



Welcome back to Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA. This is your host, Ladan Akbarnia, Curator of South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. In this podcast, I explore SDMA's collections of works from South Asia, Iran, and the Islamic world, as well as contemporary art. Drop in every week for a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or our guests, highlighting selections from the Museum's collections or exhibitions.

This week, a fascinating, seven-compartment ceramic dish tells us about a distinct decorative technique developed in Mongol Iran; cross-cultural transmissions from China; the Persian new year called Nawruz; and how objects can tell stories of their journeys over space and time. To make the most of the next few

minutes, I recommend clicking on the link to the object's online record to look at its images while I share some thoughts.

Made in two parts, this vessel consists of an upper tray with seven equally sized circular indentations or wells, possibly cast in a mold, then fitted into a lower, footed bowl, best seen in profile view. Six of these wells are arranged around a central one, alternating with small, red triangular outlines framing a oncegilded, six-petalled rosette. The interior of each well was further embellished in modern times with a central gilded, thirteen-petalled sunburst design outlined in red and white and surrounded by seven teardrop-shaped floral motifs executed in the same technique, known as *lajvardina*.

From the Persian lajvard, for lapis lazuli, this technique takes its name from a rare deepblue glaze recalling the blue metamorphic rock used for jewelry and decoration. You can see the glaze covering both of the bowl's joined components—even how it once dripped down the object's sides, all the way to the foot but the blue is clearest in the indentations. After an initial firing in this blue or a turquoise glaze, potters would paint elaborate geometric, epigraphic, and Chinese-inspired designs with enamel-like red, white, and gold leaf onto the glazed surface before a second firing.

The use of this deep-blue glaze and decorative technique appears unique to Iran in the 13th and 14th centuries, when the Mongol dynasty

known as the Ilkhanids ruled over Western Asia. Close connections to China, seat of the Great Mongol empire under the Yuan dynasty at this time, enabled important cross-cultural transmissions that led to the development of a distinctive new Chinese-inspired visual culture in the Iranian world. Motifs such as the lotus, here referenced by the radiating petal design outlined in white around the exterior of the SDMA dish, were translated by Iranian artists and craftsmen into local media. Recalling Chinese celadon "lotus" bowls with molded ridges, this particular design became a common motif on lajvardina vessels, now translated into the stonepaste fabric used by Iranian potters.

While pre-Mongol, luster-painted examples of such seven-part dishes survive from 13thcentury Iran, I do not currently know of any others decorated in the lajvardina technique. The function of these vessels also remains to be confirmed. What purpose did they serve in their original context? The consistent appearance of seven compartments in all of these vessels has led to the suggestion that they may represent the haftsin, the traditional table setting associated with the celebration of Nawruz, the spring equinox, also recognized as the new year in Iran, Central Asia, and parts of South Asia. Persian for "seven s's," the haftsin is named after seven distinct foods or substances whose Persian names begin with the letter sin, or "s." These are displayed alongside other symbolic elements on tables

(or tablecloths) throughout the thirteen-day celebration. While the significance of the number seven and associations with the spring equinox are mentioned by Iranian scholars such as Al-Biruni as early as the 11th century, the modern haftsin tradition appears to be more of a 19th-century development.

As a final note, I would like to draw your attention to the interesting, sometimes unseen or unnoticed, details that shed light on object histories. While describing the vessel earlier, I alluded to its being embellished "in modern times." If you observe the object's top, sides, and base, you will notice that much of its surface shows whitening and iridescence, which results from contact with the soil and suggests that it was once buried. Over the

course of its lifetime, significant parts of the object were overpainted, as suggested by the contrast between the overall whitened exterior and the clear, bright blue and intact gold leaf painted wells. There may also be areas that were filled with plaster, something that could be confirmed by examining the dish using X-Ray analysis or ultraviolet light. Stickers on the object's base tell us it once belonged to the late antiquities dealer Charles Dikran Kelekian, that it was exhibited at the 1940 Exhibition of Persian Art in New York, and that it was loaned to the Fogg Art Museum, now part of Harvard Art Museums, in Cambridge, Massachusetts. What we may never know, however, is exactly how the object left—or was taken out of—Iran.

## Thank you for listening. This has been Ladan on Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!

