
Revisiting the Provenance of Fish-Motif Pottery from the Honolulu Museum of Art Based on Comparative Analysis with Kashan Productions

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Extended Abstract

Introduction

In the study of Islamic pottery in Iran, determining the production centers of ceramics with unspecified origins holds significant importance. During the medieval Islamic centuries, major production centers—such as Ray, Kashan, Saveh, and Sultanabad—each possessed distinct characteristics in their pottery output. However, a number of prominent ceramic samples, attributed broadly to “Iran,” are housed in museums worldwide, with their precise production centers remaining vague. This research focuses on four ceramic pieces from the Honolulu Museum of Art: one underglaze-painted bowl and three luster-decorated tiles, all adorned with fish motifs and dating back to the 13th and 14th centuries CE. The selection of these pieces was based on the presence of the fish motif and the possibility of comparing them with similar works of documented attribution. The primary objective of this study is to answer the question: to which Iranian pottery production center do the selected ceramic pieces in the Honolulu Museum of Art belong?

Research Method

In this research, data were gathered through library studies. The artifacts under examination consisted of four ceramic pieces housed in the Honolulu Museum of Art, which lacked precise provenance information. Due to limited access to the museum’s official database, recourse was made to the sole available source, *Wikimedia Commons*. To facilitate comparative analysis, the researchers collected images and documentation of these pieces, along with similar artifacts of documented attribution from reputable collections and museums. The analyses were conducted with a descriptive and comparative approach, using the “fish motif” as the primary focus for comparison. Based on this, the studied samples were assessed against the works of documented attribution in terms of the execution of the fish motif and other accompanying designs. Furthermore, the period of creation, decorative techniques (including underglaze or overglaze), and glaze colors of these samples were also evaluated within the framework of the analysis. As a direct access to the artifacts for instrumental analysis or archaeological examination was not feasible, a comparative stylistic analysis was employed as the primary method for evaluating the samples.

Research Findings

The research findings indicated that the underglaze-painted bowl from the Honolulu Museum of Art (Row 1, Table) with its turquoise glaze and black motifs, attributed

solely to “Iran,” showed a distinct similarity in the composition of its central area to two similar pieces attributed to Kashan. Furthermore, the form of the fish depicted on this vessel (Honolulu Museum) exhibited greater curvature compared to definitive similar Kashani examples. Considering the approximate contemporaneity of their production (13th century CE), the underglaze technique, glaze color, and central decorative elements, the likelihood that this bowl being manufactured in Kashan workshops was strengthened. Additionally, the luster-decorated tile (Row 2, Table) in the Honolulu Museum, despite some differences in the fish motif compared to a similar Kashani piece, shared a significant resemblance due to the presence of two spotted hares amidst the floral patterns, with another tile explicitly identified as being from Kashan. This commonality in forms and decorative elements increased the probability of the Honolulu Museum tile being produced in Kashan workshops. Continuing this analysis, the fish motif on the second luster-decorated tile (Row 3, Table) from the Honolulu Museum displayed a remarkable likeness to two luster-decorated tiles attributed to Kashan. The direction of the fish’s movement (left to right), the use of curved lines, and the distinctive eye ornamentation (a series of dots and a spiral) in all three tiles supported the hypothesis that this piece was produced in Kashan. Finally, the third luster-decorated tile (Row 4, Table) from the Honolulu Museum also showed a notable similarity to a comparable tile made in Kashan, in terms of the arrangement of visual elements—including a floral motif with branches ending in animal heads and a partial depiction of a fish in a pool with spiral-like mouth and eye features. These similarities rendered the attribution of this tile to Kashan workshops plausible.

Current Location	Common Characteristics	Production Center of Comparable Objects	Date Range	Details of the Fish Motif in Comparable Objects	Images of Comparable Objects	Details of the Fish Motif on the Object Preserved at the Honolulu Museum of Art	Image of the Object Preserved at the Honolulu Museum of Art	Row
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 20.120.32 (<i>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.</i>)	Central Decoration Decorative Technique Date of Production Pottery Form	Kashan	13th century CE					1
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 20.120.43 (<i>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.</i>)	Central Decoration Decorative Technique Date of Production Pottery Form	Kashan	13th century CE					

The British Museum, Accession No. G.232.1-2 (<i>The British Museum, n.d.</i>)	Spotted Rabbit Motifs and Floral Motifs Decorative Technique Pottery Form	Kashan	13th century CE					2
The Louvre Museum, Accession No. OA6319/15 (<i>Musée du Louvre, n.d.</i>)	Fish Motif Decorative Technique Pottery Form	Kashan	13th century CE					3
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 1971.235.4 (<i>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.</i>)	Fish Motif Decorative Technique	Kashan	13th century CE					
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Accession No. 41.165.11 (<i>The Metropolitan Museum of Art, n.d.</i>)	Fish and Floral Motifs Decorative Technique Pottery Form	Kashan	13th–14th centuries CE					4

Conclusion

The studies conducted in this research has indicated that the fish motif is one of the significant decorative elements in Kashan pottery, with ponds containing fish being a distinguishing feature of these ceramics. Given the prevalence of this motif and the considerable resemblance of the decorations on the four investigated artifacts (comprising one underglaze-painted bowl and three luster-decorated tiles) to known Kashani examples from the same period (13th and 14th centuries CE), these works have been aligned with Kashan pottery. Examination of the decorative style, design, and composition of the fish motifs and other elements revealed that all four pieces in the Honolulu Museum of Art shared significant similarities with comparable works produced in Kashan. Therefore, it can be inferred that these four artifacts were created by Kashani artists.

The authors believe that a meticulous examination of decorations and a comparative analysis of samples provide a reliable scientific method for identifying the production location of pottery pieces that lack archaeological findings or are inaccessible for instrumental analysis. This approach can also serve as a foundation for future studies aimed at analyzing ceramic artifacts from other centers in Iran.

Keywords: pottery provenance, comparative analysis, Kashan pottery, fish motif, Honolulu Museum of Art