



Mosul School Brass Candlestick (Sham'dān)

Mamluk Cairo, Second half of the 13th century

Cast brass, inlaid with black substance and minute traces of silver

17cm high, 19cm base diameter

Stock no.: A5832

Provenance: French private collection, probably acquired in Morocco or Egypt between 1952 and 1959.

A Medieval Islamic candlestick (*sham'dān*) of brass with traces of silver inlay. The straight walls of its base slope inwards, leading towards a shoulder which protrudes slightly over the drum and dips towards the centre. A short neck leads to a concave lip, where the candle would have been held.

The body of the candlestick is decorated with geometric, figural, and calligraphic ornamentation. Lines are engraved into the brass, and darkened with a black substance. The dotted lines represent where silver was once hammered into the surface.¹

At the centre of the drum is a narrow band of knotted Kufic inscription. Though it is largely illegible, the repeated letter combinations suggest that it is some kind of benediction. The inscription is interrupted alternately by four small roundels and four larger polylobed cartouches. The roundels contain a motif of an eagle swooping on a duck. The lobed cartouches alternate between mounted hunters – a swordsman and an archer – and seated musicians, who play typical instruments of the hunt, including the tambourine or *daf* and a long goblet drum known as a *zarb* or *zombak*. The inscription band is

sandwiched between two bands of running animals, apparently dogs chasing hares and deer. Above and below this are bands of geometric braiding. The shoulder and neck are decorated by further inscription bands. Though heavily worn, the phrase '*al-izz al da'im*' or 'perpetual glory' can be read.

It is difficult to accurately determine the place of manufacture of Medieval Islamic brass candlesticks. During this period, there was significant movement of both goods and people within and between the Il-khanate territories and the Mamluk sphere. In the early 13th century, metalworkers from Khorasan moved west and helped to start the inlay industry in Mosul. Equally, as the Mongols encroached, some Mosul metalworkers moved to Damascus, Cairo, Konya, and elsewhere.²

This example shares the characteristics of the al-Mawsili group, as described by Rachel Ward. These candlesticks were made in Cairo between 1269 and 1330 CE by artisans bearing the surname 'al-Mawsili', meaning from Mosul.³ Eight individuals are known to have used this nisba, though it is unclear whether these artisans actually originated from Mosul. However, that there the candlesticks are so homogenous in size, decoration, and form suggests that the artists were members of the same workshop or guild.⁴

Candlesticks in this group have a base diameter between 17 and 23.5cm (ours has a diameter of 19cm), with the narrower pieces generally earlier.⁵ They are cast in one piece, with an idiosyncratic 'six-pronged domical structure' remaining inside the base from the casting process.⁶ Metal plugs on opposite sides of the base mark the position of spacers which held the mould in place.⁷ As in this case, the inscription is written in a narrow frieze, consisting of prayers in kufic script which is more ornamental than legible. The top and bottom of the drum are decorated with narrow horizontal bands of pattern which seem to emphasise the shortness.

Examples of this group are held in the Museum of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Antiquities (Medelhavsmuseet), Stockholm (accession no. [NM 0058/1899](#)); the Musée des Beaux Arts, Lyon (inv. no. [D 569](#)); Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo (inventory no. 1657).⁸ The closest in appearance is one belonging to the Nuha Es-Said Collection (no. 13).⁹ It is 17.9cm high with a base diameter of 19.5cm (ours is 17cm high with a base diameter of 19cm, giving a similar height to width ratio). Both have similar polylobed cartouches containing hunters, and roundels containing birds.

[1] Jenkins, Marilyn. 'Masterpieces of The Metropolitan Museum of Art New York', *The Arts of Islam*. Berlin: Rembrandt Verlag, 1981. pp. 110-11.

[2] Ward, Rachel. 'Il-Khanid Mosul: More craft than court', *Court and Craft: A Masterpiece from Northern Iraq*. London: The Courtauld Gallery in association with Paul Holberton Publishing, 2015. pp. 68-77.

[3] Ward, Rachel. 'Tradition and Innovation, Candlesticks made in Mamluk Cairo', *Oxford Studies in Islamic Art* 10.2 (1995), pp. 147-158; p. 147.

[4] Atıl, Esin. *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution, 1981. p. 51.

[5] Ward (1995) *Op. Cit.* p. 147.

[6] *Ibid.* p. 148.

[7] *Ibid.* p. 149.

[7] Atil, Esin. *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks*. Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution, 1981. p. 51.

[8] Pictured in Ward (1995) *Op. Cit.* p. 149, fig. 2.

[9] Allan, J. W., *Islamic Metalwork: The Nuhad Es-Said Collection*. London: 1982. No. 13.