

## THE HERITAGE OF MULTANI BLUE POTTERY: TRADITION, IDENTITY, AND CULTURAL DIPLOMACY

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### **Abstract**

*Kashigari or Kashi-kari, the Multani Blue Potters, is one of the most unique, visually impressive, and historically and regionally significant ceramic traditions of South Asia. It is a tradition of old which is based on the traditionally bright and pure background of white porcelain-like material on which the floral and geometric design are cobalt blue and turquoise respectively, and which is deeply rooted in the holiest of all cities, Multan – the Venerable "City of Saints". Over the centuries, Kashigari has come to represent more than just architectural tile work on Sufi shrines of the medieval period; it has become a repository for the national identity, artisanal skill and spiritual heritage of the people of Pakistan. This multi-faceted monograph takes a simultaneous approach to the subject of Multani Blue Pottery covering aspects of its historical roots in the presence of Central Asian/ Persian influence, manufacturing process, architectural manifestation, iconography and the symbolic vocabulary and its role in the context of global diplomacy and Indian nation branding.*

**Keywords:** *Multani Blue Pottery, Kashigari kashi kari, Pakistani Cultural Identity, Ceramic Heritage, Glazed pottery, Cultural Diplomacy*

### **1. Historical Origins and Civilizational Foundations**

Located in the fertile alluvial plains of Punjab, adjoining the banks of the Chenab River, Multan is the cultural hub of the province of Punjab and the oldest city of the province. Known for its ancient history, Multan was a commercial hub, an important pilgrim centre and a centre for the building of empires for thousands of years, linking Central Asia, Persia and the Indian subcontinent.

This was an environment of civilizational mixing and fusing where the craft of Kashigari, glazed blue ceramics, firmly anchored itself. The beginnings of the use of glazed tiles in South Asia date back to the period of the Delhi Sultanate (1206–1526 CE) and even further back to the period of the Mughals (1526–1857 CE), when Central Asian artisans introduced the tiles. Advanced glazing technologies from Samarkand, Bukhara, Herat and Kashan were transported by master ceramicists who either wanted to escape the instability in the region or received royal commissions.

The expression Kashigari itself is from the famous Iranian city of Kashan, which was renowned for its elaborate faience and luster-glazed tiles. These artisans arrived in Multan and found local alluvial clays, quartz deposits, and the high-temperature firing conditions of the kilns. The artists of Multan were able to combine the precision of the Persian geometry with the native South Asian plants and Sufi spiritual elements, and thus produced a masterpiece of art that became the hallmark of Multani Blue Pottery.

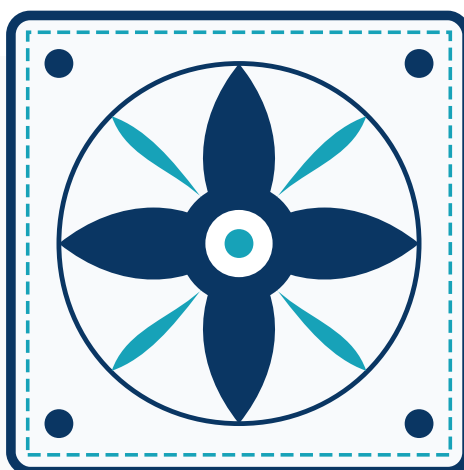


Figure 1: Traditional Multani Kashigari Rosette Tile Pattern featuring signature cobalt blue and turquoise motifs over white glaze.

## 2. Architectural Legacy & Sufi Shrines of Multan

The cultural significance of Multani Blue Pottery can be best understood when viewed in its natural context, the monumental Sufi mausoleums and shrines which form the city's skyline. For more than 700 years, Kashigari tiles have been protecting and adorning these auspicious buildings.

The most famous is the Tomb of Shah Rukn-e-Alam, constructed by Sultan Ghiyath al-Din Tughluq in the 14th century CE in 1320-24. It is an immense octagonal building covered with elaborate glazed blue, turquoise, and white terracotta tiles, and is located within the ancient Fort of Multan. The tiles were used for both their beauty and protection from the weather and the brickwork beneath, and for their ability to generate such a majestic impression of heavenly calm.

Other monumental buildings with classical Multani tile paintings are:

- Shrine of Bahauddin Zakariya (Multan): The extensive blue geometric friezes and calligraphic bands are 13th century in date.
- Shrine of Shah Shams Tabrez (Multan): Decorated with rich coloured glazed tiles with elaborate flower arabesques.
- Tomb of Bibi Jawindi (Uch Sharif): It is located south of Multan; it is a UNESCO tentative world heritage site and is famous for its exterior blue tile work on the octagonal towers and dome.

*"The blue tile of Multan does not merely cover the wall; it reflects the sky, turning brick and earth into a divine mirror of infinity." — Cultural Historian Dr. Ahmad Nabi Khan*

## 3. Raw Materials & Chemical Composition

Real Multani Blue Pottery uses a unique composition called soft-paste china or quartz fritware, in addition to high-quality local clay, whereas traditional pottery is only natural red clay (earthenware).

## 4. Step-by-Step Manufacturing & Artisanal Process

Multani Blue Pottery is a labour-intensive craft that needs months of training and precision to create. This is handed down through family lines (Ustad-Shagird tradition) by master craftsmen, called Kashigari.

### Stage 1: Clay Preparation and Dough Kneading

Raw quartz powder, white clay, and binder glass are finely ground, mixed with water, and hand- or foot-kneaded to remove air pockets. The dough should be uniform so that it may not crack during drying and firing.

## Stage 2: Shaping and Molding

For round vessels such as vases, bowls, and urns, the kneaded clay is formed on a traditional potter's wheel (Chak). Plaster of Paris molds are used to ensure dimensional uniformity and make flat items like decorative plates, wall tiles, and serving platters.

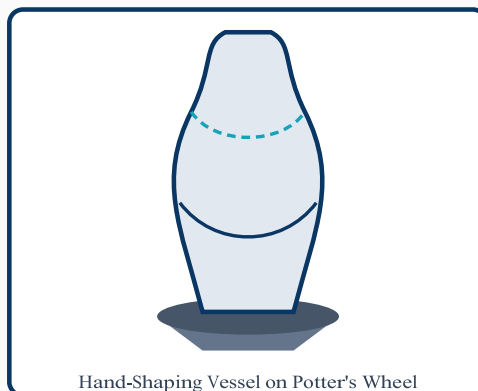


Figure 2: Technical Diagram of Clay Shaping on Potter's Wheel prior to Slip Coating and Hand Painting.

## Stage 3: Drying and First Firing (Bisque Firing)

Sun drying is done under shade for several days with slow moisture evaporation, to make greenware. When dry, they are fired for the first time at around 800°C to 850°C in a traditional brick kiln (wood- or gas-fuelled). A bisque firing is a firing that dries out the clay body but does not make it impervious to liquid glaze.

## Stage 4: Slip Coating (Engobe) and Freehand Painting

A white slip slurry (\*Astaar\*) is used to dip the bisque-fired piece. After drying, the master artist starts to hand-paint on the absorbent chalky surface. No stencils are used, and the artist trusts his years of muscle memory and his eyes to mimic the library. The artist does not use any stencils and relies on his years of muscle memory and visual intuition to mimic the library. With a fine brush (squirrel tail hair, or cat hair), the painter makes designs in dark cobalt oxide, and shades secondarily in turquoise copper oxide.

## Stage 5: Glazing and Final Kiln Firing

After painting a raw metallic oxide layer but without reacting with heat, the item will have a dull, grey appearance. A clear glass solution (Kanch) is placed on the ship. A clear glass solution (Kanch) is filled on the ship. A great chemical change takes place during this final "glaze firing" at 950°C – 1050°C: the transparent glass melts, the cobalt oxide becomes bright and intense blue, the copper oxide becomes bright turquoise, and the substrate is fused into a durable and glossy ceramic product.

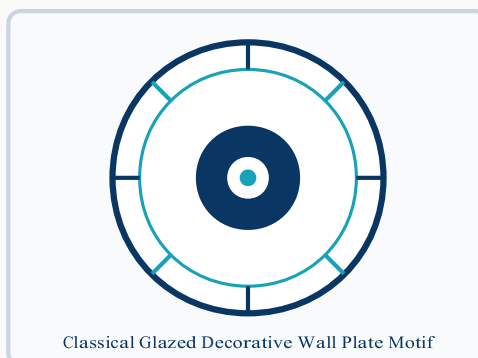


Figure 3: Glazed Multani Blue Pottery Decorative Plate showing radial symmetry and dual-tone oxide palette.

## 5. Motif Taxonomy and Symbolic Aesthetics

The vocabulary employed in the design of Multani Blue Pottery has a richness of symbolic elements. Islamic philosophy of geometry is well represented; horse-shaped floral motifs and motifs from the regional nature imagery of South Asia are included in the designs.

### A. Colour Palette Symbolism

- Cobalt Blue (\*Firozi / Lapis Tone\*): A representation of the deep blue heaven, cosmic depths, divine wisdom and spiritual protection. The Sufi philosophy considers blue to be the colour of the Immaterial and the Unmanifested Universe.
- Turquoise (\*Aabi Tone\*): Symbolizes water, life, freshness, purity, and spiritual healing.
- Pure White Background: Represents light (\*Noor\*), clarity, truth, and peace.

## 6. Role as a Symbol of Pakistani Cultural Identity

Multani Blue Pottery has moved from a regional craft to a national icon since the establishment of Pakistan in 1947 and is known all over the world.

### A. Diplomatic and State Recognition

Multani Blue Pottery has been used time and again by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Government of Pakistan for official state gifts to visiting foreign dignitaries, Heads of State and Ambassadors. It is a cultural representative of Pakistan's high-class art tradition carried by Pakistan's embassies in various cities of Great Britain like London, Washington, Beijing and Paris.

### B. Contemporary Architecture and Interior Design

Modern Kashigari tiles are regularly used by architects and interior designers in luxury homes, government buildings, boutique hotels and public monuments in modern Pakistani cities like Islamabad, Lahore, Karachi and Peshawar. The mix of the old and new is a testament to an authentic Pakistani style.

### C. Economic Empowerment and Artisanal Communities

In the industry, there are thousands of master craftsmen, youth apprentices, and women in the rural areas of Multan who are employed based on hereditary terms. The Institute of Blue Pottery, which is organized by various groups, is a good place to start.

The Punjab Small Industries Corporation (PSIC) in Multan, Pakistan, through its development arm (IBPD), provides special vocational training courses, modern kiln facilities, and quality assurance to safeguard the craft and boost export potential.

## 7. Challenges and Modern Preservation Efforts

Although the traditional Blue Pottery industry is still considered prestigious, it has many problems in today's society:

- Competition from Mass Production: Authentic hand-painted artisans are under threat from cheap ceramic imports and screen-printed copies.
- Fuel Costs and Kiln Technology: Natural gas and firewood costs are a significant factor in the profitability of kilns.
- Occupational Health: Transitioning away from traditional lead-based glazes toward eco-friendly, lead-free food-grade glazes is essential for expanding exports to North American and European markets.

Conversely, the efforts of continuous Pakistani craft councils, UNESCO preservation grants, and digital e-commerce platforms are enabling the local artisans to directly access the international markets, ensuring the continuation of Kashigari not only as a living art culture but also as financially viable.

## 8. Comparative Analysis: Multani Kashigari vs. Global Blue Ceramic Traditions

Although there are several traditions of glazed blue-and-white ceramics in the world, Multani Kashigari has more defining features that distinguish it from other traditions:

- Chinese Delft / Ming Porcelain: In China, kaolin porcelain is fired at an ultra-high temperature ( $>1300^{\circ}\text{C}$ ) and is decorated with brushwork that is applied with dragon and landscape images. The soft-paste

quartz/clay was made at lower temperatures (~1000°C) and applied with abundant geometric arabesques in Multani pottery.

- Dutch Delftware: European Delftware attempted to imitate Chinese porcelain using tin-glazed earthenware. Multani Blue Pottery keeps the continuity of the Persian/Islamic architectural tiles.
- Jaipur Blue Pottery (India): Though it shares its roots in India, Jalu pottery has a non-clay frit body while Multani pottery has a unique clay-quartz blend that is strongly associated with Sufi shrine architecture.

### Conclusion

Multani Blue pottery (Kashigari) is not only a beautiful decorative handicraft product, but it is also a living document of Pakistan's civilizational journey. The design of Kashigaris showcases the strength, skill, and genius of the Pakistani artisans and represents a significant blend of cultural features. It is an art which must be sustained and preserved in Pakistan; it must be given the first place in the world and a heritage bequeathed by history shining in radiant cobalt blue.

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