

The 'Damon' Candlestick

C. 900 - 1517 A.D.

Copper

H: 24cm

Resting on a wide, trumpeted foot, this wonderful candlestick rises from a band of chased keyfret motif to a body of open pierced fretwork, which consists of thuluth calligraphy against a ground of interlacing split-palmettes It reads; 'Happiness and Well-being and Long-life to its owner, as long as the dove coos'. Above is another single line of keyfret before a further small openwork panel around the circumference of the protruding shoulder of the candlestick's body. Its tower contains an interwoven vine and geometric design, chased in light relief, which raises to a pronounced head with a further openwork band. The very top lip has an inwardly facing grove, into which a candle would have been inserted. The shape of this candlestick is known to date back to the 12th century in Islamic arts. Over time the copper surface of the candlestick has developed a wonderful patina, with shades of green from historical oxidisation that evoke the object's age, while the tin added to the surface has alloyed with the copper to create a brilliant bronze appearance. Dating from the 15th century A.D., this candlestick comes from the Timurid Empire (1370 – 1507 A.D.) The empire covered much of modern-day Afghanistan, Iran and Central Asia and was founded by the eponymous leader Timur (also known as Tamerlane), a local warlord who wanted to restore the glory of the great Mongol Empire of Ggnghis Khan. Although the inhabitants of the Timurid Empire were of Turco-Mongol descent, their culture, and art, was highly informed by Persian tastes. They are remembered today for their brilliant metal working skills, as seen on the candlestick with its notably complex and intricate chased and pierced motifs. Much of the technical knowhow of the Timurid metal workers had been passed from the Seljuqs – themselves accomplished craftsmen. The Seljuqs, who had ruled parts of the Timurid Empire in the centuries prior, had perfected many metal working techniques, as well as the skill of alloying bronze – a composite of tin and copper - used to make this object. This candlestick would have initially been cast using the lost wax technique, whereby the molten metal was poured in to a mould of compacted sand or clay that was formed around a wax model. The heat of the metal would melt the wax, which would pour from a small hole, then set in its place. After cooling, the mould would be removed and the fine engraving added. The patterns on the body of this candlestick represent the most popular type of designs from the period – inlaid vegetation patterns and calligraphic inscriptions (figurative representations remained rare). Sadly, they offer no clue as to the original intended use of the lamp. However, the brilliance of its craft coupled

with the large amount of expensive material present suggest it either belonged to a notably important and wealthy patron, or more likely, was used to illuminate the interior of a mosque. Extant text sources describe the illuminations employed in mosque settings, sometimes listing large inventories of bronze candlesticks and lamps. Different lamps and candlestick were sometimes used on different days, with certain motifs matching the liturgy being read. They were also occasionally donated to important sultans, suggestive of the high value and social important of such objects. This candlestick's rarity lies in its openwork design. It belongs to a small corpus of known Timurid candlesticks of similar design. One was formerly in the Chalres Gillot Collection and sold at auction in 2008 and again in 2010 and is now in a private collection. At the second auction the price achieved was £217,250 – more than four times the object's lower estimate, highlighting the importance of these candlesticks. Another bronze (rather than tinned copper) and slightly earlier example from the 12th/13th century is in the Kier Collection. The most similar however, can be found in the David Collection in Copenhagen.

Exhibitions

International Exhibition of Persian Art, Royal Academy of Arts, London, 7 January – 7 March 1931, no.US15.

On loan to the Worcester Art Museum, Massachusetts since 1940.

The Turks in History, The Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge Massachusetts, 1 February – 15 March 1954.

Literature:

International Studio, September 1930, p90.

Catalogue of the International Exhibition of Persian Art, London, 1931, p191.

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