SALJUK BRONZES FROM KHURASAN

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The Metropolitan Museum’s collection of Islamic metalwork has long been known as important in both quality and quantity. A large part of it was acquired in 1891, through the bequest of Edward C. Moore, including fine specimens of metalwork from Iran (Persia), Mesopotamia, Syria, Egypt, and Turkey, and several outstanding pieces have been added in recent years. Among these the most important is a bronze ewer richly decorated with silver inlay, formerly in the J. Pierpont Morgan collection. The shape of this ewer, a cylindrical fluted body with a straight, round neck to which a spout is attached, is peculiar to Iranian bronzes and was often copied in pottery. The decoration of the Morgan ewer has many interesting features that reflect not only the artistic tendencies of the Saljuk era in Iran but also the influence of astrology on the decorative repertoire of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. On the twelve flutes of the body are represented the twelve signs of the zodiac within compartments formed by a continuous pattern of knotted interlacings ending in heads of various beasts. The signs of the zodiac are combined with their related planet lords: 1. Aries, the Ram, is ridden by the planet Mars, who holds a sword in his right hand and his characteristic attribute—a severed head—in his left. 2. Taurus, the Bull, is shown with Venus riding on his back. 3. Gemini, the Twins, appear with the dragon’s head. 4. Cancer, the Crab, is surmounted by the Moon, flanked at each side by heads of dragons, which are closely connected with the nodes and eclipse of the Moon. 5. Leo, the Lion, his knotted tail ending in a dragon’s head, is surmounted by the Sun. 6. Virgo, the Virgin, is here represented by two ears of corn held by Mercury, who appears as an old man. 7. Libra, the Balance, is shown with Venus seated and playing the lute. 8. Scorpio, represented by two scorpions, appears with Mars holding a sword. 9. Sagittarius, the Archer, is a centaur who shoots an arrow at a dragon growing out of his tail. It is interesting to note that the tail of the dragon has its exaltation, or maximum power, in this sign while the head is exalted in Gemini. 10. Capricornus, the Goat or Ibex, is shown with the planet Saturn. 11. Aquarius, the Water Carrier, is fused with the planet Saturn and is represented as an old man drawing water from a well. 12. Pisces, the Fishes, are placed around the base of the handle. Sometimes, as in the inkwell described below, this sign is combined with the planet Jupiter, holding a vessel, one of his attributes (see ill. p. 90). Representations of the signs of the zodiac and the planets were very popular in Iranian art, and we frequently find them in sculpture as well as in metalwork. They also occur on metalwork made in other provinces, such as Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt. Among the Muhammadans lucky and unlucky days were directly associated with the influence of the planets—Jupiter, Venus, and the Moon being regarded as lucky, and Mars and Saturn as unlucky. Often astrological motives form the main decoration, as on a recently acquired bronze inkwell, in which the signs of the zodiac are placed in circular medallions arranged in three groups around four horsemen (ill. p. 90). In the intervening spaces there are knotted interlacings ending in heads of beasts, some of which may be those of dragons. Such animated interlacings are typical of the Saljuk period. In the Morgan ewer similar interlacings end in the heads of lions, ibexes, hares, and dogs. Probably the latter two derive from the constellations Lepus (the Hare) and Canis Minor (the Lesser Dog).

The body of the Morgan ewer is surmounted
by twelve pairs of crowned birds rendered in high relief with their heads entirely in the round. Near the bottom, each flute has a bird in full-front view, also rendered in high relief. Embossed in high relief on the neck and spout are lions of a type peculiar to Saljuk bronzes made in Iran. Although stylized in Saljuk fashion, these birds and lions are still reminiscent of the animal decoration of late Sasanian and post-Sasanian silver vessels.

Conspicuous in the decoration of the Morgan ewer are the Naskhi inscriptions ending in human heads which appear on the flat shoulder (ill. above) and on the borders of the neck against an arabesque background. Such animated inscriptions are characteristic of the Saljuk metalwork of Iran but seldom appear on that of Mosul or Damascus.

From an artistic point of view, the Morgan ewer is a magnificent example of an inlay technique revived and further developed by the Saljuks, a Turkish tribe which originated in Central Asia and penetrated eastern Iran early in the eleventh century. We now possess conclusive evidence that the development of the technique of inlaying objects of bronze and brass with copper and silver began in this region, particularly in the province of Khurasan, whence it spread westward to the rest of Iran and Mesopotamia. Khurasan had several centers where the technique achieved its first artistic prominence, but by the thirteenth century they had been supplanted by Mosul, in northern Mesopotamia, and in time its reputation became so firmly established that practically all metalwork with inlay decoration was indiscriminately attributed to it. For years writers were hopelessly confused in determining the provenance of Islamic metalwork. Thanks, however, to recent studies of certain inscribed and dated examples, we are now able to define more accurately the characteristic features of inlaid metalwork made in Iran from the twelfth to the fourteenth century. The
number of pieces which can be attributed to Iranian workshops is growing constantly and will eventually permit us to evolve a proper classification of Islamic metalwork.

The earliest Islamic school of Iranian inlaid metalwork dates back to the eighth century and was probably situated in eastern Iran. The vessels of this school were of bronze, engraved and embossed and sparingly inlaid with copper. At first the Saljuks followed the traditional method of inlaying with copper only, but gradually they began to use silver combined with copper and silver alone. These technical and artistic innovations were introduced by Khurasan metalworkers in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.

Ewers of the type to which the Morgan piece belongs were produced in Iranian workshops during the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries. Those of the twelfth and the early thirteenth century were made of bronze (an alloy of copper and tin), the later ones usually of brass (an alloy of copper and zinc). The earlier group can be attributed to the province of Khurasan, the chief centers of which were Herat, Merv, and Nishapur.

In style and technique the Morgan ewer shows many of the characteristics of the bronzes produced by Khurasan metalworkers. One of the "trade-marks" of this school is the rosette of seven discs seen at the back of the birds' heads in the illustration on page 88. Rosettes of this type also appear on the Hermitage kettle of 1163, made in Herat, the Tiflis ewer of 1181, made by an artist of Herat, a ewer in the Metropolitan Museum (ill. p. 91) made for Ali ibn ar Rahman of Sistan (south of Khurasan), and several pieces in our collection which can be attributed to Khurasan. On three candlesticks—one each in the Hermitage, the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the Harari collection, Cairo—such rosettes form the main decoration.

Some of the ewers related to the Morgan one, particularly those with silver and copper inlay, date from the twelfth century and are similar in style to the Herat kettle of 1163. The Morgan ewer itself and several others, including ewers in the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Gulistan Museum, should be assigned to the beginning of the thirteenth century. Other related ewers, one of which is in our col-
Bronze ewer, engraved and inlaid with silver. Saljuk period, probably made in Sistan, end of the xii century. Height 7¼ inches. Rogers Fund
Comparison of the Morgan ewer with the small ewer and inkwell of the twelfth century illustrated on pages 90 and 91 shows the technical advancement made by Iranian metal-workers in the thirteenth century. The inkwell is inlaid with copper and silver plaques of irregular shape which give the typical coloristic effect found in Iranian bronzes of the twelfth century. The engraving is quite conspicuous. In some pieces of the period the decoration is engraved and small sections only are inlaid with copper and silver. In our twelfth-century ewer the engraved decoration prevails over the inlay, which is confined to a few narrow strips. In the Morgan ewer the silver plaques are more regular in shape than in the twelfth-century pieces, and the whole design is carried out in inlay, though the engraved outlines are still strongly apparent.

The influence of Iranian metalwork, both in subject matter and in technique, is quite evident in brass objects made in Mosul, which under the rule of the Zangids (Saljuk Atabegs) became a great center of Islamic arts and crafts. The work produced in Mosul during the thirteenth century after about 1230 shows a definite advancement in inlay technique over that of Iran. Soon Mosul artists were celebrated all over the Near East and their influence spread to Syria and Egypt. Several fine bronzes of the Mosul school are represented in the Metropolitan Museum, among them a ewer and a candlestick base. In these pieces almost every inch of the surface is inlaid with silver, and the backgrounds show dense meander patterns, spirals, or arabesques. The silver inlaid ewer made by Ahmad ad Daki, an engraver of Mosul, in the year 1226 represents the early work of the Mosul school. The fully developed Mosul style is apparent in the decoration of the candlestick base, which is attributed to the period of Sultan Badr ad Din Lulu (1233-1259) of Mosul, whose name is inscribed on several brass objects of similar style.

The decoration of our candlestick base includes four large medallions with episodes from the ceremonial life of the sultan, in which he appears taking part in hunts or seated on his throne receiving homage from high officials. Twelve smaller medallions contain signs of the zodiac and planets, and sixteen small circles contain personifications of the Moon. It is possible that the latter refer to the name of the sultan, which means “full moon of religion.” Two bands show animated groups of men and women drinking wine from cups and beakers, dancing girls, and musicians playing cymbals, lutes, harps, drums, and flutes (see ill. below). Some of the faces, notably those of old bearded men, are excellent portrait studies. Though rendered with great skill by Mosul artists, these realistic scenes from the daily life of the Saljuks were not created by them but derived from the twelfth-century school of Khurasan, best known to us from the Herat kettle of 1163.

*Detail of a brass candlestick base with silver inlay. Saljuk period, school of Mosul, first half of the XIII century. Bequest of Edward C. Moore*