Metalware from Pakistan in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art

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The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is fortunate to contain in its collection seven examples of high quality metalware from Pakistan. The earliest work is a copper alloy censer dating from the Buddhist period (Fig. 1). It was likely made around the fourth century in the region of ancient Gandhāra. The Los Angeles censer (M.91.350.4a-c) is made in three parts: bowl, lid, and handle. The bowl and the lid together form a combustion chamber shaped like a *loṭa*. The lid has a flat flared mouth on a short neck, which functions as the primary escape channel for the smoke. The upper shoulder of the lid features a radiant register of lotus petals with pierced interspaces, which served as subsidiary escape passages for the smoke. Adjoining the lotus petals is narrow band of marching chevrons that serves as the border for a broad register of a scrolling grape vine with alternating bunches of fruit and clusters of leaves. A narrow plain border completes the cast decoration of the lid. The bowl is unadorned apart from a shallow foot. The lid is secured to the bowl by a pendant loop that is locked into place when a tang extending from the bowl is inserted through the loop and into the mouth of a *makara* spout that forms the near end of the handle. The tang cannot be inserted completely, however, which suggests that the current handle may have once belonged to a different but apparently contemporaneous combustion bowl. The handle has four parallel ribs immediately behind the *makara* head, and then a long fluted shaft that terminates in a flared collar and a macelike knob terminus.

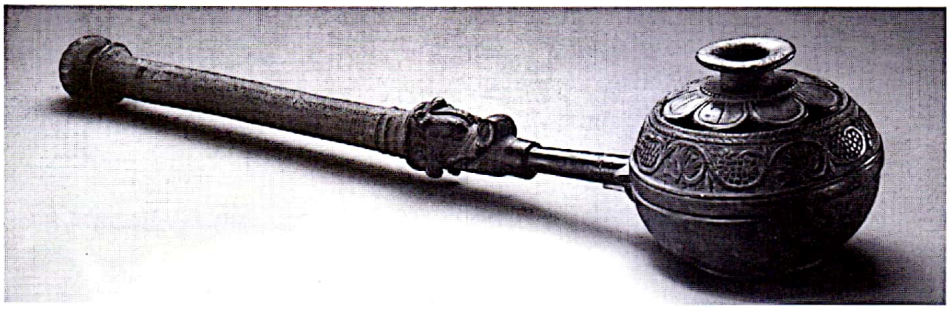

Fig. 1

The Los Angeles censer is previously unpublished. At least six other similar Gandhāran copper alloy censers have survived. Kossak illustrates one censer in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (1987.218.8a-c) and briefly references four of the remaining ones (Lerner and Kossak 1991: 102-103, no. 71). An additional censer, chiefly distinguished by the presence of small support feet and a different method of hinging the lid, was recently published as a fifth or sixth-century Vietnamese copy of a Gandhāran censer (Pegg 2007: 61, 72-73, no. 28). Alternatively, it may be a slightly variant style of Gandhāran censer that made its way along the pilgrimage and trade routes and was then 'found' in Vietnam.

The remaining examples of metalware from Pakistan in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art all date from the Mughal and Colonial periods. The first work, made probably around 1700 CE in the Lahore region (Fig. 2), is an elegant ewer (*aftāba*) used to dispense water during the traditional cultural practice of washing one's hands at meal time and before ritual prayer. The Los Angeles ewer (AC1995.52.1)[1] epitomizes the fine brassware created in the Punjab during the Mughal period, and represents the culmination of one of the oldest and most important forms of Islamic metalware. The ewer has a teardrop-shaped bulbous body supported by a hexagonal pedestal foot. The hexagonal neck has an everted rim and a band of ring-moulding at the junction to the body. The S-curved handle terminates at the top with a hinge flange for the now-missing cover followed by a 'Mughalized' dragon head – the traditional upper terminal of the handle of Middle Eastern ewers – whose bulging eyes, pointed ears, and gaping mouth have been simulated with flowers for its eyes, leaves for its ears, and forking branches for its mouth (Fig. 3). The long spout has floral scrolls and a flower bud terminal. The foot is embellished with half-palmettes divided from the floral scrolls by a moulding of blossoms in a row.[2] The ewer's cast and incised decoration, which was once highlighted by a now mainly missing black lac resinous ground, consists of a stylized flowering plant in a central teardrop-shaped panel surrounded by borders of floral scrolls. Although the ewer's shape follows established conventions in Islamic and Indo-Islamic metalware, its decoration has been dramatically embellished and 'Mughalized' with numerous depictions of poppy blossoms, which served as the leitmotif of the Mughal Empire.

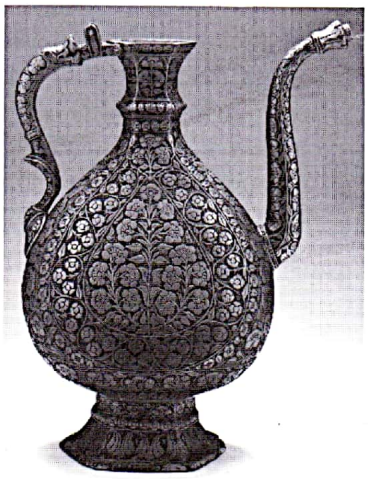

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Mughal period ewers were typically fashioned in sets with matching basins (*tasht* or *sailābchi*), which were used as a reservoir for the water poured from the ewer over one's hands; however, very few such sets remain intact and basins by themselves rarely survive.[3] Although not part of the same original set as the preceding ewer, a bipartite basin now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art (M.2000.47) relates well to it in origin and decoration (Fig. 4).[4]

Fig. 4

The Los Angeles basin is distinguished technically in that it is composed of two separate parts of demonstrably different dates riveted together to form the present vessel. The top is a broad sloped rim. The interior bottom edge of the basin rim has a narrow horizontal lip for a decoratively pierced lid (now missing) used to cover the mouth of the basin chamber and support the set's original

matching ewer[5] (present location unknown). The bottom of the basin is a compressed bulbous body with a low foot.

The floral decoration on both the top and bottom parts of the basin consists of various flowering plants set within cartouches formed by the adjoining broad lower leaves of smaller flowering plant motifs. The flowering plants on the exterior sides of the body of the vessel bottom have delicate floral and vegetal forms created by black lac-filled lines incised into the flat surface of the brass. The flowering plants are emphasized and given breathing room by the areas of negative design space surrounding them. There are two decorative borders adjacent to the flowering plant motifs. The top border is a band of scrolling floral motifs. The border above the low foot consists of a series of narrow incised leaf forms with midrib to margin venation. The exterior of the upper neck of the basin's bottom is unadorned and presently serves as the *ad hoc* juncture of the top and bottom parts.

In contrast, the composition of the floral motifs on the rim of the basin is more compact and denser with less negative design space within the cartouches. This subtle compositional difference has the effect of emphasizing the overall pattern of floral motifs rather than the individual flowering plants. In addition, the cast floral motifs on the rim are less finely detailed with sparser and coarser linear incising, and their surface is raised above the lac ground. The underside of the rim is graced by short overlapping incised petal forms.

The dating of the Los Angeles basin is complex due to its current two-part construction. The flowers on the bottom of the basin can be stylistically attributed to c. 1650-1665 CE, probably sometime between late in the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1628-58 CE) and early in the reign of his successor Aurangzeb (r. 1658-1707 CE). The top rim of the basin, dating stylistically from around 1725-1750 CE and dated by an inscribed *Devanāgari* inscription reading *samvat* 1799 (1741 CE), is most likely a replacement added to repair damage to the basin's original rim. Alternatively, the top was possibly added to convert an earlier vessel, such as a bowl, to a different function; which is a known practice in the cultural history of Indo-Islamic and Islamic metalware (Melikian-Chirvani 1982: 214-215, no. 99). However, the fact that the exterior of the upper neck of the basin's bottom is unadorned argues against the basin bottom originally having been a bowl because the exterior decoration of most bowls continues all the way to the top.

Intriguingly, a *loṭa*-shaped brass vase in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.21-1889) is made in horizontal sections with a seam visible across the waist of the vessel. Melikian-Chirvani attributes the vase to 'North Western Hindustan, probably Lahore, c. 1580-1600' CE (Melikian-Chirvani 1982: 348-350, no. 164). On this basis, one could argue that there may have existed in Lahore a tradition of fashioning metal vessels in parts and that the Los Angeles basin represents another example of this tradition with the top rim being fashioned separately by another artist. However, as Zebrowski convincingly reattributes the V&A vase to the 'Deccan, 16th century' (Zebrowski 1997: 209-210, 212, no. 327), the existence of an extensive tradition of composite vessels being manufactured in Lahore cannot be supported at present.

Regardless of why the Los Angeles basin was given a later upper part – which actually makes it all the more interesting – when its two components and the Los Angeles ewer are studied together they facilitate a greater understanding of the technical and artistic progression of Mughal brassware in the leading South Asian centre of its production between the mid-seventeenth and the mid-eighteenth centuries.

The next three examples of metalware from Pakistan in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art were made in the Colonial period in the northern Punjab districts of Sialkot and Gujrat between 1850 and 1870. They feature the distinctive *koftgari* decoration. The technique involves incising or cross-hatching a design into the surface of an iron or mild steel ground with a hard steel needle or liner chisel. Pure gold wire or gold leaf is then hammered into the engraved pattern and the whole object is heated, re-hammered, and polished. The *koftgari* decorative technique originated in Iran and was subsequently brought to northern India, where it was used at first to embellish fine arms and armour produced for the Rajput and Sikh rulers and warrior nobles. After the British annexed the Panjab in 1849 and banned the indigenous production of firearms, the technique was used chiefly by metalworkers in the northern Punjab districts of Sialkot and Gujrat to make myriad objects that were intended mainly for sale to European visitors and for presentation in the great exhibitions and world's fairs that were held in Europe and South Asia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

In contrast to their gold-encrusted tops, the bottom of *koftgari* works made until around 1870 customarily feature a silver sheet hammered over the iron surface. There is usually a design of cross-hatching and/or chevrons overlaid in silver alloy foil, which unless cleaned has typically oxidized to black. This distinctive bottom decoration is significant for helping to date such works, as by 1872 the bottoms of *koftgari* vessels were finished with electro-plating (Baden Powell 1872: 167).

Two of the Los Angeles examples of *koftgari* metalware feature fine gold wire overlay, while the third work incorporates both gold wire and gold leaf. The first work is an oval shaped jewellery box (M.73.5.140)[6] with foliate motifs of lacelike fineness (Fig. 5). The side of the body and the slightly concave sloped top of the lid feature scrolling vegetation while the flat top of the lid has vegetal designs in delicate cartouches. The planes of the vessel are divided by 'braided wire' borders on the lid, *koftgari* borders on the body, and complimenting scalloped rims with *koftgari* ornamentation. Round balls with *koftgari* designs serve as the feet.

The second work is an elegant inkstand (M.2000.125)[7] fashioned in an organic form of a small foliated branch of an apple tree resting on an oval stand (Fig. 6). The apple is hinged on the side so that it opens to reveal the inkwell. The two leaves are elliptical with serrated edges and elaborate venation. They are depicted in a three-dimensional manner, by rising upwards from

Fig. 5

Fig. 6

their stems and curling gracefully down to the top of the inkstand. The *koftgari* decoration is more varied than on the previous example, with both foliate and geometric forms featured. It is also more pronounced, as the gold wire is a thicker gauge. The inkstand may have once been part of a writing set consisting typically of an inkstand, pen tray, candlestick, and portfolio. Such writing sets were a favoured correspondence accouterment of European residents and travellers in South Asia during the Colonial period.

The third and most resplendent example of *koftgari* metalware in the collection of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art is a rectangular casket (M.2001.93)[8] surmounted by a pyramidal shaped lid with a flat crown (Fig. 7). A projecting curvilinear rim accents the bottom of the lid and the base of the vessel body. The former rim facilitates lifting the lid, while the corners of the latter morph into lobed feet. The undulating rhythms of the lid edges are paralleled by the stepped outline of the vessel body, the junctures of which extend into rows of plain gold leaf used to divide the three horizontal registers. The primary *koftgari* decoration on the lid is a flowering tree, with a secondary geometric pattern displayed on the crown. The *koftgari* motifs featured on the horizontal registers are a flowering vine (top), large stylized jackfruit on a scrolling vine (middle),[9] and a series of alternatively inverted lilies with foliate stems (bottom).

The bottom of the Los Angeles casket, made of the customary oxidized silver sheet with cross-hatching and chevrons, is significant not only for its general dating as mentioned above, but also because it has the numerals '1867' painted in what appears to be a nineteenth-century handwritten script (Fig. 8). While this is likely an old inventory number, it is also conceivable that it

Fig. 7

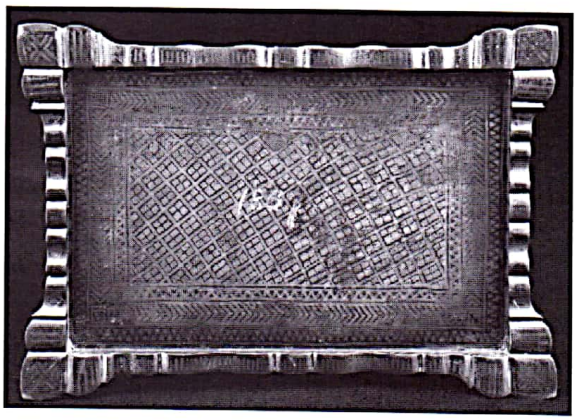

Fig. 8

is the date when the object was acquired and/or manufactured. If the latter possibility were the case, and it should be remarked that 1867 would precisely accord with the attributed period of the casket, then this would be a rare, if not unique, dated *koftgari* work.

The final work to be addressed represents the northernmost tradition of metalware in Pakistan. It is a late eighteenth-century water-pipe (*huqqah*) base (M.82.225.1) made in the form of a yak's horn (Fig. 9), which has been variously attributed to Gilgit or Skardu in Baltistan.[10] The body of the Los Angeles *huqqah*-base is fashioned out of a curved and fluted cylinder of iron. It is embellished with large brass mounts crafted in an openwork design of a flowering vine with various types of blossoms.

The borders of the mounts, which recall the decoration of Iranian and Kashmiri metalware, are a series of pointed lobed forms with pierced geometric and floral designs. A similar *huqqah*-base in the Victoria and Albert Museum (IS.23-1966) still has a faceted brass fitting, which once connected to the combustion bowl or intermediary tube.

The seven works from the Los Angeles County Museum of Art discussed herein present a broad spectrum of metalware from Pakistan ranging from the fourth to the nineteenth century. The major centres of production and the important types of media are all well represented. The Los Angeles County Museum of Art is honoured to be the caretaker of these significant works of art, thereby helping preserve the rich artistic heritage of Pakistan.

Fig. 9

Notes

[1] Previously published in Markel 2002: 31, figs. 9 (right), 10; Peter Marks Gallery 2000: no p.; Markel 1999: 31-34, pls. 11, 11a; *LACMA Annual Report 1994/95*: 24; Zebrowski 1997: 162, no. 227; Zebrowski 1986: 259, note. 23; and *Indian Heritage* 1982: 152, no. 506.

[2] On the underside of the foot is an incised inscription in Arabic letters and numerals. It has so far proved undecipherable, and probably represents an inventory number or perhaps a shorthand code for the weight of the vessel.

[3] For an example of a surviving set attributed to the Deccan, 17th century, see Zebrowski 1997: 168-169, no. 238. For an early 18th century Lahore basin in the Jagdish and Kamla Mittal collection, Hyderabad, India (76.1283), see Zebrowski 1997: 173-174, no. 248a-b.

[4] Previously published in Markel 2002: 31, fig. 9 (left).

[5] The presence of the cover support lip proves that the vessel is a basin rather than a spittoon, which were often made in this same general form but without the lip needed to support the cover. The opening of spittoons is also narrower in order to conceal the spent saliva in the bottom chamber. For examples, see Zebrowski 1997: 179-181, nos. 260-264. For a spittoon attributed to Lahore, late 17th – early 18th century in the Musée Guimet, Paris (MA 6790), see Okada 2000: 93; and Zebrowski 1997: 182, no. 265.

[6] Previously published in Pal 1973: 172, no. 339, but therein attributed to 'Persia, 19th century' and medium identified as 'silver with gold inlay.'

[7] The Los Angeles inkstand is previously unpublished. For a similar *koftgari* inkstand in the Bhai Sikandar Singh Collection, Bagrian, see Goswamy 2000: 63, no. 43.

[8] Previously published in Markel 2002: 33, figs. 14, 15. For a related casket, see Untracht et al 1993: 80, no. 149.

[9] For a recent identification of jackfruit in Indian sculpture, see Meister 2009.

[10] Gilgit: Simon Digby (pers. comm.); Skardu: Zebrowski 1997: 243-244, pl. 418.

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