



OBJECT IN FOCUS

Figural Buffware Ceramics from 10th Century Nishapur

1 BUFFWARE BOWL WITH A FIGURE ON HORSEBACK



A deep, round bowl painted in a vibrant color scheme of black, yellow, and green under transparent glaze, this exceptionally preserved piece of polychrome painted buff-ware pottery and its figural decoration are of a distinctive ceramic type developed in Nishapur during the tenth century. To achieve the lively polychrome effect accomplished on our bowl, a slip-like tin coating was applied to the buff-ware fabric of the pot, after which the polychrome pigments were painted on and fired under a transparent glaze. Emerging from the kilns at Nishapur were new creative and technical possibilities, seen in the confluence of careful, if stylized, draftsmanship with a liberal application of pigment.

The technique of firing slip-pigments under a transparent glaze was initially developed by potters in Iran to imitate the metallic effect produced on luster-painted ceramics in the Iraqi pottery workshops. However, the underglaze polychrome technique developed in Nishapur resulted in an entirely new and virtuosic style of decoration. If the Nishapur potters did not achieve the lustrous finish they had admired in Iraqi luster pottery, innovations in slip-painted wares led towards new decorative and technical inroads, as is well illustrated in our bowl. The black outlines of the form of our rider and his mount are complemented by the purposeful, yet unrestricted application of dappled, metallic slip pigments in yellow and green.

The style of figural decoration that characterizes Nishapur wares is grounded in a cycle of “feasting and fighting” themes. The figure on horseback that appears on our bowl lends itself more readily to the “fighting” or martial category of decoration. More broadly, he fits into the re-emergent iconography of the Iranian epic during this period¹. Holding a short sword in his left hand and the reins of his horse in his right, our hero and his horse prance bravely onwards to the left. The dappled body of the horse is adorned with an elegant saddle and trappings; the elegant curves of his neck and front foot harmoniously echo the rounded form of the bowl.

A bowl of nearly identical size and form can be found in the Sarikhani Collection (c.f. Fig. 1., *Bowl, Earthenware painted in black, yellow and green, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, inv. I.CE.2122*). This bowl shape is found only in Nishapur buff wares; it does not appear in contemporary Sāmānid slipware pottery production.²

Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century

7.3 x 18.2 cm (7 1/8in) diameter; Earthenware painted in black slip and yellow and green pigments under a transparent glaze. Exceptional condition, with some neatly re-attached breaks and minor areas of repainting where modern repairs were made. The original vibrant colors and transparent glaze are in remarkable condition.

Provenance

Harvey B. Plotnick Collection, Chicago, Sold at Sotheby's, January 2012

Exhibited/Publication

Perpetual Glory, Medieval Islamic Ceramics from The Harvey B. Plotnick Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2007.

Exh. Cat., Oya Pancaroğlu, Perpetual Glory, Medieval Islamic Ceramics from The Harvey B. Plotnick Collection, The Art Institute of Chicago, 2007, pp.80-81, no.39.



Fig 1.
Bowl, Earthenware painted in black, yellow and green, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, inv. I.CE.2122. From Oliver Watson, *Ceramics of Iran*.

1 Pancaroğlu, 82.
2 Watson, no. 68, p. 130-31.

2 BUFFWARE BOWL WITH LEOPARD RIDING A HORSE



A cheetah rides jauntily on the back of a horse in the center of this charming polychrome buff ware bowl from tenth century Nishapur. This shallow, rounded bowl with short foot belongs to a group of ceramics from the Nishapur workshops known as “buff wares.” These unique polychrome underglaze-painted wares were thrown using a distinctive buff-colored clay fabric body. The fine, buff-colored clay fabric of the bowls differentiates them from the reddish clay fabric used for contemporaneous Nishapur ceramic production.

Buff wares are unique among the pottery production of Sāmānid Nishapur, which was an incredibly diverse hub of ceramics production along the Silk Road. The Sāmānids have long been renowned for the production of beautiful but incredibly spare and heavily slipped black-on-white epigraphic wares over a reddish clay fabric. The polychrome buff wares, on the other hand, feature dynamic and fantastical figuration in vibrant color schemes, typically decorated in a combination of black (manganese purple slip), yellow, and green pigments. The outburst of figuration on buff ware bowls like ours—featuring fantastical, esoteric, princely imagery—stands in stark contrast to the more restrained aesthetic otherwise associated with early medieval Islamic pottery.

**Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century**

6 cm x 20.4 cm (8 in) diameter; Earthenware, painted in black slip, yellow and green pigment under transparent glaze. Condition: Excellent overall condition; breaks carefully re-attached in modern conservation; small area to upper right of bowl near border has been lost and replaced in conservation. Original pigments and glaze remain bright and vibrant.

Provenance

Collection of H. K. Monif
Collection of Edward Binney III (1925-1986)
Sold at Sotheby's, 1982

Exhibited/Publication

Islamic Art from the collection of Edwin Binney III,
Travelling Exhibition, Smithsonian Institute, Washington
D.C., 1966-68.



Fig 1. (above)
Figural Bowl, Nishapur,
Iran, 10th century. The
Cleveland Museum of Art,
inv. 1959.249.

Fig 2. (below)
Fragment of bowl with
cheetah riding a horse,
Nishapur, 10th century.
Published by Charles
Wilkinson.



The figures of horse and cheetah on our bowl are depicted in profile and painted in black slip against an opaque white tin-slip ground. Dabs of yellow pigment highlight the ornaments on the body of the horse, while green, yellow, and black are used to render the spotted body of the cheetah. The uplifted front paw of the cheetah rests on the mane of the horse, as if imitating a human rider holding a horse's reins. The notable absence of a human rider adds to the fantastical quality of the scene (c.f. Fig. 1., *Figural Bowl, Nishapur, Iran, 10th century. The Cleveland Museum of Art, inv. 1959.249; Fig. 2., Fragment of bowl with cheetah riding a horse, Nishapur, 10th century. Published by Charles Wilkinson, Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period, New York, 1973, p 53, pl. 86a).*

This compelling image most likely refers to ancient Sasanian and epic Iranian traditions of the hunt, wherein cheetahs were trained from birth to hunt and ride on the backs of horses with a human companion. The hunt was an elaborate and festive occasion that might include hundreds if not thousands of horses in procession and outfitted in solid gold trappings, not unlike those rendered in yellow pigment decorating the body of our horse. Thus, despite the lack of human rider, the image is not entirely a flight of fancy. The image of a trained cheetah riding a horse into the hunt fits neatly into the epic Persian narrative cycle of “hunting and feasting” that dominates the iconography found on buff ware ceramics, and hearkens back to pre-Islamic Persian literary and pictorial modes (c.f. Fig. 3., *The “hunter” bowl, Nishapur, 10th century. Tehran Museum of Art. Published in Dorothy G. Shepherd, Bacchantes in Islam.*).

Our two central figures are surrounded by stylized vegetal decoration and pseudo-Kufic motifs that might initially appear to the Western eye as cartoon-like letter “L’s” filled in with yellow pigment. The border features a band of white and yellow-ornamented split palmettes on a black slip ground, while the everted rim of the bowl is decorated with alternating floral and chevron motifs in yellow and green. The exterior of the bowl features panels of chevrons interspersed with radiating lines. Collection labels dating to the beginning of the 20th century remain on the base of the bowl.



Fig 3. (above)
The “hunter” bowl,
Nishapur, 10th century.
Tehran Museum of Art.
Published in Dorothy G.
Shepherd.

Fig 4. (below)
Bowl decorated with a
leopard. Nishapur, 10th
century. Israel Museum,
Jerusalem



3 BUFFWARE BOWL WITH IBEX AND BIRDS



A black, slip-painted ibex stands against a bold yellow ground at the center of this Nishapur bowl. Our ibex is part of a group of stylized figures typically found on this kind of polychrome buffware, where birds, beasts, and humans tumble and prance riotously through the rounded field of these vibrant vessels. Here, the lone ibex is accompanied by truncated calligraphic motifs, one of which may be intended to read “*barakah*” or “*blessing*.” (c.f. Fig. 2., *Bowl with gazelle and bird*, Cat.H.3., Oliver Watson, *Ceramics from Islamic Lands, The Al-Sabah Collection*).

A ring of birds encircle the central roundel and ibex below a band of pseudo-calligraphy near the rim of the bowl. The protruding plumage and bodies of the birds form a hexagonal, star-like border around the central motif. The use of the birds’ forms to enhance and inform the composition of the ornamental register of the bowl suggests a high caliber of draftsmanship. Despite the liveliness of the decoration and the ground almost entirely filled with motifs, the potter must have taken pains in planning this coherent and elegant composition. The careful application of pigment on this bowl is also notable; green is added sparingly yet advantageously to the plumage of alternating birds, and to the calligraphic motifs adjacent to the ibex. Otherwise, the bowl is characterized by the strong contrast between the black slip painting and the yellow pigment that fills the rest of the field.

Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century

8.8 x 22.2 cm (8 ¼ in) diameter; Earthenware, underglaze painted with black slip, green and yellow pigments. Good overall condition; several carefully re-attached breaks throughout.

Provenance

Sold at Christie’s, 9 October 2015
Private Collection in the UK, from 1962
Sold at Sotheby’s, 20 March 1962



There is a sense of restraint in the application of pigment on this bowl that is not seen in all Nishapur wares, which are notorious for their punchy figuration and dramatic color combinations. Motifs and pigments may often seem to have been added by the potter to fill the field rather than to create a coherent scene (c.f. Fig. 1., *Bowl with horseman*, Nishapur, 10th century. Sarikhani Collection, inv. I.CE.2091). These wares and their rousing decoration caused quite a stir when they were first unearthed in the archaeological discoveries of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the curator Charles Wilkinson in the 1930s. The excitement over this never before seen figurative style in Islamic ceramics was tempered by criticism of its allegedly folksy style, though over the decades a favorable view of Nishapur wares has largely won out over its detractors.¹



Fig 1. (above)
Bowl with horseman,
Nishapur, 10th century.
Sarikhani Collection, inv.
I.CE.2091

1 Lane, 18-19.

Today, the vibrant hunting, feasting, and fighting scenes that appear on these bowls tend to be associated with a revival of the Iranian epic in the medieval period, as the Persian literary tradition was experiencing a new flourishing at the Sāmānid courts. Some of the more festive scenes have been associated with the Persian new year festival of Nowruz . The broad appeal of these rampantly figurative, festive scenes makes it difficult to identify a specific market for this kind of ware. Several bowls with Christian motifs, such as the bifurcated, tri-lobed cross, appear on wares excavated from Nishapur. It has been suggested that it was in fact Christian potters who made up the pottery workshops at Nishapur. There is also evidence of the export of the so-called “inanimate” style of Nishapur polychrome wares based in part on the presence of two vessels the Museum für Islamische Kunst, Berlin.² Ultimately, there is no way to know exactly why or for whom these bowls were made; but it is clear that the style appealed to many.



Fig 3. (above)
Bowl with ibex, Nishapur,
10th century. The Nasser
D. Khalili Collection,
cat. 61.

Fig 2. (below)
Bowl with gazelle and
bird, Nishapur, 10th
century. The Al-Sabah
Collection, Cat.H.3.



4 BUFFWARE BOWL WITH A HORSE OUTFITTED FOR THE HUNT



The interior of this deep, rounded bowl is decorated with the figure of a large, animated horse outlined in black slip and painted with bright yellow pigment against a black ground. Selective detailing with a green metallic slip appears throughout. The background is among the more riotous of the Nishapur polychrome buff ware compositions, with three birds tumbling through the upper half of the composition and an upturned gazelle trampled underfoot (c.f. Fig. 1., *Bowl with horseman, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, cat. no. 70 in O. Watson*). Stylized vegetal motifs fill the remainder of the surface.

The central horse motif is encircled by a framing band of abstracted, foliated Kufic. This inscriptional element is likely meant to recall the repetition of the word “*barakah*” or blessing (c.f. Fig. 5., *Bowl with Cheetah Riding a Horse, Nishapur, 10th c., The Nasser D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art, cat. no. 60 in E. Grube*). The exterior is decorated with alternating leaf motifs, a conventional feature of polychrome buff ware from tenth century Nishapur.

The central figure of the horse sports decorative fittings with dangling ornaments, highlighted with dabs of green pigment. Depicted in left-facing profile, the horse prances through the scene, outfitted as if in preparation for the hunt (c.f. Fig. 2., *Bowl with hunter riding off with falcon, Nishapur, 10th century, The David Collection, inv. 251968*).



Despite his elaborate trappings, our horse is depicted without a human rider. This absence places our bowl among a group of Nishapur buff wares on which a central animal figure dominates the decoration. Other examples of these wares include an Asian humped cow in the Al-Sabah Collection; a horse being ridden by a feline in the Khalili Collection; and a marvelous bird in the al-Sabah Collection (c.f. Fig. 3., *Bowl with Asian humped cow, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, cat. no. 69 in O. Watson*; Fig. 5., *Bowl with feline riding a horse, Nishapur, 10th century, Khalili Collection, cat. no. 60 in E. Grube*; Fig. 4., *Bowl with bird, Nishapur, 10th century, al-Sabah Collection, Cat.H.5 in O. Watson*).

Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century

7 cm x 22 cm (8 2/3 in) diameter; Earthenware, underglaze painted with black slip, green and yellow pigments. Good overall condition; transparent glaze somewhat abraded, as is typical of these wares. Yellow and black pigments remain vibrant. Minor breaks have been neatly re-attached in modern conservation.

Provenance
Collection Jacques Matossian, 1960



Fig 1. (above)
Bowl with horseman,
Nishapur, 10th century,
Sarikhani Collection, cat.
no. 70.

Fig 2. (below)
Bowl with hunter riding
off with falcon, Nishapur,
10th century. The David
Collection, inv. 251968.



The lively, animal – centric scenes on Nishapur wares such as this one tend to be as animated as their human-centric counterparts. Here, the large and fierce eye of the horse, with pupil connected to the upper eyelid, and an extended parallel line above the eye to indicate the brow, is consistent with depictions of faces of this type—on both human and horse (c.f. Fig. 5., *Bowl with feline riding horse, Nishapur, 10th century, Khalili Collection no. 57 & 58 in Grube*). The open mouth of the horse and groomed mane add to the martial mood of the scene; the horse seems to be rearing to enter upon a high stakes activity, whether battle or the hunt.

The depiction of the horse on our bowl conforms with the hunting and fighting themes that characterize a large portion of Nishapur wares of this type, a counterbalance to the more jovial “feasting” scenes that make up the rest of the corpus.¹ It has been convincingly argued that the dual themes of “feasting and fighting” reflect a revival of the epic mode in Iranian literary production of the 10th century.² The conventions of this epic mode often require a hero and his steed. Though this horse is missing its hero, it is not hard to imagine it featuring in a scene from the Iranian epic canon.

This striking bowl features a combination of conventional motifs – horse, bird, vegetal ornament, Kufic pseudo-inscription – that the potters of tenth century Nishapur employed to great effect. These simple motifs were combined in a variety of ways, such that there is a recognizable cycle of images that can be found on these buff ware bowls. Despite the conventional use of these motifs, the decoration of these figurative wares never fails to surprise and amuse with their novelty and dynamism. Our lively horse is no exception.



Fig 3. (above)
Bowl with Asian humped cow, Nishapur, 10th century. Sarikhani Collection, no. 69.



Fig 4. (above)
Bowl with bird, Nishapur, 10th century. The Al-Sabah Collection, Cat.H.5 in Watson.



Fig 5. (below)
Bowl with feline riding horse, Nishapur, 10th century, Khalili Collection, no. 57 in Grube.



1 Pancaroğlu, 9-10.
2 Ibid.

5 BUFFWARE BOWL WITH FIGURE ON HORSEBACK



This large, polychrome buff-ware bowl features a mounted rider and horse in profile. Adhering to the stylistic tendencies of the distinctive buff-ware pottery that was produced in Nishapur during the tenth century, the composition is drafted in black slip on a vibrant yellow ground. The innovative buffwares emerging from the workshops at this time are characterized by their lively figural decoration, never before seen gracing Islamic ceramics to such an extent. The characteristic yellow, green and black metallic slip pigments, fired under a transparent glaze, also distinguish these wares from other Nishapur and Sāmānid ceramic wares.

Holding a battle axe in one hand and the reins of his horse in the other, our horseman fits into the martial theme that characterizes many Nishapur bowls. Typically, the lively figuration found on these bowls has either to do with “feasting” or “fighting.” In this case, both the figure of the horseman and his mount are decked out in elaborate textiles. Decorative sections of arabesques along the body of the horse, the dotted saddlebag, and the fields of crosses ornamenting the armored tunic of the figure act as a pictorial shorthand for the luxurious textiles and battle-ware sported by both horse and rider.

Carefully applied splashes of green and yellow pigment along the bodies of both horse and rider add to the sense of lively patterned decoration drafted by the detailing in black slip. Various ornamental forms fill the interstitial space around horse and rider, including abstracted vegetal and poly-lobed jeweled forms. A slightly upturned gazelle seems to float in space beneath the horse and rider. An abstracted inscription appears just to the left of the horse. Rather than suggesting a coherent scene of some sort, the scholarship suggests that these decorative elements are diagnostic of the Nishapur style, where generic elements were added largely to fill in the space of the composition.

The stern and slightly narrowed eyes of both horse and rider pleasingly mirror one another, adding to the martial mood of the scene. Another close example of the horse and rider motif, commonly found on Nishapur buff ware, can be found in the Sarikhani Collection in Oxfordshire (c.f. Fig. 1., Bowl, Earthenware painted in black, yellow and green, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, inv. I.CE.2122).



1 Pancaroğlu, 9-10.

Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century

8.66 x 22 cm (8 5/8 in) diameter; earthenware painted in black slip and yellow and green pigment under a transparent glaze. Good overall condition, with neatly re-attached breaks and areas of repainting around repairs. The transparent glaze has dulled slightly throughout, though the vibrant polychrome slip remains intact beneath the glaze. Small chips on the rim reveal the buff ware fabric of the bowl.

Provenance
Private Collection, UK



Fig 1. (above)
Bowl, Earthenware painted in black, yellow and green, Nishapur, 10th century, Sarikhani Collection, inv. I.CE.2122 in Watson.

6 BOWL WITH A FESTIVE PERFORMER OR MYTHIC FIGURE



This remarkable Nishapur bowl features a dynamic central figure – likely a festive dancer or mythic character – who wields two large stem-like objects. At first glance, the two wands might appear to be weapons, or perhaps musical instruments. However, close comparison with other Nishapur bowls of this type suggests that they are floral stems, a common motif found in the arts of Persia found on buffware bowls of this distinctive period of ceramic production.

A bowl with a seated woman in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston and a bowl with seated male figure in the Khalili Collection offer compelling comparisons: the figures both grasp a floral stem in one hand. In the bowl with the seated woman, a vegetal motif near her drinking cup closely resembles the stems that appear on our bowl (c.f. Fig. 2., *Bowl with seated male figure holding floral stem and wine cup, Nishapur, 10th century, Khalili Collection cat. no. 57 in E. Grube; Fig. 5., Bowl with a seated woman, Nishapur, 9th-10th century. MFA Boston, inv. 57.683*).¹ These floral sprays seem to be associated with a documented festive cycle of dancers and wine-drinkers.

Our emotive figure belongs to the group of figural, polychrome Nishapur buff ware ceramics that are associated with the Iranian “feasting” tradition. These wares often feature figures holding drinking vessels or wine cups (c.f. Fig. 2., *Bowl with seated male figure holding floral stem and wine cup, Nishapur, 10th century, Khalili Collection cat. no. 57 in E. Grube*). Painted in a black-on-white silhouette against a dramatic black slip ground, our musician or dancer sports a pair of festive, pointed slippers and an elaborately decorated, belted tunic filled in with green and yellow pigments. He is outfitted to entertain.



Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century

9 x 22 cm diameter; Earthenware, underglaze painted with black slip, green and yellow pigments. Transparent glaze somewhat abraded, as is typical of these wares. Yellow, green and black pigments remain vibrant. Breaks neatly re-attached in modern conservation.

Provenance

Collection Xavier Guerrand-Hermes



Fig 1. (above)
Bowl with four seated figures; three holding floral stems, Nishapur, 10th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 65.270.1.

Fig 2. (below)
Bowl with seated male figure holding floral stem and wine cup, Nishapur, 10th century. Khalili Collection cat. no. 57.



¹ Wilkinson, 23.

The dancer is flanked on either side by two peacocks, and surrounded by other abstracted vegetal and calligraphic motifs that emerge from the black ground. This composition bears some resemblance to the heroic “Master of the Animals,” a motif found throughout the art of the Ancient Near East, which shows a human confronted between two beasts (sometimes birds). The figure on our bowl strikes a commanding pose with arms outstretched over two peacocks, one of them upturned. However, the playfulness of the scene and the figures within it diverge from the fearsomeness typical of depictions of the Master of the Animals. Though it seems more likely that our figure adheres to the festive themes found on Nishapur polychrome buff wares, it is possible that he retains some mythic or heroic associations. Ultimately, it is impossible to know exactly who our figure is.

The central field of the bowl is encircled by a repeating, truncated Kufic pseudo-inscription that may be meant to suggest a repeating inscription reading “*barakah*” or “blessing.”² Stylized vegetal ornaments characterize the rest of the decorative program. These ornamental elements are treated carefully with substantial swabs of yellow and quick dabs of green pigment. Slight wear to the glaze and surface of the bowl, commensurate with its age and typical of ceramics of this type, has revealed the manganese purple pigment that forms part of the black slip ground. This combination of colors is typical of Nishapur buff wares, if they are combined here to particularly pleasing effect.

This bowl is a particularly attractive example of the dynamic “animate” figural wares emerging from Nishapur in the tenth century. The quality of draftsmanship is thus worth further remark. Of note is the elegant, elongated shape of the eye and brow within an otherwise subtly drawn, almost demure face; the evocation of a festive hairstyle with three dots of comingling green and yellow pigment, perhaps suggesting a scarf knotted through the hair; and the voluminous quality of the dress and shoes, with a single downward swooping arabesque constituting the decoration of the green and yellow tunic. Together, these elements create an evocative and carefully balanced image of an otherwise generic, festive character. Unlike some of the more frenetic examples of decoration on polychrome buff wares, our bowl is characterized by a lively yet subtle composition. The design adheres to a sense of order and symmetry, while the placement of each element of the composition is purposeful.

This sensibility is matched only in the most remarkable examples of Nishapur polychrome buff ware, such as the dancer or mythic figure in the al-Sabah Collection (c.f. Fig. 4., *Bowl with dancer or mythic character, holding a wand or floral spray, The Al-Sabah Collection, Cat H.1*). The figure decorating this bowl holds a similarly ambiguous floral wand or instrument in his left hand; his arms are outstretched; and he wears a comparable long, belted tunic. This figure is characterized by the same buoyancy and expressiveness as the slightly more demure, yet equally dynamic, figure on our bowl. Our festive, performing – perhaps mythic – figure is among the most sympathetic of the Nishapur ceramics production of the tenth century.



Fig 3. (above)
Bowl with Masked Dancing Figure holding floral stem, Harvard Art Museums, inv. 2002.50.49.



Fig 4. (above)
Bowl with dancer or mythic character, holding a wand or floral spray, The Al-Sabah Collection, Cat H.1, Watson.



Fig 5. (below)
Bowl with seated woman, Nishapur, 9th-10th century, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. 57.683.



7 CHALICE FOR THE NESTORIAN CHURCH DECORATED WITH CROSSES AND BIRDS



This polychrome chalice is part of a group of ceramic buffwares that were produced for the Nestorian Christian community in the pottery workshops of Sāmānid Nishapur. The appearance of a group of surviving buffwares with Christological iconography suggests a rising demand for these glazed Nishapur ceramics in the tenth century, resulting in a richly varied production for a variety of consumers. Polychrome buffwares such as this chalice were made for a Christian clientele that was associated with the presence of a Nestorian community in Nishapur, established early as the fifth century.

Unlike many of the Nishapur polychrome buffwares, the decoration of this bowl is found on the exterior, rather than the interior, of the bowl. The Nestorian iconography that fills one large register on the exterior of our chalice consists of alternating cross and peacock motifs. The cross motif used here, with bifurcated arms ending in rounded lobes, is a distinctly Nestorian Christian iconography that appears on other examples of this niche production. Other examples appear alongside Syriac inscriptions, confirming the attribution of the wares to a Nestorian patron (c.f. Fig. 1., *Inkwell with crosses*, Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 38.40.296; Fig. 2., *Nishapur bowl with crosses and Syriac inscription*, C.K. Wilkinson, *Forschungen zur Kunst Asiens*, p.82. fig.4).



**Nishapur, Eastern Iran
10th century**

10.7 cm x 18.4 cm diameter; Earthenware, painted in black slip, yellow and green pigment under transparent glaze. The original transparent glaze and green pigments of the vessel are largely abraded, though trace amounts can be detected, particularly around the rim, and near the head and neck of the peacocks. The original black and yellow body colour remains. Several breaks repaired with staples, since removed, leaving holes that remain visible in some places. Some minor losses visible on exterior.

Provenance

Harvey B. Plotnik Collection, Chicago, Sold at Sotheby's, January 2012
Held by a London dealer, who brought it to the UK and sold it to the Harvey Plotnick Collection Private Collection, UAE, until 2000
Bought in France, 1964-1974

Publications/Exhibitions

Oya Pancaroğlu. *Perpetual Glory: Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnik Collection*, Exh. Cat., Chicago, 2007, no. 41, p. 82.

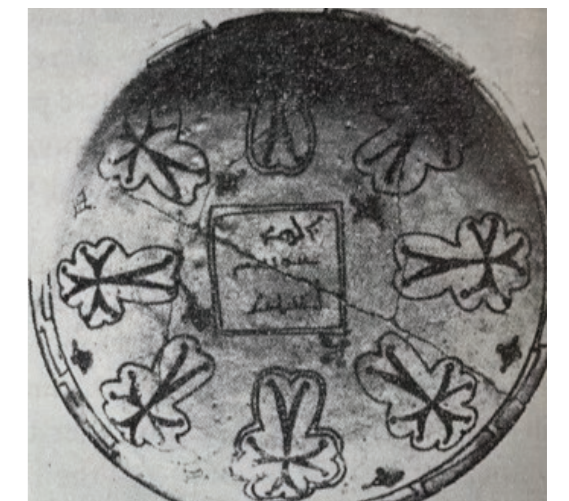
---. "Feasts of Nishapur: Cultural Resonances of Tenth-Century Ceramic Production in Khurasan." In *Harmony: The Norma Jean Calderwood Collection of Islamic Art*, ed. Mary McWilliams. 2013. p. 9-11.



Fig 1. (above)
Inkwell with crosses.
10th century. Nishapur.
Metropolitan Museum of Art, inv. 38.40.296.

Fig 2. (below)
Bowl with Nestorian crosses and Syriac inscription, Nishapur, 10th century. Muze Iran Bastan, Tehran. Published in Wilkinson.

The five peacocks that alternate with the five crosses of the bowl are key to the Christological imagery of this vessel. Depicted in profile, as if marching to the right, these jaunty birds have paradisiacal associations. Their wide, fan-like tails and tri-lobed crests recall the peacock motif of a closely related Nishapur bowl with Syriac inscription in the Harvard Art Museums (c.f. Fig. 6., *Dish with peacock and Syriac inscription*, Calderwood Collection at Harvard Art Museums. Inv. 2002.50.69). The lobed crests of the peacocks are in lively decorative parlance with the decorative lobes of the crosses. A symbol of immortality and eternity in both Christian and Islamic traditions, the inclusion of the peacock can be considered as part of the Christological and possibly Eucharistic program of the chalice.



The Eucharistic function of the chalice is suggested by the distinctive form of the bowl, alongside the iconographic combination of the two Nestorian Christian symbols of cross and peacock. The peacock (associated with eternity and immortality) is depicted in concert with the cross (associated with Christ's suffering and resurrection).¹ The union of these two symbols may reflect elements of Nestorian Christology and the notion of the dual (simultaneously divine and human) natures of Christ. In any case, these symbols certainly reflect the patronage and usage of this chalice in a Nestorian context. The upright form of the bowl, in contrast with the slightly flared walls of most other Nishapur buffwares, also suggests a distinctive function for this unique piece. It is plausible that the chalice was used or displayed in a Eucharistic liturgical context in tenth century Nishapur.

There is a second, identical example of this bowl in the Harvey Plotnick Collection, though only the one described here is published in the *Perpetual Glory* catalogue.



Fig 3. (above)
Bowl with bifurcated
cross, Nishapur, 10th
century. Bezael Museum,
Jerusalem. Published in
Wilkinson.

Fig 4. (below)
Bowl with standing figure
and cross motif on sleeve,
Nishapur, 10th century.
Saint Louis Art Museum,
inv. 29:1954.



Fig 5. (left)
Fragment of a bowl with
Nestorian cross, Nishapur,
10th century. Metropolitan
Museum of Art, inv.
40.170.500



Fig 6. (above)
Dish with peacock
and Syriac inscription,
Calderwood Collection
at Harvard Art Museums.
Inv. 2002.50.69.

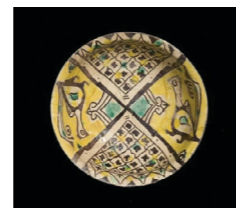


Fig 7. (above)
Bowl with Nestorian
crosses and Syriac
inscription, Nishapur,
10th century. Muze Iran
Bastan, Tehran. Published
in Wilkinson.



Fig 6. (above)
Dish with peacock
and Syriac inscription,
Calderwood Collection
at Harvard Art Museums.
Inv. 2002.50.69.



Literature

Grube, Ernst J. *Cobalt and Lustre. The first centuries of Islamic Pottery*. London: The Nour Foundation, 1994.

Lane, Arthur. *Early Islamic Pottery*. London: Faber & Faber, 1947.

Pancaroglu, Oya. *Perpetual Glory: Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnik Collection*, Exh. Cat., Chicago, 2007, no. 41, p. 82.

---. "Feasts of Nishapur: Cultural Resonances of Tenth-Century Ceramic Production in Khurasan." In *Harmony: The Norma Jean Calderwood Collection of Islamic Art*, ed. Mary McWilliams. 2013.

Shepherd, Dorothy G. "Bacchantes in Islam." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 47, no. 3 (1960).

Watson, Oliver. *Ceramics of Iran, Islamic Pottery from the The Sarikhani Collection*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020.

---. *Ceramics from Islamic Lands. The Al-Sabah Collection*. London: Thames & Hudson, 2004.

Wilkinson, Charles K. *Forschungen zur Kunst Asiens*. Istanbul: Üniversitesi edebiyat fakültesi Türk, 1969.

---. *Nishapur: Pottery of the Early Islamic Period*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973.

