

Crossed Flowers: Interconnection of Decorative Patterns on Blue-and-White Ceramics in Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey (15th - 17th Centuries)

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1. Introduction

Ceramic is a long-lasting material that can be used as a tracer for cultural connections between geographical zones and chronological periods. If we think about the evidence of the network of roads commonly referred to as “silk roads”, ceramic plays the main role in the understanding of the dynamics of commercial and cultural exchanges. Unlike spices or textiles, which are highly affected by the passage of time, this material, even when discovered in broken sherds, is a rather reliable witness. In the Eurasian space of 15th - 17th centuries, ceramic, in particular, that of blue-and-white type, is a useful indicator of the connectivities between territories located in today’s Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey. These connectivities have been possible not only through the transmission of different material supports, but also thanks to the circulation of artists and therefore techniques and specific *savoir-faire* along with them.

Chinese blue-and-white porcelain has reached Western and Central Asian territories since the late 14th century, first in the main cities of the Timurid Empire and then through Iran to Turkey. Two of the biggest collections are the Ardebil collection in Iran and the one in the Topkapi Museum in Istanbul. The introduction of these objects inspired the local potters to develop new decorative techniques and therefore new types of ceramic productions that shared common patterns, which were reinterpreted by local potters in different

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ways. Besides Samarkand, other Timurid centers, in particular the Khorasan kiln sites like Nishapur and Mashhad, supplied the court with blue-and-white ceramics. After the appearance of blue-and-white porcelain and a number of Timurid potters in the Ottoman Empire, Turkish kilns also started to integrate some of these patterns in their own products during the 16th century.. The impact of these motifs is also found on architectural elements, like the tiles in the Muradiye Mosque in Edirne, probably painted by Timurid artists. These patterns continued to be reintegrated in Turkey and Iran even after dynastic changes, like in Safavid Iran blue-and-white ceramic of the 17th century. They became therefore part of the new artistic identities, even a long time after the creation moment of the original source of inspiration. The transmission of these decorative patterns through different centuries and geographical regions on an extremely durable material like ceramic helps to identify cultural exchange and interconnections in early modern and modern Eurasian space.

Extensive works have been published on some of these subjects: concerning Timurid ceramic ware inspired by porcelain artifacts, Bailey, Golombek, and Mason edited remarkable research in 1996,¹ and the two latter scholars, jointly with Proctor and Reilly, published in 2014 an excellent work on Safavid blue-and-white pottery.² Concerning Iznik pottery's implementation of Eurasian patterns, Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby dedicate a few chapters in their comprehensive compilation of Iznik ceramics published in 1989.³ An interesting article by Walter Denny published in 1974 describes the Chinese themes integrated into blue-and-white Islamic pottery, with a special focus on Ottoman production.⁴ It is also worth mentioning the researches carried by John Carswell on the spreading of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and its impact on other ceramic productions.⁵

¹ Lisa Golombek, Robert B. Mason and Gauvin A. Bailey, *Tamerlane's Tableware. A New Approach to Chinoiserie Ceramics of Fifteenth and Sixteenth-Century Iran* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1996).

² Lisa Golombek, Robert B. Mason, Patricia Proctor and Eileen Reilly, *Persian Pottery in the First Global Age. The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2013).

³ Nurhan Atasoy and Julian Raby, *Iznik: the Pottery of Ottoman Turkey* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989).

⁴ Walter B. Denny, "Blue-and-White Islamic Pottery on Chinese Themes", *Boston Museum Bulletin* 368 (1974): 76-99.

⁵ John Carswell, *Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain Around the World* (London: British Museum Press, 2000).

The objective of this paper is to show the interconnectivity of decorative patterns as a tracer of cultural exchanges in the Eurasian space, in particular Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey, between the 15th and 17th centuries, by choosing a few eloquent examples of these “traveling motifs” originally inspired by 14th and 15th-century Chinese porcelain. This paper does not aim to do a comprehensive analysis of all the decorative patterns originated in Chinese blue-and-white porcelain and reworked in ceramic artifacts from Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey, which would be unimaginable in an article of few pages. The examples have been chosen according to wide circulation and a large number of their reinterpretations, with a focus on interlocking flowers that could be seen also as a metaphor or artistic connectivities between different cultures. The next section discusses the history of cultural interaction pertaining to blue-and-white ceramic production and design within the Eurasian space. The third section presents commonalities in peripheral bands, which are decorative patterns that are mainly on the rim or the reverse side. The fourth section focuses on center medallions, and particularly traces flowers and grapes as the most commonly found “travelling patterns.” The final section concludes and highlights the ways in which the motifs that have traveled is only one aspect of a bigger dynamic of connectivities, such as circulation of techniques and technology, of different ways of thinking, and people in various parts of the Eurasian space in different chronological periods.

2. Blue-and-White Ceramic as Tracer of Cultural Exchanges

Blue-and-white ceramic is a type of decorated glazed stoneware, fritware, or porcelain, constituted mainly by a blue decoration on a white ground, less frequently by the white decoration on a blue ground. The original model of most of the blue-and-white ceramics of this period is Chinese porcelain with underglaze cobalt-blue decoration. Therefore, it is common to use the word *chinoiserie* when referring to ceramic objects made in the Persian or Ottoman worlds that show patterns or motifs inspired or copied by Chinese porcelain ware. It is a meaningful word that takes us to the origins of this story when Chinese porcelain with underglaze blue decoration began to reach Central and Western Asian territories by the mid-14th century. The first blue-and-white porcelains that reached Central Asia were probably not exported on a massive scale, which encourages us to think that these objects were not common trade

goods, but rare vessels donated as gifts in diplomatic contexts. The examples of the Chinese blue-and-white porcelain of the end of the 14th and beginning of the 15th centuries found in Central Asia, Iran and Turkey have strong similarities with porcelains of the Chinese imperial collections: the extremely high quality of these pieces supports the thesis of their exceptional status, inside and outside the Chinese territories. Also, we know from historical Chinese sources⁶ that porcelain objects were part of the diplomatic presents that were given to Persian and Central Asian embassies in exchange for horses, metals, and other goods. Depicting this context is necessary to understand the evolution of the cross-cultural dynamics that will be discussed in this paper. Recognizing a precise form or a decorative pattern by knowing its original model facilitates the understanding of the transmission and transformations of this pattern in different geographical, chronological, and cultural contexts.

Although it is correct to say that the prototypes of blue-and-white decoration on porcelain are the Chinese wares produced during the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368) in the official kilns of Jingdezhen (Jiangxi, Southern China), it is important to remember that the origin of cobalt, the pigment used to create these decorations, as well as the idea of applying it on an object surface (glass or ceramics) were not prerogatives of the Chinese world. We can trace back the origin to Ancient Egypt, where cobalt-rich inlay was applied on white faience since the 14th century BC.⁷

Persian potters have also been using cobalt blue as a decorative element on ceramics, for example on *lâjvardina* ware. The Persian court historian and member of the potter family in Kashan, Abu'l Qasim, describes in the 13th century the use of the pigment which originated the blue-colored glaze:

“The sixth is the stone *lâjvard*, which the craftsmen call Sulaimâni. Its source is the village of Qamsar in the mountains around Kâshân, and the people there claim that it was discovered by

⁶ See, among others, the *Annals of the Ming*, the official dynastic compilation: in chapter 332, a Chinese embassy is said having brought silk and porcelain in response to a tribute mission from Shiraz and Isfahan in 1419.

⁷ Nigel Wood and Mike Tite, “Blue and White - the Early Years: Tang China and Abbasid Iraq compared”, in *Transfer: The Influence of China on World Ceramics (Colloquies on Art & Archaeology in Asia of the Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art)*, ed. Stacey Pierson, (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 2009), 21.

the prophet Sulaimân. It is like white silver shining in a sheath of hard black stone. From that comes *lâjvard* color, like that of *lâjvard*-colored glaze.”⁸

Not only the idea of applying cobalt on ceramics but probably also the pigment used by the Chinese potters itself had a Western Asian origin: a comparative analysis between Chinese and Islamic cobalt pigments on ceramics seems to support the theory that Chinese porcelain of the Yuan and early Ming dynasties used the cobalt imported from the Islamic world.⁹ Remembering this second important point is useful to approach the subject not as a unilateral dynamic of artistic influence from the Chinese to the Islamic world, but as a complex ramification and intersection of techniques and esthetic elements concerning ceramic technology and taste in the Eurasian space.

Although this paper focuses on motifs and patterns of the ceramic wares, it is important to recall two other aspects. The first concerns the aspect of the glaze: as kaolin was not available in the Persian and Ottoman empires and therefore porcelain was impossible to produce, local kilns managed to create very similar effects on the local ceramic such as whiteness, glaze brilliance, and a certain degree of impermeability. Also, the shapes of the vessels show a strong connection with Chinese wares, as the most common pieces of blue-and-white ceramics such as large dishes, bowls, and ewers, also seem to be inspired by late 14th-century porcelain. Nevertheless, the Western and Central Asian repertoire of forms, in particular, that of Islamic metalware, can be regarded as the original inspiration source for the Chinese potters who transposed it on their own material. Especially under the reign of Emperor Yongle (1402-1424) of the Ming dynasty, a large number of porcelain vessels were copies of Islamic shapes: in addition to large dishes, sometimes with foliate rim, ewers, large basins, pen-boxes, pilgrim flasks, candlesticks, etc. followed the manners of the original Islamic prototype.¹⁰

⁸ J. W. Allan, “Abu’l Qasim’s Treatise on Ceramics,” *Iran* 11 (1973): 112.

⁹ Wen Rui and A.M. Pollard, “Comparative Study of Cobalt Blue Pigment on Chinese Blue-and-White Porcelain and Islamic Glazed Pottery, Thirteenth-Seventeenth Centuries” in *Scientific Research on Historic Asian Ceramics*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 2009), 31.

¹⁰ Basil Gray, “The Influence of Near Eastern Metalwork on Chinese Ceramics,” *Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society* 18 (1940-41): 47-60 and “Persian Influence on Chinese Art from the Eighth to the Fifteenth Centuries,” *Iran* 1 (1963): 13-18.

The most common shape decorated in blue-and-white types in Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey between the 15th and 17th centuries were large dishes, with a diameter measuring c. 30-50 cm. This shape is also the one that offers the possibility for a significant analysis of the decorative structure of the piece. Large dishes generally have a plain surface of bigger dimensions than small bowls or ewers. The central space of the inner side, usually framed by a circle that separates the tondo from the cavetto, also allows designs of bigger size or with more articulated motifs. Therefore, priority will be given to the analysis of the patterns applied to this shape. The following examples of decorative patterns give an insight into the wide circulation and transformation of motifs in various parts of the Eurasian space in different chronological periods.

3. Peripheral Bands: Two Examples of “Traveling Patterns”

On dishes, peripheral bands are decorative patterns that are mainly on the rim or the reverse side. Due to their position in the decorative structure and their reduced space often followed by limited attention to detail compared to center medallions, the peripheral patterns are usually the first part of the dish to be modified when transposed to a new object. The examples chosen for this paper are the pattern called “lotus panel”, usually depicted on the outside face of the dish, and the “wave-and-crest design”, one of the most represented rim motif on blue-and-white ceramics of the referred period.

3.1. *The Lotus Panel*

The decorative band is commonly known as “lotus panel” appear to be one of the most imitated decorative pattern on Persian ceramics of the 15th century inspired by 14th-century Chinese porcelain (Fig. 22.1.) The name was first defined by John A. Pope in his study of 14th-century porcelain in the Topkapi Saray Museum.¹¹ Usually depicted on the external face of the ware, for example on the outside rim of a dish or the outside feet of a bowl, it is a succession of soft-contoured rectangles with a decoration in it, usually a scroll and a circle. As a rather simple shape that does not need a large combination of elements, the lotus panel has gone through numerous transformations. Timurid potters represented these patterns on many objects, especially outside faces of dishes

¹¹ John A. Pope, *Fourteenth-century blue-and-white: a group of Chinese porcelains in the Topkapu Sarayi Müzesi, Istanbul*, (Washington: Smithsonian Institution, 1952).

and bowls. While the reverse of a dish exhibited at the Ulugh Beg Observatory in Samarkand (Fig. 22.2.) shows a more accurate imitation of the original design, on a bowl of the Scerrato collection,¹² the interior of the lotus panel, originally a coiled line with aro und below it, has been transformed in a grape-like motif. Another bowl, conserved at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Fig. 22.3.), shows the pattern reworked in a spiral along with small stylized floral sprays. The structure of the lotus band has been preserved but the introduction of a motif in the design gives to the bowl a completely new decorative concept.

Margaret Medley argues that this pattern finds its origin in the Islamic *lam-alif* combination:¹³ if the origin may be further discussed, the hypothesis of a connection between these is certainly valid. As noticed by John Carswell, an early example of Iznik production (Fig. 22.5.), dated c.1480 and probably inspired by a mid-14th-century Chinese dish (Fig. 22.4.), the lotus panel of the porcelain prototype is reinterpreted by the Ottoman potter in a *kufic* calligraphic scroll.¹⁴ On Iznik pottery of the 16th century, the original lotus panel is mostly a far-away souvenir, but on some examples, it has been integrated in a very original way. An Ottoman dish of this period (Fig. 22.6.) shows the interior pattern is constituted by a large central medallion with a motif of peonies, encircled by a collar of lobed arches. This element with a double enclosure is a clear re-elaboration of the 14th-century lotus panel.

Moving now to the Iranian world, particularly to the Safavid period, this design does not seem to have largely inspired the fantasy of the Iranian potter on large dishes, but it was rather used on jars, in a form inspired mainly by 16th-century Chinese pieces. On one hand, the chronological distance with the Yuan and early Ming prototypes was growing wider, and the new Iranian taste had been distinguishing itself from the previous Timurid production. Another reason is probably the arrival of *kraak* porcelain, produced in China since the Wanli reign (1572-1620), which lead to the implementation of new decorative structures in the Persian production, in particular the typical radiating panels on the rim. It cannot be excluded,

¹² Golombek, *Tamerlane's Tableware*, 183, pl. 20b.

¹³ Margaret Medley, "Islam, Chinese porcelain and Ardabil", *Iran* 13 (1975): 34.

¹⁴ John Carswell, *Iznik Pottery*, (London: British Museum Press, 2006), 32.

moreover, that the *kraak* panel band has been inherited from the 14th-century lotus panel design.

3.2 *The Wave-and-Crest Design*

The wave-and-crest design, also called waves-and-rocks or breaking waves design, is a pattern used on borders, usually on rims of large dishes, which appeared on blue-and-white porcelain in the 14th century (Fig. 22.19.). It has a symbolic origin in Chinese art, belonging to the imagery of the literati culture. Through its representation on porcelain, however, it spread widely outside its original meaning. Early Timurid blue-and-white dishes often show this type of decorative band, especially in the dishes with a double or triple peony decoration usually with a Nishapur provenance (Fig. 22.7.). As high-quality Nishapur samples were reworking accurately early 15th-century porcelain dishes, the closeness of this rim design to its original model is remarkable. Nonetheless, the Iranian rims show a rather geometrical transposition of the waves, with closed semicircles interspersed with foam-like figures. The geometrization of the pattern is even more visible on another dish of the Nishapur production which shows a superposition of the semicircles while the foaming crests have been transposed in a closed spiral (Fig. 22.8.). During the Timurid period, this design was introduced not only into pottery but also into painting, for example on a manuscript of the *Shâhnâmeh* at the Topkapi collection.¹⁵ Timurid pottery is the one that mostly reused the wave-and-crest border or where, at least, the connection to the original model is clearly visible; nonetheless, some 17th-century examples also bear this motif on the rim. Two observed examples, a dish of the Victoria & Albert Museum (Fig. 22.9.) and another in the Aga Khan collection (Fig. 22.10.), appear to be close copies of early 15th century Chinese dishes, as not only the rim, but also the whole decorative structure and the central motif is being reproduced. The waves display a great dynamism and freedom that was mostly absent from Timurid examples, but these type of pieces are rare compared to the whole Safavid tradition. On most of the other 'Iranized' examples, the breaking waves on the rim leave the place to the imitation of *kraak* porcelain panels or new original decorative bands imagined by the Persian potter. A dish

¹⁵ Yolande Crowe, "Some Timurid Designs and their Far Eastern Connections", in *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Golombek and Maria Subtelny (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 172.

with a similar structure and central motif as the two mentioned samples and exhibited at the Reza Abbasi Museum in Tehran (Fig. 22.11.) reveals an extremely original mixture of Islamic geometry and the wave-and-crest design, completely redefined in a coiled scroll of vine leaves.

An original combination of the breaking waves design is also visible on the 16th-century Iznik dishes. On many examples of Ottoman dishes of this period, and not only on blue-and-white examples, is the transformation of the wave motif in a cloud-like stylized pattern, accompanied by little adjoining circles (Fig. 22.12.). It is known that Ottoman potters were acquainted with the breaking wave design, as seen on a dish of the early 16th century and conserved in Berlin, but the re-elaboration of it became a more common version and a typical feature of Iznik pottery.

4. The Central Medallion: A Floral Approach

The center medallion, also called “tondo,” has the main decorative role in the dish structure and it is the section where we “recognize the decorative intention of the whole vessel.”¹⁶ The medallion occupies a large surface and allows, even more, the realization of complex patterns with accurate details. In this paper, the focus is given to flowers as a significant example of widely “traveling patterns.” It is important to mention that this does not mean that other motifs were excluded: for example, landscapes, animals, fruits, etc. were also common subjects on blue-and-white ceramics. Nevertheless, flowers appear to be the most constant motifs which allow following more closely the evolution of the ceramic designs and the elements of connection between Central Asia, Iran, and Turkey.

4.1. Flowers

Interlocking flower blossoms and scrolls are the most wide-spread decorative patterns in the 14th and 15th century not only on Chinese porcelain, but also on blue-and-white ceramics produced in this period in the Ottoman and Persian worlds. They are represented as the main decorate motif on the tondo of dishes, but also as scrolls on the cavetto or flower sprays on the rim. On blue-and-white imported porcelain in Central or Western Asian countries, the main represented flowers are peonies, lotuses, chrysanthemums.

¹⁶ Golombek, *Tamerlane's Tableware*, 59.

The unfamiliarity of the Persian and Ottoman potters with Chinese flowers led to a large number of variations of the original blossom and, in many cases, to a complete innovation of the motif that shows only a distant memory of the inspiration model.

The Persian potter showed a great aptitude for the reinterpretation of floral motifs, a process that Bailey called “floriation,”¹⁷ and flowers have also been the main subject for new experimentation of decorative treatment. Two dishes of the Timurid period of the State Museum of History of Culture of Uzbekistan in Samarkand and exhibited together at the Ulugh Beg Observatory Museum¹⁸ show two different ways of reinterpreting a Chinese flower design and, more broadly, the whole structure of the decoration. The first one (Fig. 22.13.), already mentioned in reference to the lotus panel design (see the reverse of this dish in Fig. 22.2.) seem to be reproducing quite accurately the composition of an early 15th-century porcelain dish: however, compared to the Chinese prototype, the flower scroll leaves more blank space to ease the composition, and the peony is treated in a very different way.

The second dish (Fig. 22.14.) shows an accurate reproduction of the so-called “lotus pond” design, popular on blue-and-white porcelains of the second half of the 14th century. But, in contrast, the rest of the interior surface is treated in an innovative way: the black-contoured white squares are surrounded by blue bands that intersect all along the cavetto. The rim decoration is constituted by short tiny bands that fill up space. The Central Asian potter did not proceed in order to imitate but to ideate starting from an exotic entity. The lotus pond motif has been frequently used in the Timurid repertoire, and sherds of blue-and-white ceramics showing this pattern have been found also recently in Uzbekistan, for example in Bukhara (Fig. 22.15.).¹⁹ Also in Bukhara, the Ark museum exhibits a sherd of a blue-and-white ceramic dish with an interesting reworking of

¹⁷ Gauvin A. Bailey, “The Dynamics of Chinoiserie in Timurid and Early Safavid Ceramics” in *Timurid Art and Culture: Iran and Central Asia in the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Golombek and Maria Subtelny (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 180.

¹⁸ Published in the Samarkand museum catalogue, Akbar Chakimov, *Masterpieces of the Samarkand Museum: the State Museum of History of Culture of Uzbekistan* (Tashkent: Moziydan Sado, 2004), 159 and 162.

¹⁹ The author took part in the French-Uzbek archaeological mission in the Bukhara Oasis (dir. Rocco Rante and Djamal Mirzaakhmedov) in May 2019. A few sherds of this type have been found in the *shahrestân*.

a chrysanthemum design with an interlocking scroll of leaves and small palmettes (Fig. 22.16.).

“Floriation” was also a characteristic of the potter work in the Ottoman Empire. Even before the peak of Iznik kiln’s production, Ottoman evolution of the flower motifs show an intensification of the scroll’s details and a variation of the use of the colors on it. The naturalistic flowers started to branch out in an ornamentation process: the Ottoman potter had definitely abandoned the imitation to innovate new forms of decoration. Chinese lotuses and peonies become “turkificated” and sometimes replaced by tulips and carnations. The Ottoman taste allowed also the combination of various flower species on the same composition that led to a creation of an “unmistakable identity of its own.”²⁰ The potter orchestrated patterns and motifs from different sources and periods in a majestic way: elements of Chinese porcelain wares belonging to different periods, as well as Central-Asian and Iranian Timurid components are wisely rearranged and transformed in an original artistic creation. This connection was strengthened by the circulation of artists: a number of craftsmen from Iran operated in the Ottoman empire of the 15th-century.²¹ A very interesting example of the strong connection of Ottoman workshops with Chinese and Timurid flower designs is the interior of the Muradiye Mosque in Edirne, dated c. 1435 and formerly studied by John Carswell. The *mirhab* vault shows for the first time an underglaze blue on white ground decoration, a completely new technique for the Ottoman potter,²² which also strengthens the theory of connection to Jingdezhen blue-and-white porcelain, from a decorative as well as from a technological standpoint. Written sources report that the original single minaret was also decorated with tiles, though today no visible traces remain.²³ Yet the most interesting element of the mosque

²⁰ Gülru Necipoğlu, “Early Modern Floral: The Agency of Ornament in Ottoman and Safavid Visual Culture”, in *Histories of Ornament: From Global to Local*, ed. Gülru Necipoğlu and Alina Payne, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2016), 146.

²¹ Gülru Necipoğlu, “From International Timurid to Ottoman: A Change of Taste in Sixteenth-Century Ceramic Tiles”, in *Muqarnas VII: An Annual on Islamic Art and Architecture*, ed. Oleg Grabar, (Leiden: Brill, 1990), 136.

²² Carswell, *Iznik Pottery*, 20.

²³ Gülgün Yılmaz, “Edirne’nin Erken Osmanlı Devri Yapılarında Çini Süsleme” (*Tile Ornaments in Edirne’s Early Ottoman Era Architecture*) *Trakya Üniversitesi Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 10, no. 5 (2015): 68.

interior is the wall with hexagonal blue-and-white tiles (Fig. 22.17.). Unfortunately, the mosque's wall has been vandalized and a part of the hexagonal tiles was stolen in recent years,²⁴ but most of them are still at their original emplacement. More than five hundred tiles show an enormous variety of motifs in fifty-three different kinds of designs. On each tile, the flowers are symmetrically arranged, very often in a scheme employing seven flowers, three for each side, and a central one. The types of flowers and the choice of the blue tonality on a bright white ground are an Islamic reinterpretation, more geometrical, of the center medallion motifs of 15th-century porcelain dishes (Fig. 22.18.). It has been argued that the work of these painted tiles could have been realized by the so-called "masters of Tabriz," a vague term which has been hardly associated to a specific group of people, due to the lack of evidence except for their inscriptions in architectural contexts or their names mentioned in archival documents.²⁵ Generally, this expression includes Iranian artists working in the service of Ottoman sultans, an element that would strongly reinforce the theory of the Persian and Ottoman connection in the ceramic industry during the 15th and 16th centuries. It is possible to provide a time frame for the three main influxes of Persian artisans in Turkey: in 1420-1430, mainly constituted by potters from Samarkand and Central Iran, in 1440-1460 by ceramists from Khorasan, and in the 1470s by a Turkmen group.²⁶ Even during the 16th century Iranian craftsmen from the Safavid capital, Tabriz, traveled to Turkey to join the Ottoman court artists, bringing along with them their skills and their technology.

Safavid ceramic productions were also marked by a large use of floral motifs, in particular the ones of Tabriz, Kerman, and Mashhad. The early 15th-century porcelain models were chronologically distant but were still used as a source of inspiration, while the new style of *kraak* porcelain at the end of the 16th century was implemented in the contemporary repertoire of the Iranian artists. Apart for a few close copies of the central floral spray of lotuses and peonies, mentioned above, the Safavid potter redistributed the floral sprays and scrolls

²⁴ "Muradiye Mosque in Edirne". Turkish Archeological News. Accessed September 2019. <https://turkisharchaeonews.net/object/muradiye-mosque-edirne>.

²⁵ Khalida Mahi, "Les Maîtres de Tabriz', céramistes dans l'empire ottoman : Une mise au point sur leur identification", *Eurasian Studies* 15 (2017): 38.

²⁶ Sandra Aube, *La céramique architecturale en Iran sous les Turkmènes Qarâ Qoyunlu et Âq Qoyunlu (c.1450-1500)*, (PhD diss., Université Paris-Sorbonne, 2010), 341.

with his own esthetic view, combining it with traditional Persian motifs or simply inventing hybrid patterns. The originality of the combination of Chinese and local motifs was highlighted by the use of an especially white body, very similar to the appearance of the Chinese fired clay.²⁷ Just like the Ottomans, Iranian ceramists of the 16th and 17th centuries succeeded in taking advantage of the arrival of foreign schemes to create a sophisticated, high-quality complex product that is still regarded as a peak in the history of Persian pottery.

4.2. A Particular Motif: The Grape Design

The grape motif is also a significant example of the Eurasian connections of blue-and-white ceramics. Grapes as a decorative motif appeared on Chinese blue-and-white porcelain since the Yuan dynasty, but still in a discreet position on the general decorative structure: it is not until the reign of Yongle (1402-1424) of the Ming dynasty that this motif started to be depicted as central decoration on large dishes. The images of grapes in China have always been associated with its Central Asian origins, in particular with the Ferghana valley (大宛 “*Da Yuan*” in Chinese).

According to the *Shiji*, compiled by Sima Qian in the 1st century BC, the general Zhang Qian, envoy of the Han emperor from 138 to 119 BC was impressed by the quantity and types of grapes in Ferghana valley and brought some vines back to China. The most famous example of this category is the so-called “Mahin Banu dish” (Fig. 22.19.), in the Al Thani collection since 2015.²⁸ In addition to the high quality of the artwork, the dish became famous for his provenance pedigree: produced in the Ming dynasty’s imperial kilns, it reached Western Asia entering the collection of the princess Mahin Banu (1519-1562), daughter of the founder of the Safavid dynasty Shah Ismail I, according to the inscription on its base. The second inscription on the dish indicates the ownership of Shah Jahan, ruler

²⁷ Manouchehr Eskandarzadeh, “A description of the blue and white pottery of the Safavid era”, *Iranian Journal of Archeology - Shooshtar Branch (In Persian.)* no.2 (2013): 68-75.

²⁸ “The Mahin Banu Dish”. The Al Thani Collection. <https://www.thealthanicollection.com/the-collection/the-mahin-banu-dish>.

The dish was sold at Sotheby’s, New York in March 2015. See also Abolala Soudavar, “A Chinese Dish from the Lost Endowment of Princess Sultānum (925–69/1519–62)”, in *Iran and Iranian Studies: Essays in honor of Iraj Afshar*, ed. Kambiz Eslami, (Princeton: Zagros Press, 1998), 125-136.

of the Mughal Empire from 1628 to 1658 and constructor of the Taj Mahal. If the Mahin Banu dish is the most outstanding example of grapes dishes in connection to Western Asian territories, it is not the only one that reached Persian and Ottoman royal collections. A large number of similar pieces is to be found in the collection of the Topkapi Palace Museum in Istanbul and also in the Ardebil collection, now mostly conserved at the Iran National Museum in Tehran.

Timurid potters did not seem to have seen or reproduced these decorative patterns in their blue-and-white artworks, except for a few examples.²⁹ The Iznik kilns in the 16th century, however, implemented this decorative subject extensively in their production. The earliest Iznik pieces with grape decoration appear in the 1530s (Fig. 22.20.): the decorative structure of the porcelain dish is conserved, but the central motif of the grapes is designed in a more geometric way, with the grapes wider apart. On another Iznik example of the Antaki collection (Fig. 22.21.), the structure of the cavetto has been reinterpreted originally: the grapes have been reduced in size and redistributed on the edge of the medallion, and the central part of the motif has been transformed into the tree's trunk and branches. Also, the rim of the dish can be seen as a transition between the traditional wave-and-crest design and the Iznik rim with little circles and white clouds, as seen in Fig 22.12. The Ottoman dishes also show the originality of the Iznik production and the implementation of these patterns in a very new way: the use of different colors like green and turquoise in addition to blue gives a sense of dynamism to the tondo composition. This pattern is a significant example: not only it has been transposed to different ceramic productions but also it is a connective motif itself, which arrived in China through Central Asia, and re-exported to Western Asian collections through porcelain dishes.

5. Crossed Flowers: A Conclusion

Following the evolution of taste and technology concerning blue-and-white ceramics in the Eurasian space is a fascinating but complex adventure. Motifs and patterns can travel not only geographical but also chronological and social contexts. The decorative structure of

²⁹ A piece of the Royal Ontario Museum shows the transposition of the grape motif on the central medallion. See Golombek, *Tamerlane's Tableware*, 86.

an early 15th-century porcelain dish happened to be the inspiration, for example, for 15th century Iranian and Central Asian potters, then 16th century Turkish and even 17th-century Iranian ceramists. Not only the object that served as the original model travels; the representations and reinterpretations of its motifs, along with the techniques of realizations, spread even more than the model that served as inspiration. A motif originated in a precise time, place and circumstance will probably lose part - if not all - of its original meaning, being transposed to another symbolic system, or, more simply, assume a purely esthetic role. In this sense, considering the representation of motifs on Islamic blue-and-white ceramics as a pure imitation of the Chinese wares is reductive and incorrect. As we have seen, Chinese blue-and-white porcelain itself is not a purely Chinese invention. The complexity of its creation, from the origin of the pigment to the elaboration of the decorative structure along with the forming of hybrid Sino-Islamic shapes and designs, is probably the main reason of its allure through centuries in the history of ceramics.

Blue-and-white ceramic, like many other artistic expressions in history, appears to be a product of intercultural and interconnected societies. The motifs that have traveled through this material give us a small hint of a much bigger network of historical and cultural exchanges. The circulation of decorative patterns is only one aspect of a bigger dynamic of connectivities: it implies the circulation of techniques and technology, of different ways of thinking, and, the aspect that allows all the previous ones, the circulation of people. Like a tile inserted on wall decoration, the independent value of an object becomes even more significant when connected to other expressions that contributed to its realization. Like crossed flowers in a blue-and-white scroll, artistic expressions interlock with different ones: this gives rise to new cultural entities that have contributed to shaping the global society of the modern world, but also of the contemporary world we all live in.

Figures



Figure 22.1. Porcelain bowl, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), Jingdezhen kilns (China), Oriental Ceramic museum, Osaka. Photo: <https://bbs.arttron.net/thread-4918135-1-1.html>



Figure 22.2. Ceramic dish (reverse), Timurid period, 15th century, Ulugh Beg Observatory museum, Samarkand. Photographed by the author



Figure 22.3. Ceramic bowl, Timurid period, 15th century, Ashmolean museum, Oxford
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Figure 22.4. Porcelain dish, Yuan dynasty (1279-1368), Jingdezhen kilns (China), Topkapı Sarayı museum, Istanbul. Photo: Carswell, *Iznik Pottery*, 34



Figure 22.5. Ceramic dish, Iznik kilns (Turkey), c.1480, Louvre Museum, Paris
© 2007 Musée du Louvre / Chipault



Figure 22.6. Ceramic dish, Iznik kilns (Turkey), c.1575, Ashmolean museum, Oxford
© Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford



Figure 22.7. Ceramic dish, Timurid period, c. 1500, Nishapur (Iran), Royal Ontario museum, Toronto © ROM



Figure 22.8. Ceramic dish, Timurid period, early 16th century, Nishapur (Iran), British Museum, London
© The Trustees of the British Museum



Figure 22.9. Ceramic dish, Safavid period, 17th century, Iran, V&A museum, London
Photographed by the author



Figure 22.10. Ceramic dish, Safavid period, c. 1640, Kerman (Iran), Aga Khan museum, Toronto
© The Aga Khan Museum



Figure 22.11. Ceramic dish, Safavid period, 17th century, Iran, Reza Abbasi museum, Tehran (Iran). Photographed by the author



Figure 22.12. Ceramic dish, c. 1580, Iznik kilns (Turkey), National Museum of Renaissance, Écouen (France). Photographed by the author



Figure 22.13. Ceramic dish, Timurid period, 15th century, Ulugh Beg Observatory museum, Samarkand. Photographed by the author



Figure 22.14. Ceramic dish with lotus pond, Timurid period, 15th century, Ulugh Beg Observatory museum, Samarkand. Photographed by the author



Figure 22.15. Ceramic sherd, Timurid period, 15th century, excavated and photographed by the author in May 2019 in Bukhara (Uzbekistan)



Figure 22.16. Ceramic sherd, Timurid period, 15th century, Bukhara Ark Museum. Photographed by the author



Figure 22.17. Tiles of the Muradiye Mosque in Edirne (Turkey).
Photo: <https://humidfruit.wordpress.com/2012/11/24/tiles-at-the-muradiye-in-edirne>



Figure 22.18. Porcelain dish, Ming dynasty, Yongle period (1402-1424), Jingdezhen kilns (China), Ariana museum, Geneva. Photographed by the author



Figure 22.19. The 'Mahin Banu' dish, Ming dynasty, Yongle period (1402-1424), Jingdezhen kilns (China), Al Thani collection © Sotheby's



Figure 22.20. Ceramic dish, Iznik kilns (Turkey), c. 1530 © Christie's



Figure 22.21. Ceramic dish, Iznik kilns (Turkey), c. 1530-35, Antaki collection, Aleppo. Photo: Atasoy & Raby, *Iznik: the Pottery of Ottoman Turkey*, pl. 316

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