POSSIBLE SOURCES FOR SOME MOTIFS OF DECORATION ON ISLAMIC CERAMICS

The interest in Islamic ceramic vessels began about a hundred years ago, and by 1950 the number of ceramics available for study from private and public collections and from excavations had become considerable. Yet conclusive information has hardly advanced since the early studies, or kept pace with the successive amassing of publications.

Notations are always made of measurements and techniques of decoration, and some space is given to enumerating motifs. Motifs, the components of decoration, are comprised of major and subsidiary elements, such as inscriptions, which have only recently begun to be translated; animals, particularly birds and rabbits; vegetables, such as “palmettes” and “split leaves”; human figures, often seated in “conversational” poses and sometimes holding glasses, or equestrians; and Chinese-style lotus, clouds, or phoenixes. What publications for the most part have sought were answers to questions regarding place of origin and date.

Studies seeking dates often deal with vegetals, attempting to find a means of dating by their styles. None of these searches have proved wholly successful, mainly for lack of dated examples which would allow a progression of style to be constructed. A further impediment is the lack of a precise vocabulary of vegetals, the actual situation being that there are more variations on a form than exact repetitions of a single standardized form, so that a writer’s designation of a vegetal, such as a palmette, tends to be a personal decision, with the resulting interpretations not always convincing.

While much space has been given to the description of decoration, i.e., the motifs and their compositional arrangement, attention has increasingly been given to its style. In most of these studies the focus is on the subsidiary elements rather than the central motif. Attempts to interpret the meaning of motifs are rare, and conclusions as to their meanings are even rarer.

One of the few instances of an inquiry into the meaning of a motif was an article first published by Diaxonov in 1939; he was able to relate images on a cup, painted in the mina’i technique, to an episode in the Shahnama frequently illustrated in manuscripts dating from the fourteenth century onwards. This same episode is also portrayed on tiles which, like the cup, have been dated to the thirteenth century, presumably for their relationship in subject matter, figural style, and technique of decoration to dated mina’i ware, but as yet there has not been an inquiry as to why episodes from the Shahnama were used on ceramic vessels and revetments.

Another form of inquiry is represented by a critical search in 1961 to find the meaning of images with inscriptions on a luster plate dated 607 A.H. The plate had been known for a long time. In 1924 Ernst Kühnel had interpreted the images as representing a scene from a Nizami poem in which Khusrav discovers Shirin bathing, but in 1951 when the plate was exhibited in London, it was noticed that the scene did not correspond to the description in Nizami’s poem. The 1961 study was most thorough. It was found that the inscription on the plate neither described the scene nor gave a direct clue to the meaning of the images. Nor was there any clue to the images in mythological or folkloric literature. A final source presented indicated that all of the elements of the scene corresponded to allegories common in Sufi writings, and as all other inquiries were found wanting, it is difficult to understand why this last interpretation was finally minimized by the writers, who ended their study inconclusively.

Another kind of inquiry occurs in more general discussions on the nature of Islamic art. In 1974, for example, Richard Ettinghausen dealt with characteristics that make decorative arts Islamic. His main thesis was that it is important to determine when the motifs common to Islamic decoration — florals, geometric patterns, inscriptions, animals, and humans — appear and when they do not appear. He found that old signs reappear, especially the ones from ancient myths and “magical” concepts which center on cosmic lore and the power of natural and supernatural forces, the universal powers still to be reckoned with. He saw that motifs of this kind reappear particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, in both the decorative arts and in Sufi writings of those times. He noted that these Sufi writings recognized
two levels of existence, physical and metaphysical, that there was a higher level or insight beyond outer form. He concluded that viewed from this perspective the motifs of decoration may be rendered with meanings to be seen on many levels, that is, they may have a meaning beyond their immediate forms.

A similar discussion was undertaken by Oleg Grabar in more than one instance. Both Grabar and Ettinghausen proposed that it was likely that motifs had meanings, and both expected that their meanings would be found in a cultural context. Still, they continued to treat motifs as ornamental, simply on the grounds that no information as to their meanings had yet come forward.

The present undertaking is a search into cultural contexts for some motifs found on sherds I collected in Syria (with the kind permission of the Syrian Department of Antiquities and the generosity of a Fulbright grant) from a number of sites which were important during the time of Nur al-Din. The motifs on these sherds are not unknown; some examples related to those presented here have already been published, but their meanings have not been sought.

One of these motifs is in relief on an unglazed sherd found at Kal'at Najn (fig. 1). It is probably a fragment from a band of decoration on the shoulder of a bottle. The fragment shows a large bird standing on the back of a smaller bird and bending down to bite the smaller bird's chest, while the smaller bird bites the neck of the larger bird. This composition fills a round medallion.

Four related examples are known. (1) An unglazed sherd with the same birds in relief but with a pierced ground was found earlier in the Danish excavations at Hama, to the west of Kal'at Najn. (2) The same motif appears in relief on an unglazed piece, said to be a lid and found in Syria, but the small bird of the Najn-Hama samples is larger on this piece. (3) A glazed sherd, said to be from Syria, has a pair of birds identical to those from Kal'at Najn, with differences only in the background and technique of decoration — the birds are in a circle in the center of a bowl; the remaining ground is filled with stylized vegetals encircled by their stems; and the decoration, under a clear transparent glaze, consists of a black line drawing and blue background. The birds and vegetals are white, with spots of red within the vegetals. (4) Finally, a glazed sherd, said to be from Egypt, has a pair of birds in reserve on a lustered ground in the center of a very small bowl, in a style very different from those from Syria: a large somewhat stylized bird, with a hawk-like head turned to the right, stands erectly on the back of a realistically rendered, long-beaked bird.

Birds composed in this way are not uncommon. They illustrate the description of the pelican, the initial source for which is the Physiologus, an early-Christian compilation of information about animals, plants, and stones that represent Christian dogma and morals. The author and the origin of the Physiologus are not known; it is thought to have been written before the fourth century either in Egypt or Syria. In the fifth century it was translated into Ethiopian, Armenian, and “old Syrian.” The Syrian edition doubled the number of entries and included sources other than Biblical ones. Arabic translations followed, and by the eleventh century it was used as a school book, widely translated from France to Russia. From the end of the twelfth through the thirteenth century it was incorporated into bestiaries and expanded. In the thirteenth century it was one of the three most popular books (the Apocalypse and the bestiaries were the other two), and it became a source for medieval manuscript illustrations and much of Christian iconography. It was widely read throughout the fourteenth century, and many of its stories remain popular until today.

The story of the pelican is said to be one of the most popular in medieval literature and art. The pelican is described as having a great love for its young. As the young grow, they strike their parents (either mother or father), and the parents retaliate by striking them dead. But they soon regret the act and restore the young to life by shedding their own blood over them. Into this is read compassion and regeneration in a Christian context, symbolizing Christ and the Eucharist.

The common form of illustration for this story in medieval art is the one found on the Kal'at Najn sample.