

Mamluk Candlestick

Egyptian or Syrian

Circa 1320-1360

Brass, Silver-inlay

H:22cm Diam:17cm

A brass candlestick with a wide drum base that widens towards the foot, and is topped with a disc drip terrace. The base is inscribed in Arabic tuluth calligraphy honouring either Mamluk Sultan al-Malik al-Nasir Muhammad ibn Qalawun (1293-1341), or his son, Sultan an-Nasir Hasan (1334-1361). The two large radial roundels on the base translate as, 'Glory to our Master the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, wise, diligent and just, who exerts himself [in time of war], who stands ready [to protect the realm], …'. The bold calligraphy stretching the height of the base between the roundels translates as, 'Glory to our Master the Sultan, al-Malik al-Nasir, the Wise …'. Both inscriptions are acclamations of the reigning Sultan's authority to rule. The tapering cylindrical neck, and socket with a flared nozzle and integral lower bobeche, are decorated with bands of foliate arabesques, flying bird motifs, pointed palmettes, and six-petalled rosettes; all of which are recognizable emblems of the Qalawunid dynasty.

The shape of this candlestick, with a broad base and single central holder, originates from the metalworking traditions of twelfth-century Iran and Iraq. Prior to the introduction of inlaid designs in the twelfth century, there is only evidence of candlestick being produced from precious metals like gold and silver. Wax was expensive and wax candles, which were often elaborately decorated with coloured paper and gilding, were even more so. Brass and bronze candlesticks only became popular after the fashion for inlaid silver and gold decoration arose.

Mamluk candlestick were likely used in religious ceremonies, weddings, and other celebrations, where they would have been seen by many members of the court. The endowment deeds of mosques and mausolea often specify how many candles should be provided and how often they were to be lit. Candlesticks may also have been given as gifts to members of the court and military officials – candlesticks intended for domestic settings were often decorated with imagery that reflected courtly life, such as processions.