

**Spanish Lustreware 1400 – 1600:  
The continuation of a Middle Eastern tradition**

Background notes

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**Figure 1 Dish, tin earthenware with lustre decoration.  
Courtauld Gallery, London. Gambier-Parry Bequest 1966.**



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## Project background and collections

This dish was probably made in Valencia between about 1500 and 1525. It is one of five pieces of Spanish lustreware in The Courtauld's collection. Displayed on its own for the first time since it was presented to the Courtauld, as part of the Gambier-Parry bequest in 1966, the dish, which is decorated with brown lustre on a warm tin glaze, was shown in Gallery 2 near the permanent display of Italian Renaissance ceramics from 6 February to 29 April 2013. For online information provided at the time of the exhibition see link:

<http://www.courtauld.ac.uk/gallery/exhibitions/2013/illuminating/dish/index.shtml>.

The Courtauld collection of Manises wares is small and consists of five objects. Much larger and more impressive is a collection of Manises lustreware from Riano Collection, today in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



**Figure 2 Vase, Valencia, mid 17th century or later, Samuel Courtauld Trust, The Courtauld Gallery: Gambier-Parry Bequest 1966**

## **Production in Spain**

Such lustre decorated objects are attributed to the Valencian pottery production, most probably to Manises. Manises is a town close to Valenica and Paterna where pottery, lustre pottery in particular, has been produced since the 14th century. It was the place where Muslim artists were welcomed to foster profitable business and in the time of the Reconquista many Muslims indeed found refuge in the area, bringing with them the unique knowledge of decorating pottery objects with lustre. Muslims living in Spain under Christian rule are known as Mudejars and their specialized knowledge has slowly become available to the Christian potters who have adopted it and merchants who have enabled its dissemination across Europe. Spanish lustreware has been namely prized abroad and exported to Holland, France, England but mostly to Italy.

Though many cities in the Iberian Peninsula were centres of ceramic production, two of them, Paterna and Manises, established themselves as the major ceramics production centres from 14th century onwards. Islamic techniques and the use of mineral pigments – copper for green, manganese for dark purple and cobalt for blue – were used to decorate tin-glazed earthenwares.

Manises produced a variety of objects but its main trade was in lustreware. Historical records show that the technique of lustreware on ceramics came to Manises after Pere Buyl, Lord of Manises, visited Granada in 1308-1309 on a diplomatic mission for the Kingdom of Aragon. There he admired Nasrid lustreware famous since early 13th century. It seems that he spotted commercial opportunity in lustreware production and encouraged Islamic artists to settle in his lands. They have probably continued to produce lustreware alongside their Christian artists until a later date, since Arabic inscriptions and signatures attest for their presence.



**Figure 3 Collection of Spanish Lustreware from Victoria and Albert Museum, London**

## Technology of lustre ceramics

Lustre is a painterly technique produced by applying decoration in the form of compounds of copper and silver, mixed with clay or ochre, on an already fired ceramic object. To produce a lustred object three firings are needed; first to fire an object to biscuit firing, then a tin glaze to get the light white colour of the body and then application of painted designs in lustre to produce its glittering effect. The limitation of air and the correct flow of gases in the reduction kiln ensure the extraction of oxygen from the metallic compounds, resulting in an even lustre glaze.



**Figure 4 Tin-glazed earthenware with lustre decoration. Ca. 1520-1560, Manises, Spain. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (303-1893)**



**Figure 5 Dish, tin-glazed earthenware with lustre decoration. Ca. 1520 – 1560, Manises, Spain. Victoria and Albert Museum, London (321-1893).**

## Links with Italy and beyond

Spanish pottery in the 16th century found itself in the period of transition. Until about 1525-30 lustreware retained its prestige, but the general decline started soon after. Yet in 1585 the Valencian town council was proud to present 100 large dishes of *Obra de Manises* on the occasion of Philip II's visit to Valencia and production of lustreware remained for another two centuries a prominent industry in Manises. It produced lustreware predominately on a local scale and Mariam Rosser Owen cites a recipe dated 1783 that shows traditional techniques were passed down through the generations, allowing their revival in the 19th century. These later objects were decorated in a strong coppery colour (Figure 2), derived from the addition of vermilion, a mineral that could be acquired locally. The scientific research has shown that the amount of expensive tin oxide in the glaze has been reduced in these later objects but the production, though on a smaller scale, hasn't died out.

Italy was the most avid importer of Spanish lustreware. By the time this dish was made, potters from two Italian towns in Umbria, Gubbio and Deruta, had perfected their own version of lustreware, which imitated the look of Spanish lustre although the colours were quite different. As interest in acquiring Italian lustred ceramics rose, Valencian lustreware became less desirable abroad and there was a sharp drop in exports. By about 1500, the skill and knowledge accumulated by the ceramists of Faenza seem to have reached its peak, while the little town of Gubbio has seen a rise with the workshop of Giorgio Andreoli, who set up the pottery which was to become, beside Deruta, the biggest centre of production of Italian lustreware.



**Figure 6 Dish, tin-glazed earthenware with lustre, Deruta, 1510-1520.  
Victoria and Albert Museum, London (C.2172-1910).**

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