



UNUSUAL VESSEL FROM THE ISLAMIC METAL COLLECTION OF THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM

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ABSTRACT: A vessel from the Islamic metal collection of the Náprstek Museum that was included among the objects of Iranian origin differed at first sight from Iranian vessels. This vessel's shape is reminiscent of an Indian vessel, but it was not clear to which geographical area or historical era it belonged. Indian vessels do not generally carry any inscriptions to help with identification, and nor do we have sufficient material for comparison. This article brings closer analysis of the individual elements of the vessel on the basis of which I might come to a conclusion or create a hypothesis, which could be put forward for further specialist evaluation.

KEY WORDS: Vessel – Islamic metals – *huqqa* base – *lota* – brass beat work – engraved decoration – India – Kashmir – Punjab.

In the Náprstek Museum's collection of Islamic metal objects I have discovered a vessel (Fig. 1) which was included for working purposes among the objects of Iranian origin, but which differed at first sight from Iranian vessels. We know that a number of Indian metal vessels are so similar to their prototypes from Safavid Iran (1501–1722) that it is fairly difficult to identify them with certainty (Zebrowski, M., 1982: 26). Nevertheless, the range of Indian vessels is different from that of the Safavid ones. The *lota* is unknown in Iran (Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 338). This vessel's shape is reminiscent of an Indian vessel, but it was not clear to which geographical area or historical era it belonged. Indian vessels do not generally carry any inscriptions to help with identification, and nor do we have sufficient material for comparison. The final decision to classify it as coming from the north west of India, from the Kashmir or Punjab region at the start of the 19th century, was the result of a fairly long road during which for a while I considered classifying it as coming from Deccan. I consulted with colleagues from the National Museum in Delhi, who supported me in my efforts.²

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Fig. 1: Vessel. India, Kashmir or Punjab, beginning of 19th century. Brass; beat work, chased, engraved, black composition/lac on cross-hatched ground. H. 18.6 cm, diam. of body 18.1 cm, diam. of stand 8.2 cm. National Museum–Náprstek Museum, 16 273.³

While studying and publishing articles on Indian metal objects⁴ over the last ten years, I have come across a large number of items in collections and publications regarding metal vessels (see bibliography), but I was nevertheless unable to find a comparable vessel. This led me to decide to carry out a closer analysis of the individual elements on the basis of which I might come to a conclusion or create a hypothesis, which could be put forward for further specialist evaluation.

The thing about the vessel that attracts the most attention at first sight is its incongruity – the discrepancy between the form (a round body reminiscent of a Hindu Indian *lota*, or rather the ritual *lota chambu* or also the *huqqa* base) and the all-over decoration familiar from Muslim vessels. In addition, there is the precision of the all-over plant decoration, surrounding four polylobed medallions with subjects reminiscent of Safavid miniature paintings, contrasted with the almost perfunctory finishing of the vessel in a short, smooth and undecorated neck that is then hammered out into a broad rim. Not even the medallions

and comments. In e-mail correspondence with Stephen Markel of Los Angeles County Museum, Kashmir was mentioned as a place that should also be taken into account, something for which I am grateful.

³ This vessel belongs to the collections that were transferred to the Náprstek Museum in the middle of the 20th century.

⁴ Pospíšilová, D., 1997. *Metamorphoses of Metal*. Prague, National Museum; 2001. Collection of Bidri ware. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum*, 2001, No. 22, pp. 1–25; 2003. Brazier. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 2003, No. 24, pp. 13–18; 2004. Cutters for Areca Nuts. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum* 2004, No. 25, pp. 1–16; 2007. Deepa. Oil Lamps. *Annals of the Náprstek Museum*, 2007, 28, pp. 37–77.



Fig. 2: Detail. Medallion with a nobleman.



Fig. 3: Detail. Medallion with a female musician.



Fig. 4: Detail. Medallion with a male musician.



Fig. 5: Detail. Medallion with a servant.

with figural subjects achieve the quality of the decoration that surrounds them, however, (see fig. nos. 2, 3, 4, 5). There are too many heterogeneous elements here, giving the vessel a hybrid character and an unbalanced look overall.

The Shape

The spherical shape with no stand is derived from the traditional Indian *lota*, which is always lower and more solid-seeming than the ewer. The belly of this vessel is almost as wide as it is high. The bottom is circular in shape and finishes in a metal sheet that is hammered out around the outer edge of the vessel. The constricted neck is short, with no ring moulding, and it then flares out to form a wide lip, turned downwards. The impression created by the vessel is that the craftsman, probably a Muslim, first made a bottle (*surahi*) and then changed his mind, shortening and hammering out the unfinished, undecorated neck. The way in which the averted rim is created gives an impression of simplicity. It definitely does not seem that the craftsman was experienced in making typical Indian vessels such as *lotas*. The roundness of the shape makes it look like a *huqqa* base, but made out of sheet metal it would have no stability, which is why *huqqas* were cast.⁵ From the very start, Hindus and Muslims influenced each other in India. "A brass vase engraved with arabesque attests to the adoption of indigenous vessels by Muslim of India" (Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 209). Muslims Islamicised Hindu objects (Zebrowski, M., 1986: 254). "When Muslims did employ *lota*-like vessels, they were often disguised by Islamic ornament like Arabic script, scrollwork or other abstract designs" (Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 212).

The Historical Context

Kashmir is a region with a predominantly Muslim population. Arabs began to settle there in the 8th century. Islam spread in the 14th century, and there was a strengthening of cultural ties with Iran in the 15th century in particular, when Persian became the official language. In order to revitalise local craftsmanship, artists from Iran and Turkestan were invited in, while Kashmiris went to Iran for experience. The range of vessels produced in Kashmir was broad, consisting in particular of various items such as *surahi*, *lota*, kettles, trays, bowls and samovars (Scarce, J. M., 1971: 83).

Lahore in the Punjab was a place where cultures met. "Lahore was the main focal place where Central Asian, Iranian and Indian artists and calligraphers joined heads and hands[...]" (Shrivastava, R. P., 1987: 278). A number of artists and ordinary people emigrated to Lahore from Kashmir in 1831–1841 (Shrivastava, R. P., 1987: 277–8). Kashmir itself was home to many Persian emigré artists. "The most important aspect of culture in Kashmir is that the valley was a crossroads, with artists from diverse backgrounds painting there in unrelated idioms" (Leach, L. Y., 1995: 931). In addition, items of Persian origin appeared there, serving as models for Kashmiri craftsmen (Kipling, J. L. 1886: 8). The objects that were created in this region were therefore likely to depart from the traditional forms, marrying in themselves a number of aspects typical of various periods of development (see the all-over decoration of which the motifs date from the Timurid period (1370–1506), Safavid motifs in the medallions and the shape reminiscent of a typical Indian *lota*). They would thus create

⁵ *Huqqa* evolved from *lota* in the seventeenth century (Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 206).

an object that at first sight was heterogeneous and would be unlikely to have been created in a conventional environment. "The mixture of motifs of various periods is typical of what has been termed the revivalist movement" (Melikian-Chirvani, A. S. 1982: 340).⁶ The attempt to stimulate production by a return to various styles of the past was not successful, however. "In the eighteenth century, as the Iranian connexion became looser, a trend towards baroque exaggeration became noticeable" (Melikian-Chirvani, A. S. 1982: 274). When unity of form and content is lost, the internal logic of the work is also lost. "That is probably a suitable definition of decadence" (Melikian-Chirvani, A. S. 1982: 274). It is well known that the quality of artistic craftsmanship in India worsened from the 18th century. This happened in particular after the breakup of the traditional court workshops and under the influence of orders for the European market. According to J. L. Kipling, Kashmir and the Punjab did not produce particularly distinguished metal items, and around 1886 most of them were being sold to Europe (Kipling, J. L., 1886: 8).

Artists

The uncertain political situation and wars led to frequent migrations by craftsmen, who were loyal to whoever gave them an order. Lucrative employment provided the strongest motivation for craftsmen to migrate. There was thus a spreading of cultures and new trends. Indian artists were anonymous; only a very few artists' names have been preserved. Crafts in India are inherited, passed down through particular professional castes, mostly with low social status. Calligraphers were the only people to achieve a higher social status, and that was only with the arrival of the Muslims. Artists in countries ruled by Muslims were of various nationalities, and did not have to be Muslims. Even within a single workshop it was possible to distinguish orders for Hindu and Muslim customers. As far as Kashmir and the Punjab are concerned, the *Journal of Indian Art* states that copper was worked by Muslims, brass by Hindus. Sometimes they worked them both, but Hindus did not undertake tinning (Kipling, J. L., 1886: 2). Muslims did not even use brass for decorative purposes (Kipling, J. L., 1886: 4). When working on an order, it was important to take the client's wishes into account. Craftsmen always managed to adapt to demand, and to create an original shape or subject to order. A number of objects or designs for decorative art objects came from painters. Outside the court sphere, painters were multi-professionals, ready to satisfy the demands of a patron for either painting or decorative items (Mittal, J., 1987: 131). From the Mughal era (1526–1857) it became a matter of course that craftsmen were able to work to a design by another artist, above all a painter (Mittal, J., 1987: 138). "In almost all parts of India the painter was often a craftsman and worked in many media like wood, ivory, silver and gold, copper and brass" (Mittal, J., 1987: 130). In the case of the vessel described, it seems that a painter would have created the pictures on the four polylobed medallions, the motifs of which are based on those familiar to us from Safavid miniature paintings (1501–1722). It is clear that artists were capable of transferring the motifs requested into metal (Atil, E., 1990: 22).

⁶ "The revivalist movement appeared in Hindustan, presumably in Punjab around Lahore, some time in the early 19th century. It was linked with a similar movement that started in Iran in the 18th century, and lasted well into the 19th century" (Melikian-Chirvani, A. S. 1982: 340).

Technique

There is a division of labour among craftsmen producing vessels. Vessels made from sheet metals are made from a single piece, if they are fairly small. The sheet is hammered on a stake to obtain the required shape. Surface decoration is achieved using various techniques, in the case of this vessel by engraving. Engraving is a technique that in the area of north west India in question was used by Muslims, unlike embossing, which was used by Hindus (Kipling, J. L, 1886: 6). Most incised designs consist of removing the ground from around a design, thus leaving the design itself standing in low relief against a hatched or cross-hatched ground. After the ornament has been engraved, the background is finished with the use of black organic composition. This type of decoration was used in Iran from the 15th century, when inlaying was replaced by a simpler decoration of a carved ornament on a cross-hatched background rubbed with black organic matter (Atil, E., 1990: 26).

The vessel in question is decorated with a pattern with various heights of relief. It is lower in the upper part, and higher in the main, central part of the vessel. The decoration thus stands out more clearly against the black background, which is relatively well preserved in the deeper hollows. Where the relief is lower, the black material has been partially rubbed away, and so the cross-hatching of the background shines through. From the technical point of view, the all-over decoration of plant arabesques surrounding four polylobed medallions containing motifs from Safavid miniature paintings has been masterfully carried out. It is fine work, with a feeling for detail. The artist definitely managed to execute in metal, to a high standard, a design made for paper painting. At the finish, the artist rubbed the engraved decoration with a black substance so that its proportions stand out in the foreground against a smooth background.

Decoration

Utility vessels are smooth and undecorated. For ornament or ritual purposes, decoration is used, usually plant or figural designs, but in the case of the *chambu lota*, a vessel for holy water, the decoration consisted of Hindu motifs or geometric designs. The vessel in question is utilitarian in character, but it is decorated. The all-over plant pattern is designed in such a way that the main part, which covers most of the surface, is interrupted only by the four polylobed medallions. Each medallion depicts a detail of a painting, with the motifs of a ruler drinking, a servant serving him and two musicians, one male and one female. In the upper part of the vessel there is an undecorated fillet that divides the main decoration of the vessel from the undecorated neck and throat by a short strip with a pattern that is finer than that on the rest of the vessel. A similar division can be found on the bottom of the vessel, where the smooth, undecorated bottom is divided first by a decorated and then an undecorated strip from tightly-compressed serrated lappets – lotus petals around the base. This is a typical Indian pattern found on most decorated Hindu vessels. In each of the lappets an individual flower is engraved, known from the Indian decorative repertoire from the period of the Mughal ruler Jahangir. The decoration of the vessel is engraved to various depths. The highest is in the main, central part, but on the shoulder of the vessel, under the neck it is carried out in lower relief.

The main decoration consists of arabesques of foliage and flowers, of which the most distinctive are peonies connected by long stems. Between these flowers are other decorative elements, such as a pattern in the shape of a heart framing a lotus. Under the heart are two

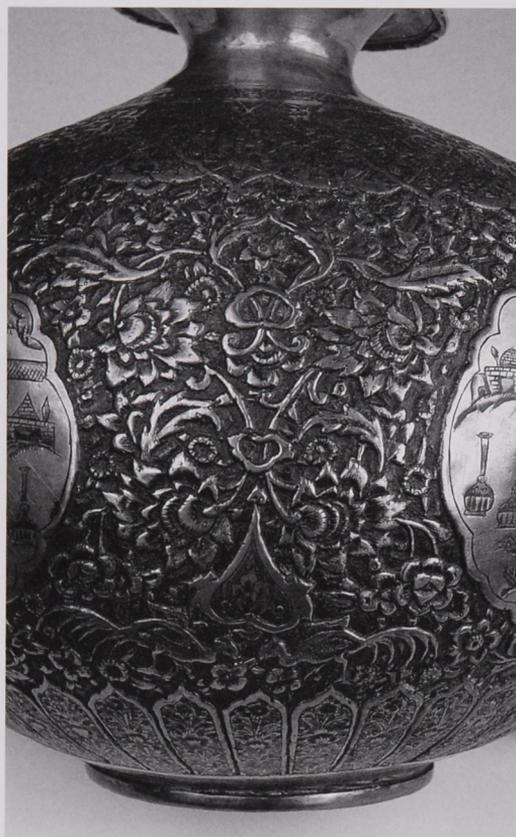


Fig. 6 a, b: Detail of decoration of the water vessel in question.

peacocks in a composition mirroring each other (see fig. no.6). A flower that is frequently repeated is the anemone with five petals, known from the Iranian decorative repertoire. The peony and lotus foliage, with birds in between, is a typical decoration of the Timurid period (1370–1501). In India this type of decoration was introduced by the Mughals (1526–1857). It was mostly complemented by cartouches with calligraphic inscriptions (Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 34, 36). From the 14th century we find plant tendrils with split leaves. Safavid items made from copper and bronze were decorated with letters and plant tendrils. Some had buds, others had flowers, and others had split leaves. In the 16th and 17th centuries figural compositions were dominant, with animals and people in landscapes, courtiers at celebrations, drinking and riding horses (Atil, E., 1990: 29). Given that there was close cultural exchange between the Safavids and Mughals, the same motifs can be found on Indian vessels. Similar trends, such as landscapes with animals, were also popular in Deccan thanks to the close connections with Iran and Turkey. The leading work here is a tray showing animals fighting and being hunted, with birds among the foliage (see fig. no. 7) from the period around 1600.⁷ If this decoration is compared with the basic decorative motif on the vessel described, however (see fig. no. 8) it is clear that its execution is closer to the decoration that appears on book covers from Safavid Iran (see fig. no. 9). The four medallions (see figs. nos. 2, 3, 4, 5) on the surface of the vessel show four pictures that seem to come from a single miniature painting, depicting a banquet taking place in a landscape with Muslim architecture. Figural compositions showing banqueters and cups, bottles and trays of fruit, with musicians and dancers belongs to the Timurid decorative repertoire (Atil, E., 1990: 23). Two of the medallions have a stylised window in the corner with a tasselled curtain that seems to be indicating the nearness of a palace interior. This element in the composition, which is otherwise set in an open landscape, seems illogical. All four figures – the ruler, servant, male and female musician – are sitting, three of them in a typical position with the weight of the body resting on the left leg, which is bent at the knee and tucked under the buttocks. The right leg is also bent at the knee and resting on the sole of the foot. The fourth figure, the servant, is also seated, but he has the soles of his feet close together and his knees apart. All the figures have a large cylindrical cushion behind them, which in Safavid miniature paintings is seen only with rulers. All of them, including the women, are dressed the same way in a long cloak with buttons, a shawl collar and a belt at the waist. The men have large turbans on their heads tied from a strip of cloth with the ends on the top of the head. The woman's hair is covered by a shawl that falls over her shoulders to her waist. The clothing, cushions and even the lute are decorated with a fine floral *buti* pattern. The man is playing the lute, the woman a tambourine, which are musical instruments known from Safavid miniature paintings. The servant holds a large tray of food in the shape of a pyramid, while the ruler has a bottle with a flared neck in one hand and a cup in the other. All the medallions feature further vessels, in each case two bottles with a round body, a straight, narrow neck and a wide throat. The musician has a low bowl, and the ruler has a low, round box, seemingly with a flat lid. The landscape is completed by bushes of an indeterminate type, in each case behind the figures. The bushes are all the same except for the one in the medallion of the ruler, who has a willow behind him. This is known from both Safavid and Rajput miniature paintings. The scenes do not represent any sort of historical illustrations, but a particular poetic convention with no specific features, which the artist has used to point to certain artistic and historical models (Compare: Leach, L. Y., 1986: 81, fig. 22).

⁷ Drawn from a photograph in the book by Zebrowski, M., 1997b: 334.



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Fig. 7: Drawing. Detail of decoration of Deccani tray.

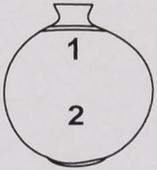
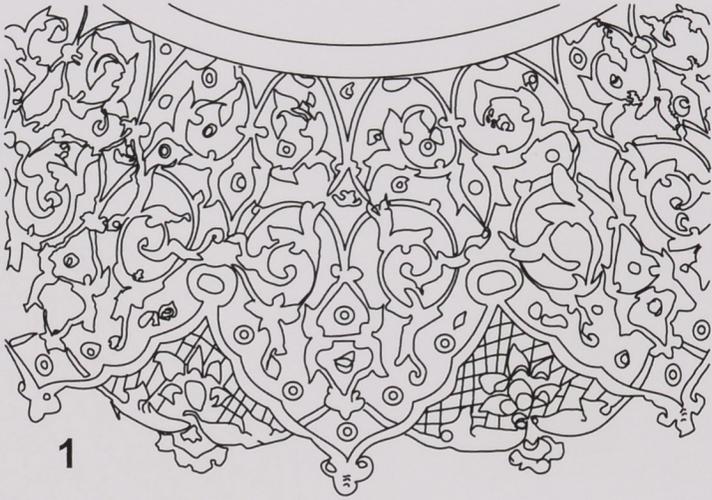


Fig. 8: Drawing. Detail of decoration of the water vessel in question.

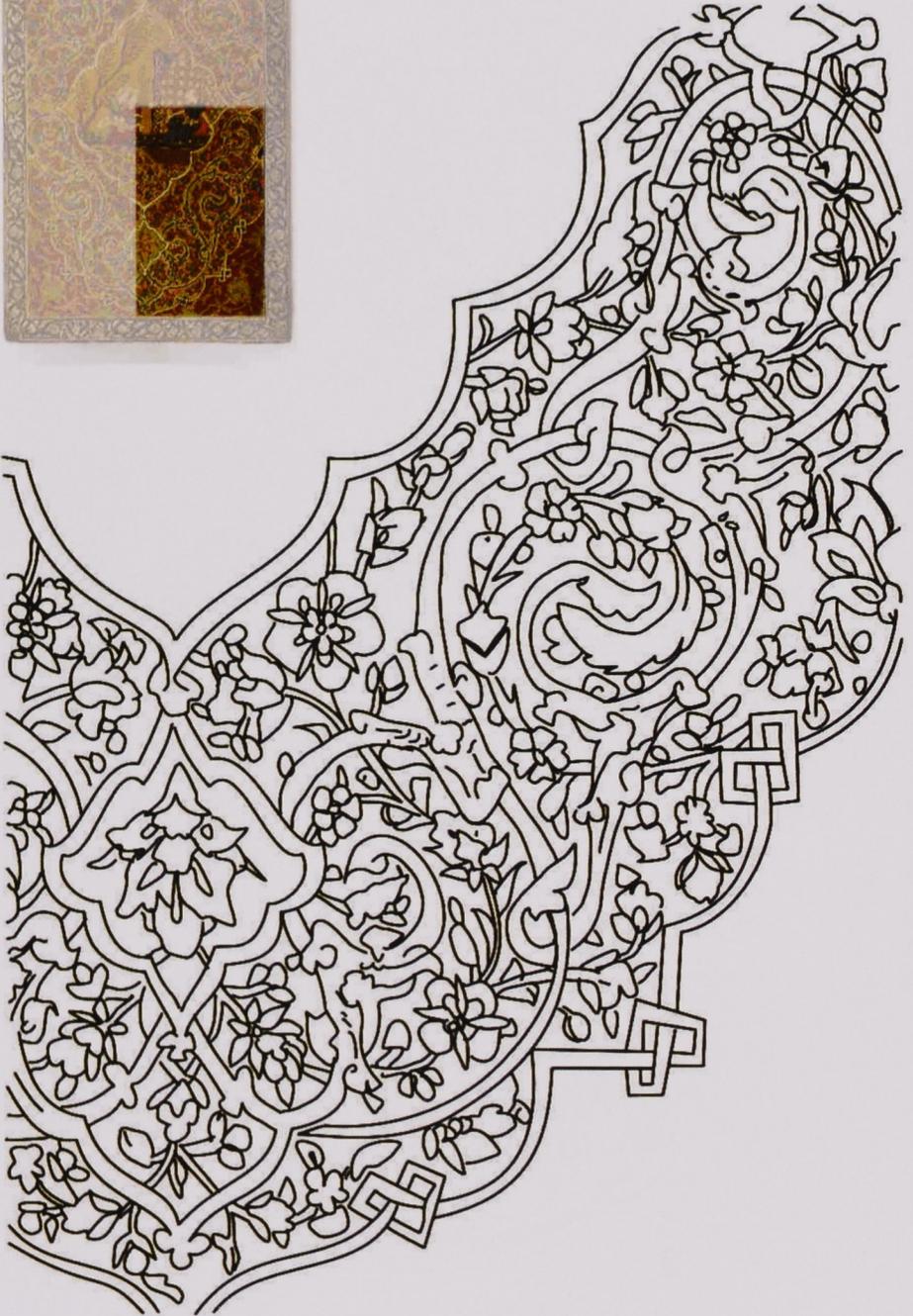
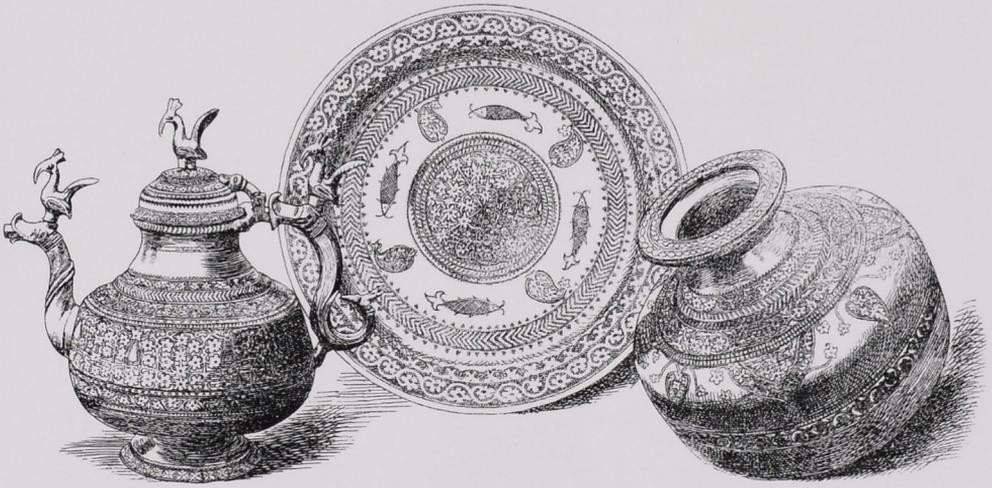


Fig. 9: Drawing. Detail of decoration of Safavid book cover.

HINDU BRASS VESSELS.



RÁM SING DEL. J. L. KIPLING DIR.

W. Griggs, Photo-lith. London, S.E.

Fig. 10: Hindu vessels.

CASHMERE TINNED COPPER NIELLO.



Fig. 11: Muslim ewer.

Connections to the Kashmir Metalware Tradition

If we compare this vessel with vessels that were produced in Kashmir in the second half of the 19th century, we see parallels with Hindu vessels (see fig.no. 10),⁸ both in the round shape of the lotus and the decoration that was found on Hindu vessels (such as the foliage with five-lobed flowers. Nevertheless, the decoration on the shoulder of the vessel is most reminiscent of the decoration seen on a Muslim bottle made of tinned copper (see fig. no.11).⁹ It features spiralling stems of the same thickness, with split leaves and continuous arabesque patterns, a decoration typical of Kashmir vessels. The decoration of these vessels was chased and engraved with black lac (organic compound, not niello) rubbed into the background. "Although Persian and Kashmir pieces strongly resemble each other [...], Kashmiri design is sharper, almost brittle, with chasing worked in thin lines and deeper relief" (Scarce, J. M., 1971: 84). The golden hue of the brass itself emphasises the link with Safavid vessels (Melikian-Chirvani, A.S. 1982: 349), but the overall impression that the vessel gives is Indian. As the above analysis of the individual elements shows, it is fairly likely that it comes from the Kashmir or Punjab region.

Translation by Valerie Talacko

Photographs by Jiří Vaněk

Drawings by Jan Šejbl

⁸ Journal of Indian Art, 1886, No. 1., pl. II.

⁹ Journal of Indian Art, 1886, No. 1., pl. IV.

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