

## **Examining the Shape and Decorations on Iranian Metal Inkwells (5th-10th Centuries A.H.) Preserved in the Metropolitan Museum**

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### **Introduction**

Inkwells are tools considered in relation to the art of calligraphy. Until now, no study has particularly been done on the metal inkwells of the Metropolitan Museum. Therefore, this study addresses the Iranian metal inkwells, belonging to the 11th-16th centuries AD (5-10 A.H.), in terms of their shape, decorations, and patterns. In the middle centuries, metal inkwells were highly popular and exported to other countries; this fact highlighted their importance and beauty among other Iranian metal works in Islamic era (Shea, 2018, 45). In order to determine the features of these Iranian metal inkwells in terms of shape, decorations, and motifs from the 11th-16th centuries in the Metropolitan Museum, this study first addresses the metalworks of the Seljuk and Safavid eras; then, it identifies and analyzes the common designs and decorations of inkwells in terms of vocabulary, usage, and appearance.

### **Research Method**

This study examined and compared 6 Iranian metal inkwells preserved in the Metropolitan Museum, belonging to the 11th, 12th, 13th, and 16th centuries (5, 6, 7, and 10 A.H.), with and without lids; most of these works belonged to Khorasan region in terms of shape (the type of lid) and decorations. For this purpose, a brief history of the art of metalworking from the 5th to the 10th centuries AH was provided; the inkwell terminology was extracted from reliable encyclopaedias. Then, the samples were examined in terms of shape and composition of decorative surfaces. Decorative motifs of the inkwells were also examined in terms of plant, animal, geometric, constellation, human figures, and calligraphy categories, including the use of floral Kufi or Naskh scripts by providing analytical tables and motif frequency diagrams. Data was collected in the form of library and documentary reviews, and images were collected from the website of the Metropolitan Museum.

### **Research Findings**

This study used 6 samples of decoration, including plant motifs, animal motifs, human motifs, constellations, geometric motifs, and calligraphic inscriptions. Plant decorations were the most common, and geometric motifs and constellations were the least common ones. They made use of a variety of khataei motifs, including round flowers, Shah Abbasid, and leaves along with chiaroscuro or morassae as well as ivy stems and scrolls often leading to animal heads or filling the background with geometric and human elements, constellations, and so on. . Horses, lions, gazelles, rabbits, and wolves were the widely used animal motifs that were placed among geometric frames or within the scroll ivy and arabesques, and in their background.. It was noted that animal motifs were placed in a regular rhythm at certain distances and faces of the inkwells, or they were symmetrical. Geometric motifs included sun and cross (chalipa) motifs and seven circle patterns. Human motifs were depicted in the samples on horseback or in the form of constellation motifs. Constellations were also associated with human and animal motifs due to the conventional

illustration method. Calligraphic inscriptions were used on the lower and upper bands of the inkwell as well as on the cover. Additionally, Kufi and Naskh scripts with prayer phrases for health, dignity, and happiness of the owner of the inkwell were the most common ones. Metal inkwells, used in different periods of Iranian art, indicate the importance of calligraphy in different regions of Iran such as Khorasan and Isfahan. Decorations and motifs, used in the works left from the 12th and 13th centuries AD (Seljuk period), contained mostly plant motifs, despite the flourishing of astronomy in the Seljuk period and by Iranian scientists. In the tradition of carving metal works of the Khorasan School, dense plant motifs, arabesques, decorative ivy in repeated patterns were widely used and filled the space of objects in a balanced, proportionate manner. This tradition was preserved in the 10th century as well, and the application of Iranian Tasheer and painting patterns-- such as the intertwining of plant-animal motifs and the elegance of carving-- was doubled. The decorative motifs of metal containers such as inkwells reflected best the recorded history of religious customs and beliefs while representing religious and ceremonial celebrations as well as hunting and fighting rituals.

### **Conclusion**

Most of the inkwells were baseless, and the division of the decorative space in the inkwells with domed lid was carved on three levels, but the inkwells without a lid or with a flat lid had only one surface for decoration, on which all the elements were arranged. Therefore, the variety and coherence of motifs were presented more in the dome inkwells. The 6th and 7th century (AH) inkwells all had a connecting ring and plate around their body, but the 10th century (AH) inkwells had a connecting ring on the tip of its dome-shaped lid. Results showed that five inkwells from the 5th to 7th centuries were round or had flat lids with a dome in the centre of the lid, embedded on a short vertical base. Their motifs were mostly plant motifs, followed by human and animal motifs, calligraphy decorations, and constellations. Two of these constellations were influenced by the astronomy developed in Khorasan School by Iranian scientists. In the 10th century inkwell, animal motifs and twists of plant motifs were more elegantly and naturalistically drawn, close to the art of Iranian Tasheer. Also, the shape of the inkwell was based on towers and derived from the architectural patterns of a long cylindrical vertical base and a domed lid, symbolizing the sky. In total, plant decorations were the highest in number and geometric motifs (sun, Chalipa, and the seven circle pattern) as well as the constellations were the least common. Horses, lions, gazelles, rabbits, and wolves were widely used animal motifs that spotted among geometric frames or within the scroll ivy and arabesques. Human motifs were depicted on horseback or in the form of constellations. Calligraphic inscriptions were used on the lower and upper bands of the inkwells and on the lid. Kufi and Naskh scripts were the most used motif in decoration of inkwells.

**Keywords:** metalworks, inkwells (Duat), Seljuk, Safavid, Metropolitan Museum.