

# The Flowering of Seljuq Art

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WHEN ONE EXAMINES the holdings of Islamic art in the Metropolitan Museum and in other major collections, one soon becomes aware of the fact that the various periods and regions appear in an uneven measure. Such an “unbalanced” representation is to be expected—just as it is found in the exhibits of the arts of virtually all countries. It is also clear that this variation in the number and quality of objects is not primarily the result of the vagaries of taste among curators and collectors or in the art market; rather, it is due to specific conditions in some countries during certain periods. The understanding of this basic though little-investigated phenomenon will help us to grasp the reasons for the productivity, or the lack of it, at a given time.

Of all the periods in Iranian art, that of the Seljuqs, roughly between 1050 and 1225, and particularly the second half from about 1150 to 1225, is the richest, in that most artistic media are extensively represented, in particular, ceramic wares and tiles, stone and stucco carvings, metalwork, jewelry, glass, and textiles (Figures 1–15); even figural painting (Figure 16) and figural objects and sculptures, either in the round or in the form of reliefs (Figures 17–23), are not missing. Furthermore, the objects are of excellent artistic quality and often of high technical perfection. This period has quite rightly been referred to as a time of “artistic explosion.”<sup>1</sup> Specifically, the wide range of first-rate

objects distinguishes it even from the preceding Samanid-Ghaznevid-Buyid period of Iran and Central Asia, which also was very productive. The same can be said in even stronger terms with regard to the contemporary output of Iraq, Anatolia, North Africa, India, and even Egypt. What is it that caused artistic creativity to reach a peak in Iran in the rather short span of about seventy-five years? (It is, of course, necessary to remember that the termination of this astonishing epoch was brought about by the destructive force of the various Mongol invasions.)

It has been recognized that one basic factor involved in this age of high artistic productivity was the urbanization of Muslim society. Hence, it has been said that “it is the urban bourgeoisie of Iran which was the primary sponsor and inspirer of the astonishing development given to the beautiful objects in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.”<sup>2</sup> However, while this fact is incontrovertible, urbanization and the accompanying production of goods for the middle classes in the various towns cannot be regarded as the cause as such or, at least, as the sole cause. First of all, at that time, urbanization was found all over the Islamic world and was not a specific Seljuq Iranian phenomenon. Yet Iran and her bordering regions to the east stand out by the profusion and versatility of their mercantile and artistic production. In addition, there are other points to be

1. Oleg Grabar, “The Visual Arts, 1050–1350,” *The Cambridge History of Iran*, V, *The Seljuq and Mongol Periods* (Cambridge, 1968) p. 626.

2. Grabar, “Arts, 1050–1350,” p. 648; see also L. T. Giuzalian, “The Bronze Qalamdan [pencase] 542/1148 from the Hermitage Collection (1936–1965),” *Ars Orientalis* 7 (1968) p. 95.

considered that force us to take into account various factors besides urbanization and middle-class proclivities. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum's excavations at the site of the huge ancient city of Nishāpūr and later clandestine diggings there have produced some outstanding large objects as well as vast quantities of small pottery bowls with rather unpretentious, though attractive, decorations, which on no account can be called objects of the highest aesthetic appeal, let alone luxury wares. They can be explained only as having been made for the impecunious lower middle class of Nishāpūr in the tenth and eleventh centuries. Moreover, in spite of urbanization and the production of objects for the urban bourgeoisie, the local artistic performance, as well as that of the whole province of Khorasan, was more limited than the Seljuq one, being restricted for the most part to pottery and glass, and on the whole not as technically varied and artistically brilliant. Nor was the local pottery endowed with as rich a figural imagery. On the other hand, there was a decline of production in the vast urban conglomerate of Cairo from the second half of the fourteenth century, and this showed itself in quantity and quality and even in the range of media.

It seems obvious that what created the propitious conditions for such outstanding artistic production

FIGURE 1

Mortar with bovine-headed loops to hold rings. Cast and chased bronze. Persia, Seljuq period, XII–XIII century. Height 6 ½ in. (16.51 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 12.33.4



FIGURE 2

Ewer with Kūfic inscription in relief on the nearly spherical body. Cast and chased bronze inlaid with silver. Persia, Seljuq period, XII century. Greatest height 11 ⅝ in. (29.51 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Frederick P. Huntley, 59.53

must have been something very special, or what is more likely, a combination of contributing factors. Let us then look at what might have been the causes and, in doing so, proceed from the general to the more specific.

There was, first of all, a very advantageous ambiance created by the long duration of Seljuq rule—a favorable condition that bears out the historical principle established by Ibn Khaldūn:

If a dynasty is of short duration, life in the town will stop at the end of the dynasty. Its civilization will recede, and the town will fall into ruins. On the other hand, if the dynasty is of long duration and lasts a long time, new constructions will always go up in the town,

FIGURE 3

Footed hemispherical cup with an anthropomorphic Naskhī inscription, the signs of the zodiac, and arabesque scrolls. Bronze, engraved and inlaid with silver. Persia, Seljuq period, early XIII century. Height 4 ½ in. (11.43 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Edward C. Moore, Edward C. Moore Collection, 91.1.543



the number of large mansions will increase and the walls [or markets] of the town will extend farther and farther.<sup>3</sup>

Secondly, there had developed a climate highly conducive to lucrative commercial activities of every sort, and these were widely endowed with an Islamic ethos. Thus, a handbook on commerce entitled "The Beauties of Trade," probably written in the eleventh century in the Fāṭimid-Ayyūbid realm by a well-traveled importer-exporter named Shaykh Abu'l -Faḍl Ja'far b. 'Alī ad-Dimishqī, states:

Trade is the best of all gainful employments and the one which is most conducive to happiness. The merchant can achieve easy circumstances, he has knightly per-

fection (*lahu muruwwa*), and while he may possess many thousands, he is not demeaned by a simple garment. Because he who has dealings with princes may not be able to afford the expenses this involves, yet he still has to appear in a shiny garment and turban and has to keep beautiful horses with clean harnesses, saddles and reins and slaves as well. And he who belongs to the military has to eat coarser food, his life is more limited and he is counted as a tyrant; even when he acts justly he is hated. . . . It was the Prophet who said first: How beautiful is an honest merchant!<sup>4</sup>

Even such a high-minded philosopher and theologian as al-Ghazālī, with all his concern about the next world and the preparatory work for it, has this to say:

The markets are God's tables and whoever visits them will receive from them . . . the honest merchant is more dear to me than one who keeps himself free for all sorts of divine worship . . . he is involved in a Holy War (*jihād*) because Satan meets him by way of measures and weighing and in the direction of giving and taking and so he is involved with a Holy War with him. . . . [Also:] . . . to provide for one's family so that they may not need anything from the community and to provide for them by lawful trade is [to be reckoned as] a form of *jihād*.<sup>5</sup>

Even royalty joined in the acclaiming chorus, as a remark in the *Qābūs-nāmeḥ* (1082) of the Ziyārid prince of Gurgān, Kai Kā'ūs b. Iskandar, indicates. Here, however, it is intrepidity rather than ethical considerations that gives the merchant his outstanding position:

Clever men say that the root of commerce is established in venturesomeness and its branches in deliberateness, or, as the Arabs express it, "Were it not for venturesome men, mankind would perish." What is meant by these words is that merchants, in their eagerness for gain, bring goods from the east to the west, exposing their lives to peril on mountains and seas, careless of robbers and highwaymen and without fear either of living the life of brutal people or of the insecurity of the roads. To benefit the inhabitants of the west they import the wealth of the east and for those of the east the wealth of the west, and by doing so become the instrument of the world's civilization. None of this could be brought

3. Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah, An Introduction to History*, trans. Franz Rosenthal, II (New York, 1958) p. 235.

4. The Arabic title is *Kitāb al-Ishāra ilā Maḥāsin at-Tijāra*; for discussion see Hellmut Ritter, "Ein arabisches Handbuch der Handelswissenschaft," *Der Islam* 7 (1917) especially pp. 65–66; for the date and locale of the author see Claude Cahen, "A propos et autour d'*Ein arabisches Handbuch der Handelswissenschaft*," *Oriens* 15

(1962) pp. 160–162. See also G. E. von Grunebaum, *Medieval Islam, A Study in Cultural Orientation*, 2nd ed. (Chicago and London, A Phoenix Book, 1966) pp. 215–216.

5. Ritter, "Ein arabisches Handbuch der Handelswissenschaft," p. 32; see also A. K. S. Lambton, "The Merchant in Medieval Islam," *A Locust's Leg, Studies in Honor of S. H. Taqizadeh* (London, 1962) p. 124.



FIGURE 4  
Inkwell with the signs of the zodiac in the main register, friezes of animals in the other bands, and arabesque scrolls on the domed cover. Cast bronze inlaid with silver. Persia, Seljuq period, first half of the XIII century. Height 5  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (14.60 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 59.69.2 a, b

about except by commerce, and such hazardous tasks would not be undertaken except by men the eyes of whose prudence are stitched up.<sup>6</sup>

Yet it should be stressed that the moral premise for the encomium bestowed by high and low on the merchants was that they were honest in the many aspects of their trade activities. The fact that the issue of reliability and fairness is constantly raised indicates that conditions were often far from ideal, but this does not seem to have lowered the general esteem in which this social class was held. Indeed there appears to have been

6. Kai Ka'us ibn Iskandar, *A Mirror for Princes, The Qabus-nameh*, trans. Reuben Levy (New York, 1951) p. 156.

a social corrective that tended to improve the ethical behavior of the urban bourgeoisie. This was due to the fact that in the twelfth century the *fityān* ("young people") adopted the chivalrous codes held earlier by the higher circles of originally Iranian knightly organizations.<sup>7</sup>

To facilitate the mercantile conditions and, in particular, the exigencies of worldwide trade, the urban society provided services specially tailored to various needs. The law books written between the second half of the eleventh and the early thirteenth century, especially those whose authors were of Iranian origin, show that the contemporary mercantile law was based not on an artificial and doctrinaire canon but on the social realities and business practices of the time and region. Significantly, they fully appreciated the profit motive as the chief purpose of credit transactions, partnerships, and the special arrangement called "commenda." They even provided legal devices (*hiyal*) to circumvent

7. Franz Taeschner, "Futuwwa, eine gemeinschaftsbildende Idee im mittelalterlichen Orient und ihre verschiedenen Erscheinungsformen," *Schweizerisches Archiv für Volkskunde* 56 (Basel, 1956) pp. 122–158 (where all the earlier literature is given).

FIGURE 5  
Earthenware bowl with an incised arabesque scroll under a white glaze. Persia, Seljuq period, XII century. Diameter 7  $\frac{3}{4}$  in. (19.68 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 63.159.2

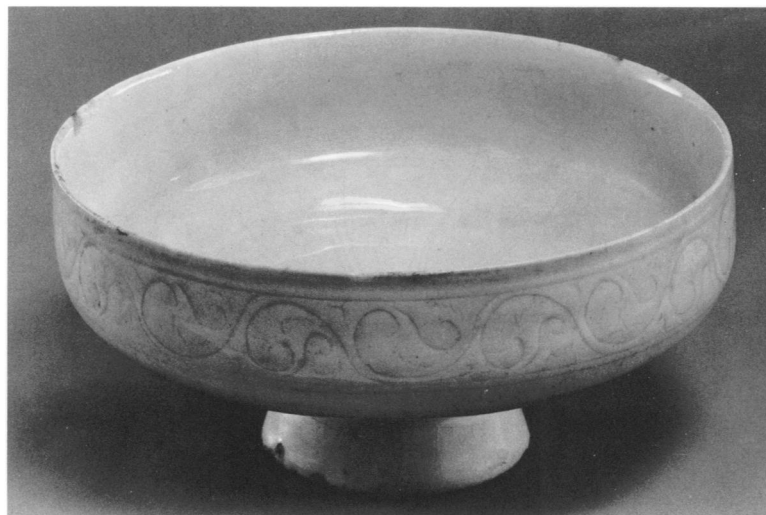






FIGURE 6

Large earthenware vase with molded decorations in three registers under a turquoise glaze. Persia, Seljuq period, early XIII century. Height 33 in. (83.82 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 39.189

the more rigid laws, while formally following them so as to avoid burdensome restrictions and to reap the full benefit of the investments.<sup>8</sup> In addition, there were specific institutions to assist the merchant and the artisan. Thus, in spite of the Koranic interdiction against interest and usury, moneylenders and moneychangers played an important role. Nāṣir-e Khosrow tells us that

in 1052 there were two hundred moneychangers in Isfahan.<sup>9</sup> In addition there was the institution of the *jahbadha*, “who were, on the one hand, bankers of a sort and on the other official moneychangers cum sureties, who verified and standardized by exchange the different types of currency, good and bad, paid by the taxpayers in return for a small percentage collected as a supplementary tax from the latter.”<sup>10</sup> Then there was the institution of the *bayyā’*. These were

persons enjoying a high and wide confidence who were brought in for appraisal, for estimating quality and for trading all the goods belonging to the ruler’s court. Specifically, for instance, it was told of them that they packed products in bales and that strangers came and bought the goods in that form, without opening them since they relied on the *bayyā’*. And in every town when they would deliver the goods they would present the marks [*khatt*] of the *bayyā’* and sell them for profit without opening them.<sup>11</sup>

Besides these generally accommodating conditions, there is no doubt that a “bullish” economic situation in towns and cities leading to high levels of production and a proclivity to purchase manufactured goods was the primary cause of the artistic developments. There must have been a highly favorable milieu of urban wealth, with an active demand for goods, especially luxury goods, to bring about such propitious market condi-

8. “The commenda was an arrangement in which an investor entrusted his capital to another party to trade with it and then return to the investor the principal and a previously agreed upon share of the profit. The trading partner did not normally contribute to the investment, but as a reward of his labor received the remaining share of the profits. . . . Any loss resulting from the perils of travel or from an unsuccessful business venture was to be borne exclusively by the investor; the agent was in no way liable for a loss of this nature, losing only his invested time and effort.” Abraham L. Udovitch, “The ‘Law Merchant’ of the Medieval Islamic World,” in *Logic in Classical Islamic Culture*, ed. G. E. von Grunebaum (Wiesbaden, 1970) pp. 113–130, especially p. 115; Abraham L. Udovitch, *Partnership and Profit in Medieval Islam* (Princeton, 1970) pp. 170–172. As can be readily seen, the very common arrangement of the commenda was a special challenge to the enterprising merchant lacking capital or goods and by its complete freedom fostered the intrepid long-distance trade of the type praised by the Ziyārid ruler Kai Kā’ūs b. Iskandar (see above pp. 115–116). But as the quoted incidents show, the commenda had also extensive repercussions for the craft production, in particular when it came to the selling of the manufactured objects.

9. Charles Schefer, ed., *Safar-nameh* (Paris, 1881) p. 92; quoted in Lambton, “The Merchant,” p. 129.

10. Lambton, “The Merchant,” pp. 128–129.

11. Giuzalian, “The Bronze Qalamdan,” pp. 100–101.

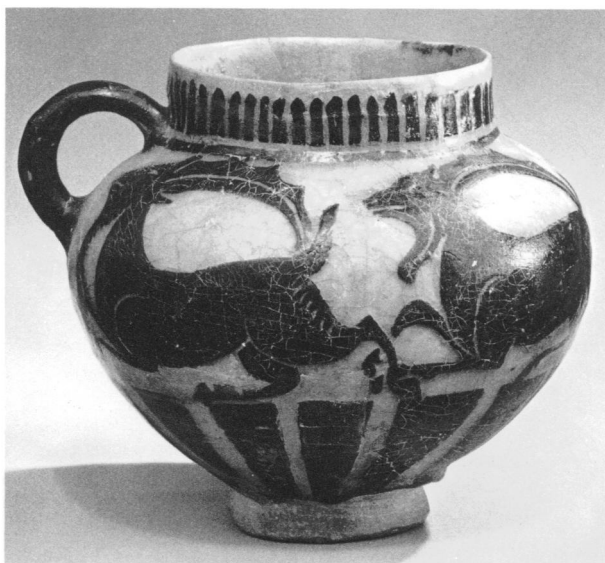


FIGURE 7

Earthenware jug with black slip decoration of running goats under a turquoise glaze. Persia, Rayy, Seljuq period, XII century. Height 5 in. (12.70 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 67.104

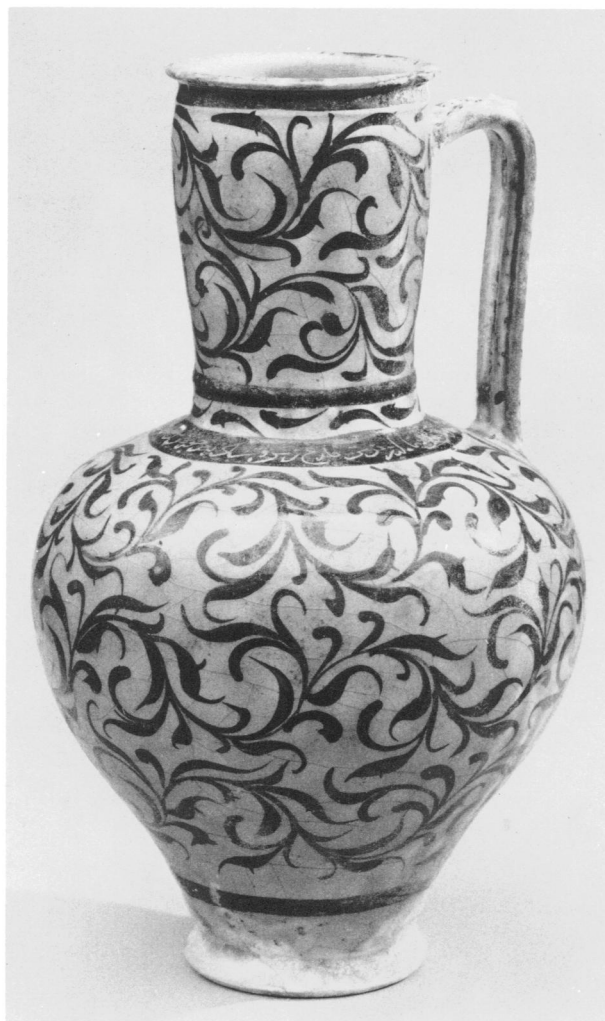


FIGURE 8

Earthenware ewer with a black painted design of leafy foliage under a turquoise glaze. Persia, Kāshān, Seljuq period, early XIII century. Height 13 in. (33.02 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 66.175.4

tions. Unfortunately, little research has been done on the effect of the economy on artistic production and the response of the buying public. It is even doubtful whether there exist in Iran and elsewhere (with the possible exception of Egypt) detailed records covering long periods of time, which would allow us to follow the ups and downs of these developments. What we do sometimes find are references to conditions that must have had adverse influence on production, such as the levying of vexatious taxes or the mistreatment and cruel exploitation of workers. The tax that all but eradicated the textile workshops of Tinnīs in the Nile Delta about A.D. 975 is one example,<sup>12</sup> as is the imposition in 999 of a tithe on all silk and cotton manufactured in Baghdad. The latter caused severe street riots and was later rescinded, at least for cotton goods.<sup>13</sup>

The basic economic circumstances so far enumerated were operative in the first half of the Seljuq period (if not slightly earlier), though they apparently took some time to become effective in the art field. It was not until the second half of the Seljuq period that the latent conditions of the economy, along with changing cultural and psychological attitudes, brought about a new flourishing of the arts. Having inquired into the economic factors, we should now consider the new, more personal attitudes and their effect on the production of art objects.

The revival of the Persian language allowed artisans to employ their native tongue in a workaday fashion on

12. R. B. Serjeant, "Material for a History of Islamic Textiles up to the Mongol Conquest," *Ars Islamica* 13/14 (1948) p. 94.

13. Serjeant, "Material for a History of Islamic Textiles," *Ars Islamica* 9 (1942) p. 82.

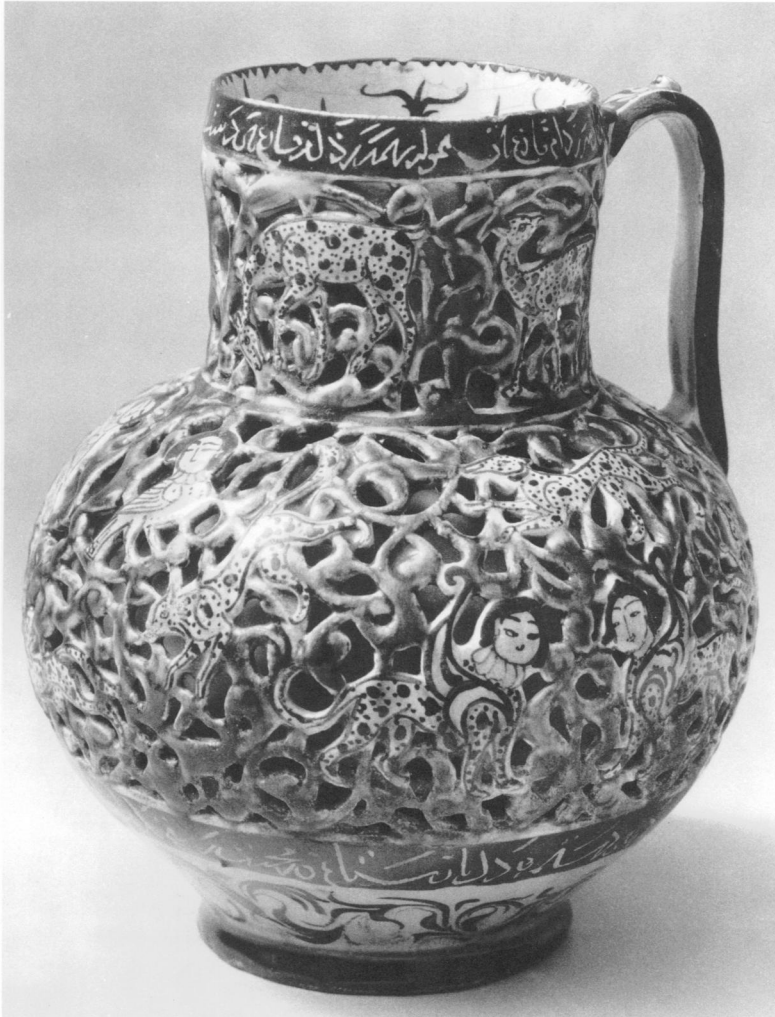


FIGURE 9

Earthenware reticulated jug with animal designs on an arabesque ground. Blue and black underglaze painted beneath a turquoise glaze. Persia, Kāshān, Seljuq period, dated A.H. 612/A.D. 1215–1216. Height 8 in. (20.32 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 32.52.1

the use of Persian, we now find that the texts are given in poetical form, which, as a means of expression, was (and is) more congenial and creatively potent to the Iranian mind. One of the favorite poetic forms used on Seljuq objects was the quatrain (*rubāʿī*), which lends itself readily to the pithy rendering of a short-thought sequence. Furthermore, the themes of the inscriptions became more personal in nature than they had been previously, with the favorite subjects being unrequited love and religion;<sup>16</sup> in other cases, these themes are of a folkloristic character, depicting popular versions of the high literature;<sup>17</sup> or, finally, they established direct personal connections between the object and maker, and the patron.<sup>18</sup>

In this manner a personal involvement was established with the objects, which at the same time became allied with literature, so that in a direct though humble fashion the artisans participated in the country's main cultural expression.

The Persian texts were no longer written in the hieratic Kūfic writing, but in a more common, cursive

objects of every conceivable shape and function. The earliest inscription within the Seljuq context, though from a region not yet identified with certainty, is to be found on a cloisonné enamel bowl made for Dāʿūd b. Suqmān b. Artuq between 1114 and 1144.<sup>14</sup> The earliest such text on an object definitely from Iran occurs on a bronze pincase of 1148, inlaid with silver and copper.<sup>15</sup> These dates are significant since they coincide with the beginning of the period of rapid growth of a more sophisticated metal production and the growth of other media as well. The use of Persian persisted throughout the Seljuq period, and on many ceramic vessels and tiles of the thirteenth century it is used exclusively.

Persian replaced an Arabic that was primarily employed for impersonal, eulogistic formulae, or formalistic historical inscriptions given in prose. Along with

14. Max van Berchem and Josef Strzygowski, *Amida* (Heidelberg, 1910) pp. 120–125.

15. Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan," pp. 95–119; L. T. Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan of 1148" (in Russian), *Pamiatniki Epokhi Rustaveli* (Leningrad, 1938) pp. 217–226.

16. Mehdi Bahrāmī, "Le Problème des ateliers d'étoiles de faïence lustrée," *La Revue des Arts Asiatiques* 10 (1936) pp. 182–185, 188–190; Mehdi Bahrāmī, *Les Recherches sur les carreaux de revêtement lustré dans la céramique persane du XIII<sup>e</sup> au XV<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Paris, 1937) pp. 65–69, 91, 95–115; Mehdi Bahrāmī, *Gurgan Faïences* (Cairo, 1949) pp. 116–121, 127.

17. L. T. Giuzalian, "A Fragment of the *Shah-nameh* on Pottery Tiles of the Thirteenth–Fourteenth Centuries" (in Russian), *Epigrafiika Vostoka* 4 (1951) pp. 35–50; L. T. Giuzalian, "Two Fragments of Nizami on Tiles of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries" (in Russian), *Epigrafiika Vostoka* 7 (1953) pp. 17–25; both articles reviewed and paraphrased in Oleg Grabar, in his review of *Epigrafiika Vostoka* 1–8, *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957) p. 551.

18. This occurs on the qalamdan of 1148; see Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan," pp. 108, 115–117.

Naskhī script, which had been used in Iran since the middle of the eleventh century, although its more monumental expression in historical texts did not occur until the middle of the twelfth century.<sup>19</sup> The large number of inscriptions that were applied to pottery vessels and tiles is indeed striking, as are their subjective and emotional content and, even more, their informal, nonchalantly cursive character. There is nothing academic or standardized about them. Rather, they seem to have the intention of giving the objects a more personal quality.

The literary aspect of the objects also poses the question whether this part of their decoration (and, on more ambitious pieces, possibly even the ornamentation as a whole) was done by a different artisan, that is, by a more educated person who was collaborating with the simple craftsman who created the shape, just as signatures on metal objects indicate a division of labor between bronzesmith and inlay worker.<sup>20</sup> In any case, the writing testifies to a fairly large body of educated artists whose work must have appealed to a responsive clientele of at least equal literary training.

All these factors—the use of the Persian language, of poetry, and of cursive, everyday writing on the objects—allowed an immediate response by the customer, who could readily identify with the sentiments expressed on the object. It spoke his language in every respect, and even when the phrases were hackneyed, they still reflected the general mood of the people. In addition, we have evidence that the inscriptions and designs were more than cliché-like “decorative features” to which little attention would be paid. Some of the represented objects, which were more difficult to identify, had label-like designations allowing the viewer to understand what he saw readily and to respond fully.<sup>21</sup> The artisans went even one step further: instead of just creating objects for ordinary use and amused contemplation, they regarded them as means to a happier life and

one of spiritual enrichment. This intent is expressed, for instance, by an inscription on two Seljuq objects:

May thy fortune be always increasing,  
Your good luck be out of all bounds,  
So that whatever reaches thy palate from this  
plate [*tabaq*, or bowl (*kāseh*)]  
O Master of the world, be an addition to thy soul.<sup>22</sup>

Naturally such direct appeal could be effective only if the artist put his heart fully into the work so as to guarantee the success of his product, both aesthetically and psychologically. This participatory exigency increased the pride of the artisan in his creation, which in turn must have influenced the quality, and even the quantity, of the objects. The self-esteem of the artist is

FIGURE 10

Bowl with “a musical entertainment.” Luster-painted earthenware. Persia, Rayy, Seljuq period, late XII century. Diameter 8¾ in. (21.26 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The H. O. Havemeyer Collection, bequest of Mrs. H. O. Havemeyer, 56.185.13



19. See Epigraphical Note by Ernst Herzfeld in Myron Bement Smith, “Imām Zāde Karrār at Buzūn,” *Archaeologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 7 (1935) pp. 73–81.

20. Giuzalian, “The Bronze Qalamdan,” pp. 95, 105.

21. D. S. Rice, *Le Baptistère de Saint Louis* (Paris, 1951) p. 21, figs. 10, 20–21. (“Des inscriptions ‘explicatives’ de ce genre ne sont pas rares sur les ‘cuivres’ incrustés du treizième siècle.”)

22. Bahrami, *Gurgan Faïences*, p. 121, no. 13; Grace D. Guest and Richard Ettinghausen, “The Iconography of a Kāshān Luster Plate,” *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961) p. 29.



FIGURE 11

Earthenware bowl, luster-painted with musicians playing the lute and castanets in the center, surrounded by inscription bands. Persia, Kāshān, Seljuq period, mid-xiii century. Diameter 19 $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (49.83 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 32.52.2





**FIGURE 12**

Minai bowl, with the master shot of the Sasanian king Bahrām Gūr, and the death of his mistress Azādeh. Polychrome-painted and gilt-decorated earthenware. Persia, Seljuq period, late XII century. Diameter 8 ½ in. (21.59 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of the Schiff Foundation, 57.36.13

clearly, even effusively, expressed in some inscriptions, such as this poetical Persian text on an inlaid bronze ewer, dated 1182, now in the Historical Museum of Tbilisi:

My ewer is good, nice and refined.  
 Who in the world has a similar one?  
 Everybody who saw it said "It is beautiful!"  
 Nobody found a mate to it  
 Because there is no similar one.  
 Look at the ewer!  
 It is spirited.  
 It is living water which comes out of it.  
 Each stream flowing out of it on our hands,  
 Gives us every time new delight.  
 Look at the ewer! Everybody praises it.  
 It is worthy of serving one as distinguished as  
 you. . . .<sup>23</sup>

23. L. T. Giuzalian, "A Bronze Ewer of the Year 1182" (in Russian), *Pamiatniki Epokhi Rustaveli* (Leningrad, 1938) pp. 230-231.

FIGURE 13

Minai tile, with Kūfic writing in relief in overglaze painting and human figures and a bird in the arabesque scrolls of the background. Molded, glazed, and painted earthenware. Persia, Seljuq period, XII-XIII century. Height 9 in. (22.86 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, J. Lionberger Davis Gift, 67.5

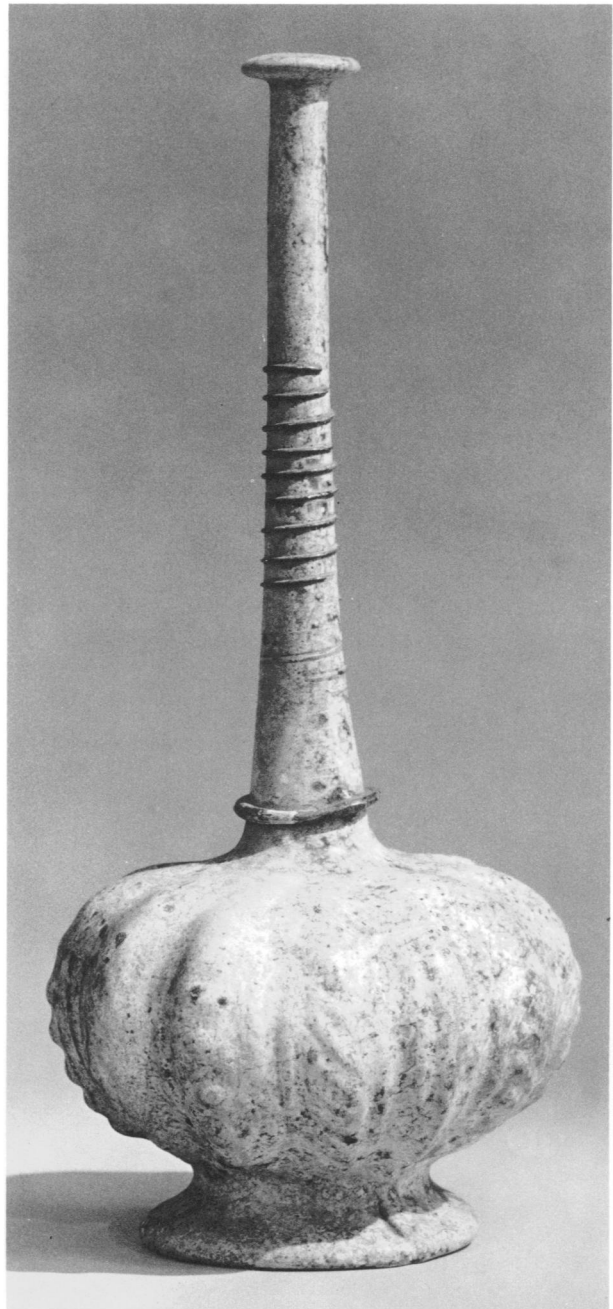


FIGURE 14

Bottle with dark blue threads circling the neck. Molded clear, yellowish glass with applied thread decoration. Persia, Seljuq period, XII century. Height 10 1/2 in. (26.67 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 64.255

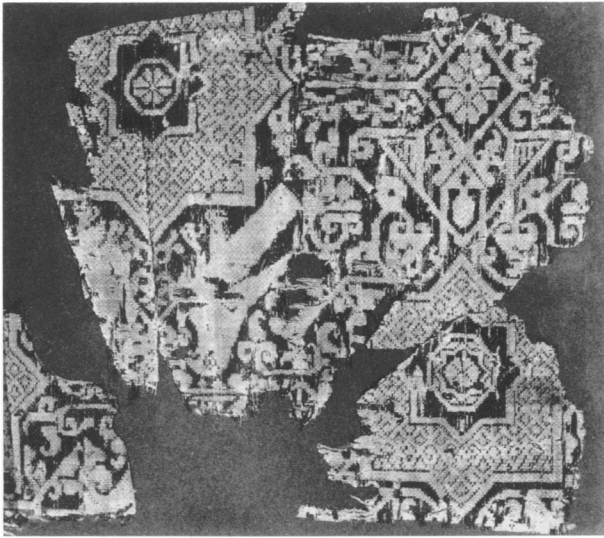


FIGURE 15

Silk textile with a star design, confronted birds, and arabesques in yellow on a dark blue ground. Persia, Seljuq period, xi–xii century. Greatest height 5 in. (12.70 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 46.156.11 a

FIGURE 16

Wall painting, the upper register showing six standing and kneeling figures, the lower showing two horsemen killing a snake, set against a red background. Persia, Seljuq period, early xiii century. Greatest width 23 ¾ in. (60.32 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, purchase, Joseph Pulitzer Bequest, 52.20.1



Another object to be considered in this context, the pencease of 1148, carries this proud, assured self-estimate in Persian verse: “God regarded me with favor while I lived, He will favor me in the future until I die.”<sup>24</sup>

Even as unlikely an object as a textile can carry an expression of the artist’s high regard for his own work. A Naskhī inscription forming the border of an animal design on a fabric in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts formulates the thought in this manner:

[As beautifully set forth as] a feast and [as] graceful  
as a glade, I am.  
The adorned sun in the new-born spring [seen]  
from the garden, I am.  
For this reason I become a good portent to  
everyone.  
That from the workshop of Amirak, the dyer,  
I am.<sup>25</sup>

Taking this attitude into account, it is not difficult to understand why artisans signed their pieces several times upon occasion.<sup>26</sup> It is more difficult to establish the reasons for the artisans’ strong feelings of self-importance and pride. It may very well have been

related to their awareness of technical excellence, inas-much as the older pottery and metal techniques had become more refined and new ones had developed. This is supported by the self-laudatory inscription pre-served in what is now the earliest complete wall cover-ing in faience mosaic, a technique that had been slowly and systematically developed in Iran; in the Sırçalı Medrese of 1242 in Konya, the artisan (from Tūs in eastern Iran) adds this Persian distich after his signa-ture:

24. Giuzalian, “The Bronze Qalamdan,” pp. 115–116.

25. Mojtaba Minovi, “A Persian Quatrain on a Dyed Silk,” *Bulletin of the American Institute of Iranian Art and Archaeology* 5 (De-cember 1937) p. 171, fig. on p. 170.

26. Giuzalian, “The Bronze Qalamdan,” p. 115.

I have made this decoration the like of which occurs nowhere else in the world.

I do not last, but it remains, a memento of myself.<sup>27</sup>

This form of self-praise naturally led to factual exaggeration. Thus the artisan Maḥmūd b. Muhammad, who, in 1182, applied the decoration to the ewer now in the Tbilisi Museum, says toward the end of the inscription quoted above:

Seven celestial lights proud as they are protect the one who worked in this perfect way.

May He bless the one who makes such a ewer, who spends gold and silver and adorns it thus.

In spite of what the artist said of the gold and silver he employed on the ewer, the piece, according to the observations of L. T. Giuzalian, shows only copper and silver inlays.<sup>28</sup>

The presence of an east Persian tileworker in Konya was most likely the result of the Mongol invasion of Iran, which brought this artist, like many others, to one of the western regions. Involuntary as this migration might have been, it too contributed to the increased productivity of the period. There is a good deal of evidence documenting this migration. For instance, there is the inscription on a piece that proves the presence of a potter from Nishāpūr working in Kāshān ("Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Nishāpūrī, dwelling in Kāshān") early in the thirteenth century.<sup>29</sup> What makes this inscription even more instructive is the fact that the piece of pottery on which it was written was excavated in Gurgān in northeastern Iran, which also bespeaks a transit trade in art goods. The migration of artisans is a question about which further discoveries of pertinent inscriptions will be most helpful. As to the transshipment of finished products, we can definitely assume its existence, judging from Kāshān miḥrābs and wall tiles found in Dāmghān, Mashhad, Verāmīn, Qumm, Bākū, Mashhad-e Miṣriyān, and other places. These specialty products, which were created in Kāshān, must have



FIGURE 17

Incense burner in the form of a feline. Bronze with engraved and openwork decoration. Persia, Seljuq period, XII century. Height 6 3/4 in. (17.14 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 37.47

been supplied, therefore, to a large intra-Iranian market that extended into the Caucasus and Central Asia. In this context, it should be mentioned that luster pottery made in Rayy has been found by Sir Aurel Stein in the provinces of Kirmān and Makrān,<sup>30</sup> and by Alessio Bombaci and Umberto Scerrato at Ghazneh in modern Afghanistan, where Kāshān luster pottery was

27. Friedrich Sarre, *Konia. Seldschukische Baudenkmäler, Denkmäler persischer Baukunst*, I (Berlin, n.d.) p. 10.

28. Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan," p. 109; Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan of 1148," p. 229. One could, of course, assume that the inscription was originally composed for and applied to an object with both gold and silver inlays and that such a

text was then applied to another vessel where it did not fit. This seems, however, unlikely, as gold inlays first appeared several decades after 1182, the date of the ewer in question.

29. Bahrami, *Gurgan Faïences*, pp. 126–127, nos. 1, 3, pls. 48, 49.

30. Sir Aurel Stein, *Archaeological Reconnaissances in North-western India and South-eastern Iran* (London, 1937) pp. 245–246, pl. xxi.

FIGURE 18

Ceramic figurine of a camel carrying a litter, covered with a turquoise glaze. Persia, Seljuq period, XII century. Height 8 in. (20.32 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 64.59



also excavated.<sup>31</sup> The latter has also been discovered as far west as Qaṣr al-Ḥayr ash-Sharqī in Syria.<sup>32</sup>

The character of artistic production and consumption can be further demonstrated by a comparative examination of the use of inscriptions on art objects, particularly works in metal, during the later Seljuq period in Iran, on the one hand, and in Egypt and Syria during the Ayyūbid and Mamlūk periods, on the other. Last-

31. Benjamin Rowland, Jr., *Ancient Art from Afghanistan. Treasures of the Kabul Museum*, catalogue, Asia House (New York, 1966) p. 138, nos. 101, 102, fig. on p. 132; Giorgio Bullini, *L'Afghanistan della preistoria all'Islam. Capolavori del Museo di Kabul*, catalogue (Torino, 1961) no. 177; S. Mizuno and others, *Ancient Art of Afghanistan* (Tokyo, 1964) nos. 196–199.

32. This information was kindly furnished me by Dr. William Trousdale and Mrs. Renata Holod-Tretiak.

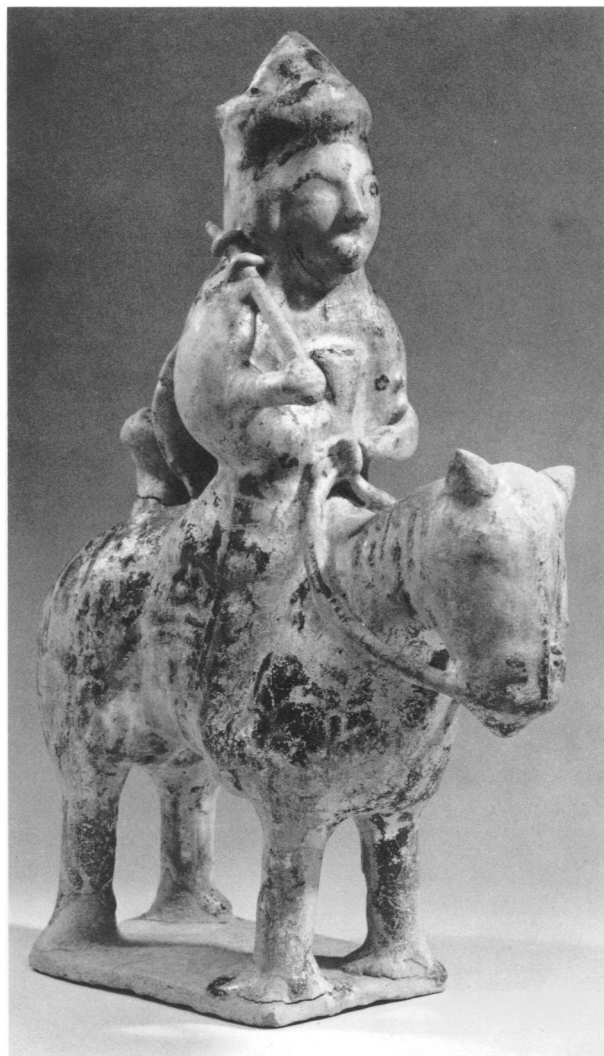


FIGURE 19

Ceramic figurine of a horseman armed with a mace and with a cheetah seated on the mount's croup. Molded, dark blue painting under a turquoise glaze. Persia, Kāshān, Seljuq period, XIII century. Height 10 7/8 in. (27.60 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 66.23

ing from 1171 to about 1250, the Ayyūbid era is roughly contemporary with the second half of the Seljuq period, while the Mamlūk directly follows the Ayyūbid and lasts till 1517. During the Ayyūbid period we find that in nearly all cases metal objects bore the names, in the form of inscriptions, of the sultans and emirs for whom



they were made, and this practice became even more widespread during the time of the Mamlūks. Because the inscriptions giving the name of a court, sultan, prince, or dignitary were large and conspicuously placed, these objects can be considered to be of a personalized nature and custom-made. This naturally limited their resale value.

By contrast, the Iranian pieces were only rarely made specifically for a prince or member of the aristocracy. Even when they were, the inscriptions were not as large or as demonstrative as were those found on Syrian and Egyptian pieces,<sup>33</sup> and the decoration was of a more general character. The few pieces whose inscribed texts associate them with rulers and their courts are in no way artistically or technically superior to the objects not dedicated to rulers or aristocracy and, perhaps, are actually inferior.

A number of artistically outstanding Iranian objects with a royal iconography are epigraphically anonymous and therefore lack any definite connection with a certain prince or member of the aristocracy.<sup>34</sup> In addition, artisans creating certain pieces designated for the mercantile class utilized an aristocratic iconography, which provided an additional snob appeal to the merchandise.<sup>35</sup> In all these cases, the general character of the decoration is about the same, so that it is only the inscription that designates the recipient's rank. This makes it clear that the Seljuq production in Iran was, on the whole, of a unified, anonymous character and was made to appeal to the large middle-class clientele of the bazaars, but was also acceptable to the aristocracy and even the courts and hardly ever created a resale problem. Technically, too, the artistic output was geared to a general market and to mass production with an effort, however, to preserve, and even increase, the quality of the objects. As L. T. Giuzalian has pointed out, this was achieved by the standardization of shapes produced by the artisans, while—at least in the metal and tile production—there was a division of labor. In metalwork there was the artist who fashioned the object and another who applied the inlay

work; in the case of mihrāb tiles, one craftsman was the ceramist, with the artfully refined and complex decoration and its epigraphy being entrusted to a separate decorator (*naqqāsh*) or scribe.<sup>36</sup>

The artistically favorable climate of Seljuq Iran becomes even more evident when compared with that of Fātimid Egypt, where we find a system of production whose character was substantially different from that of Iran. Such a comparison is particularly appropriate

36. Giuzalian, "The Bronze Qalamdan," pp. 105–106; F. Sarre in H. Ritter, J. Ruska, F. Sarre, and R. Winderlich, *Orientalische Steinbücher und persische Fayencetechnik* (Istanbul, 1935) p. 67 (this refers to a mihrāb of 1305, but it may be assumed that the practice existed earlier).

FIGURE 20

Figurine of a harpy. Molded and luster-painted earthenware. Persia, Rayy, Seljuq period, late XII century. Height 25 ¼ in. (64.13 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Cora Timken Burnett, 57.51.1



33. Bahrami, *Gurgan Faïences*, pp. 120–121, 134, no. 13, pl. 52; Guest and Ettinghausen, "Kāshān Luster Plate," p. 28, pl. 1.

34. Bahrami, *Gurgan Faïences*, pls. 16, 17.

35. Richard Ettinghausen, "The Bobrinski 'Kettle,' Patron and Style of an Islamic Bronze," *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 85 (1943) pp. 193–208.



FIGURE 21

Tympanum with an armed horseman within an arabesque frame. Relief-carved stone. Caucasus, Kubatchi, Seljuq period, late XII or early XIII century. Greatest width 51 in. (129.54 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 38.96

since Egypt was, at this time, just as highly urbanized as Iran and very active in commerce and industry, with the result that here, too, a great range of decorative arts, some of them of the highest quality, was produced. Many of these objects, however, such as those made of rock crystal, ivory, or cut glass, were luxury goods created for the court; others, such as carved and inlaid doors, shutters, and prayer niches, were for important mosques. Both represent special categories of production and should not be regarded as objects made for the common urban market. Apart from pottery, the main medium that served a wider clientele was textiles, which constituted *the* most important native industry, supplying not only the clothing, but also all the items regarded as furniture and home fittings (carpets, mats, couches, cushions, canopies, draperies, and tents).<sup>37</sup> Textiles are, therefore, a very appropriate category to investigate in this connection.

Many of the workers in Egypt, especially in the textile-producing town of Tinnis and Damietta, were Copts, which meant that they were discriminated against on two counts: first, because they belonged to a non-Muslim minority, and second, because they were engaged in the lowly trade of the weaver.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, their living and working conditions were of the poorest. The following are the thoughts of the patriarch Dionysus after a visit to Egypt in 815:

Although Tinnis has a considerable population and numerous churches, we have never witnessed greater distress than that of its inhabitants. When we enquired into the cause of it, they replied: "Our town is encompassed by water. We can neither look forward to a

37. S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society . . .*, I, *Economic Foundations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1967) p. 101.

38. Ignaz Goldziher, "Die Handwerke bei den Arabern," *Globus* 66 (1894) pp. 204–205.

harvest nor can we maintain a flock. Our drinking water comes from afar and costs us four dirhams a pitcher. Our work is in the manufacture of linen which our women spin and weave. We get from the dealers half a dirham per day. Although our earning is not sufficient for the bread of our mouths we are taxed for tribute and pay five dinars a head in taxes. They beat us, imprison us, and compel us to give our sons and daughters as securities. For every dinar they have to work two years as slaves.”<sup>39</sup>

This report of miserable living and working conditions in early ninth-century Egypt is corroborated by Yāqūt, the twelfth-century Muslim geographer, who writes of the weavers:

... al-Ḥasan ibn Muḥammad al-Muhallabī said: “One of the curious things about Damietta and Tinnis is that the weavers in them who make these fine garments are Copts of the lowest, humblest, and meanest of the people as regards food and drink. For the larger part of their diet consists of fresh salt fish, or evil-smell-

39. Serjeant, “Islamic Textiles” (1948) p. 91.

FIGURE 22

Medallion with a falconer on horseback. Molded and carved stucco. Persia, Seljuq period, late XII century. Diameter 7¼ in. (18.41 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 37.55



FIGURE 23

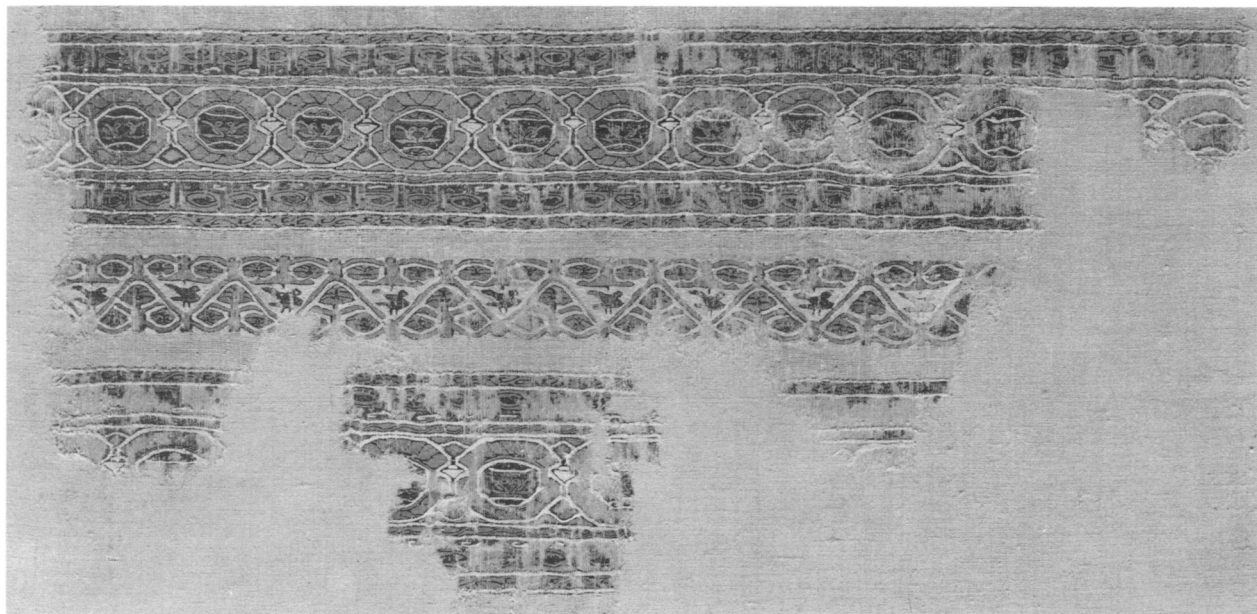
Head of a prince. Molded and carved stucco. Persia, Rayy, Seljuq period, XII-XIII century. Height 10 in. (25.40 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 33.111

ing Ṣīr fish, and most of them eat without washing their hands [afterward], then return to those valuable and highly esteemed garments and set to work at weaving them.”<sup>40</sup>

These accounts are also confirmed by a recently deciphered petition that was (ultimately) directed to the Fāṭimid caliph in Cairo (sometime before 1048), asking for release from work done under duress. The petitioner, a Karaite Jewish weaver, speaks of having been forced by the supervisor of the imperial workshops to work in Damascus for the preceding two years, during which time he could not participate in the affairs of the community nor move to another locality.<sup>41</sup>

40. Serjeant, “Islamic Textiles” (1948) p. 98.

41. S. D. Goitein, “Petitions to Fatimid Caliphs from the Cairo Geniza,” *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 45 (1954) pp. 32-38.



**FIGURE 24**

Textile with tapestry-woven bands of circles with confronted birds in the main band and single birds in the secondary band. Silk and linen. Egypt, Fāṭimid period, XI century. Width 18 in. (45.72 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Mr. and Mrs. Charles K. Wilkinson, 64.303.4

**FIGURE 25**

Linen textile with three painted decorative bands in brown, tan, and black. Egypt, Fāṭimid period, XI century. Greatest width 7 1/4 in. (18.72 cm.). The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of George D. Pratt, 31.106.16



Bureaucratic procedures as well as the constant application of heavy dues further limited the work of the craftsmen, as shown in an account of al-Maqdisi from about 985:

Now, concerning the Shaṭawī cloth, it is impossible for a Copt to weave any unless the stamp of the sultan has been placed upon it. Nor can it be sold except through the intermediary of brokers who have been entrusted with this function, and the sultan's officer writes down what has been sold in his notebook. Then it is taken to someone to wrap it up, then to another to be tied up in wrappings (*qishr*), then to another to be packed in chests (*saḡaṭ*), then to another to rope it, each of these men having a due to take. Then at the harbour gates a certain sum is taken. Each one writes his mark on the chest, and then the vessels are inspected at the time of sailing.<sup>42</sup>

Other sources describing conditions in Cairo indicate that the weavers derived no financial benefit from the excellence of their workmanship and were even required to pay a fine if the eventual income from their product was less than the expenditures.<sup>43</sup> There are other reports that are less bleak and even speak of proper remuneration, but the picture as a whole reflects an inequitable situation and an almost complete state monopoly.

When examining Fāṭimid textiles, one is often struck by their untidy workmanship, which is evident in the careless designs and unsightliness of the non-official inscriptions (Figures 24, 25). Indeed, compared to Persian artifacts, with their very elaborate inscriptions, the Egyptian art objects show a great paucity of writings (apart from the ṭirāz textiles and a few de luxe pottery pieces), most of which do not rise above the level of clichés. Unlike the metal objects in Iran, the work of these artisans in Fāṭimid Egypt reflects no pride, self-esteem, or personal involvement. There was no attempt to appeal to the feelings of the customer or to attract him by being pleasant. Moreover, demand in Egypt

was further limited by conditions that made the formation of an extensive, well-to-do bourgeoisie impossible.

There is one other civilization that offers a revealing contrast to the Seljuq—the vast caliphate of the Almo-hads, which comprised all of western North Africa, from Morocco to Tunisia, as well as Spain. Although the major cities of this empire were endowed with splendid mosques and fortifications built by order of the court—such as the Kutubiyya in Marrakesh, the Great Mosque of Seville (now almost entirely destroyed) and its famous minaret, the Giralda, the Hassan Mosque in Rabāṭ, and the Mosque of the Andalusians in Fez, as well as the walls of Tāzā and the Gates of Rabāṭ—a large, representative body of analogous minor works of art does not exist, especially in North Africa. We can explain this by noting the composition of the population, the majority of whom were uneducated Berbers of tribal origin; there was only a small educated Arabic-speaking elite and no culturally demanding and articulate middle class to sponsor a vast array of objects.<sup>44</sup>

These comparisons with Egypt and North Africa demonstrate the unique character of the psychological and cultural factors stimulating artistic production in the Seljuq period. By implication they also point to seemingly favorable working conditions in the main centers of Iran, combined with extensive facilities for a far-ranging trade. The result was a unique flowering of the arts in Iran between 1150 and 1225, a great deal of which, happily, has been preserved and is now shown in our Museum.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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42. Serjeant, "Islamic Textiles" (1948) p. 95.

43. Serjeant, "Islamic Textiles" (1948) p. 104.

44. R. Le Tourneau, *The Almohad Movement in North Africa in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries* (Princeton, 1969) pp. 107–108.