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Safavid Gombroon Bowl

Safavid Iran, Late 17th or early 18th century

Fritware, pierced and glazed

20.8cm diameter

Stock no.: A5792

This delicate bowl is finely decorated around the wall with a pierced ('fenestrated') design. At the centre of the bowl is a small dome (omphalos) decorated with black asterisks, around which is a ring of radial cobalt decoration. The rim is decorated with black dots in groups of four.

The term "Gombroon ware" refers to a group of Iranian ceramics dating to the later 17th and early 18th centuries.¹ They are instantly recognisable by their plain white body, which is sufficiently vitrified to become almost glass-like in its translucency. The glassy appearance of this object was made of very fine fritware (made of crushed quartz, small amounts of white clay and ground-up glaze) which was decorated by directly piercing through the walls of the white porcelain-like body to form patterns that were then filled by a transparent glaze to create translucent windows, a technique first became popular in Iran during the twelfth century. Hence, the light shining through these incised lines creates a subtle play of translucency and opacity whilst also serving to emphasise the thinness of the walls – a characteristic of Chinese porcelain that Iranian potters aimed to emulate.²

Gombroon ware is similar to contemporary Chinese export wares from the Dehua kilns, Fujian province, also in plain white. The increasing popularity of producing white ceramics in Iran during the seventeenth century was likely a response to the discontinuation of porcelain exports from China between 1643-83.³

However, the shapes reflect objects used by the local market, especially small shallow dishes with incised decorations, wine cups, rose water sprinklers, bases for water pipes, multi-necked flower vases, dishes, and spittoons or sand pots.

Historically, Gombroon was the name used by English traders to identify the strategic trading port Bandar-e Abbas on the Persian Gulf. Hence, Gombroon was a point of export rather than a place

of production. Possible centres for the production of Gombroon wares are Shiraz, Yazd, Kirman, or Isfahan, however, no archaeological evidence has thus far supported these claims.⁴

An almost identical bowl, dated to the late 17th or early 18th century, with asterisk pattern on the omphalos, radial cobalt pattern, groups of four dots on the rim, and similar fenestration, is held in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon ([Inv. 946](#)).⁵ Other examples of Gombroon ware can be found in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge ([C.7-1909](#)), which has three black dotted marks on the rim, the British Museum, London ([1878.1230.609](#)), which has four marks the rim and not dissimilar pattern on the omphalos, and several footed bowls in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London ([1389-1876](#); [1399-1876](#); [C.1962-1910](#); [424-1872](#); and [1401-1876](#)).

n.b. accession nos are clickable links

[1] Géza Fehérvári. *Ceramics of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum*. New York: I.B. Tauris, 2000. p.292.

[2] Maryam D. Ekhtiar and Kendra Weisbin. *Masterpieces from the Department of Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, edited by Maryam D. Ekhtiar, Priscilla P. Soucek, Sheila R. Canby, and Navina Najat Haidar. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011.

[3] Ekhtiar and Weisbin. *op. cit.* p. 233.

[4] Fehérvári. *op. cit.* p. 292.

[5] Pictured in the *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum Catalogue*. Third Edition Revised and Enlarged. Lisbon: Gulbenkian Foundation, 1995. p. 202, Cat. 192.