

ASIAN ART IN THE WORLD

Historical influences on culture and society

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ABSTRACT

Crossing Cultures, Crossing Time: China, Iraq and Europe, c. 800

With unusual swiftness and without apparent precedent, the humble character of West Asian pottery changed radically in the ninth century. An industry arose in Iraq producing ceramics technically superior to any previous Islamic or ancient Mesopotamian pottery. In a span of less than 40 years, Iraqi potters transformed common earthenware into a vehicle for complex painted and glazed decoration and then succeeded in putting it within reach of not only court circles but the citizens of a vast Abbasid empire, stretching from the Indus River to the Atlantic Ocean.

The main impetus for this dramatic transformation was international trade and the opening of the direct sea route from Iraq to China. Imported Chinese ceramics had a dramatic influence on Islamic taste and inspired fundamental and enduring changes to the production and marketing of fine pottery in the region. The three great technological achievements of the Iraqi potters – the invention of an opaque white “tin” glaze, painting in cobalt blue, and the overglaze lustre technique – are so important they shaped the history of Islamic, and even Asian and European, ceramics for the following millennium.

This talk traces the potters’ journey towards innovation and their impact on the history of world ceramics. The chain of events they put into motion provides a good illustration of how trading networks can serve as routes of transmission for not only foreign objects (material culture) but also of scientific and technical knowledge that can, in turn, stimulate the economic and social conditions necessary for driving changes in taste in distant parts of the globe.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Jessica Hallett is Senior Curator of the Middle East and China, and Coordinator for Research, at the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon. Her doctorate from Oxford University gave rise to the exhibition, *Iraq and China. Ceramics, Trade and Innovation*, at the National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian, Washington (2004), which cross-seeded as a case study for early globalization in the fields of Sociology and Comparative Literature. She has co-curated various exhibitions in Lisbon, including *Cultures of the Indian Ocean* (1998), *The Oriental Carpet in Portugal* (2007 – awarded the Reynaldo Santos Prize), *Blazing a Coloured Trail* (2009); *Triumphal Procession with Giraffes* (2010), *Venice and Istanbul, c. 1500* (2018), and *The Rise of Islamic Art* (2019 – APOM Best Exhibition). Her publications include contributions to a diverse range of peer-reviewed academic journals and catalogues, along with the books *Mamluk Glass in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum* (2000), *All His Worldly Possessions, The estate of the 5th Duke of Braganza, D. Teodósio I, c. 1563* (with N. Senos, 2018), and *Calouste Gulbenkian's Carpet Collection* (with C. Serra, 2024). She has a degree in Analytical Chemistry and often brings science as a lens to her work. Hallett is currently leading the participatory curatorial project *Power of the Word*, which brings local voices inside the Gulbenkian Foundation (*Pilgrimage* 2019, *Fables* 2020, *Women* 2021, *Divine Wisdom* 2022, *Circles of Science* 2023).