

THE POTTER'S ART IN PERSIA

BY ARTHUR UPHAM POPE

ONE SOURCE of the richness and soundness of Persian art is the numerous, varied, and continued contacts with other and contrasting cultures. On all sides Persia exchanged artistic ideas and methods. Assyria, Egypt, Greece, Byzantium, India, and China all both contributed to and profited by the achievements of Persia, including the accomplishments of her potters. With China there was mutual sympathy and admiration, so that the exchange was particularly cordial and advantageous, especially in painting and faience. In Parthian times Persia instructed China in the use of green and blue glazes, and later received back the gift with interest in the beautiful T'ang splash glazes. Probably powder blue and certainly the reticulated technique, that marvel of craftsmanship whereby an elaborate pierced outer shell is closed over a plain under body, were borrowed by the Ming potters from Persian masters of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. The grains of rice pattern, as Hobson has shown¹ was another much appreciated gift of Persia, as well as a series of animal-headed ewers. On the other hand, the Chinese had already in the ninth century taught the Persians the beauty of simple shapes and monochromes in the T'ing style, and again in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, Chinese ceramic fashions enriched Persian faience with a number of important elements, while in the seventeenth century a crowd of Chinese potters were brought to Persia to expound to adept pupils the art of blue and white. But all that Persia borrowed, even in these fields, was promptly and thoroughly fused with the national style, so that it became a true expression of her own artistic individuality. In general, foreign elements did not linger on in Persian art, but were speedily absorbed or rejected. It could not be otherwise with an art of such dominant personality, in which consistency and integrity counted for so much.

There were at work in Persia none of the sacerdotal and ceremonial motives that played such an important part in the creation of fine vessels in Greece, China, and in medieval Europe. But art

¹In his article on the relation between Chinese and Persian ceramics, in the forthcoming *Survey of Persian Art*, Oxford University Press.



CUP OF PAINTED EARTHENWARE
Rayy, Twelfth Century
(Collection of Mrs. John D. McIlhenny, Philadelphia)

and life were never separated in Persia; there was no distinction between fine and applied, major and minor arts, so that the variety of purposes for which the vessels were created and their intimate dependence on the every-day life may have been a source of artistic integrity. Moreover, the Persian potters succeeded to an ancient heritage of dignified and expressive contours which dated back at least to the polished gray earthenware of the second millenium B.C. Thus the Asterabad finds, which Dr. Wulsin dates around 2000 B.C., yielded many flasks, ewers, and goblets of this kind, some of surprisingly powerful shapes, others of extraordinary elegance, all decisive and robust. And finally, since fine taste, a passion for perfection, and a belief in the naturalness and importance of beauty were taken for granted, artistic achievement of a high order was inevitable.

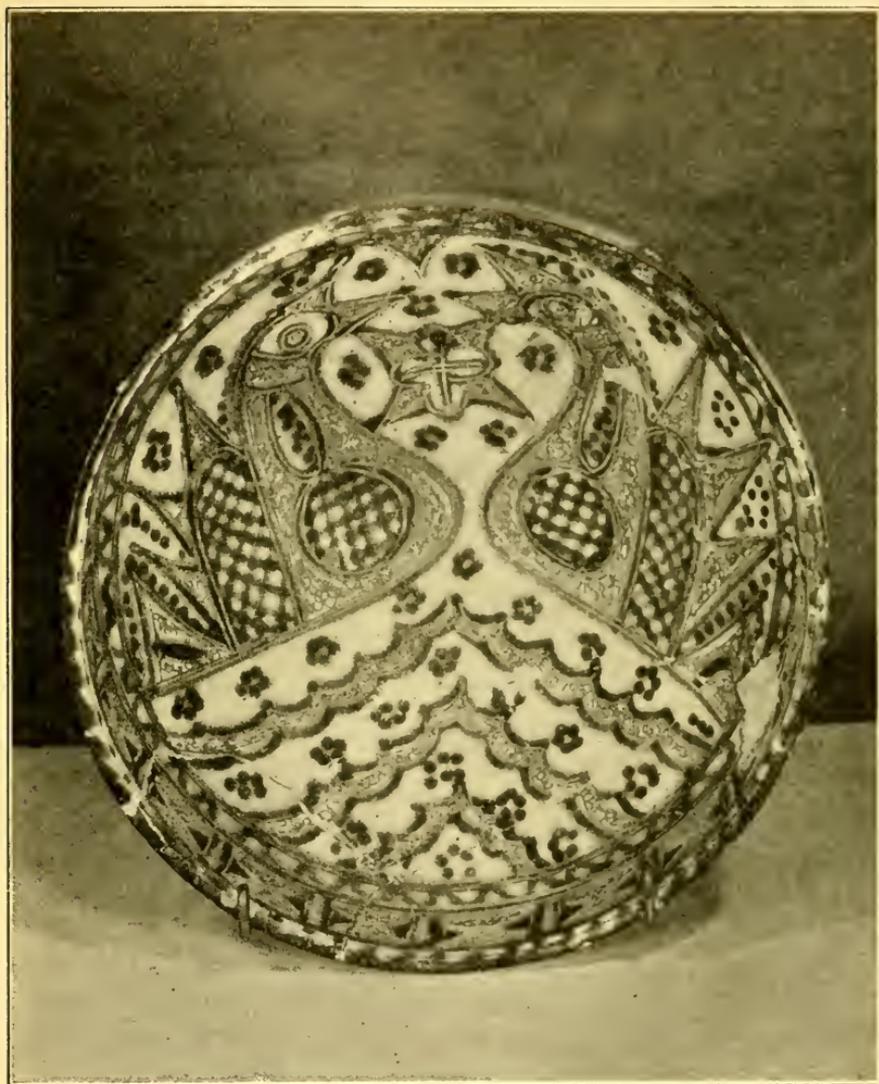
The glazes were numerous both in color and nuance, although there was no such play for variety, meticulous finish, or technical stunts that surprise and delight us in Chinese porcelains. Whether the Persian potters were aware or not of such possibilities, their less pretentious finishes certainly fit the easy, unassuming contours and decoration more perfectly than would any distracting display of virtuosity.

With characteristic Persian reticence, some of the tenth century bowls are quite plain in color and decorated only with shallow incised designs, but these are so finely wrought, so ingeniously varied, with static and moving patterns so perfectly balanced, that it would seem almost impossible to have created such a delightful fantasy out of a mere web of shadows. Other medieval wares, on the contrary, were painted by the leading artists of the day. Here gay cavaliers, enthroned princes, scenes from the *Shah Nameh*, are scattered with an adroit hand in such an easy and casual style that they seem almost by happy chance to have fallen into exactly the correct position and the most engaging rhythms (Page 32). This type was produced especially at Rayy and Saveh. Luster, too, was carried to its highest perfection by the artist potters of Persia, especially of Kashan and Rayy, in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In the well-preserved pieces a richly textured pattern of figures is lit up by a flickering fire of elusive reflections, one of the marvels of the potter's art.

Persian faience is by no means limited to the delicate and evanescent, however. In early Islamic times, particularly in western Persia, we find a series of vessels, mostly bowls and pitchers, in glowing emerald green, or unctuous brown glazes, of robust and sometimes bizarre designs (Page 35). The patterns, which are bold almost to coarseness, are usually reserved against a dark ground. The gleam of the rich glazes, the sheer force and sincerity of the drawing, the dignity and beauty of the ornamental inscriptions, have commended these wares to a large group of connoisseurs who prefer virility to prettiness and who find solid satisfaction in their forthright affirmative character. These and certain other contemporary provincial products of the ninth to the eighteenth centuries, from Garous and Yazkand, in the west, to Amul and Sari in the northwest, for a long while were known by the name "*Guebre*," which means *Fire Worshipper*, on the mistaken theory that since these vessels were ornamented with men and animals, often quite close to the Sasanian tradition, they must be the work of Zoroastrian communities, surviving despite the dominion of Islam. The theory was only a bad guess, as Koranic inscriptions prove.

Still another important ceramic production are the jars big enough to hide one of Ali Baba's thieves, used for wine, oil, water, or millet, but decorated with as much care and affection as if meant only for contemplation and enjoyment. Of lapis, cobalt, or turquoise glaze, or clive or golden luster, or more rarely, in the early periods, covered with delicately streaked glazes of brown and green, these jars were always of dignified, often monumental, form, sometimes with a perfectly smooth surface and quite plain, sometimes with a lightly indicated network of compartments filled with cunningly drawn men, beasts, or birds, or more often with subtly contrasted horizontal zones in which geometric ornaments, a wealth of arabesque or plant motives, running animals or polo games, all in relief, alternate rhythmically. Usually the top is encircled by bands of majestic Kufic inscriptions.

Meanwhile the potter's skill had also been put to the service of the architects. The same brilliant but subtle lustres that were applied to plates and jars were being used also on tiles to surface both exterior and interior walls. In the more massive style part of the design, usually boldly rendered inscriptions in handsome



POTTERY BOWL

Probably from Anul, Tenth-Eleventh Century
(Collection of Mr. and Mrs. Sam A. Lewisohn, New York)

calligraphy, is modeled in relief, and this often is glazed with lapis or turquoise, the luster enriching the background in an intricate pattern of foliate scrolls which functions less as a linear ornament than as a device for giving modulation to the shimmering gold. In a more intimate style the tiles are shaped alternately in stars and crosses that fit together in a firm but varied reticulation, the crosses more simply decorated with conventional motives, the stars usually carrying more elaborate illustrations of animals or birds or even personages. Sometimes in these the gold is suddenly splashed with a thin bright turquoise.

A little later the most remarkable and characteristically Persian adaptation of ceramics to architecture appears, the mosaic faience, each color of tile fired separately at the temperature that assures the utmost vividness, then all cut with unfaltering dexterity into the intricate shapes required by an elaborate floral design. Of all the buildings in Persia covered in this magnificent type of revetment, the Mosque of Gauhar Shad at Mashad must, for beauty of color, be given supreme rank. Built in 1418 at a time when the art of the book was approaching its zenith, it reflects in its ornament the skill and taste of the great illuminators, but in no mincing way. The Persians' love of grandeur, their skill in handling large forms, served them well here, so that although each panel seems inexhaustible in richness, the patterns are all bold and strong. Those of the vaults, which are in green and white or red and white, are colossal in scale, while mouldings, parapets, and all defining lines are broadly emphasized, giving this vision glory, substance, permanence, authority.

In the seventeenth century the repertoire of architectural faience was still further expanded with a kind of polychrome painted tile, illustrative designs with rather large scale figures or, in the mosques, semi-realistic floral inventions, in several colors in a ground usually of yellow, or less often of blue or *café au lait*, or sometimes white. The palaces of Shah Abbas were liberally embellished with these, so that many examples remain. A few, the work of miniaturists of the school of Riza Abbasi, have an elegantly graceful, if somewhat languid charm.

But delightful as these tiles may sometimes be, the great period of the potter's art was definitely passed. Blue and white and cela-

don adapted to the current fashion for things Chinese were produced in quantities and with considerable skill, though even at their best they cannot rival the originals. More successful are the purely national developments, especially a type of polychrome painted wares with figures or flowers easily brushed in with a characteristic non-chalance. This ware, incidentally, has had an odd historical fate, for it was discovered by European connoisseurs in the nineteenth century in quantities in a remote village of the Caucasus so that for some years it was supposed to have been made there and was called Kubachi faience. Now, however, it is known that it reached there merely in the course of trade but was truly Persian, made in large part in the vicinity of Isfahan.

In the eighteenth century Persia was so distracted by war, internal disorder, and poverty that all of her finer arts deteriorated. Yet the skill of the potter is still there, his deftness, his certainty, his traditional knowledge of the medium. With a recovery of her native sense for spirited design, Persia may again take the lead in the ceramic arts.