

## **A Study of Motifs of Metropolitan-Museum Mamluk Metalworks and an Investigation of their Impacts from Neighboring Areas: A Case Study of Brass Box and Basin**

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### **Introduction**

The Islamic world in the 14<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the establishment of a government on the ruins of the Ayyubid state in Egypt, known as the Mamluk Sultanate, which lasted for nearly three centuries. The Mamluk system had a distinct impact on metalworking and other arts. Due to the considerable wealth concentrated in the hands of the Mamluk sultans, they became more prominent patrons of art compared to the local populations. As a result, the metalwork from this era, driven by commissions from sultans and rulers for ceremonies and formal occasions, encompassed various objects with different functions, including ceremonial, religious, and courtly consumption items. Among the themes depicted on these early Mamluk works are the iconographies related to astrology and celestial signs, feasting, hunting, and warfare. The main purpose of this research is to articulate the characteristics of the motifs, concepts, and themes embedded in the Mamluk metalwork preserved in the Metropolitan Museum.

### **Research Method**

According to the stated purpose, the following question arise during the course of this research: What motifs have been utilized in the decorations of Mamluk metalwork preserved in the Metropolitan Museum, and what type of motifs are predominant in the decoration of these works? The research is conducted using a descriptive-analytical method. Data collection has been carried out using library resources. The total number of works in the Metropolitan Museum includes 30 samples, which were purposefully and consciously selected from seven groups of works in the museum. Four works from the seven groups were chosen based on their date of creation. The first group included works with a basin form; the second group contained two items from the boxes in this collection. The works were selected based on their date of creation; the first sample from each group was the oldest, and the second sample was the most recent within the studied timeframe.

### **Research Findings**

The analysis of the decorative motifs in the selected metalworks revealed that these artworks employed a combination of human, animal, plant, calligraphic, and geometric motifs. Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that in the early centuries of the Mamluk period, the prevalent motifs used in metalworks primarily included calligraphic, human, plant, and geometric designs. A tendency to cover the entire surfaces of the artworks with motifs was a characteristic feature of metalworks from this period. The common themes in human motifs often related to

astronomy, courtly life, and festivities. In terms of calligraphy, Kufic script was widely used, while plant and geometric motifs were typically employed to fill borders, backgrounds, medallions, and frames. However, during the middle period, after experiencing a temporary decline due to unfavorable governmental and political conditions, the style of composition and diversity of motifs underwent change, resulting in works that often lacked human motifs. Larger medallions filled with large lotus flowers and their buds; poppies and five-petaled flowers became more prominent. The only animal motif depicted in the works from this period was flying ducks, which were either entwined around the central medallion or represented as decorative borders or symmetrically on the bodies of the pieces which were essential to Mamluk motifs. Calligraphic inscriptions in Naskh and Thuluth scripts gained significant importance during this period, often praising the sultans and wishing for their victory and health. Geometric motifs alongside these designs also held a special place, while plant motifs continued to serve to fill empty spaces in geometric compositions, except for cases where they were used as color accents. The use of specific colors associated with each emir and sultan during this period was particularly significant. The final changes in the decoration of artworks, as noted in the research process, belonged to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. During this period, there was a strong inclination towards a distinctive and highly refined style which was commendable in terms of execution skills and geometric, botanical complexities. High-quality calligraphic inscriptions were completely eliminated, and lines were mostly placed within geometric frames, often indicating the artist's or owner's identity. The use of medallions with rectangular, oval, and square frames as well as the frequent incorporation of polygonal sunburst motifs on the base or the body of the works brought the metalworks of this period to a peak of flourishing.

## Conclusion

The engravings and metalworks of the Mamluk period can initially be regarded as a combination of characteristics of metalworking from neighboring regions, including Iran, Mosul, and the traditions preceding the Mamluks, specifically the engravings from the Ayyubid period. In fact, from the mid to the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, Mamluk metal engravings represented a synthesis of the art from these regions. The forms of the works and the techniques employed continued the traditions of Ayyubid, Iranian, and Mosul metalwork; however, the most significant influence and borrowing can be traced back to Iranian art, particularly from Khorasan. The last period of substantial influence on the motifs of Mamluk metalwork emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The works from this era in Egypt were influenced by the metalwork of neighboring Islamic regions, particularly Iran's western and northwestern areas, coinciding with Timurid metalworking. The use of Timurid manuscripts in Cairo during the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century further highlights the impact of Iranian art on Mamluk motifs (which had also been influenced during the Ilkhanid period). This influence may be attributed to the peace established between Iran and Egypt as well as to the trade and economic relations between Iran, Egypt, and Europe along with the presence of artists such as Mahmoud al-Kurdi. During the Mamluk period, the types of motifs, design forms, and spatial organization of bodies along with intricate arabesque forms and techniques in inlay work, resulted in beautifully and magnificently produced works that garnered admiration from Europeans and resulted in numerous commissions for these works. In the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, it became difficult to distinguish between works produced in Iran, workshops in Cairo and Damascus, Turkey, and European samples whether in terms of motifs, techniques or quality of execution. This convergence resulted from the mutual influences that these regions had on each other over several centuries, leading to a kind of artistic unity.

**Keywords:** metalwork decorations, brass box, brass basin, motifs, Mamluk's art.