

Persian Sculptural Ceramics History and Design from Prehistoric to Contemporary

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Abstract

Persian sculptural ceramics has a long and productive history. Through the centuries, Persian potters have responded to the demands and changes brought by sociopolitical turmoil by adopting and refining newly introduced forms and blending them into their own culture. This innovative attitude has survived through time and influenced many other cultures around the world. The Islamic prohibition on using human figures and animal forms not only could not stop the long tradition of producing ceramic sculptures but also generated new styles of making mixed functional and conceptual objects with clay with most delicate and fine design in accordance the new vision and ideology. Contemporary sculptural ceramics today inherits this long history and uses its rich and diverse culture as source of inspiration. This lecture describes the old and long history of sculptural ceramics through Iran's art history from prehistoric to the contemporary and meanwhile introduces examples from pre-Islamic period alongside with Islamic continuation of sculptural ceramics. Also will provide several examples of contemporary ceramic sculptors and discusses their style and source of inspiration; a primitive, a classic and a modern ceramic sculptor to explain the common current of the field in Iran today. Finally describes writers own recent experimental sculptural ceramics as part of his doctoral research and its outcome.

Preface

Although the famous cited opposition in Iran as part of Islamic culture to the depiction of human figurative sculptures and animal forms holds true for religious art and architecture, in the general context such representations have always been applicable in Iranian art and culture almost in all ages which is rooted back long before the religious prohibition, and still continues lively in variety of styles and conceptions.

This lecture describes the old and long history of sculptural ceramics through Iran's art history from prehistoric to the contemporary and meanwhile introduces examples from pre-Islamic period alongside with Islamic continuation of sculptural ceramics. Also will provide several examples of contemporary ceramic sculptors and discusses their style and source of inspiration; a primitive, a classic and a modern ceramic sculptor to explain the common current of the field in Iran today. Finally describes writers own recent experimental sculptural ceramics as part of his doctoral research and its outcome.

Persian Sculptural Ceramics; Prehistoric Period

Persian sculptural ceramics starts almost with the initial steps of civilization in Iran. A Goddess female fertility clay figurine called Venus of Sarab found in Kermanshah in the west of Iran and dated to 7th millennium B.C. is considered as one of the oldest ceramic sculptures found in the plateau of Iran (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Venus of Sarab, Iran, 7th millennium B.C.

Ancient “Mārlik” and “Amlash” are two archaeological sites in the province of Gilan, which extends southward from the southwest shore of the Caspian Sea in the north of Iran which are the sites of royal cemeteries, and artifacts found at these sites date back to 3,000 years ago where numbers of tombs were found. In the handful of tombs, where partial skeletal remains were preserved, the body seemed to have been laid on its side on a large flattened slab, surrounded by grave goods. Many found objects in these graves are of unglazed earthenware mainly terracotta, grotesque in form and visually arresting, seems to serve more than just beautiful functional earthenware. These objects which were designed and made of the shape of birds, human bodies and mainly terracotta humped bulls, appeared in the end of the second millennium B.C. to the beginning of the first millennium B.C. and were used as funerary ritual objects and buried with the corpses as part of the belief and ritual ceremony of the time. This kind of belief and putting pottery objects with dead used to be very common in ancient Iran as part of their belief system that a dead will rise some day and would need these objects to serve him/her (Fig. 2).



Fig. 2. Pottery as grave objects buried with corpses, Shahr-e-sokhteh, Iran, 2nd Millennium B.C.

Comparison of the pottery bulls (Fig. 3a) with actual humped bulls of Iran (Fig. 3b) makes clear that the hump is exaggerated, often to an extraordinary degree. This emphasis was doubtless made to convey the impression of enormous power, not surprising when one consider how important bulls were in the ancient economies. The body is supposed to contain and hold water, milk or a kind of holy liquid and give the immortal strength and power to it. Common to most is the spout like mouth,

which probably served to pour liquid during the burial ceremony with control.



Fig.3. a: Terracotta Humped Bull, Mārlik Civilization, Iran, 1th Millennium B.C., b: Actual Humped bull, Iran

Another typical example of this period are the female statuettes from the early 1st millennium B.C. (Iron Age II). Some of the most elaborate representations of females in the art of the ancient Near East are images of divine and cult figures whose association with certain aspects of life made them essential to the welfare of humanity. Fertility, procreation, and the growth of crops and livestock were among the basic concepts identified with female divinities. Representations of nude females in clay are the simplest and most obvious expression of these concepts, and such figures appear throughout antiquity in many regions. This striking example in clay from the South Caspian region of northwestern Iran is hollow and probably served as a cult vessel as well as a sacred image (Fig. 4 a & b).



Fig. 4. a & b: Terracotta female statuettes, Iran, 1th Millennium B.C.

Islamic Period Sculptural Ceramics

In spite of the fact that sculpturing of human body and portrait and animal forms considered prohibited in Islamic religious law because of the fear of paganism and the belief that the creation of living forms is unique to God, tradition of making ceramic sculptures continued to survive during Islamic period in different regions and in variety of styles. With the spread of Islam outward from the Arabian Peninsula in the seventh century, the figurative artistic traditions of the newly conquered lands profoundly influenced the development of Islamic art. Ornamentation in Islamic art came to include figural representations in its decorative vocabulary, drawn from a variety of sources. One category in this regard was continuation of mixed functional and conceptual wares in shape of birds, animals and humans or inspired by stories provided by literature (Fig. 5 a & b).



Fig.5. a & b: Functional wares in shape of animal forms, Iran, 8th and 12th Century

Many ceramic sculptures in this period are also related to the court and events related to different kingdoms especially Seljuq era. For instance this hollow stonepaste vessel is molded in the shape of a hunter on horseback. With a mace in his right hand and a shield on his back, he wears all the paraphernalia of the battlefield, but the presence of the small cheetah seated behind him suggests that he is a hunter. Cheetahs, caracals, and other wild felines were captured, tamed, and trained by specialized cheetah-keepers to assist in hunting expeditions, a traditional leisure pursuit of royals and the wealthy elite in pre-Islamic Iran that was later adopted by the Arabs in the first centuries of Islamic history. A passage from the Shahnama, written in the early eleventh century but based on traditional epics passed down orally, tells of a hunting party organized by the Sasanian king who was accompanied by hundreds of richly dressed and armed horsemen, falconers, tamed felines, musicians, and servants; among them were three hundred horsemen leading

cheetahs (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6. Stonepaste vessel in shape of animal forms, Iran, 12th-13th century

Another common form in this period is objects in the shape of a woman cradling a baby belong to a large assemblage of ceramic figurines. One can see there the black pigment painted directly on the body. Despite its unrefined appearance, the painted decoration quite precisely defines the details of the figures, such as the woman's headdress, braids, and cross-hatched breasts. The marks painted on her cheeks follow a Central Asian iconography and are probably related to apotropaic rituals. They might represent tattoos or scars really practiced by women, as charms or applied as a form of facial adornment. Another figurine in the shape of a seated, jeweled woman nursing a baby is made in luster technique. Both this and a similar figural vessel are hollow, suggesting that the pieces were probably used for storing and dispensing water (Fig. 7 a & b).

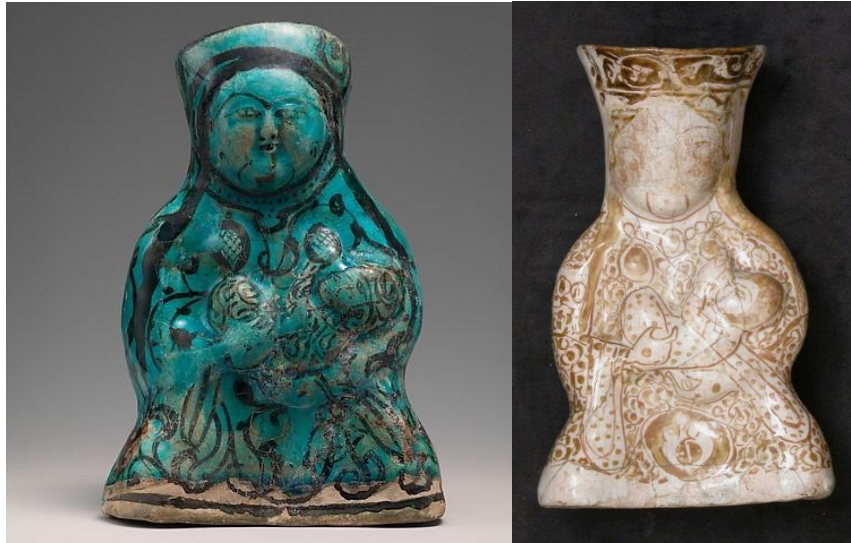


Fig. 7. a: Stonepaste vessel in the Form of a Mother and Child, painted under transparent turquoise glaze. b: Molded, luster-painted on an opaque white glaze, 12th-13th century

Some fantastic motifs, such as harpies (female-headed birds) and griffins (winged felines), were drawn from pre-Islamic mythological sources, whereas others were created through the visual manipulation of figural forms by artists. The harpy, was a common motif in many parts of the Muslim world. In Iran it was adapted in the twelfth century as a motif on wares in a variety of media.



Fig. 8. a: Stonepaste luster-painted Harpy, b: Stonepaste Harpy with underglaze painting, Seljuq Era, 12th-13th century

Contemporary Approaches

Sculptural ceramics as a medium to transfer thoughts, ideas and concepts is a live and popular art amongst the sculptors and crafts people in Iran today. Verity of styles and techniques are in use by different artist from primitive handmade technique to modern and advanced methods. Kolsoum Tamizian from Mazandaran (north of Iran) and Sara Mohammadi from Kurdistan (west of Iran) are two female craftspeople who are not carry any academic and organized education in the ceramic field, working primitively with clay using simplest tools and yet making beautiful and genuine works of art which are very dynamic and original.



Fig. 9. a: Sara Mohammadi, b: Kolsoum Tamizian, rural potters

As pottery is considered a female activity in the history, there are still women in many parts of Iran who are responsible for making pots for daily usage or for sale. These women learn the art directly from their mothers or a close female relative and use local clay found in their surroundings and fire them in primitive kilns. Objects are usually unglazed. The objects are inspired by local animals or mixed imaginary creatures based on mythological believes and historical narrations.



Fig. 10. a & b: Mythological and local animal forms as sculptural ceramics

Manijeh Armin is another example of feminine artists working in a more contemporary style and sophisticated way. As a poet and writer and a self-educated ceramic artist, her source of inspiration come from literature, religious or mystic sources. Her works in most cases convey a complete narration or story in a complex piece of work or a series of works, which to read the story one should turn around the piece and see different views or different pieces (Fig. 11 a & b).



Fig. 11. a & b: Sculptural ceramics by Manijeh Armin

Parviz Tanavoli is a modern and international sculptor working in verity of techniques and material including clay. His source of inspiration from ancient artifacts to today's popular expressions is indeed a characteristic of all of his works. This combination is most prominent in his ceramic works, each display features that have made him one of the most outstanding figures in Iranian art today. His works convey different and often opposite influences, from the very modern to the very traditional, from the

elitists royal genres to the popular and mercantile tastes, from the delicate mystical perspective to the most superstitious beliefs, and to draw a totally personal and very genuine statement from this internal struggle.



Fig. 12. a & b: Sculptural ceramics by Parviz Tanavoli

The final example of contemporary sculptural ceramics of Iran is related to the writer's own series of works done during his research period related to his doctoral thesis regarding the position of experimentation in ceramic art and design education at New York University and under supervision of Dr. Judith Schwartz's (at the time, professor and head of the Crafts at N.Y.U., Steinhardt School of Arts and Art professions). Using the new context and school of thought as a challenge for creation and rising the question that how the new environment with all its opposition to personal and educational experiences, would lead to creation of new works and also to a new understanding regarding the practice in research of freedom of expression and in an attempt to surmount own limits and attempting to apply an old and traditional technique with a contemporary approach.



Fig. 13. a: New work inspired by Marlik ceramic humped bulls, b: Experimental figurative sculpture,
 Shabanali Ghorbani, 2016, N.Y.U., U.S.A.

Conclusion

Persian sculptural ceramics has a long and productive history. Through the centuries, Persian potters have responded to the demands and changes brought by sociopolitical turmoil by adopting and refining newly introduced forms and blending them into their own culture. This innovative attitude has survived through time and influenced many other cultures around the world. The Islamic prohibition on using human figures and animal forms not only could not stop the long tradition of producing ceramic sculptures but also generated new styles of making mixed functional and conceptual objects with clay with most delicate and fine design in accordance the new vision and ideology. Contemporary sculptural ceramics today inherits this long history and uses its rich and diverse culture as source of inspiration.

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