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VISUAL TRANSFERS ACROSS ASIA: CHINESE MOTIFS AND THE SYNTHESIS OF TIMURID ORNAMENTATION

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Abstract

This paper examines how visual models of Chinese origin entered the Timurid artistic system through fifteenth-century Silk Road exchanges and how they were subsequently redefined within the local artistic tradition. The scope centers on the major cultural centers of Herat and Samarkand, focusing on two media where these processes are particularly visible: miniature painting and blue-and-white underglaze ceramics. Rather than cataloguing isolated examples, the study addresses broader patterns of transformation while referring to specific cases where relevant. The research employs comparative visual and stylistic analysis to map compositional structures, trace families of motifs, and assess how material and technique influenced aesthetic decisions. Findings indicate that Chinese-derived elements were not passively copied but translated into the ornamental grammar of Timurid art and adapted to its visual logic. Over time, these external forms stabilized as hybrid configurations and became part of the internal order of Timurid ornamentation. The study concludes that individual artistic imports evolved into new stylistic norms through deliberate adaptation, offering a model for understanding intercultural artistic synthesis. The Timurid case, examined through the lenses of Herat and Samarkand, demonstrates how continuous cultural contact, material technology, and composition collectively shaped stylistic innovation and the emergence of a synthesized visual language across Chinese and Timurid art traditions.

Keywords: *Timurids, Silk Road, Chinese art, motif transfer, ornamental grammar*

Introduction

The Timurid era was marked by intensive cultural contacts between Central Asia and China along the routes of the Silk Road. These interactions facilitated the transmission of Chinese artistic motifs into Timurid visual culture, especially in the cultural centres of Samarkand and Herat. The Spanish

envoy Ruy González de Clavijo, who visited Samarkand in 1403, noted that Timur's courtiers made use of Chinese porcelain, which was regarded as a prestigious commodity (González de Clavijo, 1928; Lentz & Lowry, 1989). From the early fourteenth century, the production of Chinese blue-and-white porcelain (qinghua) at Jingdezhen was

directed towards export, and through Persian and Arab merchants such wares spread widely across the Middle East (Harrison-Hall, 2001; Carswell, 1985; Medley, 1982). As a result, Chinese porcelain became an integral element of the Timurid artistic language, prompting new forms and styles at the intersection of two traditions (Golombek, Mason, & Bailey, 1996; Watson, 2004).

The aim of the present study is to trace the pathways by which visual motifs from China entered the Timurid artistic tradition and to show how these borrowed elements were creatively reinterpreted within the local style. The analysis focuses on two media in which the impact is particularly evident: book miniature painting and blue-and-white ceramics with underglaze decoration. The central problem is to determine whether Chinese images were merely copied or whether they were integrated into the Timurid ornamental system and adapted to its aesthetic logic.

Method

The study employs comparative visual-stylistic analysis: it juxtaposes the compositions and ornaments of Chinese prototypes with their Timurid reinterpretations. This approach makes it possible to trace families of motifs – for example, the dragon, cloud scrolls, or lotus patterns – from their Chinese origins to local versions. It also considers the influence of material and technique on the alteration of forms. The analysis encompasses both artistic artefacts (miniatures, ceramic objects) and written sources (travel accounts, diplomatic reports) with a view to reconstructing channels of exchange. Using the Timurid case, it shows how sustained cultural contacts, the adoption of new technologies, and reciprocal influences in compositional practice stimulated stylistic innovation and the emergence of a hybrid artistic language uniting Chinese and Iranian traditions.

Results

The research reveals compelling evidence for the penetration of Chinese visual motifs into Timurid art and their creative transformation in a new environment. The principal results are presented below, grouped by the two media under study – miniature painting

and underglaze blue-and-white ceramics – with concrete examples illustrating processes of motif adaptation.

- 1. Chinese motifs in Timurid miniature painting.** Timurid miniature painting exhibits a wide range of borrowings from the Chinese artistic tradition, refracted through local aesthetics. In the early phase (at the turn of the fourteenth to fifteenth centuries), under the influence of Song–Yuan art, Persian painters turned to depictions of nature and adopted landscape devices previously uncharacteristic of Islamic painting (Sugimura, 1992; Lentz & Lowry, 1989). Timurid miniatures display rocky crags with stylised contours, squat gnarled trees, and distinctive “mushroom-shaped” lingzhi clouds framing the scenes (Homma, 2017; Rawson, 1984). These elements closely reproduce Chinese models and impart depth and multi-planarity previously absent from the landscapes. As T. Sugimura notes, the traditional Persian manner – flat grounds with figures on a single plane – was enriched under Chinese influence by devices of “unbounded space and endless planes”, giving artists greater freedom of composition (Sugimura, 1992; Lentz & Lowry, 1989). At the same time, Chinese influence in painting was largely indirect: there is no evidence of Chinese masters working at the Timurid court; rather, imported motifs were creatively assimilated by local artists (Lentz & Lowry, 1989; Roxburgh, 2000).
- 2. Chinese motifs in Timurid blue-and-white ceramics.** Archaeological and museum research on Timurid ceramics has identified an entire strand of local production geared towards the imitation of Chinese porcelain. Ceramic wares of the fifteenth century found in Samarkand, Nishapur, Herat, and Tabriz comprise bowls, dishes, and ewers painted under the glaze in cobalt blue, produced in a fritware (stonepaste) body. The evidence indicates that the Timurids did not merely import porcelain but established their own production of its analogues, adopting both the technical and artistic aspects of the Chinese model (Golombek

et al., 1996; Watson, 2004; Harrison-Hall, 2001).

For example, the dragon motif became widespread on Timurid wares. Descriptions and scholarly publications refer to fifteenth-century Iranian *kumgān* (ewer) forms with underglaze-painted dragons closely akin to Yuan prototypes (Golombek et al., 1996; Watson, 2004). The dragon is rendered scaly, with tongues of flame stylised as clouds issuing from its body – a device characteristic of Chinese art but creatively reworked by local masters (Rawson, 1984; Harrison-Hall, 2001). In particular, on Samarkand examples the flames around the dragon are often geometrised, turning into patterned cloud-ribbons integrated into the vessel's overall ornamental lattice, thereby making the motif an organic component of Timurid decoration (Watson, 2004; Golombek et al., 1996).

Beyond dragons, Timurid blue-and-white adopted numerous other Chinese ornaments. One of the most common was the vegetal scroll: stylised lotus and peony blossoms and vine tendrils. These motifs decorate the borders and cavetto of Timurid bowls, cups, and dishes. Persian masters often combined Chinese floral motifs with traditional Islamic elements, inserting, for example, fine arabesques around peonies – an intentional combination of visual languages that enriched the local ornamental system (Harrison-Hall, 2001; Medley, 1982; Carswell, 1985).

Summarising the findings above: the study demonstrates that Chinese motifs – from dragons and cloud scrolls to floral arabesques – permeated Timurid art across media. However, these motifs were not simply copied, but translated into a new artistic language. In miniature painting, Chinese devices enriched Persian art, enabling complex landscapes and decorative compositions, yet the motifs acquired different meanings and functions within an Islamic worldview. In ceramics, the Timurids actively reproduced Chinese forms and ornaments, achieving a high level of imitation, but adapted them to local materials and incorporated them into their ornamental canon. Thus, over the course of the fifteenth century, external forms from China travelled from exotic novelties to stable hybrid configurations, becoming in

part “native” within Timurid art (Golombek et al., 1996; Watson, 2004).

Discussion

The results attest to deep and productive processes of intercultural adaptation in Timurid artistic practice. Contrary to outdated views that Eastern art was confined within rigid canons, the Timurid example shows a pronounced openness to external influences and a capacity for creative rethinking of borrowed ideas.

The significance of this synthesis is twofold. First, the exchange of motifs enriched the visual vocabulary and enabled new artistic solutions. Timurid culture prized grandeur and refinement, and Chinese porcelain, painting, and silk satisfied this aesthetic demand, offering exquisite images (brilliant blue on white, extremely fine ornament). By mastering them, Timurid artists raised technical and artistic standards to a new level – aptly described as the Timurid Renaissance. Second, the phenomenon of intercultural synthesis bears civilisational significance: it attests to the close-knit ties of Eurasia in the pre-industrial age. Our study is but one stroke in the larger picture of global exchanges along the Silk Road, yet a telling one. The constant presence of Chinese goods and ideas in Samarkand and Herat shows that the Silk Road was not only a commercial but also an artistic artery through which styles and tastes circulated. In this sense, the Timurid empire functioned as a crucible in which Asian traditions (Mongol, Persian, Chinese) were fused into an original synthetic culture (Manz, 2007; Shea, 2018).

Conclusion

The present study has reconstructed the transfer of artistic motifs from China to Timurid art in the fifteenth century and identified the regularities of their transformation. The principal findings may be summarised as follows:

Large-scale exchange along the Silk Road. In the fifteenth century, intensive trade, diplomatic, and cultural contacts between the Timurid Empire and China enabled Chinese works of art (porcelain, textiles, scrolls) to reach Central Asia. The Timurid elite received them as exemplars of supreme quali-

ty and style, which stimulated local artisans' interest in Chinese visual forms (González de Clavijo, 1928; Rossabi, 1976; Fan, 2023).

Active borrowing of motifs across media. Timurid artists adopted and adapted Chinese landscape, ornamental, and mythological motifs. In miniature painting this appeared in depictions of rocks, trees, clouds, and fantastical beings (dragons, phoenixes), as well as in the visual rendering of Chinese objects (porcelain). In ceramics it took the form of producing blue-and-white wares emulating Chinese porcelain in shape and décor (Sugimura, 1992; Homma, 2017; Golombek et al., 1996; Harrison-Hall, 2001; Watson, 2004; Carswell, 1985).

Creative adaptation and synthesis. Borrowed elements did not remain external additions but were creatively reworked. This is evident in stylistic modifications (e.g., contour outlining, reconfiguration of composi-

tions), in the re-semantisation of symbols (the dragon becoming a decorative motif), and in combinations with local ornaments. Over time, stable hybrid forms emerged and came to be perceived as part of the Timurid artistic language (Manz, 2007; Subtelny, 2007).

Moreover, understanding mechanisms of visual adaptation may inspire contemporary artists and designers to pursue a bold cultural dialogue.

In sum, the trajectory of motifs “from China to Herat” illustrates how art develops through curiosity and openness. Timurid masters turned borrowing into creation, and the synthesis they forged exerted a long-term influence on the region's artistic traditions. This confirms its historical significance and its relevance for understanding the mechanisms of global artistic interaction (Lentz & Lowry, 1989; Manz, 2007).

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