Lidded bowl

Place of origin: Damascus (possibly, made)
Date: 1500 - 1550 (made)
Artist/Maker: Unknown
Materials and Techniques: Brass, engraved with silver inlay
Museum number: 841&A-1891
Gallery location: Medieval & Renaissance, Room 63, The Edwin and Susan Davies Gallery, case 8

Public access description

The brass bowl dates from the first half of the 16th century. Its flat, tight-fitting lid suggests it may have been a container for a measured quantity of spices or other delicacies. This bowl displays the coat-of-arms of an unidentified Italian family.

Venice, during this period, traded and fought extensively with the Turkish and Arab empires which bordered the Mediterranean basin. Venetian merchants brought back to the city goods that had an immediate influence on local design, and eventually the rest of Europe.

The bowl is decorated in the 'Veneto-Saracenic' style with motifs and patterns inspired by Islamic art forms. The bowl is damascened, a technique which involved decorating engraved iron, brass or steel with gold or silver wire.

This bowl is a good example of the Venetian reinterpretation of Middle Eastern metalworking traditions. Its form is Italian: no vessels of this type occur in the Islamic world. Its bands of ornament simplify Islamic knot and script motifs. The blank shields on the sides are intended for the arms of a European owner.

The influence of Islamic art on Italian design was profound. The arabesque pattern, based on a stylised plant with a winding stem, was studied and copied by contemporary Italian artists. By the middle of the 16th century, the arabesque as a form of ornament was beginning to influence craftsmen all over Europe, and became incorporated into the development of European ornamental design, until the decline of the Rococo in the late 18th century.

Descriptive line

Middle East, Metalwork. Bowl with curved base and flat lid, brass with engraved and silver-inlaid decoration of knotted pseudo-Arabic inscriptions against dense foliate scrollwork, with roundels bearing blank heraldic shields, Damascus, Syria, 1500-50

Physical description

Shallow covered bowl with steep sides and flat, tight-fitting lid, brass, engraved and inlaid with silver and a black compound, with minute arabesques, medallions with shields and ornamental bands.

Dimensions

Height: 6.0 cm, Diameter: 14.6 cm

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Object history note

This covered bowl was made during the first half of the sixteenth century probably for the Venetian market. An Italian coat-of-arms is engraved on the medallion on the side. The Museum acquired the bowl in 1891 when it was valued at £20.

Historical context note

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The bowl belongs to a type of metalwork formerly known as 'Veneto-Saracenic': elaborately decorated wares including dishes, bowls, candlesticks and inkstands with traditional Islamic motifs including twirling knots and stylised, intertwined leaves ('arabesques') decorating the entire surface, much of which is highlighted in inlaid silver-wire ('damascening'). The popularity of these items among Venetian families led them for a long time to be attributed to Muslim craftsmen ('Saracens') working in Venice. This theory has long been discredited on the grounds that the Venetian guild system was too strict to allow Muslim craftsmen to work there.

Strong trade links between Venice and the Middle East are now considered to be the reason for the prominence of this type of Metalwork in Venice. The Mamluk export industry based in Damascus was a major source of inlaid brassware for the Venetian market in the late fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The popularity of these wares eventually inspired Venetian metalworkers to develop a host of imitation-Islamic brasses.
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In Venice, the production of brass dishes and vessels flourished in the first half of the 16th century. They were very elaborately decorated but not with traditional European linear ornamentation. Venice, during this period, traded and fought extensively with the Turkish and Arab empires which bordered the Mediterranean basin. Thus Venetian merchants brought back to the city Near Eastern goods that had an immediate influence on local design, and eventually the rest of Europe.

It has been suggested (Ward, LaNiece, Hook and White, 1995) that the tight fitting lids and regular sizes of this type of bowl meant it was used as packaging for selling measured quantities of spices and other goods across Europe.

URL

http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76198/lidded-bowl-unknown/