



Chapter Title: Traces of Mosul: An Inlaid Brass Pen Box in the V&A

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Part 1

METALWORK

Traces of Mosul: An Inlaid Brass Pen Box in the V&A

MOYA CAREY

The inlaid brasswork of Mosul has a long history of scholarship, with a well-known central corpus of signed or dated objects. This article deals with an unpublished object, the base of a large pen box in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Heavily damaged, this object requires close attention for its original decorative scheme to be discerned. The external surface is covered with a highly sophisticated programme, in prodigiously minute gold and silver inlay, which follows the court iconography of Badr al-Din Lu'lu' (d.1259), the ruler of Mosul.

This short report is designed to highlight a metalwork object in the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A), London that has remained in obscurity since its acquisition by the museum in 1855. The reason for this neglect is, though, very clear. The object was once part of an extraordinary inlaid brass pen box, but the inlaid decoration is on an unusually small scale and is consequently hard to read, a difficulty that is compounded by the box's damaged state.¹ Nevertheless, the box is an

informative witness to the skill of Arab artists and craftsmen in the medieval period and it deserves to be better known.²

The V&A was opened to the public in 1852 as the Museum of Manufactures, a name that was soon changed to the Museum of Ornamental Art. From 1854, the items purchased for display there included examples of historical metalwork produced in the Middle East in the Islamic period. The acquisitions made in the following year included the brass box already referred to, which was purchased for £3 and 13 shillings. There is no record as to the vendor, as is normal for this period, and the museum accessioned the box simply as 'Damascene work of gold and silver on brass. Ancient Arabic'. Its 'Damascene' inlay work does, indeed, make it an outstanding example of both 'Manufactures' and 'Ornamental Art', despite its subsequent obscurity.³



The rectangular box was formed from sheet brass by hammering and it measures 36.2cm in length, 5.1cm in height and 9.4cm in depth. [Figure 1] It appears to be the lower half of a relatively large pen box, although it retains none of the interior fittings for ink or sand. Indeed, the interior is now entirely plain. Fine pen boxes are typically richly decorated inside as well as out, and are fitted with an internal lining of brass sheet inlaid with gold and silver. This is now missing, but at one end, two small pegs show where the inner shell was once attached.

As we shall see, the pen box can be attributed to the mid-thirteenth century, but its large, rectilinear form is unusual among the surviving examples from that period as most comparable examples date from the fourteenth century. Dated or dateable thirteenth-century pen boxes are usually smaller and have rounded ends, but important exceptions do exist.⁴ One is a thirteenth-century pen box in the British Museum that is decorated with paired planets and zodiac signs, and this has almost exactly the same dimensions as the V&A object.⁵ The two distinct shapes are not chronologically determined, but relate to the professional requirements of two different classes of scribe, according to the Mamluk historian al-Qalqashandi (d. 1418), who noted that long pen boxes with square corners were used by treasury scribes, while chancery scribes used ones with rounded ends.⁶

The external surface of the pen box is engraved with decoration overall, and these designs were once densely inlaid with gold and silver. Much of this inlay has been lost, but enough survives to show how it was executed with intense and exquisite detail. As discussed below, the imagery reflects the political iconography of the mid-thirteenth century, and particularly that associated with Badr al-Din Lu'lu', who was the independent ruler of Mosul in northern Iraq from 1233 to his death in 1259. Throughout the thirteenth century, Mosul was a significant centre for the production and export of inlaid brassware, making objects with sophisticated decorative programmes that combined ornamental designs with figural scenes and calligraphy. Flat inlaid areas of gold and silver were further engraved with linear detail, creating refined 'drawing' of great skill. Signed examples demonstrate that production occurred in Mosul, with some items made directly for the court of Badr al-Din. Signatures also demonstrate an extensive 'lineage' of Mosul metalworkers, retaining their *nisha al-Mawsili* (of Mosul), and traceable from Iraq to Syria and Egypt, well into the fourteenth century.⁷ High-status pen boxes were the essential accessory of any senior civil servant, and indeed some are depicted holding prominent examples as an indication of their office, in court scenes on Mosul metalwork.⁸ Within the context of Mosul's metalworking reputation, pen boxes are picked out as particularly special: Sibt ibn al-Jawzi (d.1256) observed that an inlaid pen box



Figure 1.

Inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq.

V&A inv. no. 3653-1855 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

Figure 2.

Roundel containing falconer on horseback, detail of inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq. V&A inv. no. 3653-1855

© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

from the household of Badr al-Din Lu'lu' was usually worth 200 dirhams.⁹

What sets the V&A pen box apart is the minute character of the inlay, which contains the ornamental and figural components but no inscriptions. This decoration is on a far tinier scale than other published figural examples of Mosul or *al-Mawsili* metalwork. Indeed, the damaged remains of this pen box must transform our understanding of the celebrated proficiency of the Mosul metalworkers. At first glance, though, the design seems incoherent and essentially invisible. Only inspection at very close quarters allows the eye to comprehend the composition and, notwithstanding the later damage, this is surprisingly complex and sophisticated. Given the tiny scale, such 'discovery' is only possible when the object is held in the viewer's hand and even more than other inlaid metalwork, this is not an item for display at a distance but the purveyor of an intimate message almost exclusively visible to the privileged possessor.¹⁰

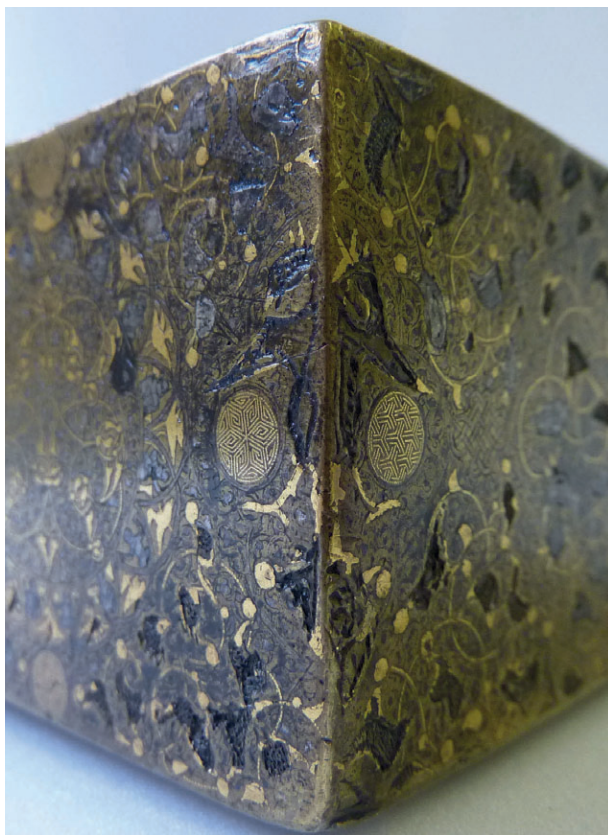


Figure 3.
Two-headed eagle positioned over the corner-angle, detail of inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq. V&A inv. no. 3653-1855 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

The four external sides of the box follow a single decorative system, a continuous horizontal frieze of relatively large roundels linked by much smaller roundels. The filler motifs inside the small roundels are either six-pointed stars or Y-fretwork, which were both regularly employed by Mosul metalworkers, while the background field is filled with two planar systems of ornament, one of animated, or *waqwaq* scrollwork inlaid in gold, and the other of foliate scrollwork inlaid in silver.¹¹

Each end of the pen box features a single scalloped medallion, filled with a scrolling *waqwaq* composition in gold inlay, flanked on each side by a single plaited knot, while both of the long sides feature a row of seven main roundels, with a matching programme of three themes. Figures occur in the second, fourth, and sixth roundels: the central, or fourth, roundel contains a minute enthronement scene, while the second and sixth show a falconer riding a horse in the company of guards. [Figure 2] The first, third, fifth, and seventh roundels have two overlaid compositions of half-palmette designs; a larger gold-inlaid pattern is superimposed onto smaller silver scrollwork.

There are circles within circles here: each main roundel has its own outer band of yet further decoration, all of them inhabited by even tinier figures. The band around each enthronement scene contains twelve discs that illustrate the signs of the zodiac in gold inlay. [Figure 6] Around each horseman, there are eight standing figures and four falcons seizing their prey. [Figure 2] Around the remaining circles, which contain ornamental designs, there is an almost impossibly small series of 16 seated figures in silver, each with their own microscopic drinking vessels and other tableware in gold. [Figure 4] These party-goers measure 0.3cm in height at the most.

On one side, however, this scheme is not complete. The two images featuring the horseman and his attendants are missing, and the brass surface is scoured with hatching. Their places are taken by a newer pattern in a much flatter technique. This may be part of an old restoration, carried out after the box was separated from its lid: marks on the interior demonstrate that these two roundels had originally accommodated the positioning of hinges.

A final feature of this horizontal decorative scheme comes at the corners: the designer has chosen to turn each corner with a two-headed eagle, which is therefore folded around each angle. [Figure 3] This play with the axial symmetry of the motif emphasises the neatness of the overall plan and it begins to hint at the box's high status. The double-headed

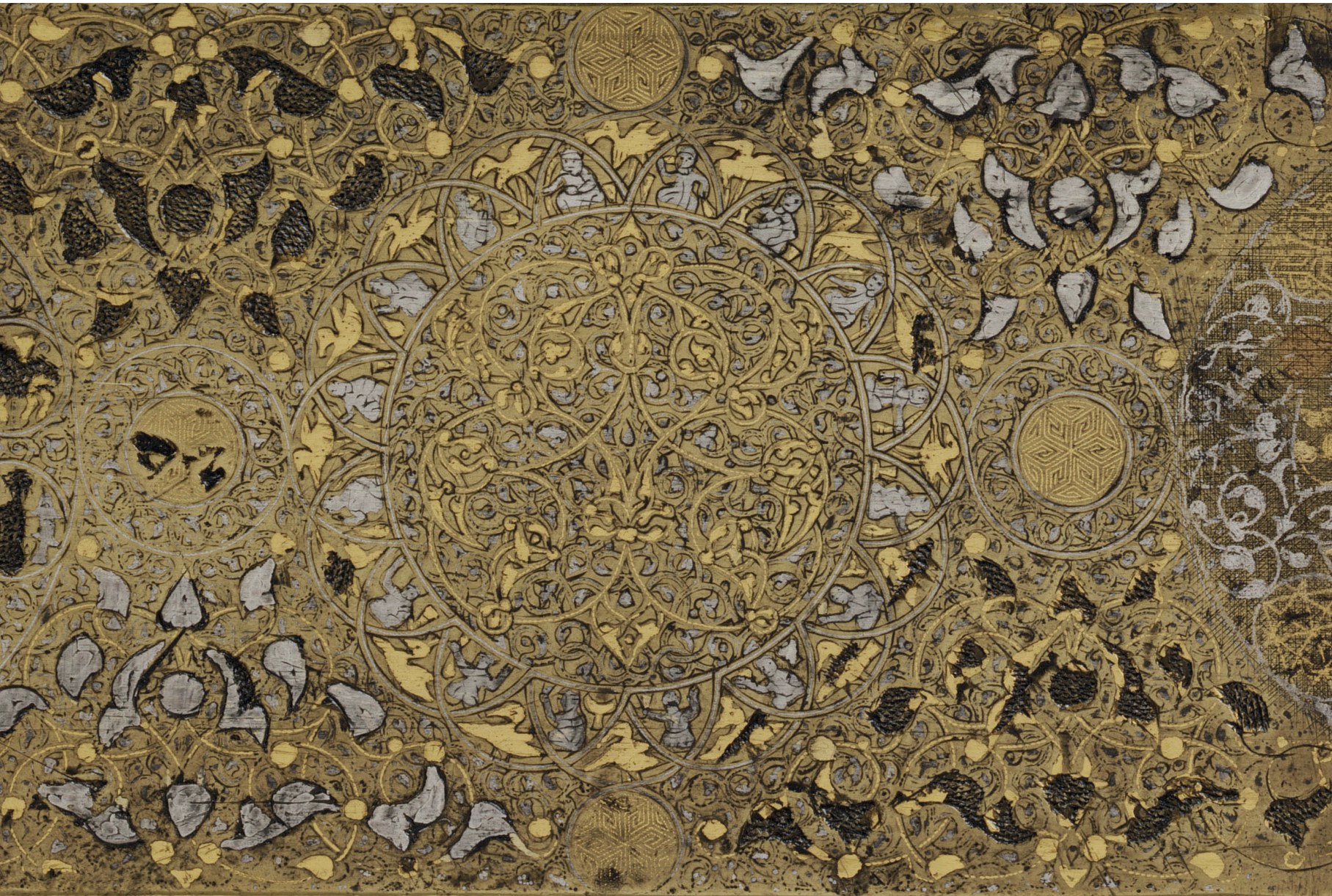


Figure 4.

Roundel containing central foliate motif, with silver-inlaid drinkers and gold-inlaid birds around the outer borders, detail of inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq. V&A inv. no. 3653-1855 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

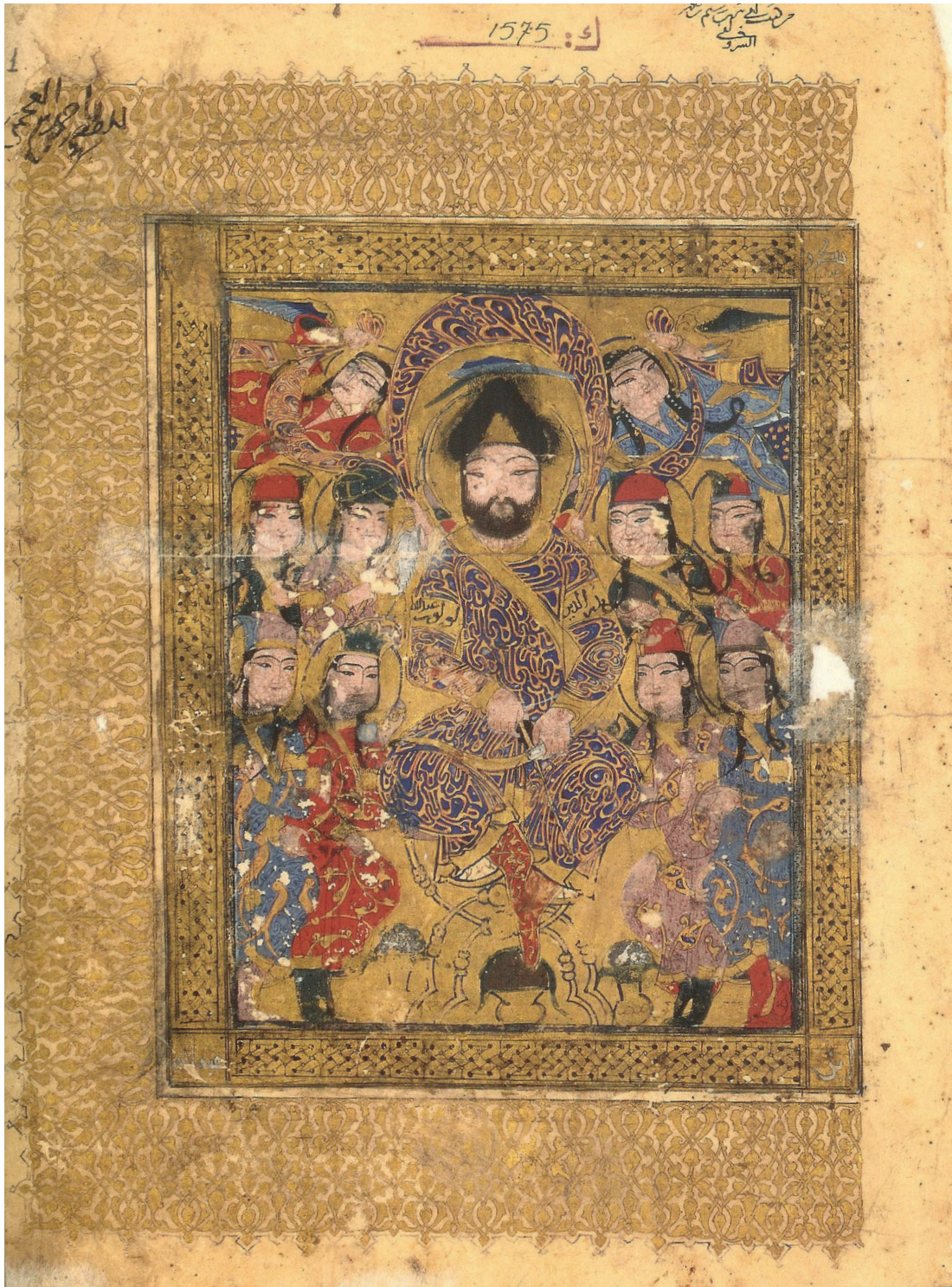


Figure 5.

Ruler portrait inscribed Badr al-Din Lu'lu', frontispiece painting to vol.17 of *Kitab al-Aghani* compiled by Abu'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, c.1217–1219, Mosul, Iraq. Istanbul Millet Library 1566, fol.1r.

eagle was a royal symbol in the Middle East in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries: it was adopted by the Artuqids of south-east Anatolia, the Ayyubids of Egypt and Syria, and by the Ayyubids' immediate successors, the Mamluk sultans and amirs of the second half of the thirteenth century.¹²

The object certainly demonstrates an impressive achievement of micro-illustration, but it also offers a sophisticated visual range of linear design. Many of these elements relate to the methodology of drawing on paper, as in the three separate concentric formats employed for the different roundels, each derived through compass work.¹³ The surface design was surely conceived by a master illuminator who was confident that these linear and figural designs would translate to inlaid metalwork. The success of that translation was the achievement of a master metalworker, who may or may not have been the same person. Using the colour contrasts of silver and gold to denote separate themes and hierarchies, the complex framework is also clarified through the consistent use of silver inlay to outline the interlocking circles and arches.

In terms of the figural designs, there are several strong correlations between the V&A pen box and manuscript

painting produced in Mosul in the thirteenth century, as well as parallels with other examples of inlaid metalwork from this period. These images relate to the representation of the ruler, conveying either enthroned majesty or prowess in hunting. The central roundel on each side illustrates the former: although the inlay is very damaged, we can detect a man shown sitting upright with his feet crossed, one hand lifted to his chest while the other holds a *mandil* or courtly napkin at his hip. [Figure 6]

On one side of the box, the silhouette of the ruler's head suggests the triangular form of the fur-lined cap worn in thirteenth-century Iraq and Syria by the atabegs—local rulers, who, like Badr al-Din Lu'lu', acted as regents for the Saljuq dynasty. In this case, the atabeg is flanked by two gold-booted retainers, each holding a fluttering fan or flabellum over his head. Two lions lie beneath the ruler's feet, following a standard iconographic trope of righteous rulership. Overall, the scene projects divinely sanctioned rule and this is reinforced by the celestial reference in the surrounding band, where, as already noted, within twelve tiny roundels, the constellations of the zodiac orbit the ruler.¹⁴

Direct parallels are found in the frontispiece paintings of the multi-volume *Kitab al-Aghani* (Book of Songs), produced



Figure 6.
Roundel containing seated ruler flanked by attendants, with gold-inlaid zodiac signs around the outer borders, detail of inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq. V&A inv. no. 3653-1855
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London.



Figure 7.
Waqwaq animated scroll, including head of a unicorn and other animals, detail of inlaid pen box, thirteenth century, Mosul, Iraq. V&A inv. no. 3653-1855 © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

in Mosul in 1218–1220, before Badr al-Din assumed full sovereignty. These depict a ruler, who is identified as Badr al-Din in an inscription on his sleeves, either sitting cross-legged with his court [Figure 5] or riding out with his falcon.¹⁵ This second theme recalls the other main figural image on the box, namely, the roundels depicting a horseman flanked by his bodyguards and with a falcon at his wrist, which we can recognise as a second ‘ruler portrait’.

The clear links with representations of Mosul’s ruler are not confirmed in the usual manner, by the content of a calligraphic element in the decorative scheme, which is, as we have seen, entirely absent. There may have been inscriptions on the lid or inside, but no evidence remains to support this speculation. Nonetheless, the echoes of the political iconography of mid-thirteenth-century Iraq and other visual modes from that period balance the dissimilarities between this exceptional object, or what is left of it, and other metalwork pieces known to have been made for Badr al-Din. The most notable of these visual modes is the diminutive scale of the surface design on the V&A box.

Mosul inlaid designs are typically larger, allowing for internal details to be engraved into areas of figural inlay, to depict facial features, horse-trappings, and even flower petals and birds’ feathers. Indeed it may be argued that the scale of figural inlay steadily increased, from the early thirteenth to the mid-fourteenth centuries, specifically to allow for more and more linear detailing. Inlay work drew closer to manuscript illustration. Here, however, the design is so small that it is barely legible. In emphatic contrast, the V&A object is one of the largest square-cornered pen boxes of its kind and also one of the earliest. The status and the scale, for the object itself and for its decorative programme, were apparently inversely related. Julian Raby has proposed that ‘tour-de-force’ virtuosity (such as miniaturisation) may indicate ‘the credential work’ of a newly graduated craftsman and links highly technical performances with the procedures of a functioning guild system.¹⁶ Still discernible in its damaged and incomplete condition, the V&A box has a decorative programme that clearly makes claims to a royal connection and to the extraordinary metalworking industry of Mosul. Despite its apparently august beginnings, however, the box received ruthless treatment from its later owners.

Repairs, re-use, and re-fashioning are typical actions imposed on objects in continuous use and can be interesting indications of different judgements made over many centuries. Most notably in the case of inlaid brass wares, they were looted of their gold and silver inlays when an owner determined that the cash value of the metal when removed exceeded the worth of the object with its decoration intact. This judgement was clearly applied to the V&A box at some point since the larger areas of inlay have been picked out so that, for example, the principal figures are left only as silhouettes in the brass. That damage was then made good, or at least partly concealed, by superimposing new decoration. An attempt was made to re-silver some of the areas of lost inlay: this was particularly severe with the gold-inlaid animal heads of the original *waqwaq* scrollwork, including deer, oxen, rabbits, elephants, and unicorns. These are still recognisable in outline but replaced only as crude forms in silver. [Figure 7] Other interventions are seen on the base of the pen box, which was heavily redecorated with a relatively large foliate design, and in the new ornament applied to two roundels on one side, as mentioned above.

Although we know nothing of the pen box’s owner before 1855, other objects have a clearer history, at least in the nineteenth century, when Western private collecting began to focus upon Middle Eastern artworks. This shows that some collectors admired designed objects for their own sake rather than as items for conspicuous aesthetic display in their homes. William Wrench, for example, who died as British consul in Istanbul in 1896, owned a Mosul brass candlestick from the early thirteenth century which has lost almost all of its inlay but nonetheless still shows a complex programme of figural illustration.¹⁷ In the case of the V&A pen box, appreciation of the object has been exceptionally muted since it entered a public collection 160 years ago. Two factors may now end this obscurity. One is the museum’s creation of a curatorial section to care for the category of objects to which the pen box belongs, which occurred only in 2002. The second is the rise of digitisation of the museum’s collections, which are now accessible through an on-line catalogue, Search the Collections. Digital photographs available online will give everyone access to the pen box and allow them to see it at an appropriate level of magnification.¹⁸ It will no longer be necessary to hold this object in your hand in order to see the extraordinary decoration in its every detail.

Notes

1. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, inv. no. 3653-1855. The metal of the pen box has not been tested but is likely to be brass, an alloy of copper and zinc.
2. It is my pleasure to make this report in a volume dedicated to Doris Behrens-Abouseif, whose own work has encompassed other little-known metalwork items in the V&A's great collection of art and design from the Islamic Middle East.
3. On the V&A's Middle Eastern collections, see: Stanley, T., 'A Mamluk Tray and its Journey to the V&A', in Porter, V., and Rosser-Owen, M. (eds.), *Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World: Art, Craft and Text. Essays Presented to James W. Allan*, London, 2012, pp.171–86; Stanley, T., 'Islamic Art at the V&A', in Crill, R., and Stanley, T. (eds.), *The Making of the Jameel Gallery of Islamic Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London, 2006, pp.2–24, and Vernoit, S., 'An Overview of Scholarship and Collecting, c.1850–c.1950', in Vernoit, S. (ed.), *Discovering Islamic Art: Scholars, Collectors and Collections*, London, 2000, pp.1–61.
4. Round-ended: Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, inv. no. MW.221 (L.19.8cm); Museum of Islamic Art, Doha, inv. no. MW.121 (L.23cm); and V&A, London, inv. no. M.712-1910 (L.24.8cm), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O65726/writing-box-unknown/>. Square-ended: V&A, London, inv. no. 370-1897 (dated 702/1302, L.34.5cm), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O108518/writing-box-unknown/>; Louvre, Paris, inv. no. OA.3621 (dated 704/1304–1305, L.32.4cm); London, V&A, London, inv.no. 8993-1863 (Mamluk date, L.30cm); V&A, London, inv.no. 371-1897 (Mamluk date, L.29.5cm), <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O65715/pen-box-unknown/>.
5. British Museum, London, inv. no. 1884.0704.85 (L.36.8cm, W.9cm), Ward, R., *Islamic Metalwork*, London, 1993, p.83.
6. The two options suited the different paper formats used by each profession: 'As for treasury scribes, they use long square-cornered [pen cases], so that they may put inside the covers of their pen case a minimum supply of the accounting paper they need, corresponding to the pen case in size. The pen cases that judges and their clerks use usually follow this pattern, except that they are generally of wood.' Al-Qalqashandi, *Kitab subh al-a'sha*, quoted in Allan, J., *Islamic Metalwork. The Nuhad es-Said Collection*, London, 1982, p.92.
7. Noting a total of 35 objects signed by 27 different craftsmen using *al-Mawsili*, Raby describes a *Mawsili isnad*, with such signatures denoting pride in the link with this professional tradition, see Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony and the Problem of the "Mosul School of Metalwork"', in Porter, V., and Rosser-Owen, M. (eds.), *Metalwork and Material Culture*, pp.56–57. Continuing this momentum, inlaid brasswork became an important part of visual culture under the Mamluks, in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The evolution of Mosul metalwork scholarship is discussed in Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', pp.11–20.
8. Two candlesticks: British Museum, London, inv. no. 1969.9-22.1, and Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, inv. no. 1891 91.1.563, with courtier groups reproduced in Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', pp.47–48.
9. Cited in Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', p.29 and footnote 93.
10. Similar exclusivity is afforded by books, which are principally designed for close single readership at any one time and therefore follow small scale in both written word and image.
11. Aside from the small roundels, there is no fretwork and foliate scrollwork is the dominant theme. The typical 'double-T fret' found in Mosul metalwork is wholly absent, as is the characteristic Mosul octagon discussed in Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', p.31. The term *waqwaq* derives from the name of a remote island described in medieval geographical literature as well as the Alexander romance and refers here (and more generally) to any decorative plant form sprouting human and/or animal heads, as used in Middle Eastern design traditions.
12. For instance on the incense-burner datable 1264–1279, made for Syrian amir Badr al-Din Baysari, British Museum, London, inv. no. 78.12-30.682, reproduced in Ward, R., *Islamic Metalwork*, p.110.
13. Compass-drawn pattern play is also characteristic of Qur'an illumination in thirteenth-century Syria and Iraq: see a Qur'an dated 634/1236–1237, Nasser D. Khalili Collection, inv. no. QUR704, James, D., *The Master Scribes: Qur'ans of the 10th to 14th centuries AD*, Oxford, 1992, pp.52–53.
14. A similar zodiac disc represents a clock component, and is illustrated twice in the 1205 manuscript, *Kitab fi Ma'rifat al-Hiyal al-Handasiyya* of al-Jazari, produced in Artuqid Amid/Diyarbakir.
15. *Kitab al-Aghani* (vol.17): Istanbul, Millet Library, inv. no. F.E.1566: fol.1r. Raby establishes similar parallels with the Aghani paintings and two Mosul candlesticks, Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', pp.45–47.
16. This interpretation addresses two miniature Mosul objects, an undated bucket (H.8.3cm) and a lidded box (H.3.3cm) dated 1220, Raby, J., 'The Principle of Parsimony', pp.56–57. Ward has identified a group of early fourteenth-century Mosul brass objects with 'dizzily' intricate inlay work, intended 'to advertise [the craftsmen's] superior skill and technique', Ward, R., 'Ilkhanid Mosul: More Craft than Court', in Ward, R. (ed.), *Court and Craft, A Masterpiece from Northern Iraq*, London, 2014, pp.71–72. While this includes three (round-ended) pen boxes, the group avoids the micro-figural compositions achieved on the V&A object and may be a later development of the same trend for concentric circle patterns.
17. V&A, London, inv. no. 380-1897.
18. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O66230/writing-box-unknown/>