

DAVID AARON



Mamluk Pilgrim Flask

Near East or Egypt

mid-13th to mid-14th Century A.D., Mamluk

Glass

Diam:8cm

A blown glass pilgrim flask with a flat circular body leading to a short neck and everted lip. Moulded decoration covers the faces and sides, enamelled in red and green with gilded outlines. On each face a central quadrilobed floral motif is framed by arabesques in a symmetrical pattern around the circle. The sides are adorned with a series of fleur-de-lys – an early Mamluk blazon that is featured on coins and war drums, as well as personal objects like combs. Polychromatic iridescence has formed across the surface of the glass.

Enamelling on glass was first developed in the Syrian region, probably at Raqqa; recent research has moved the earliest date of its production to the last two decades of the 12th century or the early 13th century. After the Mamluks made Cairo the official capital of their empire, glassmakers at Fustat soon became active. The mid-13th century has been referred to as the 'golden age' of gilding and enamelling on Islamic glass and, by the 14th century, most enamelled glass was probably produced in Egypt.

Enamelling required a sophisticated control over the temperature of the wood-fuelled kilns of the medieval period, which had to remain consistent for prolonged periods in order to fix the different colours to the glass surface. Throughout the following centuries of Mamluk rule, glass production expanded into a wide range of different forms adapted from metalwork, pottery, leather, and ivory, and dimensions were increased dramatically. Small, portable enamelled and gilded glassware, such as this flask, was produced mainly towards the earlier period of the Mamluk Sultanate (1250-1517). Initially,

many different colours were used together, but by the time Nāṣir Muḥammad ibn Qalāūn (r. 1293-1341 A.D.) came to power, a more controlled palette of red and blue with gold outlines was the standard. This period is also typified by a more orthodox restriction of decorative motifs to the vegetal and aniconic.