In ancient accounts of Nishapur, one of the most important cities of Iran from the ninth century to the thirteenth, we find little mention of the pottery made there. In fact there seems to be but one early literary reference that definitely indicates it was well thought of. This anecdote, which is otherwise rather pointless, is quoted by Vambery in his History of Bokhara. One day at Bokhara Amir Sa‘îd, the son of Ahmad ibn Isma‘îl who was governor of Nishapur in A.D. 907, asked for some water, which was brought to him in a common jug. Al Husseyn, an ‘Alid who had been captured and taken to Bokhara, expressed some astonishment at this, saying, “Thy father is governor of Nishapur where such beautiful jugs are made. Why does he not send some specimens here?” The son of the famous general replied, “When my father sends presents from Khorassan [the province in which Nishapur is situated] he generally sends specimens of such articles as thyself.” Excavations on the vast site of that ancient city, and the continued digging there—both licit and illicit—carried on since the termination of the concession held by the Metropolitan Museum, have brought to light some very fine pottery of the ninth and tenth centuries that would justify a remark such as Husseyn’s. A problem that faces all archaeologists, however, is to distinguish between what was made locally and what was imported. In regard to pottery, the one form of evidence which cannot be disputed is that derived from the discovery of kilns, and more particularly from the spoiled products that are thrown away, usually called “wasters.” Examples of both wasters and kilns were discovered by the Museum’s expedition during the years before the end of 1940 when, due to the war, all our work there ceased. The finds, however, were not as numerous as we had hoped. None of the kilns were of the ninth or tenth centuries, although some wasters of that period were found. However, others of a later date when Nishapur was still a most important city have shown us that the manufacture of fine earthenware pottery continued there for several hundred years.

In 1947 the Museum decided not to resume field operations in Persia and Egypt, and Walter Hauser and I went out to wind up affairs. During the latter half of that year, while we were recording and making proper disposal of the antiquities in the storerooms and realizing the Museum’s assets, an outbreak of cholera postponed our similar mission in Egypt. The delay
Exterior of a mold showing lugs that were broken before use. Height 6 7/8 inches.
Metropolitan Museum Excavations, 1947

Detail of a fragment of a mold made from a wooden master model

gave us time for further clearance of a group of kilns that had been discovered earlier. The nature of the fragments and wasters found in the vicinity proved that the kilns were not functioning before the eleventh century at the earliest. We completely cleared three of them and in the process discovered three worn coins. Coins are notoriously treacherous as a means of dating archaeological finds, but these at least gave a post quem date of the eleventh century. Dr. George Miles of the American Numismatic Society kindly examined them and discovered that they were of the period of Masud I (A.D. 1031-1041) and the Caliph el Qa’im (A.D. 1031-1075). It would seem unlikely that these kilns functioned before the end of this century as had previously been thought, but every indication would suggest that they were in operation during the twelfth century, and it is not impossible that they were still working a few years later.

In the rubbish that inevitably accumulated in the vicinity of the kilns were a number of things fascinating to anyone interested in knowing how Persian potters of several hundred years ago produced the wares which we rightly treasure today. At first glance this material would seem to most people very unattractive, for it consists of broken pottery, stilts and other supports, fragments of wasters, ash, lumps of quartz, evidence of one kind or another of the manufacture of frit for glaze, and fragments of molds. It is with some of these last that we are here concerned. They showed instantly that Nishapur had produced some of the finest glazed molded wares of the time. But for this discovery there is little doubt that all such wares, no matter whence they came, would be credited to other cities, in the same way that, until quite recently, certain of the ninth- or tenth-century black and white and other slip-painted wares of Nishapur have been falsely attributed to Afrasyab (Samarkand) for no better reason than that very similar ones had first been discovered there. Still more recently, when the pottery of Nishapur became so well known, many pieces were attributed to Nishapur that had been made elsewhere.

The use of molds was not in itself anything new. Persian and other Mohammedan potters had been using them for several hundred years before the twelfth century; they merely con-
continued a traditional technique that had been practiced in many parts of the world long before Mohammed was born. This they developed during the twelfth century to a peak of excellence far above the level of the previous few centuries. The mold is a valuable supplementary tool to the potter, as it greatly increases his scope both practically and economically. By using a mold the potter can reproduce in clay the effects of repoussé work in metal with its projections, be they simple or elaborate, which he cannot do while throwing and turning clay on his revolving wheel. He can produce in quantity similar pieces without the infinite labor that would be required were he to carve and model each individual vessel. There is thus a tendency to add to the richness of the decoration at the expense of what might be considered the special intrinsic quality of wheel-thrown pottery.

The molds were not made of the same material, and none of them were of plaster, the material used in current practice. Some were of thoroughly refined natural clay that had an extremely smooth reddish surface after firing. Others were made of a gritty composed body which burned to a buffish color, whereas still others with less clay were nearly white. This material was very similar to, and in some cases indistinguishable from, a body composed with a high percentage of powdered quartz on which the alkaline glazes were used so effectively in the twelfth century.

Not only were the molds of different materials, but the designs within them were not produced by one single method. Some were scratched freehand directly into the clay mold after it had been given its over-all shape, the point making a telltale “burr” on each side of the line as it was pushed through the soft material. In the example illustrated on page 235 the potter forgot he was working on a mold and did not write his Arabic inscription in mirror writing as he should have done for it to come out correctly in the cast. This fragment, part of a mold which resembles a small cupola surmounting a square, is for making, when inverted, a form of tazza, which has a square top instead of the customary circular one. Other molds were made by the ancient method of impressing the interior surface with small terra-cotta stamps which were ideal for repetitive patterns, for they were easy to use and saved much labor. But the Mohammedan potters who used this technique never were able to excel the work of the Perenni, who, a thousand years earlier in Roman times at Arretium (Arezzo) in Italy, made the famous Arretine ware. The Perenni had achieved incredibly skillful results, especially with parts of human figures in various combinations.

Examination of the fragments lying around the old Nishapur kilns showed that some of the molds had been made by a third method, and it was from these that the finest Persian glazed
molded ware was produced. The feel of the exterior of these molds, excepting those that were made for the production of flat circular dishes, is quite different from the others. Touch quickly tells one that the wet clay was subjected to a good deal of pressure with much manipulation of the fingers. The molds were fairly thick, some of the larger ones being about half an inch through. The fragments indicated that they were mostly two-piece molds, and that they had been held together in the kiln by clay lugs which were broken after firing. The lugs, which can be seen in the illustration on page 236, were undoubtedly applied to ensure that the two halves, when separated again, would fit properly and not be warped differently.

A close examination, under a raking light, of the interior surface of these particular mold fragments revealed that they could only have been created from a master model of the vessel, or part of a vessel, that the potter desired to make. It was soon apparent that the master models likewise were not all made of the same material. One of the molds, illustrated on page 236, shows unmistakable signs of having been pressed on wood, for the grain is clearly impressed on the interior surface. The fragment shows that the vessel, which would have been a large one, was adorned with a series of men wearing boots and long skirtlike garments. The folds in the drapery are represented by curved lines cut in the wood by a graver, which, cutting across the grain, left characteristically jagged lines on one side of each curve. All this serves to show one of the reasons why the mold fragments are so important, for the finished glazed products do not reveal the minute details which alone can tell us what the master models were made of.

Other mold fragments had a queer roughish surface, obviously not reproducing the texture of wood. This surface is similar to the gritty white body of the glazed molded wares. There is every reason to believe that the same material was used for the purpose of making master models, and on page 237 we see an example of this very thing with its original cutting, damaged

Fragment of a mold made from a gritty earthenware model, and a modern glazed pressing from it. Height 6 3/4 inches
Metropolitan Museum Excavations, 1947
though it is. The design on the upper part consists of three lions in procession, and on the lower part are radiating reedings like those familiar in metal work. Between the two designs is a smooth plain band which is where the mold would be divided, but here is no sign of juncture on either side. Although three-fourths of the upper part of the design exists, there is no sign of a vertical division either. It is this lack of division which confirms our observation that this is not a cast from a mold but is itself a master model. It must further be reported that it is somewhat thicker than a vessel of this size would normally be.

A mold fragment made from a master model of this gritty material is shown opposite, and beside it is a photograph of a modern pressing made from it and glazed. The shape of the vessel for which a mold like this would be used may be seen in a ewer (see below) that has been in the Metropolitan Museum for many years. It shows very clearly the rather careless way in which pieces from the two halves of the mold have been joined together. With the nonchalance of Persian potters, no attempt has been made to place the handle and spout, which were separately fashioned, in a position that would in any way disguise the join.

The designs of this type of molded ware were often exceedingly interesting; some, as in the last example, combine bold script as the main motif with a delicate pattern of foliage and birds in the background. There is sometimes, as in the fragment on page 237, another form of contrast: highly stylized animals—in this case lions—decorated with various forms, and quite realistic birds in the background. In another mold, on this page, which has the decoration divided into three registers, one above the other, there is realism both in the birds which form the background for a group of musicians and a man with a horse, and in a band of animals in the lowest register. The growing and curling leafy forms in this ware are like no real plants, but they live as convincingly as though they were—a proof of the artistry of the designer.

No glazed fragments of any of the wares made in these particular molds were discovered in the Museum’s excavations at Nishapur. This is not altogether surprising, for the digging was almost
entirely confined to areas wholly or chiefly occupied during the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries. The magnificence of the wares and the multitude of vessels of that period found through continuous unsupervised digging during the last fifteen years, to satisfy the demands of the market, has tended still further to doom to oblivion the glazed earthenware made at Nishapur in the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. We hope to publish later other molds and kiln products, but those described here may serve not only to give some suggestions as to the mold techniques employed at Nishapur, but also to show the danger of ascribing fine glazed molded wares to other cities in Iran while entirely neglecting the fact that they were also produced in Nishapur.


Notes The cover design of this issue of the Bulletin, adapted from a detail of a woodcut by Paul Gauguin, serves as a reminder of the large and very colorful loan exhibition of Gauguin’s work that opened on April twenty-third and will remain on display in our Special Exhibition Galleries until May thirty-first. As to the woodcut, our version of the subject, Auti te Pape, or Women at the River, is the second of several states, each of which differs both in detail and in coloring from the others. Even within the same state each print Gauguin pulled from his blocks may differ from the others to the point of being virtually independent of them. This is just one of the cultivated irregularities of his work in this medium that help to bring us into the creative presence of this aggressively individualistic artist—and that seem, indeed, appropriate to the primitivism of his subjects.

It should be remarked that the same figure that we have excerpted from the woodcut for our cover prominently occupies the foreground of a notable canvas by Gauguin, painted in Tahiti in 1892 and entitled Aha Oe Feii? (What! Are You Jealous?) This is one of the great body of magnificent nineteenth-century French paintings that are in the museums of Soviet Russia and that are familiar to only a very small part of the art-minded American public.

Auti te Pape is represented in the exhibition in four different versions, all from the rich collections of Gauguin prints in the Art Institute of Chicago, where the current exhibition was on view before coming here. Gauguin worked in practically all media and the present occasion offers a rare opportunity to survey the full range of his eccentric genius—paintings, drawings, sculptures, and, among his prints, lithographs and etchings as well as woodcuts. The illustrated catalogue of the exhibition lists approximately two hundred items drawn from some fourscore private and public collections. The Museum has joined with the Art Institute in the publication of a picture book that reproduces selected woodcuts by Gauguin from the collections of both institutions.

M.B.D.