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A Study on Islamic Human Figure Representation in Light of a Dancing Scene

Islamic decoration does indeed know human figures. This is a controversial subject¹, as many Muslims believe that there can be no figural art in an Islamic context, basing their beliefs on the Hadith. While figural forms are rare in Muslim religious buildings, in much of the medieval Islamic world, figural art was not only tolerated but also encouraged.²

¹ Richard Ettinghausen, 'Islamic Art,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, (1973) xxxiii, 2-52, Nabil F. Safwat, 'Reviews of Terry Allen: Five Essays on Islamic Art,' ix. 131, Sebastopol, CA, 1988, *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies (BSOAS)*, (London: University of London, 1990), liii . 134-135 [no. 1].

² James Allan, 'Metalwork Treasures from the Islamic Courts,' *National Council for Culture, Art and Heritage*, 2004, 1.

The aim of this research is to develop a comprehensive framework for understanding figurative art. This research draws attention to the popularization of the human figures and their use in Islamic art as a means of documenting cultural histories within Muslim communities and societies. Drinking, dancing and making music, as well as pastimes like shooting fowl and chasing game, constitute themes in Islamic figurative representations.³

Out of a number of dancing scenes, in particular, I have selected two examples from the Seljuqs of Iran and Anatolia in the 12th-13th centuries.⁴ One scene occurs on a ceramic jar (Pl. 1) and the other on a metal candlestick (Pl. 2).⁵ Both examples offer an excellent account of the artistic tradition of the Iranian people, who since-antiquity have played an important role in the evolution of the arts and crafts of the Near East.⁶

The founder of the Seljuq dynasty, Tughril, took the title of Sultan in Nishapur in 1037 when he occupied Khurasan and the whole of Persia. In 1055 Sultan Tughril entered Baghdad and occupied Iraq and Syria. His successor Alp Arslan (1063-1072) annexed Armenia and captured Anatolia. After defeating the Byzantine army at the battle of Malzikert in 1072, the Seljuqs subsequently established an independent line of kings, the Sultanate of Rum, with their capital at Konya. The triumph of the Seljuqs had

³ Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 219.

⁴ *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East and North Africa*, Ed. Trevor Mostyn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 65.

⁵ Elf Gokcigdem, 'A Thematic Approach to Seljuk Imagery: Dancing Figures Found on a Group of Candlesticks,' *Sanat Tarihi Defterleri*, (Istanbul: 1988), 67-68.

⁶ Maurice S. Dimand, 'Treasures of Iranian Art,' *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, New Series, (January 1950) lix. 145-153 [no. 5].

far-reaching effects in the history of Islam.⁷ It meant that the eastern Islamic world was unified once more under a powerful dynasty, and that there was permanent settlement of the Turks in western Asia.

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, has the widest the breadth of media. Broadly speaking the objects reflect a technical excellence and a distinct artistic quality of this period. The patronage of the Seljuqs favored the development of the arts, which were encouraged not only by the Sultans but also by Emirs, the Atabegs, and the members of merchants' families.⁸ The portable nature of some small objects, which could be traded freely over long distances, encouraged the spread of decorative fashions and styles. These became mediums of exchange within the economic and cultural sphere of the Near East.⁹

Technological developments in Iranian ceramics, including wheel throwing, opened up new possibilities in shapes and glazes. The shapes range from the ubiquitous simple work bowls, which are often unglazed, to elaborately decorated water jugs covered with various glazes.¹⁰ In the art of metalworking, the most important

⁷ For historical background see, *Persian Art Before and After Mongol Conquest*, (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Museum of Art, April 9-May 17, 1959), 7, *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the Middle East and North Africa*, Ed. Trevor Mostyn, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 65; Barbara Finster, 'The Seljuq as Patrons: the Art of the Seljuqs in Iran and Anatolia,' *Proceedings of a Symposium held in Edinburgh in 1982*, Ed. Robert Hillenbrand, California, 1994, the general political history of Seljuq period is discussed in C.E. Bosworth, *The political and Dynastic History of the Iranian World (A.D. 1000-1217)*, v. 1-202.

⁸ Richard Ettinghausen, 'The Flowering of Seljuq Art,' *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 1970, iii.113-131.

⁹ Geza Fehervari, *The Keir Collection, Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection*, (London, 1967), 55-56.

¹⁰ On the portable objects of the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries see, *The Cambridge History of Iran, The Saljuq and Mongol Periods*, Ed. J.A. Boyle, (Cambridge, 1968), v. 643; Richard Ettinghausen & Oleg

innovation introduced by the Seljuqs was the technique of inlaying bronze and brass vessels with gold and silver. Cast bronze vessels intended for everyday use were manufactured and decorated with engraving, relief, and openwork.¹¹

The art of this late Seljuq period is distinguished particularly by extensive use of figural expression.¹² The dancing scenes examined in this research were produced approximately during the late Seljuq period. The first case is a ceramic jar coated with a turquoise glaze whose body is richly molded with decorative designs. The body depicts dancing women. The design shows six dancers joining hands below their breasts and hiding parts of their bodies (Pl.1a). The figures stand against a floral background. The dancers follow the curve of the jar body and then fall in a straight line. They are wearing tunics; two armlets are carefully drawn on both forearms. Head covers vary from one dancer to another. One of the dancers is wearing a turban with the two fluttering ribbons of cloth (*taylasan*) hanging down in two long lines while the other has a halo that is not quite circular. The legs are shown in profile and are bent as if they were moving together to the left joining their hands. The dancers' heads are turning backwards, leaning slightly toward their shoulders.. Their faces are the fully-rounded

Grabar, *The Art and Architecture of Islam, 650-1250*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 343; on the attribution of luster-painted ware to Rey, see Ernst J. Grube, *Islamic Pottery of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century* in the Keir Collection, (Faber and Faber Ltd, 1976), 210.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia Iranica*, Ed. Ehsany Arshater, (New York: Encyclopedia Iranica Foundation, 2003) xi,72-74, For general information on Islamic metalwork, including Iranian inlaid metalwork see, James W. Allan, *Islamic Metalwork: The Nuhad Es-said Collection*, (London, 1982), Linda Komaroff, 'Pen-case and Candlestick: Two sources for the Development of Persian Inlaid Metalwork,' *The Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 1988, 89-90, Nasser D. Khalili, *The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture*, (Worth Press Ltd., 2005),112.

¹² For an overview of human images up to the twelfth century see, Eva Baer, 'The Human Figure in Early Islamic Art: Some Preliminary Remarks' *Muqarnas*, 1999, xvi,32-41, Oya Pancaroglu, *A World Unto Himself: The Rise of a New Human Image in the Late Seljuk Period (1150-1250)*, (Cambridge: Harvard University, May 2000), 14-16.

Iranian "moon face" celebrated in literature with unchanging features and painted accordingly in manuscripts and on pottery. The eyes are straight lines topped by arcs, the lines extending far beyond the arcs, as in a miniature painting. The nose is long and the very tiny mouth is represented by a single inverted arc. The waving lines of the body and clothing, such as the wide sleeve, accentuate the movement of the dancers. The decoration balances figurative and abstract motifs.

The second example is a candlestick cast in bronze with traces of silver and gold inlay (Pl.2a). The shape of this candlestick, with its concave body and decorated socket contains three roundels which enclose representations of princes horseback-riding. The fitting of the horses once highlighted with gold inlay, is now barely visible. Between the roundels are three dancing scenes, each consisting of five dancers standing with joined hands and arms crossing over another. These dances wear long robes falling well below the knees with a double lapel crossing over their breasts fastened by a very narrow belt. Two decorated gloves are carefully engraved on both arms. The headdress has curious triangles and three horizontal lines, emphasizing the separation between the headdress and the robe. Dancers have haloes around their heads. The feet are in profile in the shape of short pointed boots. Straight, strict engraved lines characterize the dancers' performance and bodies.

There are two separate issues to be resolved in this discussion: first, the different explanations accounting for the meaning of the dancing figures and second, the historical and technical correspondence between ceramics and metalwork in Khurasan and Anatolia in the 12-13th Centuries.

First, let us turn to the explanation of the dancing scene¹³. Much has been written on the meaning of figural representations in Islamic art. Umayyad palaces abound with figural representations. By the Abbasid period there had been a reduction in both scale and physicality in the use of figural representation, while the palaces of the caliphs at Samarra had frescos of dancing girls.¹⁴ The shift happened in the art of the Persian-speaking world and, later, within Islamic principalities of India, the most recognizable group of images contains representations of legendary heroes. In this discussion I shall concentrate on portable arts that were highly developed in Islamic material culture and display a similar decoration.

¹³ There are several jugs, ewers, bottles and candlesticks with similar dancing figures such as. A Seljuq ceramic ewer (no. 113CER1588TSR), coated with a dark cobalt blue glaze with moulded decoration, Iran, 12th Century see, Geza Fehervari, *Ceramics of the Islamic World* in the Tareq Rajab Museum, New York, 2000, pl. 113, p. 103, Nishapour Bottle, late 12th C, H.12 inch. The Mahboubian Collection, see, *Treasures of Persian Art After Islam*, pl. 196, a candlestick decorated with dance scene belongs to Sultanate of Rum, 13th to early 14th century, Victoria and Albert Museum *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World 8th-18th Centuries*, London, 1982, p. 363, another candlestick belonging to the group under discussion is decorated with related dancing scenes, C. Boisgirad, A de Heeckeren/Droust River Gauche, *Art d'Iran*, (Sale catalogue), 10 December 1976, [no. 4], G. Ventrone, 'Una brocca Selgiuchide Consccna di danza' in *Arte Orientale in Italia*, Rome, 1071, figs 14, 15. Ettinghausen was among the first to study it and to put forward an explanation, "Before the most recent interpretation by Bausani" Their view is that it is a representation of a religious dance by Zoroastrians. (Zoroastrianism is the religion and philosophy based on the teaching ascribed to the prophet, while the law forbids mixed dancing, Zoroastrian men and women are permitted to dance together and play music as part of worship in special places like temples or covered buildings where participants join hands forming a circle with the dance leader and other musicians in the center), others said that it might be a Turkish dancing step calling to mind a similar one illustrated on 13th century albarello, where the same formula appears to have been used for decoration, see ceramic jar with standing figures and vegetal background motifs, Seljuk Iran, Reyy 12-13th C, Boston, Museum of Fine Arts, 31-721 By reviewing the previously mentioned objects, it is possible therefore to say that the dancing scenes were not connected to the religious life but closely associated with high culture of the ruling groups, whatever their nationality. This observation is by no means proof in itself.

¹⁴ In objects decorated with dancing scene musicians, hunters, dancers, and cupbearers are juxtaposed with a seated figure, who usually holds a cup filled, presumably with wine. The earliest of these scenes on luxury objects may be the well known series of Umayyad, Abbasid and Fatimid luster pottery show individual women apparently dancing with some objects in hands (See, Eva Hoffman, 'The Beginning of the Illustrated Arabic Book: An Intersection Between Art and Scholarship,' *Muqarnas*, XVII, (Leiden Brill, 2000), 40-42. It appears also in ivory boxes from Umayyad Spain. In Persian luster bowls it is famous to see a drinking party with singers and dancers. There are many examples of such figures in Persian *mina'i* (enameled) ceramics of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, arranged in multi-figure compositions.

The representations on the portable objects feature single and paired figures. Figures are often grouped in cycles and contained within non-figural decoration. These representations are seldom accompanied by explanatory inscriptions. Where there are inscriptions, they do not explain the figural representations they accompany but rather indicate the general character of an image. Most figural images are explained as a part of a princely scene. The candlestick depicts another form of entertainment: auspicious animals appear with the dancing women on the rim, evoking the hunting pastime.

This note provides an important clue for explaining the dancing scenes which depict the pastimes, especially the royal feast, as a way of indicating their imperial status. Drinking, watching female dancers, and hunting are all recreations belonging to this imperial cycle, which existed already in Sassanian art. These themes were developed further in the Umayyad, Abbasid, Fatimid and Persian periods to reflect not only the etiquette of formal occasions but more generally to indicate royal celebration of wealth, and cultural prosperity or political stability. However, it is not possible to conclusively prove the meaning for the dancing scenes, since the contemporaneous folklore which would explain them has been lost.¹⁵

Muslims have had different views about dancing. Throughout Islamic history, there have been times of greater acceptance or rejection of dance. It is possible to

¹⁵ While different objects may have shared similar vocabulary they might not convey any single shared meaning because meaning might be tied to reception and circumstances of use. The imagery on the same works could be perceived and interpreted differently by different users and viewers, see Eva R. Hoffman, 'Christian-Islamic Encounters on Thirteenth-Century Ayyubid Metalwork: Local Culture, Authenticity, and Memory,' *Gesta*, 2004, 132.

suggest that dancing has been a part of Islamic folk ceremonial and royal ritual; in other words these scenes provide a glimpse of a royal pastime.

Another issue concerns the artistic, technical and historical correspondence between ceramic and metalwork in Iran and Anatolia in the 12-13th Centuries. In both selected objects, the human figures in the dancing scenes are free and not intersected by circles or medallions of different shapes. This composition is particularly suitable to the idea of pleasure and dancing, which can be described as the rhythmic movement of the body, usually to music and within given space, for the purpose of expressing an idea or emotions, releasing energy, or simply taking delight in the movement itself. It is notable that there is an effort to focus on the body movement with joining hands and similarities in pose, despite the conservative performance and formalization of rhythm in the Anatolian candlestick as though the dancers were armies in a princely scene. The rhythm of the dancing figure on the jar has a freedom and lightness far removed from the candlestick

It has been known throughout the ages, that techniques applied to ceramics imitate those applied to metal partly because the former medium allows the ceramicist a wide variety of technical freedom, and also because clay is cheap, thus permitting the ceramicist to copy objects from more expensive media. By the Mongol invasion, important technological changes occurred in both ceramics and metalwork. The problem therefore raises the question of ceramic and metalwork typologies as well as technological and economical factors in the Seljuq period. More significant is the fact that, whereas potters had previously imitated the forms and decorations of metal

vessels,¹⁶ the reverse occurred as both shape and design features of ceramic vessels were imitated in bronze.¹⁷ However, the formalistic design of the dancing scene in the Anatolian candlestick indicates that metalwork objects possessed greater prestige than ceramic ones. Figural decoration does not seem to adapt according to the function of the object it decorates.

If the conclusion that late Seljuq metalwork designs owe much to Iranian ceramics is correct, then there are further questions to be clarified. The first is that decorative pottery still held a dominant role within the minor arts in the 12th-13th centuries, and the second concerns the common style of decoration between the Seljuqs of Iran and Anatolia and whether that influence was due to migration of craftsmen¹⁸ For the time being it is best to leave the question open. If it does turn out to be the case that pottery played a dominant role, it would still leave us with the separate problems of the identity of craftsmen who designed and executed the candlestick. That some were Iranian is, of course, to be expected in the artistic milieu of the Sultanate of Rum.

¹⁶ Yasser Tabbaa, 'Bronze Shapes in Iranian Ceramics of the Twelfth and the Thirteenth Centuries,' *Muqarna iv* (Leiden E.J. Brill, 1987), . It is of some relevance to note here that Anatolia offers comparable cases of conflicting trends, often united as in architecture. Konya in Seljuq times springs to mind with its monuments reflecting Syrian and Iranian ideas, patterns and techniques.

¹⁷ An enormous expansion of figurative representation are the development of an iconography based on Central Asian models, resulting in the creation of a special presentational type for the ruler's image and another for the ruling class, is probably the most interesting achievement of the period. A vast territory stretching from Central Asia to the Bosphorus and the center of Syria, is united in one culture that dominated both eastern and western Islam for at least a century after the down fall of the Seljuk rulers of Iran, see Ernst J. Grube, (London: The World of Islam, 1966), 76

¹⁸ Remark on style, techniques and craftsmen see The Cambridge History of Iran, The Saljuq and Mongol Periods, The Visual Arts 1050-1350, v ed. J.A. Boyle, (Cambridge:1968), 644, Arthur Upham Pope, A Survey of Persian Art from Prehistoric Times to the Present, IV, (New York:1967), 2490.



Pl.1. Ceramic jar, Molded, blue glaze, Seljuq Iran, 12th Century, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 57.51.16 (gift DNC)



Pl.2. Cast and turned bronze with traces of silver and gold inlay, Seljuqs of Rum, 13th Century, dimensions: 20.5x19.4 cm (8 1/16x 7 5/8 in.), Harvard University Art Museums, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Department of Islamic and Later Indian Art (2 December 2006-30 June 2008) 349.1983 (private collection)



Pl.1a. Details "dancing scene" of pervious ceramic jar, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 57.51.16 (gift DNC)



Pl.2a. Details "dancing scene" of pervious candlestick, Arthur M. Sackler Museum, 349.1983 (private collection)