



Today's Masterpiece: [*Bottle with landscape and flowing river*](#), 17th century.
Stonepaste, underglaze and luster decoration. Gift of Mrs. Irving T. Snyder.
Conservation funded by Haleh and Massih Tayebi, 1964.72.



Welcome back to **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA**. This is your host, **Hannah Hyden**, Research Assistant for South Asian and Islamic Art at The San Diego Museum of Art. Drop in each month to hear a new mini talk led by SDMA curators or guests focusing on works from the Museum's collection.

On a pear-shaped ceramic bottle created in Iran at the end of the seventeenth century, meandering blue-gray rivers cut diagonally through a dense forest of floral sprays and leaf tendrils painted in a shining copper-red luster. In this week's episode, a masterpiece of Persian pottery shows us how material culture throughout the seventeenth century broke with tradition to reflect the first great era of globalization.

From as early as the fourteenth century, blue-and-white Chinese porcelain circulated throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. However, it wasn't until the late sixteenth century that local potters were able to match the appearance of Chinese originals more closely. This was made possible by the innovation of stonepaste, a replacement for earthenware that was white in color and perfected over several centuries to imitate the thin and smooth quality of the kaolin clay used in Chinese porcelain. Potters in Iran replicated Chinese models with great precision, gradually adapting motifs to suit their own preferences and meet the changing taste of global markets.

For the first time in history, global trade was predominantly conducted and controlled by Western nations, which had amassed outposts and factories reaching from Indonesia to the Netherlands. Iran supplied trading companies such as the English and Dutch East India Companies with fine export goods, in particular silk and wool, but also other wares, including ceramics. Within Iran, the influx of foreign commodities like fine Chinese ceramics, prints from Europe, or paintings from India were enthusiastically consumed. These imported goods often served as status symbols for elites living in dynamic cosmopolitan cities like Isfahan, the imperial capital of the Safavid empire in Iran.

The bottle we examine today reflects the openness to experimentation and innovation that epitomized seventeenth century Iran. In the 1650s, the ceramic technique of luster decoration, which had not been used in Iran for several centuries, was revitalized by local potters. Rather than drawing upon Chinese sources, designs found on 17th-century lusterware tended to be largely Iranian in origin. Yet, interestingly, this bottle takes references from *both* Chinese blue-and-white imports and contemporary illustrated paintings and wall tiles from Iran. From the serpentine rivers traversing the bottle's body and the upward snaking tree-like roots, the object's composition — that is, the arrangement of its various elements — mimic Safavid manuscript illustration. However, when looking closely at the vessel, one sees the peculiar little face of an animal apparently peeking out from under a speckled rock at its center. The reality,



however, may be something different. Comparing the SDMA bottle with Chinese porcelain and other Persian ceramic wares from this period suggests that this creature is most likely a mistranslation of a popular motif found on Chinese porcelain, that of a deer curled up with its legs folded underneath its body. The rapidly growing demand for mass-produced objects might explain the rushed brushstrokes we see on the SDMA bottle, which resulted in a stark difference in color among the animal's body, face, and limbs. So, what was intended to be the dappled body of a deer appears instead as a large rock, crushing the deer beneath it!

Moving to the base of the bottle, we find an imitation Chinese seal-mark, which, on a porcelain ware, would have indicated the Chinese dynasty and emperor associated with its production. While the Iranian potter's inclusion of this detail might appear to indicate that the artist wanted to make a Chinese copy, the novel combination of motifs and glazes says otherwise. The traditional Persian luster flowers are painted as large as Chinese motifs, demonstrating that the painter considered the two motifs to be of equal importance. The bottle therefore reflects over a century of innovation and adaptation in a rapidly changing world.

Thank you for listening. This has been **Hannah** on **Masterpiece Minute at Virtual SDMA!**



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