

A M I R M O H T A S H E M I



Chinese Iron Container

China, late Ming dynasty, 16th-17th century

22 cm high, 10cm wide, 11 cm deep

This unusual item is modelled as a tall rectangular container with a hole on each side, attached to a deep rectangular well. It is probable that this is a desk stand, employed to contain brushes and water for use on the scholar's desk. Porcelain desk stands complete with integral screens were made in rectangular form,¹ which chiefly date to the second half of the sixteenth century.

The later sixteenth century was also a time when iron vessels with inlaid silver wire were created, like this stand.² Manufacturing vessels in iron rather than bronze was work that had features in common with the production of iron tools and weapons. However, embellishment with inlaid silver wire raised such pieces to the status of decorative works of art. The silver inlay on this piece is quite worn but is well preserved on one side and reveals the design to consist of cranes among swirling clouds, with a diaper pattern on front. Cranes symbolise long life and superhuman wisdom in China, because their white feathers link them to the islands of the Immortals, and it is believed that they carry the souls of the dead to Paradise. Clouds are said to be formed by the union of yin and yang and thus represent the celestial realm, happiness and good fortune.³

These typically Chinese motifs surround quotations in Sini script, the type of Arabic script written in China, that are quite well written. On the back and on one of the sides is the prayer **الحمد لله** "Praise be to God". The inscription on the front is undeciphered. The fourth side consists of an Arabic saying "There is no God but Allah, Muhammad is the prophet of God". This phrase is found on several other Chinese pieces, including a porcelain incense burner in the Percival David Collection in London⁴ and a bronze box in the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur, assigned by them to the Zhengde period (1505-21).⁵ It begins with the word **ال مؤمن** (al-mu'min – "the believer"), but has not been fully deciphered.

The combination of Chinese vessel shapes and auspicious patterns, with Arabic inscriptions, typifies an art style that first developed in China at the end of the fifteenth century. Thus the desk stand exemplifies the union of Islamic and Chinese influences, both in its shape and its decoration.

Footnotes:

1. A porcelain example dated to c.1540-1600 is in the British Museum, illustrated in Jessica Harrison-Hall, *Ming Ceramics in the British Museum* (British Museum Press, 2001), no.9:109, p.263. A Wanli period (1573-1620) blue-and-white square stand is in the Philadelphia Museum of Art,
<https://www.philamuseum.org/collections/permanent/41059.html?mulR=1589805329|23>.
2. An iron jar and lid with inlaid silver wire and a Wanli period reign mark (1573-1620) is in the Victoria and Albert Museum, see Rose Kerr, *Later Chinese Bronzes* (Victoria and Albert Far Eastern Series, 1990), pl.44, p.55.
3. Fang Jing Pei, Symbols and Rebuses in *Chinese Art. Figures, Bugs, Beasts and Flowers* (Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, California, 2004), pp.45, 52.
4. PDF A.469, a porcelain incense burner dating to the 17th-18th century and made at the Dehua kilns in Fujian province.

https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=3180497&partId=1&people=40033&peoA=40033-3-18&page=1

5. <http://www.iamm.org.my/galleries/china/>