BIG MAMLUK BUCKETS

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We have become preoccupied with identifying fakes amongst the genuine objects in our collections or on the market. But this enthusiasm can go too far and several of the finest medieval Islamic enamelled glass vessels have been accused at some time of being ‘too good to be true’ (the Palmer Cup) or ‘looking too late 19th century’ (the Cavour Vase). ‘Middle Eastern enamelled glass’ is not that susceptible to weathering; even archaeological fragments often remain quite clear and those vessels that found their way into European treasures have usually survived in a near perfect state, making them candidates for suspicion. To make matters worse, 14th-century Cairo and 19th-century Paris shared a taste for lavishly ornamented objects to such an extent that 14th-century Egyptian objects looked quite at home in a 19th-century Parisian salon (this was after all the reason that they were imitated in the first place). Equally, I feel quite sure that Parisian objets de vertu would have been avidly collected by Mamluk amirs if their position in history had been reversed. The result of this shared aesthetic is that to modern eyes, genuine Mamluk objects can look more 19th century than their French imitations.

The subject of my paper is a small group that has suffered more accusations of fakery than any other: big Mamluk buckets, large, heavy, cylindrical containers, between 200 and 280mm high, with a pronounced flange below the rim. Five of these are known, and three of them have been pronounced 19th century at some point in their life. My interest in this group was aroused by a bucket sold at Christie’s in the Rothschild sale in London in December 2000 as French, 19th-century Mamluk style (Christie’s 2000, 66–7, 44–7, lot 16). I will focus on this vessel (COLOUR PLATE 39) before discussing others in the group.

The history of the Rothschild bucket is unknown before 1884 when it was published for the first time by Édouard Garnier as part of the Spitzer collection in Paris (Garnier 1884, 297, fig. 1). It was published twice more by Garnier in 1886 and 1891, and once by Gerspach in 1885. It was acquired by Baron Alphonse de Rothschild at the sale of the Spitzer collection in Paris in 1893. The Rothschild inventory numbers P.48 over 310 are inscribed on a circular ticket on its base. Rothschild had a special case made to contain the bucket and the enamelled blue glass bottle (now in Qatar, Museum of Islamic Art) which he bought at the same sale. While in the Rothschild collection it was discussed in publications by Schmoranz (1899, 20, 33), Rouveyre (1926, fig. 61) and Lamm (1929–30, vol. 1, 306, vol. 2, pl. 115,12). It remained in the possession of the Rothschild family until the Christie’s sale in December 2000 when it was acquired by a private collector.

The bucket is 210mm high. It is made of thick glass which has a brownish tinge and some large and many tiny bubbles. A broad inscription band runs around the vessel just below the flange. The cursive Arabic inscription in blue enamel is set against a winding white scroll with animal-head terminals in green, yellow, white and black, and red leaves. The thick red enamel ground and border of the inscription appear pinkish but were originally gilded. Below this band are, alternately, lion roundels and double-headed birds. The roundels are framed in red with gold lobes as an outer edge and a gold ground. The lion, in blue enamel, is shown striding to the left, with its right paw raised and its long tail doubling back over its rump. The double-headed eagle is outlined in red and filled with gold. Its heads are in profile, its wings outstretched and its claws clasp the dragon-headed terminals of its tail. Around the base and rim of the bucket are friezes of red palmettes, once gilded all over, with small green enamel dots decorating alternate palmettes on the lower frieze. A narrow twisted and knotted cable, outlined in red and filled with gold, runs around the vessel just above the flange.

This object hits all the alert buttons at once: excellent condition, extravagant decoration and an unusual form with a disarming similarity to 19th-century champagne buckets. A provenance in the Spitzer collection provides little reassurance. No doubt this is why Christie’s attributed the bucket to 19th-century France. So far as I know, no one disagreed with Christie’s verdict and the bucket was acquired by a collector who, ironically, was attracted to it because he thought it such an unusual example of French ‘Mamluk revival’ glass.

Christie’s backed up their attribution for the bucket by suggesting that Schmoranz and Migeon both thought it was a fake, but actually no scholar has ever questioned its authenticity in print. Christie’s claimed that ‘Schmoranz obviously was not enamoured of this beaker’ after quoting a whole section of his text (Christie’s 2000, 66). But in his text Schmoranz never queries the authenticity of the bucket; on the contrary, he compares it to the two Kassel beakers which both have an impeccable provenance. His vicious sarcasm is directed at Garnier’s effusive and inaccurate description of the bucket. In a classic put-down of an inferior colleague, he quotes Garnier’s text with his own corrections in square brackets: Garnier describes the lions as red, Schmoranz points out that they are blue; Garnier describes the Kufic script and Schmoranz states that it is actually a cursive inscription. Garnier talks of the dominant
used in blue enamels on Mamluk glass but is unknown from any other period and was never used in European enamels, therefore its presence in enamels is conclusive evidence of medieval date and a Middle Eastern provenance. Furthermore, the body glass contains about 0.6% chlorine which is much higher than would be expected from glass produced after the middle of the 19th century when chlorine levels go down to 0.1–0.2% (Ian Freestone pers. comm.). Henderson and Carboni’s paper in this volume give some useful additional distinctions between 14th and 19th-century enamelled glasses which confirm the early date of the bucket. One is the level of magnesium in the body glass (less than 0.5% in the 19th century and between 2 and 6% in the 14th century: the bucket has 3.7%. Another is the level of potassium which at 2.9% for the bucket is more typical of production in the 14th century than in the 19th century.

The bucket has the distinctive base structure unique to beakers produced in the Middle East in the 13th and 14th century. Bill Gudrenath has demonstrated how it was formed: a separate pad of glass was applied to the foot of the vessel which causes the inner wall to dome while the top part is pulled down in the centre where it touches the pad, leaving a distinctive dimple in its top (Tait 1998, 52–3). This technique died out in the Middle East towards the end of the 14th century and was never used in Europe. It is one of the main arguments used by Hugh Tait to prove the medieval date of the Palmer Cup (Tait 1998, 50–5).

Every detail of the decoration on the bucket can be paralleled in Mamluk glass vessels and archaeological fragments. I can illustrate only one example, a fragment from Fustat in Berlin which shares several of the bucket’s most distinctive decorative features: thick impasto red enamel with gilding on top, big looping scroll terminating in open-mouthed animal heads, loose floating tendrils and dots of enamel (FIG. 1).

FIG. 1 Fragment of a beaker, gilded and enamelled glass; L. 54mm, D. 2–2.5mm; Museum für Islamisches Kunst, Berlin no. I.2467
Unlike many of the 19th-century vessels, the inscription is neither gibberish nor formulaic (fig. 2). On the contrary, it seems to relate specifically to the function of the bucket as a finger bowl. It is written in informal cursive style in two sections of equal length. Each section begins above and to the left of one of the lions (which walk in the same direction as the text) and in front of an animal head terminal which also points to the left (the other animal heads face right or down). One section is clear. It reads Ana ihitwa 'al-ma' al-sirr which can be translated as ‘I contain pleasant water’. The other section is more enigmatic but it may read Ina 'ihiyar al-anamil surrati ‘Indeed, dust of the fingers is my reward’. A longer version of the same inscription is found on two 14th-century round-bottomed brass bowls of a type generally used as finger bowls in the Mamluk period (Cairo, Gayer Anderson Museum, unpublished; Berlin, Museum für Islamisches Kunst, see fig. 3). Sarre (Berlin 1986, 103) translated the inscription on the Berlin bowl as ‘Die zehn Finger haben mich zum Gefass gebildet, ich umfasse kühles Wasser’ (Ten fingers made me. I contain cool water). Whatever its precise translation, the recurrence of this unusual inscription on two 14th-century metal bowls which were unknown in the 1880s when the bucket first appeared is powerful evidence in favour of its authenticity.

Three other buckets are close in shape and style to the Kassel bucket and were probably made in the same workshop around the same period. One used to be in Prince Yusuf Kamal’s collection and is now in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo (illustrated in Lamm 1929-30, vol. II, pl. 182.2). The second was in the collection of Madame Edouard André in 1929 but its present location is unknown (illustrated in Schmoranz 1899, 33, fig. 30; Lamm 1929-30, vol. II, pl. 179.11). Lamm suggested that it might be a fake but he gave no reasons for his view. Schmoranz did not doubt it and Lamm’s drawing suggests that it is very similar to the Cairo and Kassel buckets in shape and layout and details of decoration. The third is in the Gulbenkian collection in Lisbon (no. 2377, illustrated in Ribeiro and Hallet 1999, 120-1, no. 8). This bucket is of more serious concern because of its close similarity to the mosque lamps bearing the name of the Mamluk amir Qusun, whose mosque in Cairo was built in 1329, some or all of which are known to be 19th century. If the Qusun lamp in the Metropolitan Museum is genuine (and it is thought to be — and was recently on display in the Glass of the Sultans exhibition in New York: Carboni and Whitehouse 2001, 232-4, no. 116) there is no reason why another vessel should not be decorated in a similar style, and the bucket has been published by Ribeiro and Hallet (1999, 120-1, no. 8) as a genuine 14th-century Mamluk object.

The Rothschild bucket is subtly different in size and shape to all of the other four surviving buckets. It is smaller: 210mm high whereas the others are around 260–70mm. It has a more flared body and a lower rim. It has a double base whereas they have a single base with a high kick. It is much closer in size and shape to two candlesticks, which are really just inverted buckets with a neck and socket attached, one in the Corning Museum (colour plate 41) and another which used to be in the Eumorphopoulos collection but whose present location is unknown (illustrated in Hardie 1998, fig. 20.5). Doubts about the Corning candlestick, when it reappeared on the market in 1990, fell into both the ‘it looks 19th century’ and the ‘too good to be true’ categories. But there are numerous archaeological fragments decorated with similar geometric designs and it is now generally accepted as genuine and was on display at the Metropolitan Museum in the Glass
of the Sultans exhibition (Carboni and Whitehouse 2001, 270–2). As Stefano Carboni pointed out in the exhibition catalogue, the distinctive geometric decoration of the Corning candlestick must postdate 1313, when that style of illumination was introduced into the Mamluk Empire. The design became enormously popular during the rest of that century, so it is difficult to date it more precisely by style alone. However, the use of high-lead red enamel painted on the interior of the vessel, a technical innovation which first appears on mosque lamps in the 1340s, suggests a date after about 1340. The arabesque decoration on the Eumorphopoulos candlestick, which can be compared to mosque lamps made for Sultan Hasan in the 1350s, confirms a date for them both in the middle of the 14th century.

Lamm dated the Rothschild bucket to 1260–1270, probably because lion roundels were, until recently, assumed to represent the blazon of the Mamluk Sultan Baybars who ruled 1260–1277 (Lamm 1229–30, vol. I, 306). In fact the lion motif was used decoratively throughout the 14th century (Ward 1998a, 31). Lions very similar to those on the bucket appear alternately with the sun image on the Berlin brass bowl (fig. 3). Like the two glass candlesticks which it resembles and the two metal bowls bearing the same inscription, the Rothschild bucket should probably be dated to the middle of the 14th century. I suggest that it stands at the head of a series of enamelled glass buckets and candlesticks that were introduced into the Mamluk repertoire in the middle of the 14th century and continued until the decline of the enamelled glass industry at the end of the 14th century. I hope that it can now retake its rightful place as a genuine and exceptionally interesting example of Mamluk enamelled glass.

REFERENCES


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