A Persian Ewer Without a Past: Uncovering the History of a Thirteenth Century Turquoise Ewer at the RISD Museum

Abstract

What happens when an object's entire known history (and part of its body) is fabricated? Motivated by a desire to recover the occluded histories of Islamic art objects displaced by the colonial market, this paper is a result of a semester-long research project into a turquoise-monochrome glazed ewer at the RISD Museum which examined it not only through typical art historical methodologies but also through its political, socio-cultural, chemical, and institutional histories. Central to the investigation was my close visual and formal analysis of the Ewer, which revealed that its neck and handle are indeed modern restorations. For this reason, I also situate this object alongside exceptional *comparanda* from international museums and private dealerships/collections that bolster a discussion of this ceramic as both an autonomous object and part of a larger group of pastiched Iranian archaeological wares. This paper ultimately argues that the ewer is an artifact of colonial desire, its reconstructed wholeness crafted through networks of illicit excavation and forgery to satisfy the demands of a strengthening market that desired Persian art at any cost. By drawing on the scholarship of museum professionals and Islamic art historians, the study demonstrates how unwavering demand for "authentic" Persian ceramics led to the manufacture of convincing pastiches. Far from being a "forgery" in the reductive sense, the RISD Ewer is a powerful case study in the ethics of museum acquisition and the historiography of Islamic art, from *romantisme européen* to the economics of modern collecting. Rather than dismissing it as inauthentic, this project insists on the ewer's value as a witness to cultural and economic entanglements and catalyst for rethinking how museums narrate global histories. In a field where authenticity is often privileged over context, this study proposes a more nuanced lens—one that treats flawed objects as critical sources of knowledge.

Word Count (not including Non-New-Information in the Appendix): 5481

Introduction

Within the Rhode Island School of Design Museum's vast collection of over 100,000 objects, a turquoise Persian ewer (Fig. 1) might go unnoticed among the museum's impressive painting, sculpture, and photograph collections. Though the ewer's maker is unknown, the RISD Museum curatorial files roughly date this object between the 12th and 14th centuries. For this 33-centimeter-tall globular vessel, whose decorated body sits upon a high foot and extends upward to a beak-shaped lip via a thin, tubular, elongated neck and lattice handle, a closer look reveals there is more to it than meets the eye (*See* Appendix 1).

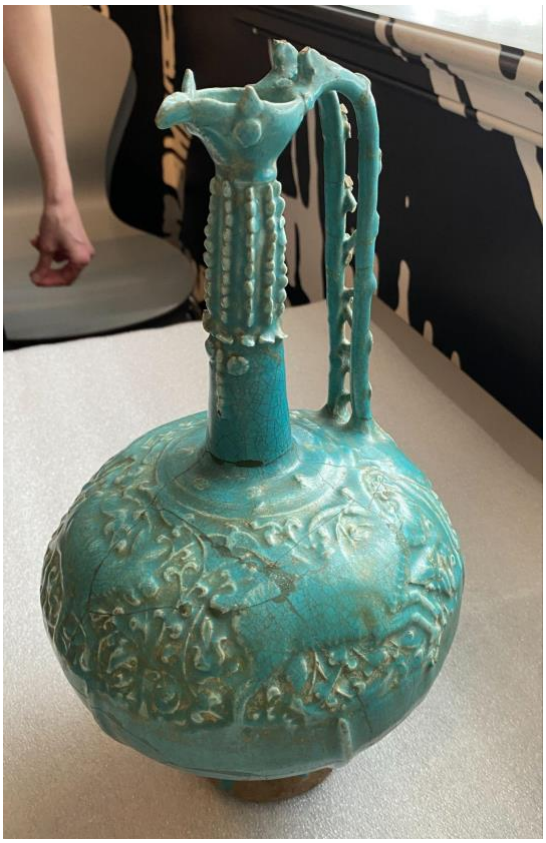

Figure 1. Unknown Maker, *Persian ewer* (The RISD Ewer), 1300s, glazed earthenware, ac. 27.118. (Image: Author, March 2025)

The known information about the life of the RISD Ewer before its 1927 purchase with the Museum Appropriation Fund is scant. The object's provenance, based on these files, is also minimal. There is no further information regarding related objects in the collection, who the ewer was acquired from, or its life prior to its accession, other than a note in the 1927 acquisition card

recording that Sultanabad was a potential "site" or findspot.[1] J.L. Jablonski (the presumed curator at the time) further identified in the 1998 condition report that the ewer could have originated in Kashan.[2] As I have come to learn, however, the ewer's attributions to Kashan and the Sultanabad provenience in these records are false, information meant to ground this orphan object in a remotely secure past with some form of empirical data based on similar pieces. Such an over-attribution of ceramics to specific sites in Iran despite lack of evidence further contributes to the dominance of market-driven historiography in shaping what we know about these objects and the difficulty of reconstructing lost histories absent such documentation.

In the four months that I have deeply engaged with this ceramic, I have concluded that the RISD Ewer is a fascinating artifact of medieval and modern craft and record of the early 20th-century colonial art market. It is, without a doubt, entrenched in the politics of the colonial art market for Islamic ceramics and the pressures of Western collectors that span the late 19th and early 20th centuries. In confronting the interests and demands of a market directly responsible for the unending flow of Islamic art and antiquities from Iran to the West during this period, I argue that the RISD Ewer is as much a commentary on the global art market as it is on the local one, opening the door to profound conversations about the movement of objects across the world.

Background: Colonial Excavations and the History of the Islamic Art Trade, 1850-1930

The RISD Ewer's year of accession (1927) locates it in a period of great activity in the U.S. market for Iranian antiquities, where collectors sought to bolster their collections of Persian art through antiquities that they or dealers would bring back from their travels. The modern restorations done to the RISD Ewer's body, neck, handle, mouth, and lip attempts to masquerade it as an archaeological ceramic, one where we assume a secure provenance and provenience. While we cannot say, with certainty, how this piece was made or remade, the extensive reconstruction was intended to disguise the broken object's discontinuous surface.

Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam attributes the commercial and industrial searches for exoticism in Persia to "*romantisme européen*."[3] As antiquarian ambitions translated into the creation of

[1] Unknown, March 1927 Aquisition Card.
[2] J.L. Jablonski, July 1998 Conservation Report.
[3] Mohammad-Nader Nasiri-Moghaddam, *L'archéologie française en Perse et les antiquités nationales (1884-1914)* (Paris: Connaissances et Savoirs, 2005), 13.

European national museums in the late 1700s, there was an "increased demand for art objects," which led European travelers to attempt their own excavations for "portable artifacts."[4] Long before the French monopoly on Iranian excavations, Iranian merchants searched for ancient objects to sell to Westerners, while visitors took special interest in the ruins of the ancient cities and the possibilities of positively identifying Biblical towns.[5] Any place where individuals—farmers, travelers, merchants, and tourists—made surface finds became hotspots for excavations, not to mention the fact that many antiquities "reached the market indirectly" as farmers exposed sherds in their fields.[6]

Perhaps the most notable 'era' of Iranian archaeology is the French Era (ca. 1884-1927) which uncovered a wealth of material relating to the pre-Islamic and Islamic civilizations of the region. When René de Balloy (1845-1923), the Plenipotentiary Minister to Persia, secured a French monopoly on Persian excavations in 1894, unprecedented amounts of portable Islamic art objects entered the art market through "an international collection of diggers, dealers, brokers and institutional and private collectors."[7] Though the French lost their monopoly in 1927, the passing of the Antiquities Law of 1930 allowed various international actors (e.g., the Metropolitan Museum of Art) to carry out their own archaeological excavations sanctioned by the government of Iran.[8] Thus, Margaret Graves deems the period between the late 19th and early 20th centuries "the colonial heyday of international collecting."[9]

As a result, many fakes and forgeries began entering the art market. Around the turn of the 20th century, the appeal of exoticism and orientalism became felt in the collections of wealthy American and European families, not to mention the museums in these regions as well. With the rise in popularity of Persian art in the same period, no category of it was "immune to faking" as the business of forgery became lucrative as the demand for Islamic art increased the

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[4] Ali Mousavi, "The History of Archaeological Research in Iran: A Brief Survey" in *The Oxford Handbook of Ancient Iran*, ed. Daniel T. Potts (Oxford University Press, 2013), Oxford Academic eBook, 4.
[5] Nasiri-Moghaddam, *L'archéologie française en Perse et les antiquités nationales (1884-1914)*, 16.; David Stronach, "EXCAVATIONS i. In Persia," Encyclopædia Iranica, last modified January 20, 2012, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/excavations-i.
[6] Charles K. Wilkinson, *Nishapur: Ceramics of the Early Islamic Period* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1973), xxiii.
[7] Margaret S. Graves, "Fracture, Facture and the Collecting of Islamic Art," in *Faking, Forging, Counterfeiting: Discredited Practices at the Margins of Mimesis*, ed. Daniel Becker, Annalisa Fischer, and Yola Schmitz (Germany: transcript Verlag, 2018), 91.
[8] Mousavi, "The History of Archaeological Research in Iran," 5-7.; Wilkinson, Nishapur, xxiii.
[9] Graves, "Fracture, Facture and the Collecting of Islamic Art," 91.

price for it. [10] As most of the excavated pieces were fragments, unusual features were added to these sherds to make them whole, increasing their value and desirability amongst prominent Western collectors.

Even though he writes about Pre-Islamic arts, Oscar White Muscarella notes that there are two main types of forgeries under which most Iranian artworks lie: (1) objects "falsely presented as an ancient artifact" or (2) objects with forged proveniences.[11] The RISD Ewer is an example of an object that falls into both categories for its restored neck and handle were falsley attributed as 'medieval' and attributed to Kashan and Sultanabad. The RISD Ewer also fulfills Muscarella's requisite conditions for the ways that forgers added to excavated objects and fragments, including being "copied from other genuine or modern objects" and joined together with "fragments of different authentic objects" which ultimately "compromis[ed] the original form and idea."[12] Thus, we may speculate that the RISD Ewer was indeed worked on by a 20th-century forger-restorer somewhere in Iran before it arrived at the RISD Museum.

Along with Muscarella, X, and Blair, Oliver Watson is among this group of scholars of Islamic art who have engaged with the fabrications and forgeries of the field, often uncovering uncomfortable truths about objects in international collections. Watson worked extensively with the museum's ceramics collection in London, taking notice of the fact that two specific jars in the collection were evidence of 19th-century forgeries. These 'forgeries'—he famously distinguishes between fakes as "real things, but deceptively improved to make them more interesting to the collector" and forgeries as "things made totally new as deceptions"—were collected for the museum by an "official agent" in 1876.[13]

According to Watson, many museums began ringing alarm bells about "the dangers of falsifications in Islamic art," but their dire warnings were silenced by the "authority of social position," especially where the historian of Persian art, Arthur Upham Pope (1881-1969), was involved.[14] As Pope was a prominent dealer of Persian art at this time, it makes sense that the

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[10] Sheila S. Blair, "FORGERIES iii. OF ISLAMIC ART," Encyclopædia Iranica, last modified 2015, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/forgeries-iii/.
[11] Oscar White Muscarella, "FORGERIES ii. OF PRE-ISLAMIC ART OBJECTS," Encyclopædia Iranica, last modified 2015, https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/forgeries-ii/.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Oliver Watson, "Authentic Forgeries?," in *Creating Authenticity: Authentication Processes in Ethnographic Museums*, ed. Alexander Geurds and Laura V. Broekhoven (Leiden: Sidestone Press, 2013), 59-60.
[14] Watson, "Authentic Forgeries?," 61-62.

international art market's tastes and demands for these objects were capitalized by the few who had the capacity to influence and deceive. The RISD Ewer's accession into the museum collection therefore grants it access into this category wherein the fakes and forgeries created during this time diffused into collectors' tastes for particular Persian wares.

This "*sans-papier* status" of Islamic ceramics, especially the RISD Ewer, puts it in quite a precarious position in the relationship between colonial extraction and the modern museum collection.[15] But this does not mean we ought to consider it a shamed object unworthy of scholarly insights.[16] "Forgery" or "Pastiche" should not be the only label or identity a museum object like this one should have. The RISD Ewer, like many others, has a rich and complicated life that is a testament to the high demand for certain objects like it, which is what brought them into existence in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Analysis of Comparanda

While revisiting the history of the transnational market for Islamic art allows us to understand the agents at play in the movement of large amounts of Persian ceramics between the late 19th to early 20th centuries, this did not reveal any specific answers about the RISD Ewer's history. With no secure provenience, I cannot dive deep into the sanctioned excavation history of a specific site, such as Nishapur or Rayy, or the history of unsanctioned excavations in Iran. Understanding that this object is a pastiche narrows down the scope of this research and allows me to pursue an avenue of study that considers the RISD Ewer as an object created by and for the colonial art market. But contrary to what we would expect, there has been little directed attention to these kinds of monochrome turquoise glaze molded wares and their historiographies in scholarship. In fact, many studies about fakes, forgeries, and pastiches from Islamic Iran tend to focus mostly on dismembered manuscript folios, lusterwares, and *mina'i* wares. From the comparanda that I have discovered in other museum and private collections, we clearly understand that the RISD Ewer is part of a larger collection of pastiched turquoise monochrome glazed ceramics that were acquired by major museums in the East Coast in the early 20th century.[17]

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[15] Graves, "Fracture, Facture and the Collecting of Islamic Art," 91.

[16] Graves "Fracture, Facture and the Collecting of Islamic Art," 99.; The concept of the "shamed object," when it comes to similarly pastiched/fabricated Iranian art also comes from the same above reference article.

[17] Each ewer in this section is named according to the collections in which it exists today (e.g., the Harvard Ewer). There is a problematic aspect of naming these ewers based on the museum or private collection in which they are

Figure 2. *Fragmented bottle with running animal decor* (The Louvre Fragmented Bottle), ca. 1100 - 1215, Iran, Ceramic molded decoration, transparent colored underglaze, OA 6472.

Figure 2 provides the first example of a vessel with a mostly intact (but heavily restored), molded, running animal frieze-decorated shoulder with formal similarities to the RISD Ewer, even though the animals are running in an opposite direction. Though I have not been able to securely identify all the animals on this frieze—there seems to be a lamb, a dog, a rabbit/antelope, a fox, and some sort of feline (perhaps a lion?)—the arabesque background looks to be almost identical to the RISD Ewer's. While the circular design that demarcates the top of the Louvre Fragmented Bottle's shoulder is another shared feature between this object and the RISD Ewer, the former's is filled with arabesque, and the latter's has seven equidistant dots of equal size. Looking below the frieze on this bottle, it appears that there is a continuous break around the circumference at the widest part of its body, which leads me to believe that this vessel is made up of two parts: an upper body and a lower body that were later put together.

housed, as this naming system inherently foregrounds these objects' removed contexts and implicates a chain of ownership that prioritizes their post-art market depositions. Yet, this naming convention is essential for my purposes, as it distinguishes each ewer from the others that are also called 'ewer' by their respective collections.

Figure 3. *Animal-Headed Ewer* (The Harvard Ewer), 12th century (Seljuk-Atabeg Period), Iran, Fritware molded relief decoration under turquoise glaze, 1934.45.

The Harvard Ewer is, second to the Louvre Fragmented Bottle, perhaps the most important comparable object I found in my search. The Harvard Art Museum website notes that the ewer's "head and body appear to be from two separate vessels," which is exactly the case with the RISD Ewer.[18] As such, I speculate that perhaps these ewers were restored in the same workshop. The parts of this ewer that are quite similar in form to the RISD Ewer include the running animal frieze on the shoulder, the pinched scallop decoration on the neck, its appliquéd button eyes, the different color glazes, the clean break on the ewer's foot and at the junction at its neck, the circular design of equidistant dots at its shoulder, and its extensive lower body restorations. The only noted difference is the direction of the running animal frieze—the Harvard Ewer's is clockwise while the RISD Ewer's is counter-clockwise—which perhaps can be attributed to the reuse of a mold.

This ewer came into the Harvard Art Museum/Arthur M. Sackler Collection in 1934, seven years after the RISD Museum bought its ewer. In my research of this object, I was able to

[18] Unknown Maker (Persian), *Animal-Headed Ewer*, 12th century, 36.5 × 23 cm (14 3/8 × 9 1/16 in.), fritware molded relief decoration under turquoise glaze, Department of Asian and Mediterranean Art at the Harvard Art Museum/Arthur M. Sackler Museum, accessed March 18, 2025, https://harvardartmuseums.org/collections/object/217194.

provide valuable provenance information to the Harvard Art Museum, discovering (by chance) that this ewer was object number 38 in the 1922 Rudolf Meyer Reifstahl catalogue of the Parish-Watson collection. This means that it was, by 1922, in the collection of MacDermid Parish-Watson—a prolific dealer of Islamic Art based in Manhattan—before Annie Swann Coburn—an early collector of Islamic art—bequeathed it in 1934. Email correspondence with Dr. Ayşin Yoltar-Yıldırım, Norma Jean Calderwood Curator of Islamic and Later Indian Art at the Harvard Art Museum, revealed that he and Parish-Watson might have shared an art dealership background going back to Europe in the mid-to-late 1910s.

Figure 4. *Jug* (The Sarikhani Jug), mid 12th to early 13th centuries, Iran or Transoxania, fritware with moulded decoration and touches of blue under a turquoise glaze, I.CE.2125.

The most relevant parts of the Sarikhani Jug that are similar to the RISD Ewer include its dual-rung lattice handle, the scalloped decoration on its neck, its avian beaked, the horns at the top of the dual-rung handle, the exposed foot with thick glaze, and the dual-toned turquoise glaze between its neck and lip. In his description of the Sarikhani Jug, Watson writes that there is a "surprising discrepancy between the fine workmanship of the mould block and the rather casual and rough way the jug has been assembled."[19] Furthermore he notes that the handle, which

[19] Oliver Watson, *Ceramics of Iran: Islamic Pottery from the Sarikhani Collection* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 184.

seems to have been made from "two spills of clay, with a zig-zag of stripes and small beads," is" too small and thin for such a weighty object."[20] This was my exact observation during my close study session with the RISD Ewer, not to mention the resemblance between the two vessels' lattice handles and mouths.

But as I dug deeper, I kept discovering more objects that have at least one formal similarity with the RISD Ewer (*See Appendix 2*). From the sheer quantity of it, we know with some certainty that these wares were not isolated creations, but part of a larger network of production that spans both the medieval period (the 'original' parts) and the modern era (the restorations).

The obvious mesh of two "levels of craftsmanship" and multiple different hands with the RISD Ewer is indicative that there was a modern workshop, where most of these similar ewer forms passed through, that added these features onto fragments of a medieval ceramics.[21] If this is true, it attests to the fact that there was indeed a demand for these kinds of objects and that workshops that were producing these designs for the international market. Especially as the RISD Ewer has similarities to pedestal-bowls from the Seljuq Period and many animal-headed pre-Islamic ceramics, this modern restorative mimesis was meant to make these fragmented objects appealing to buyers who could recognize their forms and appreciate their wholeness. [22] While comparanda might help narrow the possibilities, they rarely provide final answers. Perhaps we must move from the global to the molecular to find them.

The Chemistry of the Pastiche

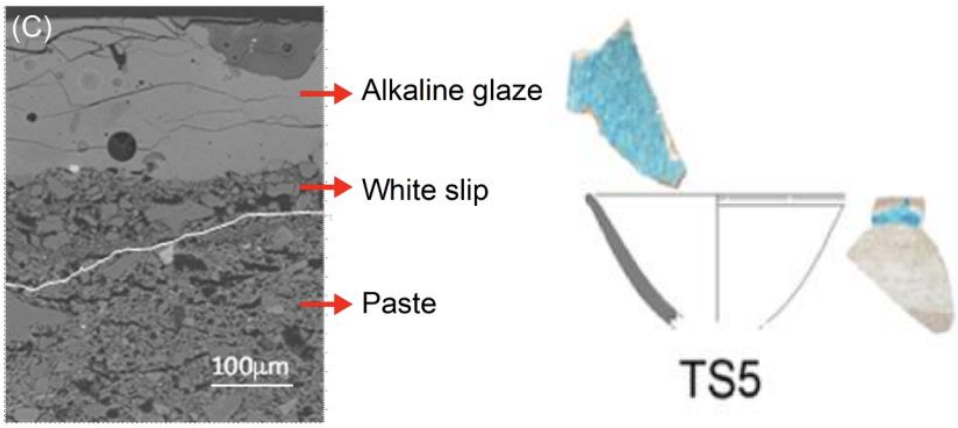
In an ideal world, extensive laboratory tests conducted on the RISD Ewer would answer many of our questions. While the bounds of my research did not grant access to a large laboratory with a range of scientific analysis and tests (nor will museums always be willing to submit their pieces to potentially destructive testing), I present case studies of other Islamic ceramic works by scholars who have come to similar conclusions. The material composition of these vessels includes a high silicon and alkali ceramic body coated with transparent alkali glaze

[20] Ibid.
[21] Watson, *Ceramics of Iran*, 184.
[22] Géza Fehérvári, *Ceramics of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum* (London: I.B Tauris Publishers, 2000), 101.; *See* Arthur M. Sackler Collection of Ancient Iranian Ceramics (nos. 67, 72, 84, 101-103, and 105) and the Met's Nishapur excavations (acs. 38.40.247 and 40.170.82).

"with Na2O as main flux and painted with chromogenic elements of Cu," which creates the familiar blue and green colors due to Copper's 2+ oxidation state.[23] These finds corroborate traditional recipes of high-alkali frit glazes in medieval Iranian ceramics from medieval manuscripts, including Abu'l-Qasim's 14th-century treatise on the manufacture of ceramics.[24]

With technologies like scanning electron microscopy with energy dispersive X-ray spectroscopy (SEM-EDX), X-ray diffraction (XRD), X-ray fluorescence (XRF), and mass spectrometry, we might discover previously unknown information. For example, Fahim et al.'s study of Safavid tile fragments from Rayy determined that the "glazes were silica-based" and that the addition of CaO to ceramic glazes creates blue and blue-green colors when in the presence of alkaline and alkaline earth metals.[25] As most monochrome glazes are alkaline—this technique did not change for 1200 years—this seems to be a common pattern with other turquoise-glazed ceramics from the same region.[26]

Other researchers have come to similar conclusions in their own studies of turquoise ceramic fragments. Mesbahinia et al. concluded, in their study of Persian Khar-Mohreh ceramics, that "the ceramic color [turquoise] is essentially due to solution copper oxide in the glazed



[23] Yan-ying Ma et al., "Compositional Characteristics of Late Islamic Turquoise Glazed Stonepaste Wares of Iran," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 50 (2023): 1, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2023.104095.; Iris Peng et al., "Exploring the Colors of Copper-Containing Pigments, Copper (II) Oxide and Malachite, and Their Origins in Ceramic Glazes," *Colorants* 1, no. 4 (2022): 376, https://doi.org/10.3390/colorants1040023.

[24] *See* Pancaroğlu, *Perpetual Glory*, 26-27.

[25] Fahim, Ghasemi, and Hosseini-Zori, "Characterization of Iranian Ancient Colored Glazed Ceramic Tiles of Safavid Era," 29.

[26] Jingyi Shen, *Chemical and Isotopic Analysis in the Investigation of Glazes from Northern China and the Middle East, 7th-14th Centuries AD*, Ph.D. thesis, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK, 2017, https://eprints.nottingham.ac.uk/48201/1/Jingyi%20Shen%20thesis%20corrected.pdf

Figure 5. (left) BSE-SEM image of a thin cross-section from sample TS5; (right) Glazed turquoise monochrome glaze vessel fragment from TS5. (Image: Molera et al. (2019)).

layer."[27] In fragments of turquoise Uzbek ceramics, Molera et al. found that "copper in rich sodium alkaline glazes gives a turquoise colour instead of green colour, which is typical of lead glazes" (Fig. 17).[28] From this in-depth scientific analysis, one thing is certain: the discovery of fritware and monochrome glaze in the medieval Middle East held fast, both across vast geographic regions and time periods and extending into the modern-day, where scientific analysis has revived interest in it once again.

Compositional analysis of ceramics may be conducted via two methods: XRF or SEM. Through XRF, a non-destructive analytical tool, an object is placed before the source of the x-ray. In a matter of minutes, the test reveals a quantitative analysis of the elements that are present in the object. SEM is the more invasive technique, requiring that small (sometimes microscopic) samples be taken from the ceramic. Nevertheless, with SEM, scholars may determine trace and minor elements, which have become a "powerful tool in provenance and authentication studies."[29] Combined with TL, which could be useful in dating both the fill material and the original ceramic, so long as the samples are taken from relevant locations, SEM could be used to concretely disprove earlier attributions or group this ceramic with others.[30]

In terms of determining which parts of a vessel are 'original' versus 'restored,' the advent of newer technologies in recent years is vital in helping scholars "unmask fakes and restorations" and opening the door to more complicated questions about ceramics' restoration processes.[31] Radiographs of what appear to be perfectly intact ceramics reveal evidence of construction or repairs, even when they have been carefully disguised. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has, for

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[27] Alimohammad Mesbahinia, Majid Rashidi-Huyeh, and Mahdi Shafiee Afarani, "Persian Turquoise Glazed Bodies: Reproduction and Optical Properties," *Applied Physics A: Materials Science and Processing* 118 (2015): 1188, https://doi.org/10.1007/s00339-014-8857-6.

[28] Judit Molera et al., "Islamic Glazed Wares from Ancient Termez (Southern Uzbekistan): Raw Materials and Techniques," *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 29 (2020): 8, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jasrep.2019.102169.

[29] Sheridan Bowman, "The Scientific Detection of Fakes and Forgeries," in *Fake? The Art of Deception*, ed. Mark Jones, Paul Craddock, and Sheridan Bowman (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 281.

[30] Mark Rasmussen, "Setting the Standard for Due Diligence: Scientific Techniques in the Authentication Process," in *Original - Copy - Fake?: International Symposium* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 2008), 21.

[31] Bowman, "The Scientific Detection of Fakes and Forgeries," 275.

example, actively engages with scientific analysis techniques and is transparent about the state of their objects, most of which have been restored (Fig. 18).

Figure 6. Examination of an ewer in the Metropolitan Museum of Art's collection of Islamic Art (left, ac. 20.120.88) reveals extensive restoration. (Image: The Metropolitan Museum of Art)

In 2021 Dana Norris and Oliver Watson conducted UV, infrared reflectography (IR), and radiography (2D X-ray) on *mina'i* wares, which have been easily forged, from the Sarikhani collection to determine which parts, if any, of these problematic objects were indeed authentic. IR captured the ranges of infrared light, which is useful in determining aspects of restoration, since inorganic pigments like cobalt blue and copper turquoise "in the restoration and colorants in the ceramic can respond differently under IR light."[32] They concluded that all three imaging techniques were useful in their study, as they discovered everything from differences in glaze thickness to visible throwing rings.[33]

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[32] Dana Norris and Oliver Watson, "Illuminating the Imperceptible, Researching Mina'i Ceramics with Digital Imaging Techniques," *Journal of Imaging* 7, no. 11 (November 2021): 9, https://doi.org/10.3390/jimaging7110233.
[33] *See* also Stephen P. Koob, "Obsolete Fill Materials Found on Ceramics," *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 37, no. 1 (1998): 49-67, https://doi.org/10.1179/019713698806082958 and Stephen P. Koob, "Restoration skill or deceit: Manufactured replacement fragments on a Seljuk luster-glazed ewer," in *The Conservation of Glass and Ceramics: Research, Practice and Training*, ed. Norman H. Tennent (London: James & James (Science Publishers), 1999), 156-.

But as Murray Pease writes, "dependence on any one apparatus is not sound investigation."[34] In order to be effective, an ideal program of analysis for the RISD ewer would include all the above-mentioned analyses regardless of whether they are invasive or non-invasive. By analyzing the RISD Ewer from all scientific angles, curators and conservators at the RISD Museum might be able to establish a place of origin for the vessel and narrow down a location for the modern workshop. The intersection of chemistry and art in the RISD Ewer proves that there is yet more work to be done on the scientific side of things. However, one thing is for certain: the partnership between art historians and scientists in this aspect has the potential to propel the field of Islamic art to new heights.

Islamic Art at the RISD Museum: Institutional Decisions and the Fleet Library Archives

Today, the RISD Ewer is in museum storage with other Islamic art works, most of which also have vague provenance. But knowing that this craze for collecting Persian pottery seems to have begun in the early 20th century, the next steps of my research took me to RISD's Fleet Library. Through the hundreds of records I perused in my quest to discover more about the RISD Ewer through a lens of early 20th-century institutional collecting at RISD, I discovered that the RISD Museum was in directly involved in the buying of Islamic art from renowned dealers in the early-to-mid 20th century. These ranged in media from 16th-century manuscript folios[35] to fragments of carpets, to sherds of and whole ceramics.

For my purposes, I am interested in the Museum's purchase of ceramics. In two letters from R. Khan Monif dated October 29th, 1921 and October 8th, 1935, he writes to L. Earle Rowe that he has received shipments of Persian antiquities from Sultanabad, Rhages, and Rakka, among others.[36] While of these letters pre- and post-date the RISD Ewer's acquisition by six to eight years, Monif is a clear example of a dealer who capitalized on the international art market's demands for these objects and had the capacity to influence important institutional decisions. Within these files, I found that Monif was frequently frustrated with Mr. Rowe's refusal to visit the Persian Antique Gallery in New York City:

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[34] Murray Pease, "Two Bowls in One," *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 16, no. 8 (April 1958): 236, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3257748.

[35] Receipt for sale of "A Royal School," 1945, box 10, folder 10, Correspondence: Persian Antique Gallery, 1920-1945, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Archives, Providence, RI.

[36] Letter to Doctor L. Earle Rowe from R. Khan Monif, 1921, box 10, folder 10, Correspondence: Persian Antique Gallery, 1920-1945, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Archives, Providence, RI.

> My intention is just to show you some of my rarest pieces in the specimens you are interested, I am the sole direct importer of Persian antiquities in the United States, I supply most of the dealers and Museums all over America…and my prices are always very reasonable.[37]

Monif's latter statement, while humorous, reveals something essential for our purposes in considering how the RISD Museum came to acquire its collection of Persian Art. While I might be reading into this aggrandizing language of a dealer attempting to make a sale, Monif's role as one of the Museum's major sources of Islamic art is an important consideration for the RISD Ewer. Yet, from my examination of the early 1920s documents in Monif's file, he did not sell any turquoise wares—at least to my knowledge—to the Museum between 1920 and 1945.

But the most important discovery I made was in the Museum Committee Reports between 1888-1929. Since the early 1920s, it seems that the RISD Museum had been receiving, as gifts, works of Persian ceramics from notable dealers and collectors, including 13th-century Sultanabad plates and bowls from a Mr. George Howe, between October 1, 1924 and June 1, 1925.[38] Yet in a *Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees* from April 13, 1927, Mr. Rowe writes the following:

> Through [the Museum Appropriation] an important purchase was made during the past quarter. This was of fifteen examples of Persian pottery…in unusual shapes and of exceptional quality…With this addition the decorative arts of Persia have an important representation in our Museum.[39]

While this answer is more implicit than explicit—I cannot deny my disappointment when I realized that the RISD Ewer was one of 15 objects purchased anonymously—it follows what seems to be patterns in correspondence between dealers and the RISD Museum directors in the 1920s, regarding large hordes of Persian art that arrived in groups.

The records of gifts between January 1 and March 31, 1927, only records 11 pieces of Persian pottery brought with the Museum Appropriation. There are four unaccounted-for objects that did not appear as gifts or loans by named collectors in the same record. Even the record of

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Museum Gifts and Acquisitions: Oct. 1, 1924-Jan. 1, 1925, 1924-25, box 1, folder 1, Corporation/Trustees Museum Committee Reports, 1888-1929, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Archives, Providence, RI.; *See* Roxanne Goldberg, "Persian Lessons: Islamic Art in America, circa 1876–1925," (PhD diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2025) for a discussion of other dealers active in New England at this time.

[39] Report of the Museum Committee to the Board of Trustees, April 13, 1927, 1927, box 1, folder 1, Corporation/Trustees Museum Committee Reports, 1888-1929, Rhode Island School of Design (RISD) Archives, Providence, RI.

gifts and acquisitions between June 1, 1926 to June 1, 1927 only mentions 11 objects. Through my own research on RISD's online catalogue, I identified ten out of the 11 (or 15 total) ceramics that were bought in 1927. The dark blue bottle (Fig. 19, ac. 27.109) and bowl with added decoration (Fig. 20, ac. 27.113) are the only two ceramics in this group that share formal similarities with the RISD Ewer.

Figures 7 and 8. Unknown Maker, *Persian bottle* (RISD Bottle), ca. 1200s, glazed stoneware, h. 33 centimeters (ac. 27.109); Unknown Maker, *Persian bowl* (RISD Bowl), ca. 1200s, glazed stoneware, h. 20.3 centimeters (ac. 27.113).

The RISD Bottle has an incredibly similar running animal frieze to the RISD Ewer; for the RISD Bowl, I highlight the dual-rung, zig-zag lattice handles with appliqué dots. Given that both objects look to have been drastically restored, the presence of these two objects in the RISD collection is further evidence that (1) if the RISD Bottle has not been restored (a slim possibility), then this is what the original RISD Ewer could have looked like and (2) if the lattice-rung handles on the RISD Bowl were indeed a modern addition (very likely), then the RISD Bowl and Ewer must have been restored by the same.

The anonymity of the actors who sold works to the Museum that were purchased with the Museum Appropriation Fund makes finding out who sold the Ewer (and the fourteen other objects in the same lot) challenging. However, there would not have been a market for objects like these ones if there was no demand for them. And it seems the RISD Museum was an active player in the acquisition and collection of these Persian ceramics in the mid-to-late 1920s.

Conclusion

The RISD Ewer is an object with no origin, no known maker, no known material, no secure dates—it is an orphan in the fullest sense of the word. So, I ask again: What exactly are we looking at? What can we say, if there really is anything to say, about the RISD Ewer? While we cannot make definitive claims about the RISD Ewer's life, the threads of research that have been linked together as a result of my close study yield radically different answers, each of which shows just how essential this vessel is in revealing the interplay between the technical aesthetics, collecting philosophies, and demands of the colonial art market between the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

But given this frustrating lack of information on the object, I maintain that we must not feed into the idea of the *silent artifact*. Museum objects like the RISD Ewer are loud, boisterous even, if only one knows where to look. This ewer therefore deserves attention not just as a "problem object" in the RISD Museum collection, but as a prime witness to an international system of excavation, fabrication, and collecting. Although most of this paper remains speculative about the origins of this ceramic, every page of a new catalogue of Islamic Art that I loaned from the Rockefeller Library or JSTOR article I opened online revealed a key piece of information or a similar formal pattern—one step closer in uncovering this vessel's story. And although the RISD Ewer's voice may be faint, it is still there—and I am listening.

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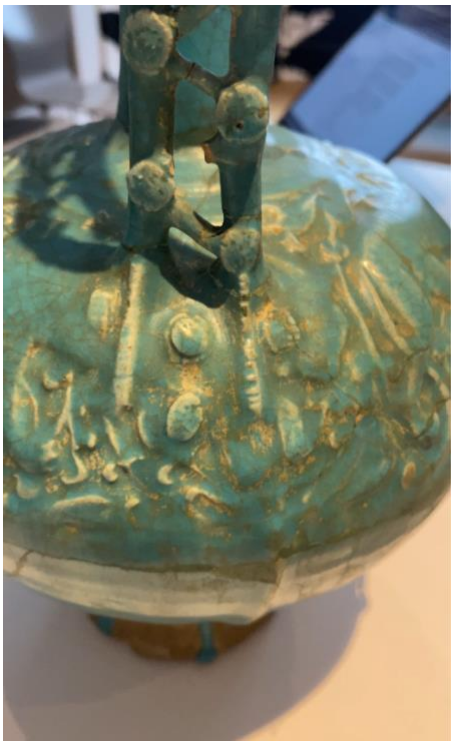
Appendix 1: Visual and Formal Analaysis of the RISD Ewer

Based on measurements I took during my only close-looking session with this object, its body measures 16 centimeters in diameter at the shoulder, 20 centimeters in diameter at the widest part of the body, and 33 centimeters in height from the foot to the highest point of the ewer's neck. It has a rather bulbous body with a shoulder that begins almost parallel to the ground and gradually gets wider until it suddenly tapers inward as the body transitions into the foot. The ewer's body is glazed in a rich turquoise color, leaning toward a blue-green in the areas where the glaze is more heavily layered and a pale white where the glaze has run off (e.g., on the ewer's ribs and the horns of the antelope). Before it came into the museum's collection, the ewer was restored, as there are patches of a darker blueish-green color in the places where the repairs are more obvious than others—that is, where someone has filled in the missing pieces. Some of the repaired cracks on the body are no bigger than hairline fissures; others range from one to five centimeters in length.

At the top of the ewer's shoulder, a circular design frames the junction between the vessel's shoulder and neck through two concentric circles with seven equidistant dots of equal size. The regularity of these circles' edges, and of the dots within the innermost circle, leads me to believe that these decorations must have also been included in the original design, for they neither project above the vessel's surface like an appliqué nor sink into it as though someone carved into the ewer's surface as an afterthought. Underneath the thin line of the concentric design's outermost circle lies the ewer's main, and most striking, decorative element: the running animal frieze. In this design, which measures about 7.5 centimeters in height and 16 centimeters in diameter, four animals chase each other through a background filled with crawling vines and leaves, sometimes referred to as an arabesque.

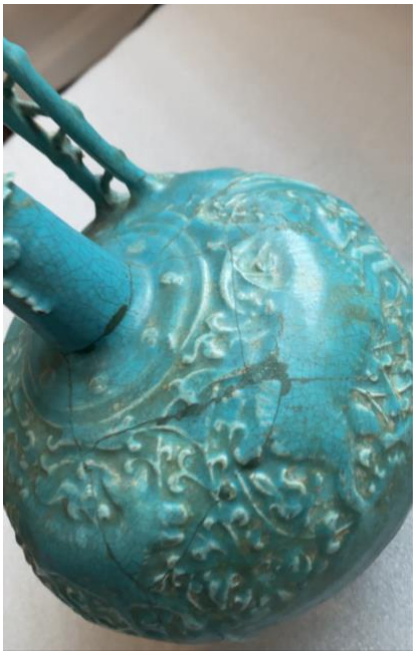
The deer and wolf on the running animal frieze. (Image: Author, March 2025)

The first animal we encounter is a deer (Fig. 2), which measures 9.5 centimeters in length and has a triangular-shaped tail and ears, an open mouth, and a slight depression in its head that suggests the form of an eye. As it only raises its front left leg—the deer's other three legs have not left the frieze's ground—the deer's gait is reminiscent of a gentle prance or trot through the arabesque, instead of running from the animal behind it or chasing the animal in front of it. The next animal (Fig. 3) resembles a wolf, measuring 13 centimeters and exhibiting features such as a closed mouth and an elongated body with fur-like textures. While its athletic build includes musculature in the hind legs, its front paws appear awkward and club-shaped, which gives this animal a bow-like stance. Although J.L. Jablonski, who filled out the 1998 conservation report (and who I believe was the conservator at the time), identified it as a wolf, its characteristics also resemble a dog or fox. Compared to the deer in front of it, I can only describe this animal's gait as predatory or stalking, for its front and hind legs seem frozen as its bowed head gazes intently at the deer in front of it. In the 1998 conservation report report, Jablonski definitively identified this animal as a wolf. While I agree with this assessment, this animal also reminded me of a dog or a fox, given its ambiguity in characteristic and form.



The base of the ewer's handle, with the ribs and dots on the lion's body. (Image: Author, March 2025)

The third animal in this frieze, which measures 13 centimeters, is a lion (Fig. 4). While it does not have a mane, its rounded head and ears, as well as its long tail, give away its identity easily. Similar to the wolf one centimeter in front of it, the lion also has a curled tail that ends in a semi-swirl, massive club-shaped paws, and a prowling position characterized by a lowered head and extended hind legs. Three out of the lion's four legs are awkwardly shaped—the right hind leg does not have any proper anatomical structure in the thigh or calf, and its paw ends in a tri-webbed foot, while the front paws appear as mere blobs. But the most striking feature about this animal in the frieze is that the connecting site of the ewer's handle on the body sits directly on top of the animal's chest and neck.



The antelope in the running animal frieze. (Image: Author, March 2025)

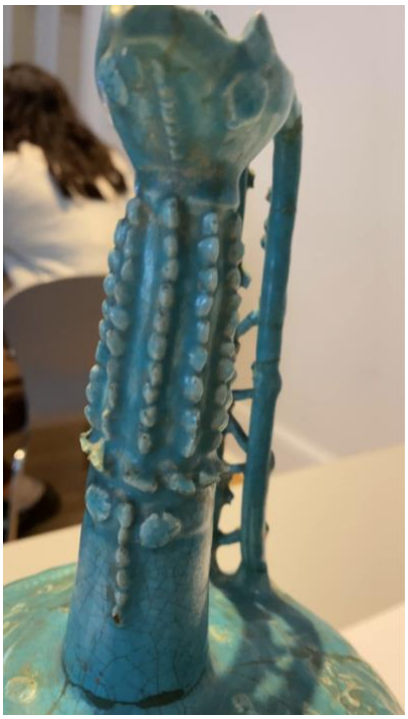
The final animal in this frieze is placed three centimeters in front of the deer and one centimeter behind the lion (Fig. 5). Given the two long horns that project from the top of this animal's head, I am inclined to call it a gazelle. Other than its horns, this animal's other features include a rounded (versus athletic) body, two triangular ears, a depression for an eye, an open mouth, and suggestions of fur on both sides of its neck, back, stomach, and rear, and accurately-proportioned hooved legs. While its back legs remain firmly planted on the frieze's ground in a slight walking position, the antelope/gazelle's front two legs are extended in front, indicating that its next movement would be to leap off the ground. The depiction of this animal in such a way that does not mirror that of the deer as fellow prey is curious, especially as both the lion and wolf, as predators, mimic each other's prowling gait.

The foot is perhaps the simplest feature of this ewer, for it does not have complications in design or shape similar to the body. The diameter of the RISD Ewer's trapezoidal foot is between eight and 8.5 centimeters at the base. Other than a large crack that runs along the foot-body junction, which extends upward to join the other cracks on the surface of the body, and a scratch, the foot is mostly intact. Another interesting detail on the foot is the ripped, yellowed dealer's sticker (Fig. 6) which has a blue border and dotted lines. Within the dotted lines that divide the sticker's interior into three equal-sized parts, I believe the numbers 4098 or 4092 were written on the top line and R359, R333, R3ss, or Rsss on the bottom line, even though they have

Ripped dealer stamp on the foot. (Image: Author, 2025)

been cut off. Along with the dealer's sticker, the last striking quality about the foot's decoration is the nine glaze 'drips' that almost always originate from the body's ribs and run vertically down. While some of these drips extend down to the base of the foot, others continue halfway to three-quarters down the foot. Since they have the same robin's egg blue color of the glaze on the neck, this has led me to speculate that perhaps the ewer was reglazed after its restoration, which could have given shape to these irregular features.

The primary decorative features on the ewer's neck are separated by a horizontal line comprising a repeating pinched scallop pattern in the middle that roughly divides the ewer's tubular neck into two distinct registers of equal size (Fig. 7).



Close-up of the neck, including the beaked mouth, vertical lines of pinched scalloped decoration on the upper half of the neck, the horizontal lines of pinched scalloped decoration, and the eyes and vertical pinched scalloped decoration on the lower half of the neck. (Image: Author, 2025)

Curiously, the decoration on the neck is not continued around its circumference; rather, it only encompasses the half of the neck's circumference that is in line with the ewer's beaked mouth. The lower register has two rounded dots, which are bisected by a similarly pinched vertical scallop pattern decoration. These appliquéd dots, indicated by their broken rather than continuous edges, make it seem as though the maker created small balls of clay and pressed them onto the neck rather than molding the existing clay to this form. A thin line of six pinched scallop decorations divides the eyes and takes the shape of a nose, lending credence to the identification of a monstrous zoomorphic design alluded to in the March 1927 and July 1998 reports. Continuing the discussion of irregularity in these decorations, it is worth noting that the horizontal line dividing the upper and lower registers slants upwards to the left and downwards to the right, as do the eyes of the anthropomorphic or zoomorphic figure. On the opposite side of the pinched scallop decorations, the back of the ewer's neck has four noticeable indentations that span the circumference of the neck. Given the regularity in distance and thickness of each indentation, I wonder if it was authentic to the 'original' neck, on top of which the modern restorer then placed the neck's pinched scallop and eye decorations.

From its elongated, tubular form, the neck tapers upward into a circular mouth, with a slim beak projecting out of the front. Above the neck's pinched scallop decorations we find the ewer's cockerel-esque face. The position of the ewer's eyes pulls our gaze up to two projecting horns that rise over the ewer's lip, which has a fairly even width around its circumference and beaked mouth. While the tips of both horns remain mostly intact (a small chip on its left horn exposes its reddish-brown inner fabric), the ewer's beaked spout has a clean break about 0.5 to one centimeter from its tip. This break was repaired with a similar darkened blue-green fill as in the repairs on the ewer's body.

Directly across from the ewer's beaked mouth, its lip thickens into the handle from two equally placed appliquéd dots that are similar in design to the eyes of the ewer's cockerel face. The ewer's handle is made up of two parallel lines that curve slightly at the top and then descend in a steep vertical line. At the apex of the handle, there are 13 appliquéd dots that are similar in shape and form to the eyes on both the ewer's neck and cockerel face. From each of these dots, which are placed diagonally across one another in a zig-zag pattern, emanates a lattice rung that follows the same zig-zag pattern down to the handle's base. Six out of the 13 lattice decorations are missing their rungs and two of them have breaks in the middle that were later repaired (Fig. 8). The ewer's handle seems to have been piecemealed together, perhaps to match the fragmentary state of the body, given the breaks that appear either right on top of or below the dots on the handle.

As the handle makes its final descent to the ewer's body, it does not connect with the body at a specific point, but extends downward via two parallel vertical lines that sit on top of the lion from the running animal frieze (Fig. 9). The base of the handle features four more appliquéd dots, similar to those on the handles and the eyes on the neck. Two of the dots are placed horizontally on the outside of these short vertical lines on the lion's head and torso. The other two dots are inside the handle's short vertical lines and are placed vertically and parallel to the handle's ribs. As the dots are not regular in shape, this leads me to believe that they, like the other dots on the ewer's neck and handle, are appliquéd (modelled or barbotine) rather than molded.

Close-up of the broken lattice rungs and dots on the ewer's handle and the lattice handle of the ewer, connecting from the lip to the body. (Image: Author, 2025)

Appendix 2: The Extensive Comparanda for the RISD Ewer

For ewers that have a similar running animal frieze, see the following: the Metropolitan Museum of Art's 12th-13th century ewer (ac. 12.224.2) that entered the collection through a purchase from Indjoudjian Frères with the Rogers Fund in 1912,[40] Esin Atil's *Ceramics from the World of Islam* object number 77 for a counter-clockwise running animal frieze in a background of arabesques[41], Grube on the Khalili collection object numbers 150, 161, 162, and 389 for bottles and a ewer with running animal friezes in arabesque backgrounds, and sherds from the Penn Museum (acs. 37-11-768, 37-11-816, 37-11-1062) excavated at Rayy.

For ewers with a similar beaked mouth, see Oya Pancaroğlu's *Perpetual Glory: Medieval Islamic Ceramics from the Harvey B. Plotnik Collection*, object no. 49 and Watson on the Sarikhani collection, object no. 88.

For ewers with scalloped decorations on the neck, see Pancaroğlu, object no. 49. For ewers with similar lattice rung handle designs, see the following: a ewer from the Yale University Art Gallery (ac. 1953.24.5) and a ewer from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (ac. 64.241.1) that entered the collection through a purchase from Jerome M. Eisenberg.[42]

For ewers with similar appliquè dots, whether as stand-ins for eyes or as other decorative features, see Giovanni Curatola's *Persian Ceramics From the 9th to the 14th Century* page 76-77 and Trudy S. Kuwami's *Ancient Iranian Ceramics from the Arthur M. Sackler Collections* object 67. For ceramics with identifiable ribs, consult Géza Fehérvári's *Ceramics of the Islamic World in the Tareq Rajab Museum* nos. 109 and 110, Atil object number 21, and Curatola page 76-77.

[40] This object was mentioned in the Parish-Watson collection catalogue, *see* Figure 3 on page xxix.
[41] Atil also makes a mention to a similar ceramic in the Met collection, which I could not find in the online collection catalogue, that Arthur Upham Pope wrote about in *A Survey of Persian Art*.
[42] Eisenberg appears to have been a dealer in looted and fake antiquities.