Bowl

Sasanian, 6th-mid 7th century CE

Silver, gilding

Lent by Lewis M. Dubroff. L2009.4.49

Silver bowls of this type, with a narrow, elliptical shape and ring foot, are characteristic of Sasanian production during the sixth and seventh centuries CE and were likely made in workshops connected to the Sasanian royal court. Silver was a highly valued commodity, due in part to a lack of abundant sources within the Sasanian empire. Such vessels were used at lavish banquets and were given as royal gifts, signaling wealth and prestige.

This bowl was made more impressive by the addition of mercury gilding to accentuate the figures engraved on its exterior surface. The decoration itself recalls Dionysian motifs seen throughout earlier Greek and Roman art, especially on drinking vessels, and evokes an atmosphere of abundance and pleasure: scrolling vines loaded with grape clusters and vine leaves are interspersed with bird’s nests, and birds, foxes, and hares play between the tendrils. The survival of Dionysian imagery in Sasanian art, as well as the adoption and adaptation of metalworking techniques, attests to the intercultural connections that existed between the Roman, Byzantine, and Sasanian empires in Late Antiquity.

In the before treatment image, it is clear how tarnish can obscure the luxurious materiality of mercury gilded silver. The gilded surface is damaged from a combination of its age, archaeological context, and previous campaigns of cleaning. A chemical compound suspended in a gel system was used to dissolve the silver sulfide. This gel allowed for a controlled application of the compound at the surface of the gilding.

A Middle Persian inscription was punched on the underside of the vessel within the ring foot, and gives the male name "Ohrmazd.". The elemental composition of the foot was analyzed with portable X-ray fluorescence spectroscopy; it was found to contain a significantly higher amount of copper than the bowl. The difference in alloy composition may suggest that the foot was added at a later date.

*Use your finger to manipulate the angle of the light on the Middle Persian inscription*

*The Sasanian bowl before treatment*

*Detail of engraving. Note the dotted lines the artist used to create perspective on the proper right front leg, back leg, and ear*