The Safavid potter at the crossroad of styles

Yolande Crowe

Forthcoming in: Iran and the World in the Safavid Age, 2007

Recent publications such as The Sea Route from Europe to Asia by Harry Holcroft (2000), or Lords of the East by Joan Sutton (1981), a cycle of conferences such as India, Land and Empire in Lisbon (2002) and even the 2002 exhibition on Trading Places: The East India Company and Asia at the British Library, neglect aspects of the trade which took place on the northern shores of the Gulf in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Admittedly it was of less importance than the spice trade and other commercial exchanges in ports of India, south-east and far-eastern Asia, but this is not a sound enough reason for neglecting the supplies and demands of Persia in particular. Even international conferences dealing with the ceramic trade pursued by the East India companies, especially the Dutch VOC (Vereenigde Oost-indische Compagnie) and the English East India Company, have omitted to draw attention to the part played by Persia and the Persian potter in the history of world ceramics. Although occasionally the Cape has been mentioned, it is as if there had been no ceramic production nor port of call along the sea route between far-eastern Asia, India and Europe. And yet the Persian contribution was well documented by Volker as recently as 1954 and three years later by Lane. In his pioneering work Volker presented a list of the transhipments of high-fired wares from the far-east to Asian trading ports including Bandar-Abbas; furthermore he recorded the quantities and approximate shapes of the ceramics. Surprisingly in one very short chapter entitled A Persian interlude, he reports the important fact that while the Chinese imperial kilns of Jingdezhen were closed, for a short time the VOC attempted to replace the missing Chinese production with similar wares produced in Persia. According to Volker’s analysis of the Dutch dagh-registers this period would have started in 1652 and lasted until official production was resumed in the Chinese kilns of Jingdezhen in 1683. It is likely that the Dutch factors while gathering special goat wool called khas in the region of Kirman realised that the area also produced glazed ceramics, most of which were inspired by Chinese export porcelain, especially blue and white wares.

When in 1957 Arthur Lane published his Later Islamic Pottery he set aside two chapters to discuss Safavid ceramics and in the index gathered a number of significant quotations from narratives by contemporary European travellers. This was the first attempt at a classification of late Persian ceramics since up to that time most researchers had concentrated on the earlier

1 Volker T., Porcelain and the Dutch East India Company, as recorded in the Dagh-registers of the Batavia castle, those of Hirado and Deshima and other contemporary papers 1602-1682 (Leiden 1954).
Lane A., Later Islamic pottery (London 1957).
2 Crowe Y., Thèmes et variations du style Transition dans la céramique persane du XVIIe siècle, in La porcelaine chinoise de Transition et ses influences sur la céramique japonaise, proche-orientale et européenne, Musée Ariana, (Genève 1997).
periods. No further work of this importance has been attempted until the *catalogue raisonné* of Safavid blue and white ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum. The Museum has a comprehensive collection of at least a thousand Persian ceramics which was assembled by Richard Murdoch Smith over the years in the 1870s and 1880s.

Arthur Lane proposed a classification of post-Timurid ceramics according to the colours used on different shapes. This method meant that rather than gathering similar shapes together, ceramics were placed in groups painted with blue, red and even green shades as well as monochrome. As a result the overall picture was rather confused. Since most of the collection consists of blue and white wares, a study of shapes seemed to be a more suitable method of classification. All through the Safavid dynasty shapes obviously evolved according to the requirements not only of local buyers but also of European and far-eastern fashions.

In the first place it should be emphasised that the long-lasting influence of Chinese so-called *Kraak* porcelain on Persian blue and white material with few dated pieces from 1615 until 1641, continued well after the fall of the Ming dynasty in 1643, although the production of *Kraak* porcelain in China would have dwindled by that time. With only about ten dated pieces for the second half of the seventeenth century it was at first difficult to catalogue most of the later Safavid production which showed a number of new patterns to the effect that the picture remained confusing. In the catalogue *raisonné* a manageable classification has been suggested for Safavid blue and white ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and in particular for the period covering the two last Safavid reigns, that of Shah Sulayman (1666-94) and that of Shah Sultan Husayn (1694-1722).

During this period of the Safavid dynasty new shapes and motifs appeared which do not relate immediately to the earlier repertoire though *Kraak* panels were still used albeit in a simplified manner. And it is during this period that the influence of European shapes became increasingly apparent. For practical reasons it has been necessary to limit the choice of examples to blue and white pieces of the late seventeenth and early eighteen centuries taken from the Museum collection: a few shapes and two special motifs have been selected for further discussion.

![Plate 1. Posset pot, h. 16 cm, w. 23 cm, English 2002-65, by kind permission of the Ariana Museum, Geneva.](image)

We know that earlier the VOC would have sent out wooden shapes to be copied in China. Then in turn some of these shapes appear to have been copied by the Persian potter, for example the klapmutz or Dutch porringer imitated in *Kraak* wares. Of the shapes selected here from later Persian wares, the posset pot, the eggcup, the candlestick, the small jug and small shoes, all were first devised in western Europe and presumably shipped out to Asia for copying in order to fulfil the requirements of international trade which demanded the reproduction of such intriguing shapes for Asian taste.
When a new European shape for a pourer arrived on the market (Pl. 1), the Persian potter appears to have produced an immediate response to it with three handles instead of the original two. The example from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Pl. 2, 3) is painted in blue and white, and other similar Persian pieces are decorated in lustre on a blue glaze. One example of the latter belongs to the British Museum and another to the David Collection in Copenhagen.

Both are signed by Hatim. An English Delft example from the J.P. Kassebaum collection came through Sotheby’s sale rooms in 1991 (Pl. 4). It has a flat base, a double-spouted puzzle pouring system, and is casually painted with the arms of the Merchants’ Taylors Company including the date of 1674. A more sophisticated shape dated 1700, but casually painted, is illustrated in van Dam’s catalogue of Dutch dated Delftware. This pot stands on three feet and the date is inscribed inside the base ring. The lid has been lost. One cannot help thinking that the Persian potter faced with an example of the double-spouted English pot, had decided not to produce a tricked container as he probably saw no use for it. Interestingly he replaced the second spout with an extra handle for the sake of balance. He could of course the Persian painting is more elegant than the decoration on the European models. The scroll decoration of flattened

---

flowers and buds on long stalks, both on lid and body, reproduces a similar pattern seen on 
Chinese bowls early in the reign of the Qing emperor Kangxi (1662-1722). It also includes a 
similar band of dense panel patterning round its neck. As to the design of the Ariana pot it 
echoes Transitional patterns (Pl. 1) whereas that of the English pot keeps to the vocabulary of 
heraldry. At the crossroad of styles the posset pot à la Persane draws on Europe for its shape 
but on China for its decoration. And in both these aspects, the Persian product is more elegantly 
shaped and painted with the additional use of fine black lines to sharpen the design.

The second group of shapes consists of eggcups, candlesticks and small jugs, all of these forms 
alien to the Persian way of life. There are two eggcups in the Victoria and Albert Museum collec-
tion, 5.5 cm high and 10 cm wide, with saucer and body in one piece (Pls. 5, 6). One has lobed 
rims and bodies with vegetal motifs, the other straight rims and reserve-painted geometric 
patterns. A candlestick, 8 cm high, has also been made in one piece with a zigzag band painted 
inside the saucer rim (Pl. 7). The casual painting of all three pieces contrasts vividly with the 
graceful decoration of the posset pot.

As for the small jug, its eight-faceted walls and slanted rolled rim suggests a metal shape 
perhaps based on an octagonal bottle shape listed in a VOC document⁵. The slightly recessed 
base is also octagonal. A blue and white example from the Godman collection now in the British 
Museum is painted with panels of buds and criss-crossed lozenges, and is dated 1109/1697. In

the Victoria and Albert Museum the average height of its four examples is 16 cm and the
facetted walls may be decorated with single panels filled with hook-shaped leaves, reciprocal
ruffled leaves or luscious flowers. Other decorations take up the space of two panels either with
reserve-painted pairs of birds or daisy-like flowers amidst leaves. One example has no separate
panels and includes a faceless robed figure with a striped bird on either side (Pl. 8). Here again
the brushwork although professional, has been hastily executed without the use of fine black
lines.

V&A 1067b-1876, cat. 531.
2476b-1876, cat. 530.
1067c-1876, cat. 532.

Plate 9.
Five Shoes.

442-1874, cat. 528
443-1874, cat. 529

Plate 10.
One pair of European shoes.
L. 13 cm, 78 046.ab,
by kind permission of the
Museum of the Rhode Island
School of Design, Providence,
USA.

The third group consists of small objects in the shape of a woman’s shoe or slipper. They num-
ber eight in the Victoria and Albert Museum (Pl. 9). Their length varies from 7 cm to 14 cm and
they are, in a similar manner to the small jugs, reserve-painted with overall designs of leaves,
panels of leaves or geometric designs. Arthur Lane in his French Faience suggests wittily that
they were used for drinking champagne and he illustrates three examples, two of which relate
to the production of Nevers in the seventeenth century; one of these shoes has a rather high
heel and pointed toe. A more sophisticated English Delft pair with a back, 12 cm long, once in
the F.L. Dickson collection, displays the date 1695 painted at the top of the tongue. Similar
shapes were also produced in Delft but the earlier examples appear to have originated in
Nevers. The two pairs in the Museum of Art of the Rhode Island School of Design, either French
or Dutch, about 13 cm long, come closer to the Persian slipper with an open heel, a small

---

6 Lane A., French Faience, London 1948, pl. 96, b, c, d.
7 Sotheby’s, London 10 October 1991, no. 10.
pattern on top of the heel and decorated panels reaching to the pointed toe (Pl. 10). One pair has a bracketed top rim similar to the Persian one. Chinese shoes are also known to have been made in different materials, porcelain, cloisonné and tin, but their style is truly Chinese and it is obvious that they belong to the eighteenth century, replicating local tradition in women’s footwear. So the original idea is more likely to be European and the shape may have been used as a trinket, perhaps to be included in a wedding basket. The meaning is not yet clear.

Making a choice among designs from late Safavid blue and white ceramics is a difficult task yet two special designs stand out which recall well known Kangxi patterns from the turn of the century: those are aster flowers and cone shapes represented worldwide in public collections of Chinese export porcelain. Their imitations with occasionally the addition of an Armenian monogram, look rather intriguing in a Persian context yet may help in making the dating more precise.

Plate 11.
Bowl, w. 18.8 cm, h. 8.8 cm, G200 Pl. 240 a,b, Qandahar excavations.

Plate 12.
Aster dish, w. 22.5 cm V&A 2715-1876, cat. 423.

The first design concerns the so-called aster motif. The Chinese aster design appears as a wheel-shape repeat on large and small export dishes; it also repeats attractively on the body of bowls and small pots. Such a regular pattern would obviously appeal to and satisfy the Persian sense of geometry. A number of well-preserved Safavid bowls and dishes with a similar aster decoration were found among the finds of the British excavations of Qandahar in 1974 and 1975 (Pl. 11). At the time these finds were puzzling, and thus began a search for such decoration among late Safavid ceramics before 1738 when the whole site was totally destroyed by

8 I am grateful for Deborah Del Gais’s help at the RISD Museum of Art in Providence, RI, USA.
Nadir Shah. This quest lead to the Victoria and Albert Museum where one dish 22.5cm wide, has a very similar type of decoration with the addition of a central Armenian monogram (Pl. 12). As far as it is known no such writing had ever appeared on earlier ceramics, so that the deciphering of the owner’s name could help to date the dish.

This first monogram with the aster pattern may be read as nazaret. In 1975 Kurdian published the dish as well as two other blue and white ceramics with a different monogram to be discussed later. He related nazaret to one specific person, Nazar, the qalantar of New Julfa who died in 1636. Unfortunately the 1630s are far too early in time to justify the presence of a Qangxi design around this monogram. The Ming dynasty only collapsed in 1643.

On the other hand if nazaret can be understood as a family name rather than that of a specific person, nazaret could be referring to one of several merchant families which had settled in Russia between the time of the first Armenian trade agreements in Moscow of 1667 renewed in 1673, and the fall of the Safavid dynasty; this would then be the Nazaret’eank family. Obviously, the Chinese and subsequent Persian aster designs could not have been devised before regular production at the Chinese imperial factories of Jingdezhen was resumed in 1683. Similar painted dishes have gone through the sale rooms in recent years which suggest the production of a complete dinner service decorated with the same monogram.

European coats of arms had been reproduced by Chinese workshops, not always correctly, since the mid sixteenth century on single bowls, jars and vases, for the use of Portuguese governors and the Jesuit community in China. Yet the same coat of arms was not repeated on series of vessels which suggests that they did not belong to dinner services. The Armenian aster service could then be one of the first Perse de commande even before the eighteenth century standard Chine de commande for the European market. Therefore the nazaret aster dish may have been produced within a time frame of about thirty years, between the late 1680s and the fall of Isfahan to the Afghans in 1722.

A second Armenian monogram could help to narrow further this time span as it appears with the second motif in the shape of a cone. In a similar manner to the original Chinese cone the Persian counterpart is filled with small scrolls and the outline is marked precisely with dots. Four of these cones have been applied to the body of a pot, perhaps a water sprinkler with a broken neck, 11.5 cm high (Pl. 13). This monogram has been painted upside down between two of the cones, possibly because it would be easier to paint it that way round. A similar fragment of a pot but without a monogram, came up for sale at Christie’s on October 10th 1999. It was attributed to Kütahya. Four cones also decorate the body of a ewer almost 23 cm high (Pls. 14, 15). The same monogram for a second time has been painted the right way up on the cup shape of the neck. The shape of the ewer and in particular its everted neck with a vertical band under its flattened rim, recalls the shape of the Iznik ewer in the British Museum dated 1510 and signed in Armenian script by Abraham of Kutahya. Michael Rogers has suggested a European prototype for this type of shape. Two hundred years later the contour of the ewer has acquired a more attractive silhouette.

11 Kevonian K., Marchands arméniens au XVIIe siècle, in Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique 16 (1975), 199-244, note 141, 238-9.
12 Lane A., Later Islamic pottery (London 1957), pl. 24a.
The second monogram appears for the third time on a dish 21 cm wide (Pl. 16) but on this occasion with an incised band of twelve lappets instead of blue painted cones. As the same monogram is painted on three different shapes, this suggests once more the notion of a dinner service. In his article Kurdian also published the above pot and dish and read the name of Sarfraz, a name which he suggested corresponded to that of the son of kalantar Nazar who dies in 1656. Again the date is too early to account for the appearance of the cone pattern on Persian wares and an alternate reading could be that of the name of Safraz. If so, this could be Safraz, the second of four sons of Khwaja Minas’s second marriage. Minas was, like the representative of the Nazaret’eank family, one of the twenty-three leaders of the Armenian community in New Julfa who signed in 1671 the confirmation of the Russian trade agreement of 1667. And this agreement lead in 1689, with a renewal in 1711, to a trade monopoly of the Armenians on Russian soil at the expense of other Oriental merchants.

According to Edmund Herzig the eldest son of Minas, Kahnan, should have inherited the leadership of the family at the death of his father in 1701, but he escaped with more than his fair share drawn up in his father’s will, to the effect that Safraz became the head of the family which meant the head of the family firm. Such a position implied being responsible for a very

13 Kurdian H., op.cit.
large trading concern which was manned by all the male members of a joint family system\textsuperscript{14}. Although the economic situation of Persia had been at a very low ebb since the 1670s the Armenian merchant community through its expertise had managed to keep control of its international network of purchases and credit facilities. No doubt through the growing trade to India and Europe through Russia, the house of Minas was able to survive beyond the siege and the surrender of Isfahan in 1722 to the Afghans by the last effective Safavid ruler Shah Sultan Husayn. Saffraz died the same year as the defeated ruler in 1727. The survival of a few pieces from a dinner service with his monogram points to his social standing in his community; it would have been produced in the early part of the eighteenth century and most likely before the Afghan onslaught. Thus a span of less than twenty years could be allowed for the manufacturing of Paron Saffraz’s service\textsuperscript{15}.

A number of letters dated between from 1706 to 1714, have survived between Catholicos Alexander in Ejmiacin, elected to the Holy See in 1705, and Paron Saffraz and his brothers. One of them written in 1707 to Saffraz by the Catholicos acknowledges \textit{the arrival of a large donation of ceramics by Saffraz to the Holy See}. The Catholicos reports that he has distributed the ceramics to his monks and other clergy visiting the Holy See, giving to each a cup, a saucer (\textit{nalbaki}) and a mug (\textit{tas})\textsuperscript{16}. These gifts were only a small part of the regular and generous donations offered by the merchants of New Julfa to the Holy See. Catholicos Alexander had served earlier in New Julfa and had been unanimously voted to the See of Ejmiacin. Such gifts of ceramics surely indicate that the production of Persian ceramics must have been specially appreciated in the region of Erivan where presumably such vessels could not be produced. There are at least three other examples of Armenian monograms which remain to be analysed. One of them was presented by Dr. A. Jamkotchian at the sixth International Congress of Turkish

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.45\textwidth]{Plate_17}
\caption{Bowl from Erivan.}
\end{figure}

My grateful thanks to Edmund Herzig for providing a number of references.
\textsuperscript{15} This conclusion makes the dating slightly later to that suggested in Crowe Y., \textit{Persia and China: Safavid blue and white ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum} (London 2002), 205.
\textsuperscript{16} The quotation is taken from a personal letter sent by Vazken Ghougassian, for which I am most grateful.
Art in Istanbul in 1991\(^{17}\) (Pl. 17). It was placed in the centre of the well of a bowl with a surrounding pattern similar to that on bowls excavated in Qandahar.

The different locations of kiln sites which produced such ceramics still remain an open question. It should be remembered that the Armenian diocese of New Julfa covered a vast territory with a large number of villages where a variety of trades could have included Armenian workers\(^{18}\). Recently Lisa Golombek has drawn attention to the town of Shah Reza some sixty kilometres south of Isfahan, as a possible centre of ceramic production\(^{19}\). Whatever the answer, European shapes were reproduced, far-eastern patterns were used as decorations and asters and cones, both Qangxi motifs, were not only adopted by the Persian potter but became favourite patterns with European workshops such as Wedgwood as late as 1876. Cones and asters of the late Safavid production are often mistaken for Kütahya decoration though they also appear on early 18\(^{th}\) blue and white Kütahya pieces. This is a useful indication which shows that patterns travel not only by sea with the East India companies but also by land across the Anatolian plateau to the Mediterranean shores of the Ottoman empire. These patterns carried along the trade route of the silk bails exported from Persia to Aleppo by Armenian merchants at the expense of the East India Companies.

___

V&A photographs by the author.

\(^{17}\) Institute of Archaeology and ethnography, Erevan, Republic of Armenia. Further pieces were reproduced in the publication of the excavations at New Nissa. See: Masson M.E., 7-72 fig. 52, Vyasmitina M.I., 147-158 Archaeological work on the site of New Nyssa in 1947, in Trudi IUzho-Turkmenistanskoi arkeologicheskoi kompleksnoi II (1951).

\(^{18}\) Ghougassian V.S., The emergence of the Armenian diocese of New Julfa in the seventeenth century (Atlanta, Georgia 1998).

\(^{19}\) Golombek L., Mason R.B., Proctor P., Safavid potters' marks and the question of provenance, in Iran 39 (2001), 207-236.