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Safavid Blue and White Cat Qalyan

Iran, Mid-17th century

Fritware painted with cobalt blue and black under a clear glaze

16.5 cm high, 12.5 cm long, 9 cm wide

Stock no.: A6102

This rare Safavid blue and white ceramic cat would have been used as the base of a water pipe (qalyan or also kalian, kalyan) to filter tobacco smoke through water. Holes on the neck and top of the head would have held the two pipes. The body is decorated with cobalt blue flames and waves, outlined in black, with black speckling filling the remaining spaces. Hatched lines around the neck, brow, and belly denote the fur. The expressive face has moulded features and stippled stripes.

Like many Safavid ceramics, the form probably derives from a Ming dynasty porcelain prototype. Rather than forming the base of a waterpipe, the Ming cats were used as nightlights, with light shining

through the eye sockets or open mouth.

An example dated to the Chongzhen reign (1627–1644) can be seen in the British Museum, London (accession no. [1984.0303.16.a](#)). This example is decorated with ‘fukizumi’ mottling, whereby ink is blown over a stencil to create areas of shadow. The use of dots on this Safavid model may be an attempt to emulate this technique.

A very similar cat qalyan is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London (accession no. [1225-1876](#)). It measures 14.7 cm high, and has similar stippling on the face and flame motifs on the body. It also has a very similar facial expression. The qalyan has been dated by Yolande Crowe to the reign of Shah Abbas II (1642–1666) and attributed to Isfahan.¹

[1] Crowe, Yolande. *Persia and China: Safavid Blue and White Ceramics in the Victoria and Albert Museum, 1501-1738*. London: Thames and Hudson, 2002, cat. 247, p. 155.