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Vase with Arabic Inscription

China, 17th century (Qing Dynasty)

Bronze

18.5 cm high, 10 cm diameter

Stock no: A5990

Provenance: Inherited from a Dutch private collection; probably purchased in Indonesia in the 19th century.

Both the form and decoration of this bronze vase embody a cross-over of ideas between the Islamic Middle East and China.

The chief decoration consists of two ogival panels on either side of the vessel. Their shape resembles decorative tilework in mosques, or on silk brocades, or illuminated manuscripts including Qur'ans.[1] The panels are filled with a pattern of interlocking ogival panels, cloud or ruyi-shaped cartouches[2] and their original derivation came from Islamic design. The panels contain a deeply recessed Arabic inscription on a punched ground that reads: لا اله الا الله القدوس [there is no god but Allah, the Most Holy]. The inscriptions are rendered in a unique blend of Arabic script employed by Chinese artists, known as 'Sini' script, which combines Arabic letters and tapered points said to derive from Chinese brushwork.

The shape of the vessel is Chinese and it probably originally formed a pair with another vase, to be used as a shrine. In fact, an almost identical example (19 cm tall, 10 cm diameter) is held in the Durham Oriental Collection (DUROM.1973.1). It has the same 4-character Xuande mark on the base and identical Arabic inscription. The vase has an elegant, pear-shaped body, a tall flaring neck, a straight base and two handles in the form of kui (龍耳), which refer to China's ancient past, when they figured on bronze vessels and had auspicious meanings associated with crops. Round the neck is a band of key-fret, another pattern derived from archaic bronze. A second mark on the base, a reign mark in historic seal script reading 'made in the Xuande period [1426–1435]'. In reality the vase is a product of the Qing Dynasty, but its form and decoration are a blend of Islamic and Chinese influences.

than this time, for bronze-casters in China viewed that early 15th century reign as being pre-eminent, an homage. The seal script characters and the heavy brassy bronze indicate a date in the 16th-18th century.

Many items associated with Chinese life and ritual but bearing Arabic inscriptions were made for the domestic market. There is no evidence of such goods being exported to the Middle East. The fashion prevailed during the reign of the Yongle Emperor Zhengde (r. 1506–1521), when Muslim administrators held considerable power at court and the emperor converted to Islam.[5] Non-Muslim scholars were also interested in such bronzes, being fascinated by the foreign script. Arabic inscriptions continued to be used on artefacts during the 17th and 18th centuries, but they became increasingly isolated from the rest of the Islamic world. The Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) permitted worship at many mosques in large cities, with particularly important ones in Beijing, Xi'an, Harbin, and Shanghai.

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[1] See examples in Khalili, Nasser D. *The Timeline History of Islamic Art and Architecture*. London: V&A, 2018, pp. 34–35.

[2] Ruyi means 'as you wish' in Chinese, so they have a good-luck connotation in East Asian art.

[3] Can be viewed https://discover.durham.ac.uk/discovery/fulldisplay?docid=alma991010503862307366&context=L&vid=44DUR_INST:VU1&lang=en&search_scope=MUSECOLL&tab=MUSECOLL&query=any,contains,DUROM.1973.1

[4] For a vessel cast in a similar copper-zinc alloy and with seal script Xuande reign mark in the Victoria and Albert Museum, dated 16th–18th century, see Kerr, Rose. *Later Chinese Bronzes*. London: Bamboo Publishing, 1997, p. 100.

[5] Harrison-Hall, Jessica. *Ming Ceramics in the British Museum*. London: The British Museum Press, 2015, p. 100.

[6] Hung, Tak Wai. *Redefining Heresy and Tolerance: Governance of Muslims and Christians in the Qing Dynasty, 1644–1911*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2024.