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A Study and Analysis of Human Ceramic Sculptures in SELJUK Art

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Abstract

Human ceramic sculptures are among the most significant manifestations of Iranian ceramic art during the Seljuk period. In addition to their artistic qualities, they provide valuable insights into the cultural, social, and religious aspects of this era. The flourishing of ceramic production during the fifth and sixth centuries AH, concurrent with the political stability and economic prosperity of the Seljuk dynasty, created the conditions for producing works in which the human figure appeared in the form of three-dimensional sculptures serving decorative, ritual, and functional purposes. The present study aims to examine and analyze the formal, technical, and conceptual characteristics of human ceramic sculptures from the Seljuk period. This applied research adopts a descriptive–analytical approach based on library and documentary studies. The data were collected and analyzed through a review of authoritative Persian and English sources, museum collections, and previous scholarly studies. The findings indicate that the human ceramic sculptures of the Seljuk period are characterized by abstract proportions, emphasis on selected body parts, simplified facial features, and the extensive use of decorative motifs. These sculptures represent themes such as courtly life, music, fertility rituals, motherhood, mythology, and various folk beliefs. Furthermore, advances in ceramic technology, particularly the use of lusterware glaze, turquoise glaze, and mold-forming techniques, played a significant role in expanding the production of these works. Examination of the surviving examples suggests that cities such as Rey, Kashan, and Nishapur were among the principal centers for the production of these sculptures. Overall, the study of these works contributes to a deeper understanding of the visual culture, symbolic themes, and ceramic production techniques of Iran during the Seljuk period, while also highlighting the continuity and transformation of pre-Islamic artistic traditions within the context of Islamic culture.

Keywords: Seljuk period, Ceramic sculptures, Human figure, Iranian ceramics, Islamic art.

1 | Introduction

The Seljuk period (the fifth and sixth centuries AH) is regarded as one of the most significant eras in the history of Iranian art. Relative political stability, the expansion of urbanization, and the prosperity of economic exchange during this period provided favorable conditions for the development of the arts and crafts. Within this context, ceramic production underwent remarkable advancements in manufacturing technology,

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decorative techniques, and the diversity of its products. Improvements in kiln technology, the use of siliceous (stone paste) bodies, the widespread application of lusterware and overglaze enamel (mina'i) glazes, and the diversification of decorative methods are among the distinguishing characteristics of Seljuk ceramics frequently highlighted in studies of Islamic art history [1], [2]. Among the ceramic productions of the Seljuk period, human ceramic sculptures constitute a significant portion of the surviving artifacts. These works were produced either as free-standing sculptures or as figural vessels and, in addition to demonstrating the technical skills of Seljuk potters, provide valuable insights into certain cultural, social, and ideological aspects of the period. Although attitudes toward the representation of living beings varied throughout different periods of Islamic history, archaeological evidence indicates that Seljuk artists created human ceramic sculptures by employing abstract, symbolic, and decorative approaches to representation [3], [4]. The examples obtained from centers such as Rey, Kashan, and Nishapur demonstrate the thematic diversity of these works. Human figurines depicting subjects such as courtly figures, musicians, women, mothers, children, and hybrid human-animal creatures are among the known artifacts of this period. Furthermore, the examination of the technical characteristics of these objects, including molding techniques, surface finishing, glaze types, and decorative elements, provides valuable information about the production methods and ceramic technologies of the Seljuk period [5], [6]. Despite the publication of numerous studies on Seljuk-period ceramics, the majority of existing research has focused on ceramic vessels, lusterware, or decorative techniques, while human ceramic figurines have received comparatively less independent scholarly attention. Therefore, examining this group of artifacts from the perspectives of formal characteristics, manufacturing technology, and visual themes can contribute to a better understanding of their position within the ceramic arts of the Seljuk period. This study employs a descriptive analytical method and is based on library research to examine human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period. This research aims to identify the formal, technical, and conceptual characteristics of these artifacts and to analyze them within the artistic and cultural context of the Seljuk period, thereby providing a clearer understanding of the status and significance of this group of works within the tradition of Iranian ceramic art.

1.1 | Research Background

Research on Seljuk-period ceramics has a relatively extensive history; however, the majority of studies have focused on manufacturing technologies, decorative techniques, glazes, lusterware, and mina'i ceramics, as well as production centers. In contrast, human ceramic figurines have received less independent scholarly attention and have often been introduced within broader studies of Seljuk ceramics.

Watson [7], in his book Persian Lustre Ware, examined Iranian ceramic technology, major production centers such as Rey and Kashan, and the development of lusterware ceramics. His research provides valuable information on the production context of Seljuk ceramics; however, its primary focus is on manufacturing technologies and lusterware ceramics, while human ceramic figurines are mentioned only to a limited extent. Blair and Bloom [2], in their study of Islamic art and architecture, examined the developments of Seljuk-period art, the expansion of ceramic production, and the increasing use of human motifs. Nevertheless, their study adopts a broad approach to Islamic art and does not provide an independent analysis of human ceramic figurines. Hillenbrand [4], in his study of Seljuk-period art, analyzed the role of political, economic, and cultural factors in the development of the visual arts. He refers to the presence of human figurines in the art of this period; however, the primary focus of his research is on architecture and other branches of Islamic art. Gibson [8], in her article "the enigmatic figure: Ceramic sculpture from Iran and syria c. 1150–1250," examined ceramic figurines from Iran and Syria in terms of their visual characteristics, manufacturing techniques, production centers, and possible functions. This study is primarily based on the identification and classification of artifacts, while their relationship with the cultural and social contexts of Seljuk-period Iran is analyzed only to a limited extent. Among Persian-language studies, Hashem Hosseini [9], in his article "a study of female ceramic figurines from the seljuk and ilkhanid periods," examined the structural characteristics, manufacturing techniques, decorative features, and possible functions of female figurines. He also referred to the continuity of the figurative tradition from the pre-Islamic periods into the Islamic era.

However, the scope of his research is limited to female figurines. Furthermore, Asadi et al. [10], in their article "The origin and typology of human sculptures in iran from the fifth to the seventh centuries AH", adopted a typological approach to the classification of human figures made from various materials, including ceramics, plaster, and stone. Although this study provides information on different types of human figurines, it does not specifically focus on Seljuk-period ceramic figurines. A review of previous studies indicates that most existing research has examined human ceramic figurines within the framework of general studies on ceramics, manufacturing technologies, typology, or the introduction of museum collections. Therefore, studies that analyze these artifacts simultaneously from the perspectives of formal characteristics, manufacturing technology, and visual concepts remain limited. The present study focuses on human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period through these three analytical dimensions and seeks to clarify the position of these artifacts within the artistic and cultural context of the period.

1.2 | Research Methodology

The present study is applied in terms of its objective and descriptive analytical in nature, employing a qualitative approach. The research focuses on examining the formal, technical, and conceptual characteristics of human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period. Data collection has been conducted through library-based and documentary research. The sources utilized include reliable Persian and English books and articles in the fields of Islamic art history, Seljuk ceramics, academic theses and dissertations, and museum catalogs. In addition, to examine significant examples, artifacts preserved in museum collections, including those of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum, and the Louvre Museum, have been studied. The research samples consist of human ceramic figurines attributed to the Seljuk period, which, based on archaeological studies and previous research, have been associated with major Iranian ceramic production centers, including Rey, Nishapur, Kashan, and Gorgan. The samples were selected purposively based on the diversity of their formal characteristics, manufacturing techniques, decorative methods, and levels of documentation, to enable comparison and analysis of these features across different examples. The collected data were examined using a descriptive–analytical method. In this process, the formal characteristics, manufacturing technologies, decorative techniques, and visual themes of the artifacts were extracted and subsequently analyzed through historical sources and previous studies.

1.3 | Research Findings

The seljuk period: The flourishing of art and the status of ceramics: The Seljuk period (429–590 AH / 1038–1194 CE) is considered one of the significant eras in the post-Islamic history of Iran. During this period, concurrent with the consolidation of political structures, urban development, the expansion of trade networks, and economic prosperity, favorable conditions emerged for the growth of arts and crafts. The patronage of Seljuk rulers toward artistic activities and the development of urban centers provided the foundation for the advancement of various fields, including architecture, metalwork, textiles, book arts, and ceramics [2], [4]. Seljuk art emerged through the continuity of Iranian artistic traditions and their interaction with Islamic culture, as well as the artistic achievements of neighboring regions. This cultural exchange played a significant role in the creation of works distinguished by diverse technical and aesthetic qualities. The use of human, animal, and vegetal motifs, together with geometric ornamentation and calligraphic inscriptions, constitutes one of the defining characteristics of the art of this period [3]. Among the artistic traditions of the Seljuk period, pottery held a distinguished position. Many scholars consider the fifth and sixth centuries AH to represent one of the most significant phases in the evolution of Iranian pottery [5]. The growing demand for the production of fine ceramics, access to suitable raw materials, advances in kiln technology, and the refinement of potters' technical skills were among the principal factors contributing to the development of this art. During the same period, cities such as Rey, Kashan, Nishapur, and Gorgan emerged as major centers of ceramic production. The wares produced in these centers are distinguished by their high quality of manufacture, diversity of decorative techniques, and technical innovations [6]. One of the most significant technological developments of this period was the widespread adoption of fritware bodies. Composed

primarily of silica, with small amounts of clay and fluxing agents, this ceramic body made it possible to produce wares with a light-colored, relatively durable fabric that was well-suited for the application of a wide range of glazes and decorative techniques. Furthermore, advances in kiln technology and improved control over firing conditions played a crucial role in enhancing the quality of ceramic products during this period [1]. Surviving evidence indicates that Seljuk potters produced a wide range of ceramic wares that exhibit considerable variation in both manufacturing techniques and decorative methods. The principal categories of ceramic production during this period include:

I. Unglazed wares decorated with moulded, carved, or applied ornamentation.

II. Monochrome glazed wares, particularly those covered with turquoise, green, blue, and white glazes.

III. Underglaze-painted wares.

IV. Lustreware (luster-painted ceramics).

V. Mina'i (polychrome or "haft-rang") wares, decorated with human, animal, and narrative motifs.

VI. Figural vessels and ceramic sculptures representing human and animal forms.

Among these categories, ceramic sculptures of the human figure occupy a distinctive position because of their emphasis on the representation of the human form. In addition to demonstrating the technical mastery of Seljuk potters, these works provide valuable evidence concerning clothing, jewelry, musical practices, courtly culture, and various aspects of social life during the Seljuk period. Consequently, their study contributes significantly to a better understanding of the material culture and artistic traditions of Iran in the fifth and sixth centuries AH [6].

2 | Human Ceramic Sculptures in the Seljuk Period

Figural sculpture represents one of the oldest branches of Iranian art, with a history dating back to the millennia before the Common Era. Archaeological discoveries from sites such as Tape Sialk (Sialk Hill), Shush, and Shahr-e Sukhteh demonstrate that the production of human figurines, particularly female figurines, was widespread during prehistoric periods. In many cases, these objects were associated with ritual beliefs, fertility, and religious practices. This artistic tradition continued throughout the historical periods, albeit with changes in modes of representation and the materials employed. Following the advent of Islam, despite changing attitudes toward the depiction of living beings, the tradition persisted in forms such as the decorative arts and ornamental objects [3]. An examination of surviving Seljuk examples indicates that human ceramic figurines became more numerous and exhibited greater diversity and technical sophistication than those of many earlier periods. Advances in ceramic technology, the diversification of production techniques, and the increasing manufacture of decorative objects created favorable conditions for the production of these works. Beyond demonstrating the technical and artistic achievements of Seljuk potters, these ceramic figurines provide valuable evidence concerning clothing, jewelry, hairstyles, musical instruments, and various aspects of the material culture of Seljuk society [1], [2]. The examined examples indicate that these works can be divided into two principal categories according to their structural form: Free-standing figurines and figural vessels. Free-standing figurines were produced in either standing or seated poses, whereas in figural vessels the human form was integrated with functional objects such as ewers, incense burners, or containers. In both categories, there is a clear tendency toward the simplification of the human body, accompanied by an emphasis on selected facial features and elements of dress. In terms of formal characteristics, many examples do not adhere to the natural proportions of the human body, with the head rendered disproportionately larger than the torso. The faces are typically characterized by almond-shaped eyes, joined eyebrows, elongated noses, and small mouths. In addition, garments and jewelry are executed with greater detail than other parts of the body, while geometric and vegetal motifs, and occasionally short inscriptions, decorate the surfaces of the clothing or the bodies of the figurines. These characteristics are commonly observed in works attributed to the ceramic production centers of Rey, Kashan, and Nishapur [8]. An examination of museum specimens indicates that the majority of these works were produced using fritware bodies and moulding techniques, with

certain details completed by hand in some cases. In addition, the use of turquoise, green, white, cobalt blue, and luster glazes is common among the examined examples. These characteristics reflect the diversity of manufacturing and decorative techniques employed in the production of Seljuk ceramic figurines [1], [5]. From a thematic perspective, the examined examples include female and male figurines, musicians, children, horse riders, and composite human–animal figures. This thematic diversity indicates that ceramic figurines were not limited to the representation of a single specific group but rather encompassed a wide range of subjects. Based on visual characteristics, find locations, and archaeological evidence, some researchers have proposed various functions for certain examples, including decorative objects, incense burners, figural vessels, toys, or objects associated with fertility rituals and popular beliefs. However, due to the limited availability of written sources, it is not possible to determine the precise function of all examples, and each object must be examined within its own historical and archaeological context [1], [8]. Based on the observed characteristics of the examined examples, human ceramic figurines of the Seljuk period constitute a diverse group of ceramic works in terms of form, manufacturing techniques, and visual themes. These characteristics provide the necessary foundation for a more detailed analysis of the formal, technical, and conceptual aspects of these works, which will be examined in the following sections based on selected examples.



Fig. 1. Seated female figurine, 6th–7th centuries AH, Kashan (Collection: Sotheby's auction house (URL1)).



Fig. 2. Mother-and-child figurine (Collection: Islamic art department, Museum of Berlin et al. [10])



Fig. 3. Seated female figurine, 6th century AH, Kashan (Collection: Oriental art auction house (URL2)).



Fig. 4. Seated female figurine, 6th century AH, Khorasan (Collection: Antonini auction house (URL3)).



Fig. 5. Mother-and-child figurine, Kashan (Collection: Cincinnati art museum [10]).



Fig. 6. Mother-and-child figurine (Collection: The Metropolitan museum of art [10]).



Fig. 7. Horse and rider figurine, 6th century AH, Iran (Collection: Al-Sabah collection, Kuwait (URL4)).



Fig. 8. Standing male figurine, 6th century AH, Kashan (Collection: The Metropolitan museum of art (URL5)).



Fig. 9. Seated male figurine, 6th century AH, Kashan (Collection: Victoria and Albert museum (URL6)).



Fig. 10. Figurine known as Sultan Tughril (Collection: Khalili Collection [10]).

3 | Discussion and Analysis Analysis of the Technical and Formal Characteristics of Human Ceramic Figurines

An examination of the selected human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period indicates that these works exhibit considerable diversity in terms of manufacturing methods, production technology, and formal characteristics when compared with many other ceramic wares of the same period. The studied examples, which are primarily attributed to the ceramic production centers of Rey, Nishapur, Kashan, and Gorgan, reflect the application of relatively advanced techniques in the creation of ceramic figurines, as well as a careful attention to formal details and decorative elements [1], [6].

The findings of this study indicate that a significant proportion of these works were produced as free-standing figurines, while others were created in the form of figural vessels, ewers, incense burners, and decorative

objects. This diversity suggests that human figurines were not limited to a single specific function and were likely used in a variety of contexts. Archaeological evidence further suggests that these works have been discovered in residential environments, elite architectural settings, and, in some cases, contexts associated with ritual activities. Accordingly, functions such as decorative, ceremonial, ritual, and utilitarian purposes have been proposed for them; however, the available evidence is insufficient to determine the function of all examples with certainty [1], [6].

An examination of the technical characteristics of these works indicates that most of the studied examples were produced using fritware bodies. This type of ceramic body, composed of silica, small amounts of clay, and fluxing agents, provided a suitable foundation for producing works with a light-colored, dense, and relatively durable body, while also enhancing the possibility of executing more precise decorative elements and glazing techniques. However, the use of clay bodies is also observed in some examples, which were likely associated with local workshops or simpler forms of production [1], [5].

The study of selected examples indicates that moulding was the most common production method used for these figurines. In many works, the front and back halves of the figurine were moulded separately and, after being joined together, details such as hands, headdresses, jewelry, and other decorative elements were added manually. This method of production not only facilitated the manufacturing process but also allowed for greater variation in the details of each work [1], [6].

Another common characteristic of the examined examples is the hollow construction of the bodies of most figurines. This feature reduced the weight of the objects while also decreasing the likelihood of cracking or damage during the drying and firing processes. In some examples, small perforations were also incorporated to allow the release of water vapor, indicating the makers' attention to technical considerations throughout the production process [1].

In the examination of the surface treatments of these works, the application of a white slip as an underlying layer, followed by the use of turquoise, green, blue, and white glazes, as well as lustre glaze in some particularly fine examples, can be observed. In some works, only certain parts of the figurine's surface were glazed, while the remaining areas were left unglazed. This variation in surface treatment and glazing techniques reflects differences in production methods and the intended uses of these objects [1], [2].

An analysis of the formal characteristics indicates that natural bodily proportions were not fully observed in most examples. The heads are generally designed larger than the natural proportions of the body, and the faces are characterized by almond-shaped eyes, joined eyebrows, elongated noses, and small mouths. Furthermore, greater attention was devoted to the depiction of garments, headdresses, jewelry, and textile ornamentation than to the precise rendering of the anatomical features of the body. These characteristics are observed in many examples attributed to the ceramic production centers of Rey, Kashan, and Nishapur, and are considered among the common patterns of figural representation during the Seljuk period [1], [4].

From a thematic perspective, the examined examples include female and male figurines, musicians, children, horse riders, and certain composite human–animal figures. The diversity of these themes demonstrates that human ceramic figurines encompassed a broad range of subjects. Furthermore, the study of garments, jewelry, hand positions, and accompanying objects depicted in these works provides information about various aspects of material culture, clothing practices, and certain elements of social relations during the Seljuk period. However, due to the limited nature of archaeological evidence and written sources, it is not possible to determine the function or symbolic meaning of all examples with certainty. Each object must therefore be examined in relation to its archaeological context and structural characteristics.

4 | Conclusion

The present study was conducted to examine the formal, technical, and conceptual characteristics of human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period. The analysis of sources and selected examples demonstrates that these works, in addition to their technical aspects, provide valuable information regarding certain cultural,

social, and artistic dimensions of Iran during the fifth and sixth centuries AH. The expansion of ceramic production centers, the development of manufacturing technologies, and the diversity of ceramic wares during the Seljuk period created the conditions for the emergence and widespread production of this category of objects. From a technical perspective, the findings of the study indicate that most ceramic figurines were produced using fritware bodies, moulding techniques, manual completion of details, and glazing processes. Furthermore, variations in body composition, glaze types, surface treatment methods, and execution quality among the examined examples reflect the diversity of production techniques employed in different ceramic centers, including Rey, Kashan, and Nishapur. From a formal perspective, the examined figurines display characteristics such as the simplification of bodily forms, emphasis on certain facial features, and greater attention to the representation of garments, jewelry, and decorative elements. These characteristics are repeatedly observed in many of the studied examples and represent common patterns of figural representation during the Seljuk period. In addition, the thematic diversity of these works, including female and male figurines, musicians, horse riders, and children, demonstrates the broad range of subjects explored by potters of this period. An examination of the available evidence indicates that no single function can be assigned to all human ceramic figurines. Their findings, structural characteristics, and previous studies suggest that these objects may have served decorative, utilitarian, ceremonial, or ritual purposes depending on their form and context of use. However, due to the limited nature of archaeological evidence and written sources, it is not possible to determine the precise function of all examples. Overall, the findings of this study demonstrate that the investigation of human ceramic figurines from the Seljuk period can contribute to a better understanding of manufacturing techniques, formal characteristics, and aspects of the material culture of this period. A simultaneous examination of the technical, formal, and conceptual dimensions of these works also enables a more comprehensive analysis of their position within Seljuk ceramic production and may provide a foundation for further studies on ceramic figural representation throughout different periods of Iranian history.

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