Contemporary ceramic and the trace of Thousands of Years Persian designs and movements

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Abstract

This study traces how Persian ceramic motifs, rooted in centuries of cultural and spiritual expression, continue to shape the visual language of contemporary Persian ceramic art. It highlights the evolution of form and meaning, showing how today's artists reimagine traditional aesthetics through their own social, political, and ecological perspectives. By drawing on historical references and personal narratives, the research brings together past and present in a dialogue of materials, symbols, and techniques. Through visual analysis, artist interviews, and documentation, it reveals how Persian ceramic traditions, particularly their intricate motifs and craftsmanship, remain vibrant and influential in contemporary practice. These motifs express artistic value while also reflecting identity, cultural continuity, and meaningful connection. By recognising their transformation across time and cultures, this study offers a broader understanding of heritage as an evolving and creative force. Artists carry this legacy forward with each gesture, coil, and mark, continually renewing its beauty and relevance.

Keywords: Ceramic, Persian heritage, Persian motifs, contemporary ceramic, exploring tradition

Introduction

This study investigates how historical Persian ceramic motifs have been preserved, adapted, and reimagined in contemporary artistic practice, with a focus on the cultural, social, and political meanings they continue to carry. Persian ceramics represent a long and rich tradition of creative expression. Their surfaces tell stories, preserve beliefs, and reflect the values of generations. The intricate motifs found in these works, often inspired by nature, poetry, or spiritual ideas, are more than decoration. They reflect a deep connection between form and meaning.

Across time, these motifs have passed through dynastic transitions, regional styles, and global exchanges. From the detailed floral patterns of Kashan to the elegant calligraphy of Safavid tiles, Persian ceramics have offered both beauty and meaning. In today's world, many artists draw on this heritage while also responding to new contexts, including migration, identity, ecological concerns, and broader cultural shifts.

To understand how artists work with tradition today, this research uses a qualitative approach. It brings together visual analysis, artist interviews, and a careful review of primary and secondary sources. Over fifty responses were gathered through a structured questionnaire shared with contemporary Persian ceramic artists. These include voices from within Iran as well as from the Persian community in Australia. Artists shared insights into their use of motifs, materials, techniques, and influences. Their reflections help us see how tradition is being reshaped through lived experience.

The study also analyses photographs of ceramic artworks, artist statements, exhibition materials, and public content from social media. These sources help reveal how different artists incorporate historical elements into their current work. Some continue classical patterns in thoughtful ways, while others introduce new meaning through reinterpretation. The motifs observed were grouped into visual categories, including human figures, animals, floral designs, geometric forms, abstraction, and calligraphy. This helped trace how symbols continue to evolve and stay relevant across different artistic contexts.

Academic research on Persian ceramic history and archaeological records provide a strong base for understanding the background of these motifs. Although the number of core documents is limited, they represent a wide range of periods and perspectives, offering a focused but meaningful view into this area of study.

This interdisciplinary approach allows the research to connect past and present through material, image, and meaning. It demonstrates how artists continue to reflect on their heritage while engaging it in conversation with the world around them. Persian ceramic art today holds both continuity and change. It honours memory, engages with culture, and creates space for personal and collective expression. Through this lens, ceramics are seen not only as crafted forms, but as carriers of knowledge, stories, and vision for the future.

History

The first pottery in Iran, part of the Mesopotamian culture, dates back approximately 12,000 years. From the earliest days of settled life on the Persian Plateau, pottery has been a key part of everyday culture, spiritual practice, and artistic expression. The documented evidence of pottery which we can refer to, belongs to the 6th BCE Tape Sialk[1].

Iran is estimated to have over 300,000 archaeological sites,[2] dating from the Old Stone Age to medieval times. These sites range from prehistoric caves, shelters, and campsites to highly complex monuments and cities.[3] Pottery has been found in these sites, in many graves as well as around the cities, and was sorted by separating the pottery based on morphology (rim, body, and base shapes). They were then subject to typology based on decoration. While many archaeological sites feature motifs and patterns associated with a specific era or tribe, the theme of pattern has persisted across places and time. The record of a decorated slip-painted bowl in fair condition goes back to 5500–4400 BCE, Cheshmeh-Ali[4].

Most of these patterns and forms are examined through an archaeological lens, while this research views them from an artistic and ceramic perspective. While we will only explore the types of motifs in general, it's essential to note that motifs have a connection to their era and transform in response to dynasties. The connection to each era can be traced by the body colour and slip that were used. Some motifs and techniques appear with greater frequency and intensity during specific periods, as they were more commonly used and refined over time. Motifs such as Floral, Animal, Mythical beasts, figurative, geometric and abstract forms, calligraphy, and symbols have been repeated in multiple dynasties in Iran.

Geometric and abstract forms

Travelling back 5,000 years connects us with made hand-built pots with fine slip and painted geometric patterns. In early periods, particularly during the Neolithic and Chalcolithic eras, vessels were often decorated with dark-painted cross-hatched, zigzags, chevrons, parallel lines, and concentric circles on light buff or reddish surfaces.

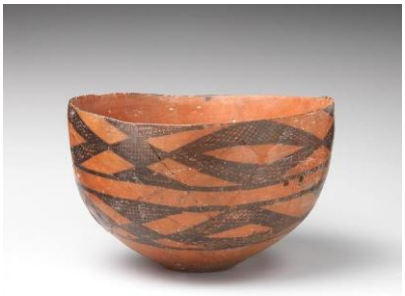

Figure1: *Bowl with Cross-Hatched Decoration*. Iran, ca. 5300–4300 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art. [5]

[1] Massoud Azarnoush and Barbara Helwing, *"Recent Archaeological Research in Iran: Prehistory to Iron Age,"* Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan 37 (2005), https://www.researchgate.net/publication/251317136_Recent_archaeological_research_in_Iran_-_Prehistory_to_Iron_Age.

[2] Mirosław Olbryś, "*Od Tepe Sialk do Suzy, Iran 1996 [From Tepe Sialk to Susa, Iran 1996],"* Z Otchłani Wieków 54, no. 1 (1999): 22–31, https://www.academia.edu/114144740/Od_Tepe_Sialk_do_Suzy_Iran_1996_From_Tepe_Sialk_to_Susa_Iran_1996.

[3] Chuck Jones, *"The Archaeological Gazetteer of Iran: An Online Encyclopedia of Iranian Archaeological Sites*," AWOL – The Ancient World Online (blog), 22 March, 2021, https://ancientworldonline.blogspot.com/2021/03/the-archaeological-gazetteer-of-iran.html.

[4] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Bowl with Cross-Hatched Decoration*, Iran, ca. 5300–4300 B.C. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/323788.

[5]The Metropolitan Museum of Art. *Bowl with Cross-Hatched Decoration*. Iran, ca. 5300–4300 B.C. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/323788.

A bowl with cross-hatched decoration is decorated with a finely painted geometric pattern of hatched diamond shapes in two bands encircling the outside of the bowl. Triangle Ware, a buff pottery decorated with crosshatched triangles, continued to develop in Hasanlu IIIA. This ware has been found throughout northwestern and central western Persia, providing a horizon marker[6]. —a diagnostic style that appears across multiple sites and can be used by archaeologists to identify and date specific occupational layers within a broad geographical area. marker

As pottery evolved in the Bronze and Iron Ages, with the innovation of the wheel, surface patterns became increasingly complex, most geometric motifs on the Buff Ware bowls of Shahr-i Sokhta consisted of composite or straightforward lines, triangles, chains of triangles, hanging triangles, zigzags and festoons[7] applied to bowls, jars, and tall cylindrical forms. In some regions, such as western Iran, potters created angular or sharply defined silhouettes with minimal decoration, allowing the abstract form itself to become the focal point. Later, since 550 BCE, abstraction appeared in the vessel's structure—incised lines, stamped rosettes, and stylised scrolls replaced painted motifs. The overall shapes became more refined and symmetrical, often with flaring rims, ring bases, or compressed bodies. In Sasanian, motifs were added more in form rather than painted[8] Persian pottery is defined by its use of repeated shapes, structured compositions, and simplified vessel outlines. These motifs followed the contours of the pot, enhancing its form through symmetry and rhythm.

From the Achaemenid period (550-330 BCE), geometric and abstract forms began to transform into more symbolic ones, influenced by Egypt, which featured human figures and floral arabesques. During the early Islamic period, roughly from the 7th to the 13th century CE, floral arabesques and human figures (especially in Nishapur and Susa wares) replaced earlier geometric abstraction.

Figurative:

Human figures originated from the same minimal and abstract forms in the 3rd century BCE, with an increase in the use of reliefs. During the Achaemenid period, human figures were largely avoided on functional ceramics, while they dominated architectural decoration. In Parthian figural vessels, the human head and bust are used as spouts or handles. During the early Islamic period, slip-painted images of seated figures, musicians, and courtly scenes featuring symbolic animal and floral designs emerged. The Saljuk period was the pinnacle of Minai ware, characterised by richly painted figures and native scenes, including poets, dancers, musicians, and lovers, and continued with Shahnameh illustrations and garden scenes. In Gajar, the shift to painting royal portraits and heroes with under- and overglazes started[9].

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[6] Robert H. Dyson Jr., "*The Achaemenid Painted Pottery of Hasanlu IIIA*," Anatolian Studies 49 (1999): 101–110. https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/anatolian-studies/article/abs/achaemenid-painted-pottery-of-hasanlu-iiia/752836B58E331459EDD1FA8D9094D029

[7] Hakimeh Bargahi and Mohammad Hossein Rezaei, "*The Emam Zadeh Chahar Rustayi Site, a Bakun Period Settlement in Bushehr Province, Southern Iran*," Sociology and Anthropology 3, no. 1 (2015): 45–51, https://www.hrpub.org/journals/article_info.php?aid=2090

[8] Oriental Art Auctions, "A Post-Sassanian Turquoise-Glazed Pottery Storage Jar, Iran or Iraq, 7th–8th Century," https://www.orientalartauctions.com/object/artisla01463-a-post-sassanian-turquoise-glazed-pottery-storage-jar-iran-or-iraq-7th-8th-century.

[9] Qajar Ceramics – Bridging Tradition and Modernity Exhibition," *Islamic Arts Magazine*, https://islamicartsmagazine.com/magazine/view/qajar_ceramics_bridging_tradition_and_modernity_exhibition/

Figure 2: *Bowl with Seated Figure*,"
The Walters Art Museum[10]

Animal and mythical beasts

The animal motif, birds, was one of the oldest motifs that continued symbolically from the 5th BCE until today. Throughout history, animal forms evolved from linear, geometric representations using painting with slip[11].

Figure 3: *Rhyton in the shape of an ibex*, Iran, 10th century.[12]

In the early Islamic period, there is a trace of the influence of aniconic motifs. Animals began to appear more frequently as central decorative elements and evolved into mythical forms, such as sphinxes and winged creatures, around the 12th century. From the 15th century, we see a transfer from courtly animals and hunting scenes. The faces of animals, such as dogs, peacocks, and horses, are more expressive. During the Qajar period, painting became bolder and more colourful, with animals used as allegories, symbols, and vehicles for moral stories.

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[10] Bowl with Seated Figure," *The Walters Art Museum*, https://art.thewalters.org/object/48.1075/
[11] Hermitage catalogue, *Persia Thirty centuries of art & culture* (Amsterdam: Lund Humphries in association with the Hermitage Amsterdam), 11.
[12] The Metropolitan Museum of Art, *Rhyton in the shape of an ibex*, Iran, 10th century, https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/325695.

The mythical beasts' evidence returns to the Achaemenid Empire, specifically Homa, which has been incorporated into Persepolis's architecture, but not on ceramics; the winged bull and lions symbolised kingly power and divine protection. They carried some Zoroastrian meanings. In early Islamic times, they returned to more decorative and symbolic designs, such as some hybrid birds found in Nishapur decoration. Simurgh, the form of Homa from the Sasanian Period (224 CE), but with the first evidence of ceramic painting dating back to the 15th CE—winged horses with cobalt blue, Minaie, or lustre techniques, and shaped. Simorgh, symbolising divinity, came in a poetic and Sufi didactic meaning—narrative framing in Qajar and sacred animal-human-headed creatures.

Floral

Floral motifs have roots back to the 4th BCE, with abstract forms representing plant-like motifs painted with black and red slip. Around 550 BCE, rare evidence of floral design on everyday ceramics appeared, but the lotus symbol began to occur on luxury ware, symmetrically and symbolically, from time to time. From 250 BCE, there was a shift from painted decoration to the addition of more elements, such as patterns like vine leaves. From the early Islamic period this pattern became more naturalistic, symbolic of paradise, and strongly tied to Islamic gardens[13]. The influence of other cultures, such as Mongolian folk design and Chinese patterns, began to take shape. The compositional pattern forms in radial and symbolises the divine order. During the Safavid period, the peak of naturalistic floral art, tulips, roses, and doughnut flowers were often used in conjunction with royal imagery, alongside figures and birds.

Calligraphy

Writing has a long history in Persian ceramic art. At the ancient site of *Shahr-i Sokhta* (Burnt City), dating to the 3rd millennium BCE, over 400 ceramic vessels were found marked with engraved or painted signs. Some of these marks are connected to early scripts such as Proto-Elamite or even the Indus script. Although not yet complete writing systems, they reflect an early use of marks to communicate or record meaning on clay surfaces (Shahr-i Sokhta report, 2023).[14]

Following the rise of Islam in the 7th century CE, writing assumed a new and central role in Persian art. Religious traditions discouraged the use of human and animal figures in sacred settings, which encouraged artists to explore geometric design and calligraphy as core forms of decoration[15]. With its strong and angular shapes, Kufic script became widely used in architecture and ceramic decoration[16].

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[13]David Wheeler, "*The British Museum Offers a Revelatory New Look at Islam and Art,"* Al-Fanar Media, February 5, 2019, https://www.al-fanarmedia.org/2019/02/the-british-museum-offers-a-revelatory-new-look-at-islam-and-art/

[14]Seyyed Mansur Seyyed Sajjadi, *"Potter's Marks in Shahr-i Sokhta: Their Functions and Meanings"* (Tehran: Iranian Centre for Archaeological Research), https://siba-ese.unile.it/index.php/erss/article/viewFile/27074/22348

[15] Robert J. Charleston*, World Ceramics an Illustrated History* (New York: NY Crescent Books, 1999). 83.

[16] Robert Irwin*, Islamic Art* (London: Laurence King, 1997), 39, 40.

Figure 4: *Bowl,* Khalili collection, Nishapur, Iran, 10th Century CE. Glazed earthenware. 7.2 x 25.1 cm.[17]

Epigraphic ceramics became common by the 9th and 10th centuries, particularly in the city of Nishapur under the Samanid dynasty. Bowls were often inscribed with blessings, short verses, or sayings in dark brown Kufic script on a white slip background. These inscriptions were decorative and carried social and spiritual meaning[18]Some works also featured pseudo-scripts—writing that mimicked Kufic forms without containing actual words. This allowed artists to include the visual beauty of script while avoiding religious or political restrictions.

Figure 5*: Bowl,* Michail Collection, Nishapur, Iran, 9th -10th Century CE.
Terra Cotta Painted in brown manganese on a white slip and under a transparent lead glaze,
5 x 12 cm. [19]

As Persian calligraphy developed, styles such as Thuluth, Naskh, and later Nastaliq emerged, each with its distinct rhythm and flow. These styles continued to influence ceramic art, where writing served as ornament and a bearer of poetic and cultural meaning.

[17] The slip-painted inscription reads *"Generosity is the disposition of the dwellers of Paradise",* Irwin*, Islamic Art*, 166.
[18] Robert J. Charleston*, World Ceramics an Illustrated History* (New York: NY Crescent Books, 1999). 77.
[19] The epigraph is illegible, but the calligraphy in the middle marks the transition from Abbasid script to the type commonly employed in Khorasan. Curatola, ed., *Persian Ceramics from the 9th to 14th Century*. 170.

Techniques and Style

Specific techniques and styles have influenced some historical motifs. To understand and trace these motifs, it's impossible to overlook the effect of the methods. First is the invention of the pottery wheel, dating back to around the 4th BCE, with evidence of wheel-thrown finished pottery. This can be easily connected to the existence of more pots without any motifs, suitable for everyday use and storage purposes. Early Bronze Age, 3rd BCE: Highly symmetrical vessels were found in Shahre-e Sukhthet, accompanied by a gender shift in ceramics and an increase in workshop-style buildings, which had an impact on symmetrical and rhythmic motifs and designs. Next is Persian lustre, which dates to the 3rd century BC, as found in levels III and IV of the Sialk site, providing evidence of a rotational device—the earliest actual lustre painting, 9th century CE, in Iraq. The first lustre vessels were found in Rayy, Kashan, and Nishapur, Iran, in the 10th century CE. Lustre was a type of luxury tableware, used in tiles and decoration, featuring figural, floral, and calligraphy motifs in golden and coppery lustres. Epigraphic and historical sources and petrographic analyses, on the other hand, suggest that Persian lustre was the prerogative of a small number of family-run potteries in the town of Kashan. The marriage of cultures to each other and the effect of these motifs on each other is evident in Rhytons and Blue and White Ceramics (Persian-Blue/Cobalt Blue) [20] [21].

[20] Aimée Froom, "*Between Sea and Sky: Blue and White Ceramics from Persia and Beyond at the Museum of Fine Arts*, Houston," *Arts of Asia*, September–October 2020, https://artsofasia.com/between-sea-and-sky-blue-and-white-ceramics-from-persia-and-beyond-at-the-museum-of-fine-arts-houston-2/.

[21] Carol Cains and Matthew Martin, "Blue: Alchemy of a Colour," *Essays*, November 4, 2015, https://www.ngv.vic.gov.au/essay/blue-alchemy-of-a-colour/.

Discussion: Bridging the Past and Present

The motifs' ongoing artistic evolution of forms, spanning over 5,000 years, continues in contemporary practice and provides a robust foundation for Persian ceramicists today. In this gradual motif transformation, multiple attitudes emerge, which we categorise into three groups in this research.

The first group, which encompasses cultural patterns and techniques such as Persian Lustre, Saljuki motifs, and Islamic tilework, has remained largely unaffected by the modern world. Makers in this group have chosen specific motifs or techniques to conserve heritage, and they hone their ancient techniques to transfer the past aesthetics to the future.

The next, braced the characteristic forms, such as Islamic calligraphy, Islimi (Arabesque) traceries and storytelling. This style is not merely a replication of tradition, but an act of a political and social event to showcase abilities and resilience. In all these approaches, contemporary craftsmen and ceramic artists creatively bridge the past and the present by using classical visual forms as an alphabet as a means of expression. Throughout history, artists have used their creativity to shed light on injustices, advocate for human rights, and challenge societal norms.[22]

The third group embraces new artistic approaches; history is embodied in the artist's intuition on a deeper unconscious level; a dialogue that spans centuries and speaks to psychological transformation, identity, and understanding of one's surroundings. The geographical and cultural boundaries blur, and the form expands into philosophical and psychological levels to observe and understand the human being and their relationship to nature and the environment. An artist's artwork is influenced by every element of the place they were born and grew up, including food, nature, culture, and environment. As ceramic artist Maryam Salour stated: "*The artist doesn't necessarily need to replicate cultural motifs to present a thousand years of culture behind their growth"*[23].

It is essential to remind oneself of the complexity of art and the importance of understanding social context. We aim to build a rough thread to hold on to, enabling us to analyse by categorising. Moreover, Iran's ancient cultural heritage is reflected at the macro level of society and in everyday life, as well as in motifs found in poems, book covers, carpets, and tiles used in architecture.

At the end, to point use of some specific symbolic Persian motifs, such as ritual symbolic geometric and abstract forms, folk storytelling, mythical creatures, animals such as ibex, birds, Homa (like Phoenix), Winged bull [24], can locate us in a specific historical place and particular metaphor. for example, Bowl decorated with linked ibex horns 5300–4300 BCE. The ibex is a distinctly Persian motif, as they are native to the Zagros Mountains of western Iran, but did not live, for example, on the plains of Mesopotamia. They are a marker of the unique, mountain identity of the people living in central Iran. [25] In contemporary work, these motifs are not abandoned but reimagined with layered meanings, more than showing a connection to a specific environment.

All these points can play a role in all three groups, depending on the type of contact and the area where ceramists work.

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[22] Nini D, *"The Intersection of Arts and Social Sciences: Fostering Understanding and Empathy,"* International Research Journal of Arts and Social Science 11, no. 4 (July 2023): 1–4, https://www.interesjournals.org/arts-social-sciences.html

[23] Maryam Salour, interview Elnaz Nourizadeh, 2025.

[24] "*History of Art: Achaemenid Art,"* Visualflood Magazine, https://visualflood.com/article/history-of-art-achaemenid-art.

The Living Thread

Despite the surge in conceptualism, specific historical techniques remain alive through inherited lineages. The lustreware tradition originated in Iraq and was refined in Kashan and Ray.[26] Dr Abass Akbari, academic ceramist, still uses Lustre as a technique in Kashan. However, this technique is also being adopted in other parts of Iran in multiple ceramic workshops, including families such as the Tavasolian brothers, whose work preserves the Saljuqian aesthetic across generations. Their ceramics maintain the merging of various poems' transcripts around the rim and geometric patterns with intricate animal and mythical creatures. They aim to keep this motif alive using lustre techniques. Analysing common lustreware motifs reveals that a combination of calligraphy and animal motifs is a prominent element in lustre tiles and functional dishes. This continuity is not static; instead, it becomes a living heritage. Contemporary artists maintain these methods while experimenting with storytelling media to convey the philosophy of the East using powerful historical poems and by protecting Pre-Islamic Persian culture and beliefs through motifs of mystical creatures.

Figure 6: *Untitled*, from the Persian Lustre series, Mohammad Tavasolian, 2024.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Tile works and relief have a long history dating back to the Achaemenid period (c. 550–330 BCE). Glazed brickwork was used in monumental architecture, such as Persepolis and Susa. Tile works flourished in Iran during the Seljuq period and have continued to this day. Mosaic was to enlarge the repertoire of designs for external use and seek instead to display rather than to suggest.

Contemporary ceramists continue to utilise this craft in architectural forms and the context of installation art. It's compelling how these motifs have improved with the higher quality of glazes, the use of colours, and attention to detail, which may reflect the influence of the maker's gender. Artists Sahar Jahangir and Armaghan Sabri are part of a new generation of artists working with tile works. These two female artists, along with many others, continued the geometric Islamic patterns. Still, both brought a personal understanding of aesthetics in using colours and their combinations, from monochrome to "Haft-rang" (the 7-colour technique is a technique which uses 7 colours in the whole pattern of tileworks,[27])

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[26] Saeed Amirhajloo et al., "*Preliminary Studies on Polychrome Luster Tiles Excavated from Qal'eh Dokhtar in Kerman by X-ray, SEM-EDX and Micro-PIXE Spectroscopy: Insight into a New Production Center of Lusterware in Southeast of Iran,*" *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports* 33 (October 2020): 102456, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S2352409X20302479.

[27] A. Seyed Mousavi, *"Haft-Rang Tile Workshop in Qajar Iran: Production and Craftsmen," in History of Construction Cultures, Volume 2,* ed. João Mascarenhas-Mateus and Ana Paula Pires (London: CRC Press, 2021), 804–811, https://doi.org/10.1201/9781003173434-126

Figure 7: *Untitled*, tilework installation, Armaghan Sabri. Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 8: *Tilework Installation*, Sahar Jahangir, earthenware ceramic. Image courtesy of the artist.

Tile work has become increasingly integrated into Tehran's city architecture over the past 12 years, particularly in the renovation of bazaars such as the Tajrish Old Bazaar (Nourizadeh:2025). Even though this combination of ceramic tileworks and architecture might not seem significant, it's essential to emphasise the shift they cause in changing these forms as part of motifs. They, which are often found in religious places such as mosques, are more cultural symbols. We place tile works in the first group as the motifs have been preserved for generations. However, this is also a gentle social movement within the second group, and it has a background effect on the artists in group three and beyond.

Divisible bridge - craft to concept

In contemporary Persian ceramics, the journey from traditional form to conceptual engagement is neither linear nor detached from its roots. Instead, it is deeply interwoven with history, symbolism, mythology, and the personal. Artists draw upon ancient motifs not merely as decorative elements but as vessels of memory, tools of resistance, and mediums of care and spiritual inquiry. This bridge between craft and concept holds both the tactile intimacy of clay and the philosophical weight of centuries of cultural narrative.

Persian calligraphy serves as a powerful example of this transformation. Designed initially to transmit sacred and poetic texts, it now often functions as an abstract composition. The letters no longer need to be read—they are experienced. Stripped of semantic content, calligraphy becomes a rhythm, a gesture, and a metaphor

for cultural presence and silence. Artists such as Farnaz Rabieijah and Mojgan Habibi liberate the script from legibility, using the shapes of letters as visual language. Rabieijah describes using the Persian alphabet as a symbol of the collective beliefs, traditions, and cultural values of a community in her artworks, which is also affected by floral patterns in tileworks. Her works intertwine sculptural and functional forms, using cut-out alphabet forms from clay, which are joined to form the shape; most of the time, patterns are embodied in the structure of the artwork.

Figure 9: *Behind the Words*, 2016–2018, Dr. Mojgan Habibi. Oxidation-fired earthenware, waxed cotton string,
470 × 280 × 37 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

This conceptual shift is echoed in Mojgan Habibi's installation Behind the Words (2016–2018). Suspended rows of terracotta letters, tied with coloured string, hover in space like a curtain of unspeakable truths. Each hand-coiled letter is partially veiled with a white slip, evoking a sense of censorship. The installation is physically delicate but emotionally resonant. As Habibi states, "*Each letter and symbol are tools of communication, even if imprisoned and subjected to censorship."* Through abstraction and placement, language becomes an act of resistance and remembrance. The work speaks through silence.

Throughout Persian ceramic history, narrative and poetry have been integral to the development of the art form. From minai ware to the inscriptions of the Samanid period, poetry merged into sculptural and functional ceramic objects. Contemporary artists reexamine metaphors and incorporate storytelling from literature and poetry, such as the Shahnameh, and recreate those scenes to highlight a modern social and political event.

In Habibi's Si Morgh (2020), this layering of myth, spirituality, and form takes a transformative shape. Inspired by Attar's 12th-century poem The Conference of the Birds, the installation consists of over two thousand handmade ceramic feathers suspended from a central column, internally lit. Crafted from clay and bone ash, the piece is simultaneously earthly and ethereal. The light emanating from within becomes a metaphor for spiritual illumination. As Habibi reflects: *"The inside light in Si Morgh is a metaphor for hope. It signifies hope in dark times… Hope is a universal human narrative*." Here, the Simorgh—symbol of divinity and collective unity—is not merely represented; it is experienced as space, form, and energy.

Figure 10: *Si Morgh*, 2020, Dr. Mojgan Habibi. Handmade ceramic forms of clay and bone ash, canvas cylindrical tube, light installation, 330 × 97 × 93 cm. Commissioned by The Lock-Up and made possible through the City of Newcastle's Arts and Cultural Funds for Organisations.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Mohsen Fouladpour creates sculptural forms based on Shahnameh stories to evoke the theme of filicide and the unbalanced power of the father, rooted in the concept of respect for authority. Fouladpour's Artistic view brings this intense subject into a level of understanding, incorporating allegory and metaphor into his visual language to speak the unspeakable.

Figure 11: *Sleep, Sohrab, in Which We Are Awake*, 2024, Mohsen Fouladpour. Earthenware, 46 × 35 × 17 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

In Iran today, where political expression can be dangerous, symbolism becomes a vital tool. Many artists employ indirect gestures—such as birds, hybrid beings, and combinations of abstract forms, body parts, and folk figures—to address trauma, censorship, and societal decay. These visual languages resonate across time, linking contemporary expression with historical strategies of coded dissent.

Animal motifs in Persian ceramic history, especially the rhyton, provide another example of evolving meaning. Traditionally shaped as horns or animals used in rituals or royal ceremonies, these vessels have reappeared in feminist and ecological narratives. Donya Rahimi, a contemporary ceramicist, creates zoomorphic forms inspired by this lineage. Rahimi examines animal forms and environments, transferring them through personal feelings and understanding, and combines them with functional, modern vessel forms.

Ultimately, this movement from craft to concept is not a break with tradition, but its extension.

Reinterpreting a bridge

Examining the works of multiple modern artists immerses us in the realms of psychology, Eastern philosophy, and personal journeys. This collection of artists mentioned that they look at their surroundings and the situation in the environment. They process their internal intuition and create their artwork. At first glance, it is hard to understand and see the heritage in these works, but through a more extended meditation on these forms, they become alive and boldly present the effect of living environments. The contemporary artist in this group won't aim to draw inspiration from visual cultural motifs; they look at their surroundings. The traces of a thousand-year culture are present at the unconscious level, from animal and floral motifs in the carpets to geometric forms in tile designs, contrasting with the modern lifestyle. Persian ceramists in the diaspora expand the conversation, layering heritage with personal memory and new contexts. Poems become what they sing and listen to when they create, and transfer to sculptural forms. The questions artists ask bring care and emphasise the importance of both the process and the finished work of art.

Artists Athena Gharegozlo and Bahareh Khodaei use animal forms in their sculptural and installation work. In contrast, Gharegozlo uses cobalt blue and gently forms human and animal figures to create a sense of Persian culture in a hidden layer. Khodaei brings the effect of location to invite the viewer to an enchanting journey through art and culture in her Paradise Gate Garden 2024.

Figure 12: *Me; Future*, 2024, Athena Gharegozlo.
Ceramic earthenware, 40 × 50 × 30 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 13: *The Gate to the Heaven*, 2024, Bahareh Khodaei.
Installation at Iran's Carpet Museum.
One piece (35 × 12 × 8 cm) composed of 721 items.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Artists such as Narges Aghdaee and Dorsa Asadi express their experiences of female characters and how they internally process their surroundings, as well as the connection between humans and both physical and psychological environments. This connection between the female body, the land, and resistance is a recurring theme in contemporary ceramics. Both artists' figurative sculptures evoke the spirit of goddesses and spiritual sculptures created for ceremonies. Aghdaee mentions that what she creates arises from her internal world and the influence of nature, botanical forms, and the environment, which is reflected in her work. Asadi uses floral forms in emotional symbolism. As Asadi writes, "Throughout history, the female body has been a recurring element in sculpture, often depicted as goddesses and symbolising fertility."[28] Dorsa consciously employs a combination of floral forms and female figures to reference the female body as a site of production and the subject of dominatin over the land.

Figure 14: *Untitled*, 2024, Narges Aghdaee.
Installation comprising ceramic, wire, and paper.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 15: *Killing the Sinner Man*, 2021, Dorsa Asadi.
Ceramic earthenware,
130 × 40 × 40 cm.
From the Balneum Mariae collection.
Image courtesy of the artist.

[28] Dorsa Asadi, interview Elnaz Nourizadeh, 2025.

Elnaz Nourizadeh's sculptures explore figurative forms and the concept of the human as a container, examining the ideas of identity, personality, and communication. As Nourizadeh reflects on her creative process: *"I have never aimed to emphasise my culture or background, but the culture and where I grew up is a code in me and my pattern. I use colours, I admire colours, and I dig into historical Rumi, Saadi, and Khayyam poems. Colours in my functional ceramics are the spirit that carries my heritage unconsciously. I explore my identity through my sculptural forms, first at a surface level, influenced by my immigration to Australia, and then at a deeper level of consciousness, where I understand myself through Rumi's poems and meditation. I believe my culture is embodied in me, and my hands reflect what I have gone through. Although I can't see my heritage clearly in my work, I have been told many times that my artworks are considered Middle Eastern and poetic."*

This group of artworks is touching in its spiritual understanding of human beings, which has been carried through generations not just as a formal visual motif, but also in language and cultural behaviour**.**

Figure 16: *Elysian*, Elnaz Nourizadeh.
Earthenware ceramic, oxidation fired,
26 × 50 × 50 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Figure 17: Chaos Order, Elnaz Nourizadeh.
Earthenware ceramic, oxidation fired,
28 × 28 × 13 cm.
Image courtesy of the artist.

Conclusion

Persian ceramics are deeply rooted in history. They tell stories that go far beyond decoration. Each form, line, and motif carry something from the past, including memories, beliefs, values, and spiritual ideas. Over time, these forms have evolved and adapted, while maintaining their original meaning. This study examined how contemporary ceramic artists engage with this long tradition and how they infuse their own voice into it. The results show that tradition continues to evolve through personal interpretation and creative engagement.

Modern ceramicists work with knowledge of the past while expressing their own perspectives. Personal experiences, social and political reflections, and spiritual insights shape their practice. Many of them also respond to the realities of displacement, globalisation, and environmental change. These conditions add new dimensions to their artistic choices. Familiar motifs such as calligraphy, floral patterns, and abstract symbols are brought into fresh contexts. Through clay, artists shape a language that reflects both heritage and the present moment.

While this study does not aim to cover the entire history of Persian ceramics, it focuses on key forms, patterns, and ideas that remain active in contemporary work. From more than fifty artist responses, the research found that lustre decoration, calligraphy, and Eslimi tile motifs continue to inspire creative use. Minai motifs, however, did not appear in any of the artworks reviewed. This absence may reflect a shift in which elements of the traditional artists find most meaningful today. Even changes in what is included or left aside speak to how artists engage with history on their own terms.

Many artists describe their practice as a conversation with the past. Some feel a deep responsibility to honour what has been passed down, while others find freedom in transformation and reinterpretation. What they share is an understanding that ceramics is more than a technical skill. It is a way to connect, to reflect, and to express cultural memory with intention. In their hands, clay becomes a bridge that links time periods, cultures, and personal experience.

This connection becomes especially vivid for artists working in diaspora or across cultural borders. Their work often blends different influences, creating forms that hold more than one identity. This reveals the strength of Persian ceramic traditions to remain alive and adaptable, even as they travel across distances. The motifs carry with them traces of the past, but they take on new meaning when shaped by new stories.

Overall, this research confirms that Persian ceramic art remains vibrant through the creative expressions of contemporary artists. It lives not only in museums or archives, but in the everyday practice of those who shape clay with care and vision. Through their work, heritage continues to grow. It remains meaningful, present, and responsive to the world around it. This tradition carries forward with beauty and purpose, always open to new forms of expression and open to what comes next.

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