



Persian Lustre Tile with Phoenix

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Probably Takht-i Sulaiman, Iran, Late 13th century

Fritware with cobalt blue and turquoise underglaze and copper lustre overglaze

Stock no.: A5883

Provenance: Greek private collection since the 1970s.

This tile comes from Takht-i Sulaiman, the late 13th-century Ilkhanid summer palace located in the province of Azerbaijan, northwestern Iran. There has been some debate surrounding the centre of production of the Takht-i Sulaiman tiles. They closely resemble contemporaneous lustreware produced in the central-Iranian city of Kashan. However, moulds found during archaeological excavations suggest that the tiles were made in situ.¹

Tiles decorated both the inside and outside of the palace, with varying technique and finish depending on the tile's level of exposure to the elements. Lustre tiles, like the present example, were used to decorate the interiors of the palace. They were first painted with oxides under a translucent glaze and then fired. The glazed surface was then overpainted with copper or silver oxide and fired in a reducing kiln. The resultant effect is a metallic sheen across the surface of the tile. Star-and-cross or hexagon dados would have covered the walls to a height of around six feet (180cm), and above this, a frieze of larger rectangular tiles such as the current example.² The effect of light glistening on the walls, covered from top to bottom with lustre tiles, would have been like stepping into a room made of gold.³

In between vegetal borders, a phoenix fills the central panel of this tile. The background is filled with scrolling cloud motifs, drawn from Chinese *xiangyun* (literally, auspicious clouds). The phoenix, too, is an image drawn from Chinese sources, namely the *fenghuang*, a mythological creature characterised by its sharp beak, long fish or peacock tail, and the wings of a swallow.⁴ A phoenix-like bird, known as the *simurgh*, also existed in pre-Islamic Persian mythology. However, it is only after the Mongol

conquest of Persia in the early 13th century that illustrations of the simurgh appear, suggesting that the Chinese *fenghuang* may have been adopted by Persian artists as a way of visualising the simurgh.⁵ This tile is therefore a testament to the cross-cultural exchange of motifs which arose from the increased movement of goods and people in Central Asia under Ilkhanid rule.

A tile apparently cast from the same mould is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (accession no. [12.49.4](#)), and is dated to the late 13th century. The same simurgh or fenghuang motif appears on a star-shaped tile in the Art Institute of Chicago (accession no. [1926.2175](#)), also dated to the late 13th century. Another frieze tile, with identical vegetal borders, is in the Victoria & Albert Museum, London (accession no. [541-1900](#)). Rather than a phoenix, it is decorated with a serpentine dragon (*loong*), a motif also adopted from Chinese mythology, where it is seen as the masculine counterpart to the feminine *fenghuang*.

[1] Carboni, Stefano, and Qamar Adamjee. 'Takht-i Sulaiman and Tilework in the Ilkhanid Period', *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History*. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000. Retrieved online on 20/11/2024 from https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/khan7/hd_khan7.htm.

[2] Masuya, Tomoko. 'Ilkhanid Courtly Life' in Linda Komaroff and Stefano Carboni (eds) *The Legacy of Genghis Khan: Courtly Art and Culture in Western Asia, 1256-1353*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2002. pp. 74-103; p. 96.

[3] *Ibid.* p. 92.

[4] Gorlinski, Virginia. 'Fenghuang'. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* [online]. Retrieved on 20/11/24 from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/fenghuang>.

[5] Compareti, Matteo. 'Flying over Boundaries: Auspicious Birds in Sino-Sogdian Funerary Art', *Eurasiatica* 5 (2016), pp. 119-153; p. 132.