



TWO PIECES OF ISLAMIC METALWORK FROM B. FORMAN'S COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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Decorative sculpture is not usual in Islamic art. The referred-to figure of pigeon represents a rare tradition of non-religious figurative sculpture. Realistically rendered figures were generally avoided in the Islamic art. The only figurative objects of animals were connected with utilitarian purposes as, for example, incense burners or *aquamaniles*. But there is a small group of metal animal sculptures with no other purpose than the decorative one that appeared in the Iranian Islamic art in the nineteenth century. However, the tradition of depiction of animals in the art originated in the Middle East in pre-Islamic times.

Pigeon. Iran. 19th century (see photo 1).

Forged steel. Decoration inlaid with gold.

Size: H.: 23.6 cm; W.: 21.5 cm; D.: (tail) 14.3 cm.

Acquisition: Bought from the Antiquity shop, 1987.

Condition: Good. The inlaid gold decoration partly removed.

Claws of the left leg are slightly damaged. The surface is partly corroded.

Photographed by: Jiří Vaněk

Published: *Umění čtyř světadílů*. p. 44.

Description

The body of forged steel pigeon is inlaid with gold ornaments, as it was usual for Iranian type of animal figurines.² The gold inlay is not in a good condition, it is quite removed from some parts of the surface, especially from the tail of the animal.

Abstract floral ornaments are used together in combination of various geometrical patterns. The head of the pigeon is decorated with geometrical pattern that resembles small feathers. Eyes are visibly marked. Chest of the pigeon is inlaid with lobed floral ornament with inner circle of double fillet. Four lotuses like pendants hang from the tips of the lobes. The wings and the tail were ornamented too; their gold inlays are shaped like stylized feathers. The curved tail has a broken edge.

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² A combination of gold and silver inlay material was also in common use (see catalogue *Umění Orientu*, fig. 57).

Animal decoration in Islamic Art

Animal decoration is quite usual in Islamic art, especially in Iran. Metalwork known from Sasanian Iran depicts both animal and human figures decorations. There was a fine metalwork production during the Sasanian period in general. The metal vessels were hammered from a sheet of metal and decorated with *repoussé* technique, chasing or engraving details. Islamic rulers continued in this pre-Islamic tradition in metalwork production so they adopted decoration themes, e. g. the imperial *banquets* (*bazm*), hunting scenes or simple animal figures also seen on silver plates and vessels.³ The animals in decoration during the Islamic period referred to the Sasanian art till the nineteenth century.⁴ The Sasanian decorative style served as an inspiration for the 'Abbasids too. We can find fantastic creatures or princely hunting scenes of Sasanian origin in their art production.⁵ The Sasanians were also acquainted with inlay decoration, although it flourished in the classical age of Islamic art in the twelfth century.⁶

The prohibition of portraying living creatures, origin of which scholars found in some verses of Qur'an⁷, was established, as a matter of fact, only for depicting living creatures at public places and in mosques. However, since the beginning of the Islamic period, there are some examples of figures or other living creatures portrayed even in mosques.⁸ This prohibition seems to be limited depending on the specific circumstances. The attitude differs from time to time and from territory to territory. For example, orthodox Sunni Mamluks in Egypt had more strict rules concerning the depiction of living creatures than Shi'ite Safavids in Iran.

One of the oldest vessels in shape of a bird is dated back to AD 796/797. It is made of bronze and inlaid with silver and it is considered to be probably of Iranian origin.⁹ There are also some animal bronze sculptures from the sixth to ninth century.¹⁰ It is evident, that the animal-shaped vessels were usual in the Islamic art production.¹¹ A number of examples survived.¹² There was also a number of vessels decorated with animal motifs. It is not hard to find some metal vessels with engraved animal decoration in any world collection of Islamic art. It is significant, that these vessels were frequently made in Iran. Animals became a part of large decorative design with geometric or floral ornamentation, alternating with inscriptions. The animals were situated on floral background or in cartouches or pendants. Depicted animals were represented usually by lions, various felines, animals of prey,

³ Some pieces of metalwork with a griffin and lions are housed in the Museum of Hermitage, St. Petersburg (see catalogue *Ermitáž*, p. 38–40).

⁴ Buyid art in the tenth and eleventh century was inspired by Sasanian themes (Ward, p. 53); the Qajar ruler Fath 'Ali Shah commissioned rock sculptures in the Sasanian manner in the early nineteenth century (Brend, p. 167).

⁵ Hillebrand, p. 47.

⁶ Ward, p. 72.

⁷ The restriction of depicting living creatures is based on verses about prohibition of idolatry 5: 92, 6: 74, 22: 31. This prohibition was elaborated through tradition, e. g. Muhammad's words said after the capture of Mecca and with destroying idols of Kaaba: "...the angels will not enter a temple (*bayt*) where images are (*tamathil*)."
(Papadopoulos, p. 49.)

⁸ See Papadopoulos, p. 48–52.

⁹ Attil, p. 15.

¹⁰ These animal sculptures are made of bronze with engraved surface decoration. There is a duck, cockerel, deer, horse or a lion (see Sarre, F., Martin, F. R.)

¹¹ See zoomorphic incense burner made of bronze and inlaid with gold from the eleventh century Iran (Hillebrand, p. 95).

¹² Ewer in the form of a bird, 796–797, incense burner in the form of a lion from the eleventh century, ewer in the form of a group of cow, calf and lion, 1206, (see Ward).



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rabbits, birds or even monkeys and fantastic creatures as griffins, unicorns or phoenixes. This style of decoration was popular mainly in Iran during Safavid and Qajar periods.

Animals were often depicted in a symbolic way. Lion or hawk, for example, represented the royalty. Birds symbolized freedom of spirit and soaring of soul in general.¹³ Atil also refers that bird was always associated with heavenly delights and good fortune. In Sasanian art, birds were accepted as a transformation of victorious gods and good fortune.¹⁴ Allan refers to an Iranian standard producer who explained animal and bird decoration of the standard as related to the King Solomon, the master of all living creatures.¹⁵ Affinity of the King Solomon character was typical in Iran so that Islamic rulers often referred to Solomon as their ancestor.

¹³ Atil, p. 89.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 55.

¹⁵ Allan, p. 263.

It is presumable, that the eldest animal sculptures were made in Umayyad Spain or Fatimid Egypt.¹⁶ The famous statue of griffin made of bronze was found in Egypt.¹⁷ Other examples from the eleventh or twelfth century also originated at this territory. When the Fatimid dynasty ended its rule in Egypt in AD 1171, most of metalworkers moved to Iran. Animal-shaped incense burners¹⁸ and *aquamaniles* with pierced and engraved decoration are known from the period of Seljuk Anatolia.

The presented sculpture of pigeon belongs to a group of animal sculptures made in Iran in the nineteenth century. The steel animals were made in shape of peacock, elephant¹⁹, goose²⁰, duck²¹, deer²², camels or others²³. They were intended mostly as ornamentally decorative objects or they were also a part of Muharram procession standards²⁴, especially pigeons. They have been used for this purpose until the present days. Many of the animal sculptures, however, were made as interior decorations of houses of Europeans settled in Iran.²⁵

Statuette of the pigeon is made of steel. Steel is an alloy of iron and carbon with content of a carbon less than two percent. Iron is known in the Middle East from the ancient times. Iron and steel production have a long tradition in ancient Iran since the beginning of the second and first millennium BC.²⁶ There were few sources of steel and iron used in Islamic Iran – wrought iron, cast iron, and meteor steel or manufactured steel. Crucible steel²⁷, also made in pre-Islamic period, was used in arms and armours manufacture. Tradition in producing steel continued in Islamic period.

Steel production was probably a family business, but rich sponsorship was necessary. The best products were made in royal workshops. In spite of problematic situation in Iran in the nineteenth century, the production of iron and steel objects continued. Due to the Great Plague and discontinued trading with Europe, Iran was far from the main political and economic interest of European countries. Moreover, the trading with Europe partly affected the decline of traditional crafts. Goods, and also materials were imported from Europe and Russia into Iranian towns.²⁸ It was difficult to find any traditional product of Iranian origin in the market.²⁹ The raw material was expensive and it was not easy to transport it from provinces to towns. Nevertheless, the traditional crafts survived in small centers. James Allan claims, that strong religious tradition with ceremonies and Shi'ite *ta'ziyeh* plays supported the traditional art production because of requirement of iron and steel equipment as arms and armours for these plays.³⁰

¹⁶ Grube, p. 72.

¹⁷ The sculpture is recently housed in The Campo Santo, Pisa (Hillebrand, p. 179).

¹⁸ Duck shaped incense burner from Iran, beginning of the nineteenth century housed in The Moravian Gallery, Brno, Czech republic (see *Islám a jeho svět*, p. 106).

¹⁹ The statues of a peacock and elephant are housed in the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen.

²⁰ See Sarre, F., Martin, F. R., pl. 135.

²¹ Allan, p. 432.

²² *Umění čtyř světadílů*. p. 38–39, 40–41.

²³ Allan, p. 430.

²⁴ Shi'ites celebrate a feast at 10th of Muharram in memory of the violent death of Imam Husayn at Kerbala in 690 AD (Kropáček, p. 221). Processions are held during this event.

²⁵ Allan, p. 430.

²⁶ *Ibid*, p. 41.

²⁷ Crucible steel was made in small crucibles made of thin-walled refractory clay with a lute lid with a central hole (*Ibid*, 51). Crucible steel was distributed also in the shape of ostrich eggs for making arms or other products.

²⁸ Iron was imported from the Urals (*Ibid*, p. 88).

²⁹ *Ibid*, p. 87.

³⁰ *Ibid*, p. 90.

New demand rose in customers of European origin. They asked for copies of historical objects or decorative pieces. Forged steel animal sculptures that had been popular since the nineteenth century corresponded to these demands too.

Dishes, trays or plates with richly decorated surface are very common in Islamic art history. Numerous items exist with engraved decoration made in the nineteenth century and were popular with both Muslims and Europeans. The presented dish belongs to this group.

Dish. Iran. 19th century (see photo 2–5).

Brass sheet. Decoration engraved.

Size: D.: 58.5 cm, h.: 9.6 cm.

Acquisition: Bought from the Antiquity shop, 1987.

Condition: Fair.

Photographed by: Jiří Vaněk

Unpublished

The dish has a flat bottom with a slanting periphery. There is a vertical band rising from the bottom. The wide and convex rim follows.

The engraved and chased decoration covers entire upper surface. Along with the use of geometrical, floral and figural motifs, the decoration includes inscriptions. The fabric of decoration with its typical figural motifs and stylization points to the Iranian origin.

The main feature of the whole decoration is its radiation from the center. There is a large rosette in the center of the dish with inner parts separated by undecorated twin fillets alternating with hatching narrow bands. There is a small rosette in the very center. Each external petal of the rosette is executed in the shape of architectural niche and it is filled with a flower in full bloom. The rosette probably symbolized the sun disk with rays, which is usual in Iran. The sun was a symbol of royalty and it was very popular in the nineteenth century Iran. The rosette is aligned by three bands. The band in the middle is decorated with flowering scrollwork. Two other bands are engraved with simple decoration representing row of small leaves. Next band is filled with twelve cartouches fringed by a fillet. Widely spaced cartouches contain *thuluth* inscriptions, and the small lobed ones contain effigies of animals. There are two types of animals in the cartouches interlaced with inscriptions: four felines and two birds. The stylized inscriptions are set against a floral background and a blooming flower arched above the animals.³¹ Frieze of thirty-two lobed cartouches including effigies of animals comes next. It is the last frieze in the bottom of the dish. Birds, monkeys, rabbits, felines, wolves, and dogs are set against a floral background. The vertical band between the bottom and the rim is engraved with a guilloche.

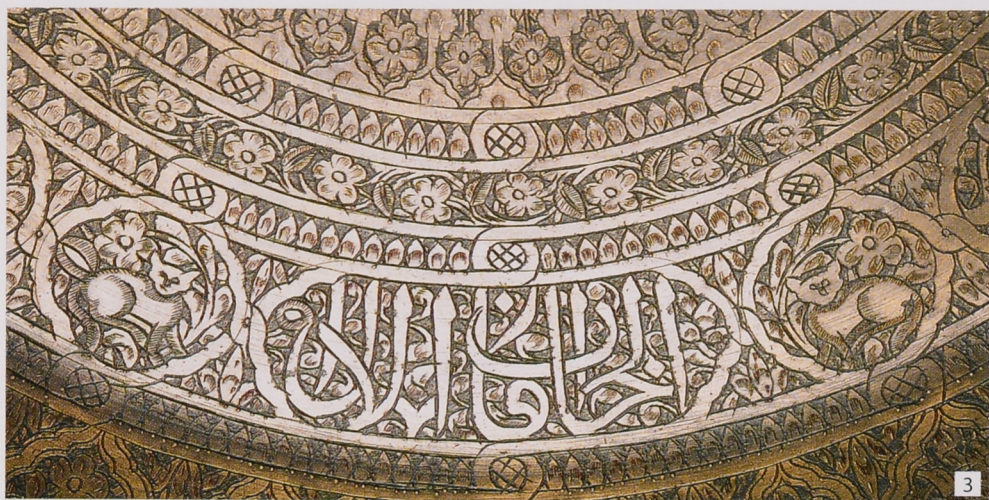
Raised and convex rim is decorated with a wide band fringed with small double friezes of abstract foliate scrollwork and small leaf-like pattern divided by undecorated fillets. The band is engraved with six roundels enclosing predominantly figurative scenes and each roundel is enclosed in the same way as the whole wide band. All figures are standing out against a floral background. Within the first roundel of the rim decoration, there is a king with a crowned head sitting in an architectural arch. There are two other arches on each of his side, including small birds. The medallion to the left of the king is engraved with two standing figures dressed in a short coat and a cap. There is a schematic column

³¹ The epigraphic cartouches contain highly stylized Arabic characters that have not been read yet by reason of difficult identification of the particular words. Nevertheless it is evident that some parts of the inscription are repeated in some cartouches.



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between them. In the next roundel, there is a sitting man executed in the same way like the king, but he has no crown, only a cap and there are no birds but flowers in the two other arches on his sides. His right hand is raised. The fourth roundel includes two arches with two standing persons, in one arch each. The men are facing each other and wearing long robes. The left figure is holding a sword resting on his left shoulder, and the right one makes conversational gesture with both of his hands. There is a semicircular face above them portrayed only with eyes, eyebrow and nose and with some kind of headdress. In the next roundel, there is a horseman holding a sword in his right hand and above his head. He also holds a small cavalry shield in his left hand. The background is composed with flowers. There is also some kind of architecture on his right. And finally, the last roundel is consisting of two sitting persons facing each other and making conversational gestures. The roundel is divided with architectural scheme. There is a frieze showing a column between the two figures, and above them, there are two semicircular faces of the same kind as in one of the previous roundels. The roundel is alternated with engraved scenes illustrating animals in the wilderness: felines, dogs and birds set against a floral background. It is necessary to say, that the execution of figural design is rather schematic, but in general, the depicted figural and animal decoration points to Iran as the place of manufacture. The way of execution of the surface makes the dating to the nineteenth century likely.



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Technical notes

The dish is made of hammered brass and turned. The decoration is engraved and chased. No metal analysis has been performed.

The brass, as an alloy of copper and zinc, is a material appropriate for manufacturing in its cold state. The composition usually also contains additional elements, e. g. lead. The brass was very popular in Islamic metalwork. The zinc, with content of about twenty percent, makes an alloy resembling gold. Therefore, brass objects compensate for costly gold products. The disadvantage of brass was its bad taste due to copper. That is why the metal utensils made of alloy containing copper were additionally tinned.

Majority of decoration is engraved. There are some parts probably made of chasing technique, especially circle marks in details. The dish was also fixed in a lathe as the central hollow proofs.

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