Our research on some 600 Safavid wares has demonstrated that the full range of export wares from China was available in the Middle East from the late fourteenth century on. Examples of almost all the Chinese models on which the Safavid wares were based are found in Middle Eastern collections, primarily the Topkapi Saray Museum and the Ardabil Shrine. Some of these had already entered the decorative vocabulary of the early Timurid potters at Samarqand during the first decades of the fifteenth century. Early fifteenth-century Chinese porcelains served as models for the superlative products of the Nishapur atelier in the second half of the century.

The fall of the Timurids in 1505 did not occasion a major change in the operations of local potteries, either at Nishapur or in the Tabriz region. However, although contemporary Chinese porcelains continued to arrive in Iran, very little notice was taken of them, with a few exceptions. It was not until the second half of the sixteenth century that Persian potters looked again for inspiration to the newest arrivals from China.

We may postulate that in the second half of the sixteenth century the quantity of Chinese porcelain arriving in Iran must have been staggering, as Safavid potters throughout the seventeenth century made extensive use of compositions and individual motifs from this period. Even when decorative bands, such as the “reserved scroll-and-ruyi frame,”1 were borrowed from contemporary Chinese imports, potters often reverted to sixteenth-century models for the central medallion. The sixteenth-century Chinese landscape rim reappears on Safavid dishes throughout the seventeenth century. The motifs discussed in the section “Sixteenth-Century Motifs of Enduring Popularity” remained popular over a relatively long period of time in China and so continued to appear on freshly made porcelains imported into Iran over the span of the Safavid period. It is not surprising, then, to find that these motifs are roughly equally popular on Safavid pottery in the first half and the second half of the seventeenth century, although the dates of the models used may have differed.

The replication of Chinese imports began in earnest during the reign of Shah Abbas I. While contemporary imports inspired many copies, potters showed renewed interest in the earliest porcelains, which they could access in private collections. We do not know why they reached back to Yuan and early Ming models, such as the cloud-point central medallion or the lotus bouquet, as well as looking to contemporary porcelains. Even if potters were not aware of the date of the early models, these models clearly did not represent the latest fashion. Perhaps the choice was made by the patron, who may have been knowledgeable about the antique status of these dishes, or may have found the aesthetics particularly appealing. The Safavid potters’ infatuation with early Chinese blue-and-white was limited to Phase I, the first decades of the seventeenth century. However, their fine copies of the Yuan and early Ming Chinese designs, particularly the magnificent renditions made by the Kirman “boutique” workshop, continued to inspire other Safavid potters throughout the century.

The new style of Ming porcelain known as “Kraak” exerted by far the greatest influence on

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1 See below, p. 152.