



### **Safavid Blue and White Jar**

Safavid Iran, Mid-17th century

Fritware decorated with two shades of blue and black

25.8cm high, 24.5cm maximum diameter

Stock no.: A5769

Provenance: UK private collection since at least 1959.

Of rounded form and with a rolled rim to allow for cotton or leather to be tied across the aperture, both the form and decoration of this storage jar are drawn from Chinese porcelain.<sup>1</sup> Chinese porcelain reached China via the Gulf as early as the 1320s, creating an almost instantaneous demand for blue-and-white porcelain. By the late 15th century, large volumes of Chinese export wares were arriving in Iran to meet the demand.<sup>2</sup> Such was the value of Chinese porcelain that Shah 'Abbas I (r. 1588-1629) endowed 1162 pieces to the Safavid ancestral shrine at Ardebil, for which he built a special *Chīnī-khāneh* (China house). The majority of these pieces were blue-and-white Ming porcelain, 805 pieces of which are documented by John Alexander Pope.<sup>3</sup> Safavid potters soon began to copy the Chinese porcelain, producing objects bearing such a resemblance as to be mistaken for the real thing by European traders.<sup>4</sup>

The shape is known as *kuan* or *guan*, with an ovoid body and short neck, traditionally used as a wine jar. A vase of this shape decorated with cranes in flight amongst *ruyi* clouds is held in the British Museum (accession no. [1937.0716.79](#)). Cranes were an auspicious animal in China due to their association with longevity. The reserve-painted lobed panel containing cranes and clouds on the present jar most resembles jars made in Wanli period (1563-1620) China, such as one in the collection

of the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (accession no. [1717-1876](#)). This device was commonly appropriated on Safavid jars of the 17th century (see V&A [184-1884](#), 31.9 cm high).

Another *kuan* jar was discovered at the Ardebil shrine, featuring lotus panels and dividers.<sup>5</sup> This motif was also copied by Safavid potters. In larger jars, such as the present example, a band of floral decoration was generally placed below the lotus panels. In this case, half flowers in reciprocal triangles form a border. A similar motif is seen on the V&A's [2541-1876](#), which dates to the 17th century.

A dragon with a mane wraps around the jar. Dragons are popular motifs on Safavid blue-and-white porcelain. A *kuan* jar in the V&A (accession no. [992&A-1876](#)) dated to the 16th or 17th century depicts a 3-clawed dragon and another in the Louvre, Paris (accession no. [MAO 695](#)) dated to 1600-1650 depicts the same. The combination of cranes in flight, dragons, and lotus panels is even seen on a vase held in the V&A (accession no. [1032-1883](#)) and dated to 17th century Iran. The dragon in the present example, with its scaly body, wings, and serpentine form without feet is rare. Only one other example is known. It likely derives from a Chinese prototype, perhaps from the Ardebil shrine. It is probably a sea creature described in the *Shanhai jing* 山海經 (*Classic of Mountains and Seas*), a mythical geography and bestiary of China dated to the 4th century.<sup>6</sup>

Safavid blue-and-white wares are generally made at one of two main centres: Masshad and Kerman. It had at one time been assumed that blue-and-white ceramics with tassel marks came from Kerman, whilst those from Masshad had black outlines and square potters' marks. However, it has been shown that these assumptions are incorrect, and the only accurate way to determine the city of manufacture is scientific analysis of the petrography.<sup>7</sup> This piece has a black rectilinear grid mark, which according to analysis carried out by Lisa Golombek, indicates a date of manufacture of 1650-1680.<sup>8</sup>

*n.b. accession nos are clickable links*

[1] Crowe, Yolande. *Persia and China: Safavid Blue and White Ceramics in the Victoria & Albert Museum, 1501-1738*. Geneva: La Borie, 2002. 90.

[2] *Ibid.* p. 9.

[3] Pope, John Alexander. *Chinese Porcelains from the Ardebil Shrine*. Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, 1956. pp. 6-10.

[4] Crowe. *Op. Cit.* p. 21.

[5] *Ibid.* Plate 27.

[6] Chen Ching-kuang, 'Sea Creatures on Ming Porcelains', in Rosemary Scott (ed.) *The Porcelains of Jingdezhen, Colloquies on Art and Archaeology in Asia* No. 16. London: Percival David Foundation of Chinese Art, London. pp. 101-122.

[7] See Mason, R.B. and Golombek, L. 'The Petrography of Iranian Safavid Ceramics', *Journal of Archaeological Science* 30 (2003), pp. 251-261.

[8] Golombek, Lisa, Mason, Robert B., and Reilly, Eileen. 'Potters' Marks', *Persian Pottery in the First Global Age*. Leiden: Brill, 2014. pp. 245-259; 257.