Islamic Art at the Crossroads: Iran and China under the Mongols

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Presented in English
11 January 2011

The Mongol invasion of Eurasia in the 13th century became a turning point in the development of the visual and material culture of the Islamic world. This is particularly evident in the art of Iran under the political control of the Mongols from the mid-13th to the mid-14th centuries. With the fascination of portable objects of Chinese and East Central Asian origin that became widely available in West Asia thanks to the socio-cultural unification of a vast geographical area of the Eurasian Continent, a unique, hitherto unknown style – Islamic chinoiserie – was born in the art of Iran under the auspices of the Pax Mongolica.

Figures 2, 3, 4.

Based on the foundation of the trans-Eurasian trade network that had been laid in the course of century-old commercial and diplomatic activities by land and by sea (Figure 1), the Mongol invasion of Eurasia in the 13th century facilitated large scale exchanges of people, goods and ideas between east and west. As the Mongols moved westwards into West Asia and established a Mongol khaganate (Ilkhanate; 1256-1353) in Iran, they brought a number of new artistic concepts to the Iranian and Islamic cultural sphere through portable objects of Chinese and East Central Asian origin. This resulted to a significant degree in the shift of artistic balance in the art of Iran.

The most powerful agency for this cultural transmission was the textile. Being nomads, the Mongols traditionally had few possessions, and therefore they paid a lot of attention to portable objects, such as silk textiles in the form of costumes and tent hangings, as a symbol of social status and wealth. The idea of wearing luxurious dress was eventually assimilated into the Iranian world under Mongol cultural influence, and this can be attested by the frequent use of Mongol-style costumes in the images of rulers and major characters in 14th-century Iranian manuscript painting (Figure 2). Here a princely figure is depicted wearing a dark blue robe richly embroidered with gold decoration, his high social rank further emphasised by an elaborate feathered hat, another hierarchical symbol in Mongol society.

Textiles of the Iranian world began to bear certain Chinese features from the mid-13th century onwards, incorporating typical East Asian animal themes, such as the dragon and the phoenix, as well as a naturalistic bent, into the whole design scheme. Such elements appear to have initially been known through imported textiles from China and East Central Asia, and these were widely copied by Ilkhanid artisans not only in woven fabrics (Figure 3) but also in different media of the decorative arts, for example in tilework (Figure 4). The ubiquity of Chinese-inspired themes in the art of Iran during the Mongol period seems to owe much to the wide availability of paper and its involvement in the process of design making, a method which enabled several artisans to share the same design. It is also important to see how China made a significant contribution to the imagery of the dragon, a mythical creature that existed in Iranian culture long before the Mongol period, together with the simurgh (a Persian equivalence to the Chinese phoenix).

China had also been known as the land of quality ceramics since ancient times. The beauty of Chinese ceramics, particularly porcelain with its whiteness, strength and translucence, continued to attract the eyes of Iranian potters who were unable to create similar pieces due to the lack of quality material in West Asia. A continuous fascination with Chinese ceramics during the Mongol period is well reflected in the two types of Iranian copy of Chinese porcelain.

The first is the famous blue and white ware. Although the idea of using cobalt blue as a decorative medium for ceramics was initially developed in West Asian contexts rather than in East Asian cultural backgrounds, this device was adapted and further developed during the 14th century by Chinese potters into the high level of technical and stylistic sophistication. The importation of Chinese blue and white porcelain to Iran and elsewhere in the Middle East encouraged the production of Iranian and broadly Middle Eastern copies of such products for the domestic market. This set a continuous fashion for the blue and white scheme in the ceramic arts of this part of the world for centuries.

Another key type of Chinese porcelain displays a distinctive jade-like apple-green glaze, known as celadon. As in the case of the blue and white ware, Chinese celadon porcelain provided a source of artistic inspiration and imitation for Iranian potters from the 14th century onwards. Yet compared with the Chinese model (Figure 5), the general appearance of the Iranian copy of celadon (Figure 6), which is made of an artificial ceramic body called frit rather than porcelain, is less translucent and devoid of absolute hardness. Furthermore, a pair of fish decoration originally employed in the

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Chinese example is transformed into a swimming tri-fish motif with radiating patters on the rim through Iranian decorative interpretations.

A tendency to eschew metalwork from the major discussion of chinoiserie in Islamic art is mainly due to the fact that metal making traditions were more deeply rooted in West Asia than in East Asia where other types of object, notably porcelain and jade, functioned almost as a substitute of metal products. Although Chinese decorative motifs, such as the dragon and the phoenix, can be found in the design of Ilkhanid metalwork, this medium of art remained intrinsically West Asian or Islamic.

Among the notable decorative features in Ilkhanid metalwork, the frequent occurrence of the lotus as a single floral motif or part of the naturalistic setting stands out. This enchanting motif also appears in a wide variety of the media of the arts, ranging from textiles, ceramics, manuscript painting to architectural decoration (figure 7), demonstrating that the motif, primarily developed in Buddhist contexts as a symbol of purity, rebirth and the Buddha, may have acquired a new decorative significance in Islamic Iranian cultural environments. Alternatively, one could argue that the motif was widely used in different media of the arts, again thanks to the use of paper cartoons at the Ilkhanid workshops, with the result of standardising a distinctive Ilkhanid ‘dymatic’ style of dual cultural backgrounds of East Asia and West Asia.

Besides the decorative arts of Mongol Iran, the role of China in the stylistic and technical development of Iranian manuscript painting is undeniable. The two-dimensional tendency with decorative emphasis typically found in pre-Mongol pictorial examples of West Asia, such as neighbouring painting traditions of the Arab world and figural motifs used in Seljuk ceramics, gave way to a three-dimensional setting by the adoption of Chinese compositional and spatial ideas. In the illustration of a mare and a stallion from the Morgan Bestiary, the sense of continuity from right to left is suggested by the movement of horses’ heads, an idea which is equivalent to that generated by the horse painting in the handscroll format, for example a painting by Zhao Meng Fu, one of the great masters of Chinese painting during the Mongol period. The two paintings also share the same idea of suggesting the sense of continuity from up to down by cutting the image by the margins, as well as the use of ground levels with indications of grass for creating the sense of depth.

The manuscript painting of Mongol Iran also displays other pictorial ideas derived from China. These range from the hanging scroll format which is effective to stress the sense of height to the horizontal arrangement of illustrations which shows a striking similarity to that typically found in the Chinese woodblock - printed books. This indicates that Iranian painters of the Mongol period had a good accessibility to a wide range of pictorial sources from China.

Iconographically, too, China or broadly East Asia had an indelible impact on the development of the pictorial arts of Mongol Iran. Along with the assimilation of East Asian facial and sartorial features in the main characters, many iconographic elements of Buddhist derivation, particularly those that came from Tibetan Buddhism, were widely adapted for the image of rulers in Ilkhanid manuscript painting, particularly in terms of posture and gesture. This Buddhist-Iranian art-historical relation should not be a surprising fact, given that Buddhism, especially Tibetan Buddhism, was patronised by the Mongols in Iran during the early periods of Ilkhanid rule until their official conversion to Islam in 1295.

As a concluding remark, let us consider the nature of chinoiserie in European and Islamic art. European chinoiserie is the European notion of how China should be like within the European cultural setting. Although it became an important aspect of European art, especially the decorative arts of the 18th century, it was essentially a one-way movement and thus serves as an example of the asymmetrical relationship between eastern and western parts of the Eurasian Continent. On the other hand, Islamic chinoiserie is the Islamic admiration, understanding and adaptation of Chinese art based on the fruitful exchange of ideas, styles and techniques. It became one of the fundamental parameters in the development of Islamic art, especially the art of Islamic Iran, and remained influential in later periods, such as the times of the Timurids and Safavids, as a reminder of the past when the Eurasian Continent was unified under the Mongols.
الفن الإسلامي في مفترق الطرق: إيران والصين تحت حكم المغول

يوكا كادوي

تم نيله للكتاب في العام 1938 وتعتبر واحدة من أبرز الكتب في آسيا. يتحدث الكتاب عن تاريخ الفن الإسلامي، ويشير إلى أهمية الفن الإسلامي في تكوين الثقافات الإسلامية.

في الجملة، يتحدث الكاتب عن الفن الإسلامي في إيران والصين تحت حكم المغول. يشير إلى أن الفن الإسلامي في إيران والصين تحت حكم المغول استمر لأكثر من 500 عام، وشهد خلال هذا الوقت الكثير من التأثر والتفاعل الثقافي.

لا يمكن القول أن الفن الإسلامي في إيران والصين تحت حكم المغول كان ثابتًاً. إن التأثيرات الثقافية كانت تتبادل بين الفن الإسلامي في إيران والفن الصيني تحت حكم المغول. من خلال هذه التأثيرات، فإن التركيز على الفن الإسلامي في إيران والفن الصيني تحت حكم المغول يظل دائمًاً في المراحل المتقدمة من التطور الأدبي والثقافي.

من المثير للاهتمام أن الفن الإسلامي في إيران والفن الصيني تحت حكم المغول كان يتأثر بشكل كبير بالثقافة الإسلامية والثقافة الصينية، مما أدى إلى تشكيل فن جديد يتميز بالجودة والرقي.
من ناحية أخرى، فإن التأثير الصيني في الناف الإسلامي يعود إلى اتجاهات وهي طريقة تأثير الصينية في الناف الإسلامي الأسبوعي والأسباب والتفاعلات. تعتبر هذه الديناميكية تأثيراً حيوياً في الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في إيران، وقد تطرقنا للتأثر بثقافة الصين والهندسة المعمارية. عندما وجدنا أن الناف الإسلامي تحت حكم المغول، كانت جزء هامًا من الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في الجزء الشرقي والغربي من قارة آسيا.

الشمولات الدينية التي سعت لها عصر الإلخان، مثل هذا العمل، كان طلاق이며 إسلامي من بين الشمولات الدينية. ففي الشمولات الدينية التي سعت لها عصر الإلخان، كان الدعوة إلى فهم الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في إيران، وقد تطرقنا للتأثر بثقافة الصين والهندسة المعمارية. عندما وجدنا الناف الإسلامي تحت حكم المغول، كانت جزء هامًا من الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في الجزء الشرقي والغربي من قارة آسيا.

مع العلم أن هذه الناف الإسلامية التي كانت لها تأثير كبير في الهندسة المعمارية، فإنها تأثرت في الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في إيران، وقد تطرقنا للتأثر بثقافة الصين. عندما وجدنا الناف الإسلامي تحت حكم المغول، كانت جزء هامًا من الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في الجزء الشرقي والغربي من قارة آسيا.

إجمالاً، فإن هذا الناف الإسلامي الذي تأثر به إيران، كان له تأثير كبير في الهندسة المعمارية، خاصة في إيران، وقد تطرقنا للتأثر بثقافة الصين. عندما وجدنا الناف الإسلامي تحت حكم المغول، كانت جزء هامًا من الناف الإسلامي، خاصة في الجزء الشرقي والغربي من قارة آسيا.
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Hadith al-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadith al-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 16 got underway in October 2010 until May 2011 and, as with previous years, it presented scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation to an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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