



Forging the Past: The Examples in the National Museum Pakistan, Karachi

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Although many collections are deposited in Museums and were lately put at disposal of scholars, we want to address a problematic issue connected to the flourishing sales of pottery vessels from Baluchistan on the antiquarian market. Because of their intricate shapes and designs, Nal vessels feature foremost in this illicit trade. Since 2007 a stream of Nal-like artefacts started to appear on the auctions in Europe. For the normal customer of these art galleries, it is usually difficult to discern an original piece from a fake, especially on the base of photographs only. Once the piece reaches his home residence, it is possible to analyse with archaeometric methods with some certainty, whether the pot was fired in ancient times or if it is just a modern piece. Yet, this is countered by the increasing use of ancient, but modified vessels. However, to the trained eyes of the people working in the field, the pictures published on the internet in auction catalogues already raise questions about the authenticity of many objects. The collection at the National Museum Pakistan Karachi represents no exception: at least eleven vessels were recognised as fakes (cat. nos. 756–766). The majority of these forged pieces is manufactured using original vessels of other traditions and repainting them with typical motives and colours of the Nal assemblage. Particular revealing are unusual stylistic elements, colour shade and thickness of the applied pigments, whereas sometimes the smell and oily consistency of the fabric hint to a modern ‘reproposition’. Those produced with high quality would certainly escape discovery on the art market.

< Cat. No. 758



Fig. 14.1
Cat. No. 756,
paint detail

In at least two cases, cat. nos. 756 and 757, complete Kile Ghul Mohammad necked jars were repainted with patterns resembling the Nal figurative style, but the skilled artisans forgot to cover some spots where the thick red slip is still visible along with the typical diagonal bands of this more ancient ceramic tradition (Fig. 14.1).

Cat. nos. 761 and 762 are further examples of quite well-executed forgeries: the thickness of the painting together with the hues of yellow and red raise questions on the authenticity immediately. At a closer look, the surface reveals also traces of



Fig. 14.2
Cat. No. 761



Fig. 14.3
Cat. No.761,
paint detail



Fig. 14.4
Cat. No 762



Fig. 14.5
Cat. No.762,
paint detail



Fig. 14.6
Cat. No.763



Fig. 14.7
Cat. No 763,
paint detail

drawings, executed with ball pens (Figs. 14.2-5). Cat. no. 763 was immediately recognised as a fake since the thick reddish slip of the original bowl does not match with the polychrome decoration (Fig. 14.6). Moreover, the consistency of the pigments is too unusual (Fig. 14.7). Such complex cases of faking demonstrate the great interest in the

Nal-painting style so well attested at Sohr Damb/Nal, and the appeal exerted on the antiquarian market by the polychrome examples.

In addition, some cases of mending, restoring and fitting clearly indicate the existence of well-equipped ateliers where such procedures can be carried out (Figs. 14.6; 7). The fakes in the collection prove that the illegal market is growing not only in terms of quantity of smuggled artefacts, but also in terms of facilities and labour force at disposal. In this constellation of illegal activities not only gangs are involved in fights over the control of ancient sites, but also simple diggers and artisans are engaged by a well-established supply network. The people are trained to master the art of modelling, painting and mending to replicate the very artefacts presented in scientific publications.