Abu Zayd Kashani is the most famous potter of medieval Iran: he worked in the two most expensive overglaze techniques, enamel (Persian mināʾi) and luster, and he left behind the greatest number of signed works. The appearance, acquisition, and exhibition of a hitherto-unknown but complete bowl signed by him (figs. 1–2) provide good reasons to return to his work. The objects he made, especially the long inscriptions he transcribed on them, allow us to compile a short biography, which in turn can help us to reassess the status and role of craftsmen in the Islamic lands during the medieval period and to understand how and why these works were appreciated in their own time. The objects themselves are an important source for such a study, as contemporary chronicles, typically written by the ulema, do not usually mention craftsmen. Such an undertaking shows what a multitalented scholar Abu Zayd was at the turn of the thirteenth century and is therefore a fitting tribute to Oleg Grabar, who has often investigated the meaning of inscriptions and decoration on the ceramics and other portable arts made in Iran and elsewhere in medieval Islamic times.

The work by Abu Zayd, newly brought to light and acquired by the David Collection in Copenhagen, is a medium-sized bowl with straight, flaring sides joined to a high foot ring at a sharp angle. The vessel is about twice as wide (diameter: 19.7 cm) as it is tall (height: 9.8 cm). Like most ceramics of the period, it is made of stoneware, in this case covered with an opaque white glaze and then painted over the glaze with coppery brown luster. The design on the interior of the well (fig. 1) shows a large medallion with two confronted figures in reserve: a male on the viewer’s right, identifiable by the cap on his head and the boot on his flexed leg, and a female on the viewer’s left, identifiable by her longer braids and headdress. Both wear loosely fitting robes decorated with foliate scrolls embellished with myriad tiny spirals that virtually melt into the background of vines with large dotted

Fig. 1. Interior of a luster bowl dated Jumada II 600 (February–March 1204). David Collection, Copenhagen, 45/2001. (Photo: courtesy of the David Collection)

Fig. 2. Exterior of a luster bowl dated Jumada II 600 (February–March 1204). David Collection, Copenhagen, 45/2001. (Photo: courtesy of the David Collection)
The earliest signed work by Abu Zayd is an enameled bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, dated 4 Muharram 582 (27 March 1186) (fig. 3). The latest is a luster bowl in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague dated 616 (1219–20). But as Oliver Watson has pointed out, the thirty-four years between these dated works do not account for Abu Zayd's full career: the enameled bowl of 1186 is too accomplished to have been a first work, and Abu Zayd must have made earlier objects that we do not know about. Such a long working life may surprise us but is not without parallel in premodern Iranian society: the Safavid painter Riza Abbasi, for example, left signed works that spanned almost half a century, from ca. 1585 to 1634.

The decoration on the newly acquired bowl dated 600 (1204) epitomizes the so-called Kashan style of painting used on luster ceramics during the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. The region around leaves and three flying birds. Two inscriptions ring the interior rim of the bowl. The inner one, painted in luster in a stylized Kufic script, contains a repeating text with blessings. The outer one, scratched in the luster ground, includes Persian poetry followed by the artist's signature in Arabic, saying that Abu Zayd wrote it in his own hand (bi-khaṭṭihī) in Jumada II 600 (February–March 1204).

The exterior of the bowl (fig. 2) has been left undecorated except for several bands. A scalloped one encircles the bowl above the carinated joint between foot and body, with thin arrows painted between the scallops. An epigraphic band encircles the rim. The text scratched through the luster consists of another Persian quatrain followed by a more complete signature of the same potter, Abu Zayd, with the same date, Jumada II 600 (February–March 1204).

The newly acquired bowl thus falls in the middle of Abu Zayd's long working life, which spanned nearly four decades and encompassed both overglaze techniques of luster and enamel (see the appendix at the end of this article for a preliminary list of his works). The earliest signed work by Abu Zayd is an enameled bowl in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, dated 4 Muharram 582 (27 March 1186) (fig. 3). The latest is a luster bowl in the Gemeentemuseum in The Hague dated 616 (1219–20). But as Oliver Watson has pointed out, the thirty-four years between these dated works do not account for Abu Zayd’s full career: the enameled bowl of 1186 is too accomplished to have been a first work, and Abu Zayd must have made earlier objects that we do not know about. Such a long working life may surprise us but is not without parallel in premodern Iranian society: the Safavid painter Riza Abbasi, for example, left signed works that spanned almost half a century, from ca. 1585 to 1634.