persia beyond the Oxus River (now named the Amu Darya), with Bukhara as their capital and Samarkand as their chief city. Samarkand became an important centre of pottery production and exported wares as far afield as Ravy near Tehran, Baluchistan in Pakistan, and Nishapur in north-east Iran. Nishapur was also a ceramic production centre, and this bowl was excavated there.

The bowl is made of earthenware and covered with a white clay slip that is decorated with calligraphy in stylised Kufic script. The appearance of the white slip imitated white Chinese porcelain from the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279), which was imported into the Middle East. Porcelain was prized in the region because of its hard, durable quality, its relatively light weight and the beauty of the glossy, smooth surface. However kaolin clay, required to produce porcelain, was not found in Persia and so local copies covered the dark surface of the stoneware clay with a white slip, which was then decorated.

Kufic is one of several scripts used in Persia and is characterised by its angular form. It is used for Qur'ans, coins and lapidary inscriptions as well as ceramic decoration. The type of decoration seen on this bowl continues an earlier tradition

of inscribed pottery that dates from the pre-Islamic period. In ancient Babylon, for example, bowls inscribed with magic spells were used as demon traps. After the Islamic conquest of Persia, inscribed bowls continued to be produced as medicinal bowls, or vessels for everyday use that were decorated with prayers, homilies and good wishes. However, Qur'anic verses are rare in the decoration of utilitarian objects (with the interesting exception of coins), because there is the possibility that the holy text might be accidentally defiled. Often the script decorating these works is nonsensical and serves as a decorative device that employs calligraphic brushstrokes for their beauty alone.

The tradition of text as decoration illustrates the importance of calligraphy in Islamic art. As an extension of the value placed on calligraphy as a means of transmitting the word of God, script was valued for its beauty and thus employed in Islamic secular manuscripts and on objects including metal wares, ceramics and textiles. However, the quality of the writing on ceramics was rarely as fine as that seen in manuscripts.