


# The Art Dealership of Saeed Motamed. A Case Study on Forgery, Expertise and Networking

Lara Deniz Ersoy 

**Abstract:** The authenticity of the objects provided by the Iranian art dealer Saeed Motamed to Weltmuseum Vienna and other European museums will be analyzed in this paper. Upon initial analysis it is suspected that the objects mentioned are either not original and/or have been tampered with. Some of these ceramic objects appear twice in different dimensions, while some others seem to have been inspired by the latest excavations from Iran. Some objects with similar dimensions, depictions and supposed date of origin seem to appear in many museums over and over again. This paper will examine these cases and will try to find answers as to whether these objects were authentic, misdated or reworked to appear older and/or more interesting.

**Keywords:** Saeed Motamed; forgery; imitation; Weltmuseum Vienna; Iran; archeology

## Introduction

In 1972, a beige colored ceramic cup appeared in an exhibition of the Linden Museum Stuttgart called *Das Tier in der Kunst Irans*. The catalogue from 1972 stated that it had been loaned from a private collection in Frankfurt.<sup>1</sup> It had a frieze on its brim, an animal with curved horns and three wavy lines as its tail was depicted here. On the second half of the frieze there were geometrical shapes and vertical lines, all done with black paint. This cup measured 17,8 cm in height and 10,1 cm in diameter. Another cup, with the exact same depiction on it, is found in the Weltmuseum Vienna under Inventory Number 137878. This object measures 15,8 cm in height and 15,3 cm in diameter and the animal figure stands on three lines instead of two. This object was acquired in 1958 from an Iranian art dealer who lived and worked in Frankfurt, Germany: Saeed Motamed (1925-2013).

Interestingly, a very similar cup appears in the collection of the Folkwang Museum in Essen, Germany under Inventory Number A160. This time, it is a 33 cm tall cup with black Capricorn silhouettes on a beige ceramic background. These double Capricorns are divided by rectangular shaped areas with geometrical shapes. The foot of the cup has the very same four triangle ornaments as the cup in the Weltmuseum Vienna. The museum acquired this object in 1963 from the same art dealer, Saeed Motamed, living and working in Frankfurt.

Why do these cups have either the same or very similar depictions but vary in size? And what does this reveal about the business practices of Saeed Motamed? Assuming the private loaner from Frankfurt for the exhibition in Stuttgart was Motamed, which would not be farfetched considering his role for the exhibition, two cups with the exact same depiction and provenance that can be traced back to Motamed are found in different dimensions.

<sup>1</sup> Col. cat. Karlsruhe (Badisches Landesmuseum): Islamische Keramik aus der Sammlung des Badischen Landesmuseums Karlsruhe. Edited by Schoole Mostafawy, Karlsruhe 2007, 7.

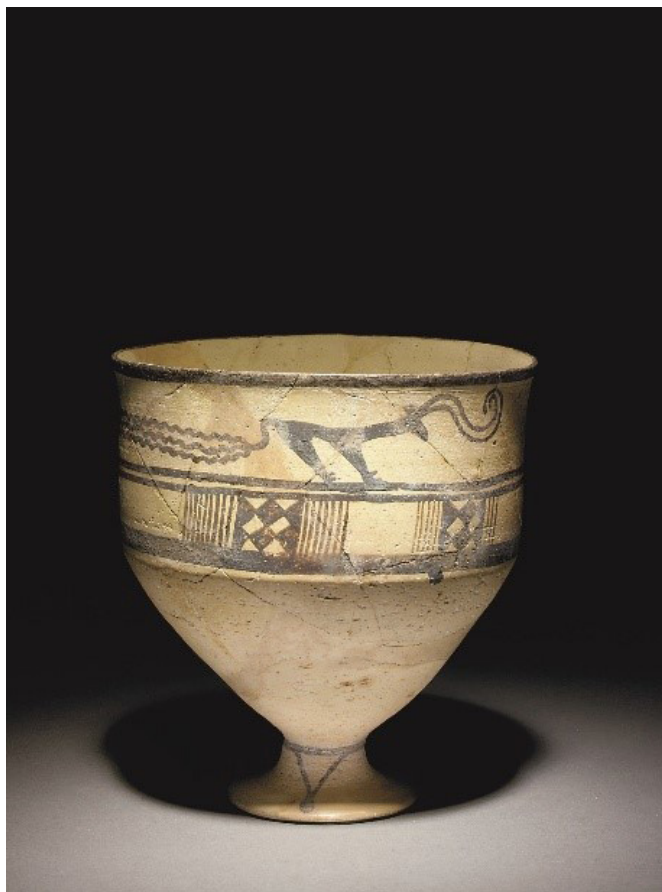


Figure 1: Ceramic cup from the exhibition *Das Tier in der Kunst Irans*, 17,8 × 10,1 cm.

On top of this, a very similar cup, again from Motamed's collection, appears in the Folkwang Museum Essen. This is just one of many examples in which questionable objects can be traced back to Motamed. A probable explanation for this is that none of the cups are authentic or were produced, being inspired by an actual prehistoric cup.

Furthermore, this paper argues that they are not isolated instances, instead together with other examples they can possibly prove that Motamed undertook alterations on authentic objects or sold objects that were entirely created by him. Saeed Motamed established himself as a collector and advised the curators who felt insecure in their expertise in the field. At the time, there were not many questions raised about the provenance of the objects, to the contrary, it was more about filling up the collections than collecting ethically and researching every object. Motamed established himself amongst the museum workers and created a network of people who trusted him and needed his help in reconstructing the collections.



Figure 2: Ceramic cup, prehistoric [?], 15,8 × 15,3 cm, Weltmuseum Vienna, Inv.-Nr. 137878.



Figure 3: Ceramic cup, 33 cm, Folkwang Museum Essen, Inv.-Nr. A160.

## Sources and Literature Review

Apart from a small entry that Motamed wrote about a carpet dating it as Qajar and iconographically analyzing the poetry written at its corners,<sup>2</sup> he mostly remained behind the scenes, preferring not to be named even when he loaned an object to a museum from his own collection. However, his important role for the collections of many museums that bought Islamic objects is apparent once the archival records of the various museums involved are inspected.

The archival material of the Weltmuseum Vienna attests to the extensive business practices of Saeed Motamed and his correspondence with Alfred Janata (1933-1993) and Walther Dostal (1928-2011), the museum's curators at the time.<sup>3</sup> The documents show that he regularly communicated with them regarding his objects and that he provided his expertise for others as well. The relevant files kept in the Weltmuseum Vienna archive are quite large and include most of the written communication between Motamed and the curators between 1955 and 1989. The lists and receipts of the objects that were bought from him were all archived using the post system and contain the prices, a small description of the object and the date of origin suggested by the collector. In later years, there are even sketches by Motamed that he made for each object next to the description.

Motamed loaned objects to many museums for different exhibitions. These were often marked as private loans from Frankfurt, but there were also cases where he was named explicitly within the catalogue. For example, in the case of the *5000 Jahre persische Kunst* (5000 Years of Persian Art) exhibition, the catalogue states that each piece within the exhibition is a loan from Motamed.<sup>4</sup>

Deniz Erduman-Çalış has been the first to thoroughly engage in research on Motamed in her PhD thesis.<sup>5</sup> She skillfully painted a map of all the

museums Motamed had contact with in Germany, on all the objects he provided and on the exhibition projects he was part of. She also provided an extensive biography of Motamed and examined his business practices.<sup>6</sup> She described him as the most important Islamic pottery collector of the postwar era in the German speaking world and raises some questions about his position and the trust given to him by the museum curators.<sup>7</sup> However, a systemic approach to Motamed's network building still forms a significant desideratum. Erduman-Çalış mentions Motamed countless times but, unfortunately, she does not attempt to tie him to the many striking inconsistencies concerning the objects he provided.

Adding to this, an article by Jan Just Witkam hypothesized that a Haftmanzar manuscript in the Linden Museum Stuttgart had been altered and severely restored.<sup>8</sup> This manuscript was also provided by Saeed Motamed. The pages were altered to make the manuscript look more beautiful and make it appeal to the expectations of the museum. However, the beginning and the end of the manuscript as well as many other pages are missing, yet two golden drawings were added to it. Gold work was also added to some other pages, entire colophons were cut out and the colophon numbered 47/a is thought to be an entire forgery.

Another article by Sigrun Martins and Birgit Schwahn analyzed a Roman Kline that had been restored in the twentieth century and was sold as a Bisellium: a seat of honor without a backrest.<sup>9</sup> That object was also bought from Motamed in 1992. In 2006, the Bisellium was taken apart and it was understood that only the fulcrum and fragments from the legs were original and that it has obviously just been put together to become a Bisellium. Both these articles make no attempts to correlate objects from other museums or mentions of Motamed in archival material, thus fail to discover the wide network built by Motamed. He also appeared as a loaner for exhibitions in numerous

2 Saeed Motamed: Ein Teppich erzählt, in: *Weltkunst* 27 (1957), No. 7, 13.

3 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files, Saeed Motamed (Handfiles for collection without archive signature).

4 Exh. cat. Nuremberg (Gewerbemuseum der Bayrischen Landes-gewerbeanstalt): *5000 Jahre persische Kunst*. Edited by Curt Heigl, Nuremberg 1961, 1.

5 Deniz Erduman-Çalış: *Faszination Lüsterglanz und Kobaltblau: Die Geschichte islamischer Keramik in Museen Deutschlands*, unpubl. PhD thesis, Ludwig-Maximilians-University, Munich 2017.

6 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 67, 177-178, 238, 270, 320, 430, 432-433, 440, 482, 539.

7 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 270, 539-540.

8 Jan Just Witkam: Increasing the Value or Hiding the Defects? The Case of the Stuttgart Hatifi Manuscript, in: *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 8 (2017), No. 2, 240-253.

9 Sigrun Martins / Birgit Schwahn: Das Bisellium, das eine Kline war. Rekonstruktion, Restaurierung und Technologische Untersuchung Römischer Klinenfragmente, in: *Restaurierung und Archäologie* 7 (2014), 27-51.



European museums. The catalogue for the *Das Tier in der Kunst des Iran* (The Animal in Iranian Art) exhibition from 1972 hints at him as a loaner,<sup>10</sup> while the exhibition catalogue *Islamische Keramik* (Islamic Pottery), published in 2007, mentions him as the seller of some objects within that collection.<sup>11</sup> Saeed Motamed also played a key role in the 1973 exhibition *Islamische Keramik* in the Hetjens Museum Düsseldorf.<sup>12</sup>

His network building, that was overlooked in the beforementioned publications, helped him to establish himself as an important art dealer for Iranian objects and also to assume some other roles, such as that of an expert and in some cases even of an unofficial curator.

## Outline

Saeed Motamed was born in Iran in 1925 and came to Stuttgart where he started his doctoral studies in physics after he had acquired his Master at the University of Tehran.<sup>13</sup> He started to collect Iranian objects and bring them to Germany as early as 1953.<sup>14</sup> In 1954, his trading company for Persian products, import-export, commission and representation appears in the Frankfurt city archives.<sup>15</sup> His business as an art dealer for the Weltmuseum Vienna started one year later when Walther Dostal (1928-2011) had just become the curator of the Islamic collection there. Motamed was one of the most important art dealers after WWII once public funding became more available for museums.<sup>16</sup> He mostly provided ceramic, glass and metal objects to the Weltmuseum Vienna as well as to other museums in western Europe such as the Linden Museum Stuttgart, Hetjens Museum Düsseldorf, and MK&G Hamburg. Most likely, Motamed was closely connected to Mohammed Yeganeh (1932-2012),



Figure 4: Saeed Motamed, aged about 36, in front of a poster of the 5000 Jahre persische Kunst exhibition.

another physics student living in Frankfurt at the time. Yeganeh started his career as an art dealer by helping his mother to sell objects to buyers in Germany. Reportedly since 1964, he had a small gallery in Frankfurt.<sup>17</sup>

Even though his company was registered, Motamed did not have a gallery like Yeganeh. It appears that in the beginning of his career there were two ways by which a curator could acquire objects from Motamed. The first way was getting visited by Motamed. Motamed visited the museum with his objects stored in suitcases and the curator then had one day to decide which objects he wanted to buy. After his visit, he left the objects that were selected in the museum and mailed the receipt to be paid. The second way was visiting Motamed at his home where the curator was then given a guided tour through the collection by Motamed himself or his wife Elfriede. After their return to the museum, the curator would then select objects he wanted to purchase. The archival material shows that Motamed and his wife also provided expertise on the objects during these visits. In a letter from

10 Exh. cat. Stuttgart (Linden Museum, July 22 to October 8 1972): *Das Tier in der Kunst des Iran*. Edited by Linden Museum, Stuttgart 1972.

11 Coll. cat. Karlsruhe 2007 (see FN 1).

12 Exh. cat. Düsseldorf (Hetjens Museum 1973): *Islamische Keramik*. Edited by Adalbert Klein, Düsseldorf 1973.

13 Martin Nadarzinski: *Polyvalente Dinge. Die ethnographische Sammlung des Badischen Landesmuseums Karlsruhe, 1875 bis heute*, PhD thesis, Johann Wolfgang Goethe-Universität, Frankfurt 2025, 112.

14 Auct. cat. London (Christie's London, 22 April 2013): *The Saeed Motamed collection Part 1*, London 2013, 3-4.

15 Nadarzinski 2025 (see FN 13), 112.

16 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 481.

17 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 541-543.

3rd November 1988, Saeed Motamed stated that he would include the translation of the inscriptions on a Qajar dagger.<sup>18</sup> Motamed had a habit of presenting the objects that he brought to the curator(s) in suitcases and to conclude the sale within a very short time. Also, in the comfort of their own office, the curators could choose further objects and keep these for one day to see whether they wanted to purchase them or not.<sup>19</sup> The curators were aware of the fact that the objects they were contemplating on might soon be sold by Motamed to another museum. Jens Kröger, who was the curator of the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin from 1985 to 2007, described this as following:

*“He flew to Berlin about twice a year after making an appointment by telephone. With several heavy suitcases in which the artworks were packed [...] He then left the artworks in the collection for appraisal and then went to the next director. In the meantime, the director decided whether to buy or not, and when Saeed Motamed came back, the decision was made within a short time.”*<sup>20</sup>

Another very important aspect of Motamed's business practices were his giftings. During his visits, he would gift one or two objects to the museum. This would make him appear as a patron of the museum not just an art dealer.<sup>21</sup> Correspondences from the MAK reveal that Viktor Griessmaier (1902-1989), the curator at the time, even asked for a small gift after a large purchase from Motamed. In a letter from 16th December 1961 he wrote: “I would be very pleased if, in view of the large total sum, you could again, as last time, decide to grant us a small bequest, not in the form of money, but in the form of a dedication of a smaller object.”<sup>22</sup>

This way, he was able to gain the trust of the curators and come across as someone who could provide far more than only these objects. This might also be interpreted as a strategy to appear generous and to build a network amongst the cura-

tors. Every gift came with the expectation of future purchases or a favor in return. The archival material in the Weltmuseum Vienna shows that Alfred Janata introduced Johannes Wieninger, then curator of the Asian art department at the Museum of Applied Arts Vienna, to Saeed Motamed. In a letter from 1988, Motamed thanked Janata for carrying word from Wieninger and assured Janata that he would contact him as soon as possible.<sup>23</sup> It was this kind of networking that allowed Motamed to become such a well-known name for Iranian objects after 1955. It is possible that the curators he was doing business with were mutually recommending Motamed to each other, or that he was asking to be introduced. Network building, gifting and partially presenting the objects swiftly were methods that he used to establish himself and become known.

Saeed Motamed and Mohammed Yeganeh also undertook excavations in Iran and they both claimed that they had an excavation license in Nishapur. Whenever there was a question raised about their objects' authenticity, they referred to this license.<sup>24</sup> There was, however, never a copy of the license provided to Weltmuseum Vienna, it was likely just spread as common knowledge amongst the curators. Mohammed Yeganeh mentioned this license to Kurt Erdmann (1901-1964), the director of the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, who was unsure of the objects that Yeganeh provided:

*“As far as the authenticity of this vase is concerned, I would first like to mention that the group of finds was found in our personal presence (father, mother and I) in Niaschbur [sic!], and thus the authenticity is an undoubtable certainty.”*<sup>25</sup>

More information is needed on the matter of the excavation license to further assess the legality of these excavations. In the case of a mold used for the mass production of ceramics (Inventory Number I.33/68), purchased by the Museum for Islamic Art in Berlin in 1968, the supposed license was brought up again. The model was recorded as

18 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Letter from Saeed Motamed to Alfred Janata, [without place], 3.11.1988.

19 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 489.

20 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 540.

21 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 483.

22 Viktor Griessmaier to Saeed Motamed, Vienna, 16.12.1961, in: Archive of Museum für Angewandte Kunst Vienna, Collectors Files: Saeed Motamed, Nr. 668-61.

23 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Letter from Saeed Motamed to Alfred Janata, [without place], 3.11.1988.

24 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 489, 539. Erduman-Çalış talks about this license twice without hinting towards the source.

25 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 542.

“supposedly from Nischapur”.<sup>26</sup> At this stage, there were questions about the provenance of the model because a ceramic object with the Inventory Number 11972/54 in the Hetjens Museum Düsseldorf was thought to have been produced with the help of this model.<sup>27</sup> It was purchased. The Weltmuseum Vienna is a well-documented case of Motamed’s practices based on the extensive archival material. Thus an account of his sales to Weltmuseum Vienna is going to serve here as an example.

Saeed Motamed’s interactions with the Weltmuseum Vienna started in 1955. At that time, he sold metal, ceramic and textile objects to the museum. The curator of the Islamic Collection Walther Dostal paid a total of 7.971 DM for these objects.<sup>28</sup> Three of the eleven ceramic objects were dated as pre-historic. These were from the Tepe Gian and Solduz areas. One of these objects was a vase with Inventory Number 135482. A closed formed vase from a village named Adjin Dudjin in the Alborz mountains was delivered completely intact. It seems that Saeed Motamed was closely following the archaeological developments in Iran at the time and providing objects that were in high demand. During the 1930s, the focus of excavators and researchers in Iran started to shift towards pre-historic sites.

This archaeologically unexplored area started to quickly produce many important findings and names of excavation sites, such as Tepe Hesar, Tepe Gian, Tepe Hasanlu, and Tepe Sialk which were popularized in the 1930s and 1940s. In 1949, six years before the above mentioned vase from Adjin Dudjin ended up in the Weltmuseum Vienna, the US anthropologist Carleton Coon (1904-1981) had started excavating in the Ġār-e kamarband and Hotu caves and had subsequently discovered Neolithic objects.<sup>29</sup> In the same year, Mahmud Rad and Ali Hakemi (1915-1997), both Iranian archeologists, started to excavate Ganj Tepe in Khorvin. This was a Neolithic excavation site that was very

close to Adjin Dudjin.<sup>30</sup> Again in 1955, and alongside the vase mentioned above, Motamed brought further objects from popular excavation sites: a painted ceramic vase from Tepe Gian, which was purchased by Dostal for 1.000 DM for the Weltmuseum Vienna collection, and a ceramic object from Solduz (Tepe Hasanlu).<sup>31</sup>

Alborz province, where the Adjin Dudjin village is located, was known for illegal excavations, so much so that it was described as a “region of the western Alborz that was virtually overrun by clandestine diggers towards the end of the 1950s”.<sup>32</sup> It is thus possible that the vase in the Weltmuseum Vienna was acquired through illegal excavations in the Alborz mountains. The cup from the Weltmuseum mentioned above from Tepe Gian with the Inventory Number 137878 was also purchased from Saeed Motamed during the previously mentioned visit. This was the most expensive prehistoric pottery within this purchase. The Weltmuseum paid 1.000 DM for the object. Neither for the cup nor for the other ceramics had there been an evaluation.<sup>33</sup> As mentioned before, it is possible that one of the three cups was authentic and was copied by Motamed in a different dimension.

The year 1958 was even more profitable for Saeed Motamed. According to the Weltmuseum Vienna archives, there were two bulk purchases. The price for the first one remains unknown, but Motamed was paid 50.000 DM on his second visit.<sup>34</sup> On his first visit, he brought eight ceramic objects, three of which were dated back by him in the pre-historic times.<sup>35</sup> These were from Tepe Gian, Tepe Sialk and Susa (Inventory Numbers 137878, 137879, and 137880). On his second visit, he brought an oval shaped vase from Solduz (Inventory Number 138120) which was purchased for 1.150 DM and which Motamed dated to 2.500 BC.<sup>36</sup> Not only did he continue to provide objects that are supposedly very old and in perfect condition, but

26 “angeblich aus Nischapur”, see Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 320.

27 It is interesting to note that Yeganeh and Motamed bring similar objects one after another. In 1968, Yeganeh brought another model for a ceramic vase with a hunt depiction. This object has the Inventory Number I.20/68.

28 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 24/55, List of the purchased objects.

29 Robert Dyson JR: Art. “Carleton Stevens Coon”, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. VI, / fasc. 3, 1982, 252-253, here: 252-253.

30 David Stronach: Art. “Excavations i. In Persia”, in: *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. IX/ fasc.1, 1998, 88-94, here: 88-92.

31 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 24/55, List of the purchased objects.

32 Stronach 1998 (see FN 30), 92.

33 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 24/55, List of the purchased objects.

34 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 19/1958, Receipt of the bulk purchases.

35 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 19/1958.

36 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector’s files (see FN 3), Post 19/1958.



the curators were also buying objects beyond their expertise. At this stage, he started to function as a dealer and expert at the same time. His confidence as an expert is first visible in his 1957 entry in *Weltkunst*, where he presents a silk carpet, dates it to the reign of Nasreddin Shah (1848-1896) and states that the hunter figures would originate from miniature painting.<sup>37</sup>

But perhaps 1962 was the year when suspicions started to arise in the Weltmuseum Vienna about the objects from Saeed Motamed. Some inconsistencies regarding the acquisitions were mentioned in the documents. In 1962, he brought thirteen objects, almost all dated B.C. Amongst these was a vessel in the form of a double Capricorn (Inventory Number 142319a/b). The archival material renders information about an inconsistency while describing the object. The head and some parts of the depicted Capricorns are very realistic while the mouth and horns are formed more simply. It is mentioned that the cover had been restored.<sup>38</sup> There is no record of it being restored in the Weltmuseum Vienna. This must thus refer to a restoration conducted before the arrival of the object.

A second object from Motamed's visit in 1962 was a figurine (Inventory Number 142320). The purchasing list describes this object as well and also mentions the discrepancies. The head of this figurine, just like the previous object, seems to be more realistic than the rest of the body. The nose, ears and mouth are distinctively formed and show a great contrast to the cylindrical legs and simple round body.<sup>39</sup> The inconsistencies appear to support the assumption that the head of this figure might be the only original part, and that the rest has been a later addition to increase its value. The goat's head with its very finely formed nose and ears seems foreign compared to the simple oval body which appears to be of a lighter color than the head. If the assumptions regarding the alterations of the goat figure are correct, this would indicate an attempt to present a bigger object than just the head by adding a body to it. And this might simply have been done to increase the price.

In 1970, the Weltmuseum Vienna purchased just one object from Motamed, a ceramic vessel with an amphora like form that he dated to the ninth century. According to the archival material, it is early Islamic but crafted in the Sassanid tradition. It also mentions that the amphora was covered in a hard sintered material despite being very well preserved.<sup>40</sup> Alfred Janata noted on the same document: "Nach Pope-Ackermann, A survey of Persian art (London + N.Y. 1967): III Tafel 189a: Sassanisch."<sup>41</sup> This note was written on the document by hand. It is possible that after the purchase Alfred Janata began to have doubts about the object. But why should Saeed Motamed have tried to date the amphora to a later date? A possible explanation is that he indeed tried to make the inconsistencies of the vase seem due to its production in the early Islamic period, i.e. after the Sassanid tradition but not being Sassanid in the first place.

The date when it was brought to Vienna by Motamed also provides some clues. The preparations for the exhibition *Islamische Keramik* had just begun in the Hetjens Museum Düsseldorf where the curator Adalbert Klein (1934-2015) had started to collect objects with the help of Motamed and his colleague Yeganeh.<sup>42</sup> As Klein was not an expert on Islamic ceramics and most likely could not read the Arabic-Persian alphabet, which is a skill necessary to evaluate Islamic ceramics, he consulted Motamed and Yeganeh. It was also mentioned by Erduman-Çalış that Klein and his colleagues were insecure in their expertise in Islamic pottery and relied solely on the suggestions of Motamed and other collectors. Motamed had approved many Islamic pottery acquisitions in the Hetjens Museum before and after the 1973 exhibition. Erduman-Çalış defined him as the real curator of the collection.<sup>43</sup> In the case of the Hetjens Museum, he

37 Motamed 1957 (see FN 2), 13.

38 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Post 10/1962.

39 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Post 10/1962.

40 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Post 17/1970. The object was described in a small paragraph in the receipt.

41 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Post 17/1970, List of the purchased objects.

42 Klein was specialized mostly on East Asian and German ceramics and was an experienced researcher in this field. See Exh. cat. Düsseldorf (Hetjens Museum 21 March to 2 May 1965): *Chinesische Keramik aus Düsseldorfer Museums- und Privatbesitz*. Edited by Adalbert Klein, Düsseldorf 1965; Adalbert Klein: *Japanische Keramik. Von der Jōmon-Zeit bis zur Gegenwart*, Munich 1984. It seems that his tasks also included the purchase of Islamic ceramics because in the curatorial department it was grouped together with Asian ceramics.

43 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 482-484.

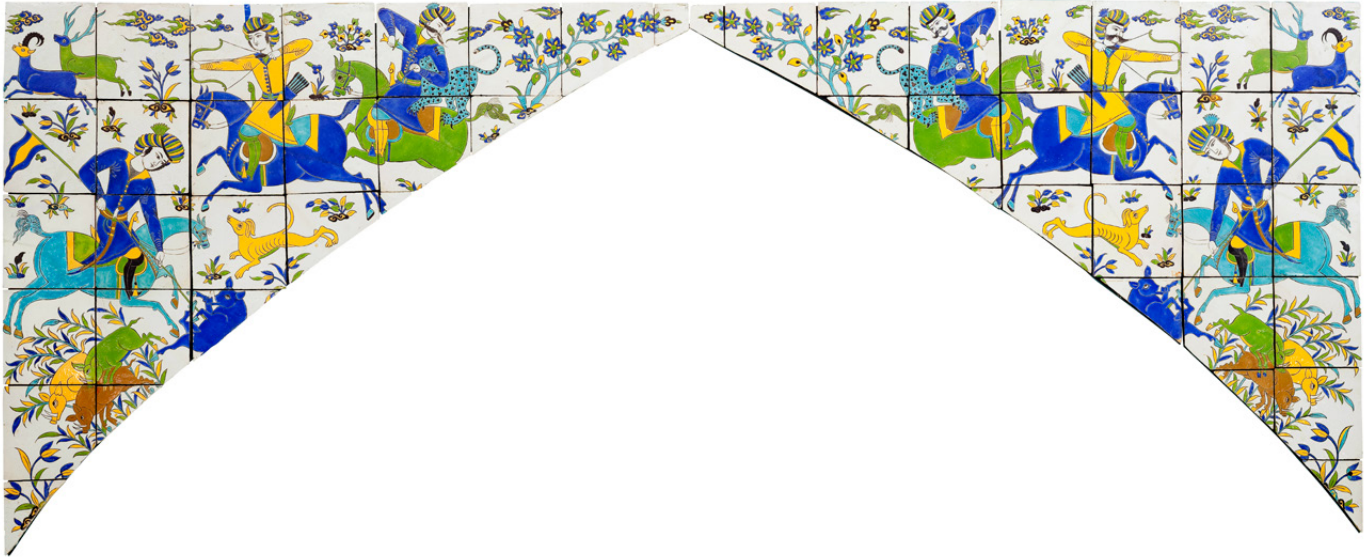


Figure 5: Safavid [?] tile arch, 132 × 346 cm, Ceramic Tiles, MK&G Hamburg, Inv.-Nr. 1980.8.

was the art dealer and the curator at the same time, which was a very profitable position. It appears that he used the lack of expertise in the museum to become an unofficial part of the staff, thereby increasing his profits.

While describing the *Neuerwerbungen 1956-1974* (New Acquisitions 1956-1974) exhibition, Peter Wilhelm Meister, the director at the time, admitted that the museum was lucky to have both Motamed and Yeganeh living in Frankfurt. This is a typical example of the role Saeed Motamed played in the formation of that museum's postwar collection, not only as an art dealer but also as an expert who was working together with the curators in building up the collection.<sup>44</sup>

In 1989, the Weltmuseum Vienna bought its last objects from Saeed Motamed. These objects were three paintings depicting religious scenes, three big locks and two fire tongs. The exchange between Alfred Janata and Saeed Motamed on these paintings was extensive. The purchasing committee also noted: "The origin of the objects is known and impeccable and has been checked (in the case of archaeological metals) for its authenticity."<sup>45</sup> This is the only document in the Weltmuseum Vienna archive mentioning a formal review of the objects.<sup>46</sup> Compared to 1970, when Alfred

Janata inserted a citation from a survey of Persian art as he apparently felt unsure about an object, or to the purchase of a goat statue in 1962, when, despite Janata mentioning black waxy residue on the statue, no review had been done, this is a very different approach.

The purchase before his 1989 visit took place in 1973. This pattern seems to be consistent at MK&G Hamburg where Saeed Motamed presented objects for sale almost every year. However, there was a significant reduction in purchases after 1974. With the exception of a tile arch (Inventory Number 19808) bought in 1980, there were no further purchases from him between 1974 and 1989. At this point, his attention shifted onto US and British markets because the British Museum in London and the MET in New York started to acquire many objects from Motamed around 1973.<sup>47</sup> According to the MET online collection, there were on average one or two objects acquired from Motamed each year. In 1974 and 1975, there were respectively six and seven purchases made. This steady increase of involvement in the British and US markets may have been caused by the cooling down of the art market after the postwar buying boom and/or the declining trust in Saeed Motamed.

The tile arch he provided for the MK&G was bought by Motamed in November 1977 at a Christie's auction for 850 GBP, at the time the arch was

44 Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 270.

45 "wurde (bei archäologischen Metallen) auf seine Echtheit überprüft". See Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Letter of the purchasing committee.

46 Weltmuseum Vienna Collector's files (see FN 3), Post 10/1962.

47 MET Online Collection, URL: <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search?q=motamed&offset=40&sortBy=AccessionNumber>, <07.04.2025>.



dated in the Qajar period. In 1980, he managed to sell that same arch to the MK&G for 75.000 DM after he had changed the date to the late Safavid period.<sup>48</sup> It is impossible to know whether Saeed Motamed offered his expertise to the museum regarding the dating of the object, but it surely did help to secure a higher price. Erduman-Çalış refers to three more arches in the Linden Museum bought in 1977 at a Sotheby's auction. One of them shows a very similar ornament pattern compared to the arch in the MK&G in Hamburg. These were also dated to the Qajar period by Sotheby's and sold as such to the Linden Museum.<sup>49</sup> Assuming that Sotheby's dated the arches based on their iconography, the dating seems to be correct. Iconographically the tile arch in MK&G shows great resemblance to the arch in the Linden Museum, which means that the dating of the MK&G tile arch by Christie's to the Qajar period is correct. By changing the date of the tile arch, Motamed was able to profit even more from it.

As already mentioned above, Saeed Motamed was starting to get more active on the US and British art markets. He was also buying objects from auctions in Britain and the US and selling them to museums in western Europe. Some of the objects he provided for the British Museum are today marked as forgery or imitation in the online collection. Amongst these objects are cylinder seals (Inventory Numbers 135924, 135923, 135427, and 135426), an album with calligraphy appearing as imitation (Inventory Number 1979051402), and a figure mold which is clearly identified as forgery (Inventory Number 135856).<sup>50</sup>

With this information from the British Museum, a pattern emerges in Saeed Motamed's production. The questionable objects can be categorized in three groups: the first group consists of objects that were misdated and/or from dubious origins such as illegal excavations. The Safavid (?) tile arch from the MK&G Hamburg and the objects from Adjin Dudjin can be grouped here. The second group is made up of objects that are potentially not entirely authentic, thus possibly partially forged. These are usually either authentic pieces

that were probably altered by Motamed to look older or could be sold for much more than they are actually worth. An example for this category is the Haft Manzar manuscript, where he altered the pages so much that entire colophons were added, pages were trimmed, and golden edges were inserted.<sup>51</sup> Witkam describes the manuscript as:

*"[...] The product of an extensive make-over, which may have been done not too long ago. This must have had the purpose of making an already attractive, but very incomplete manuscript into a more beautiful manuscript whose shortcomings are compensated for, or rather overshadowed by, the splendor of the extra ornamentation."*<sup>52</sup>

The goat and Capricorn figurines, the Sassanian (?) amphora in the Weltmuseum Vienna and the Bisellium in Frankfurt can also be subsumed under the second category. Allegedly, the third category of objects is entirely Motamed's own production, such as the clay mold in the British Museum, which shows a female figure wearing a Parthian dress.<sup>53</sup> This last group happens to be the hardest one to categorize objects at. More extensive research and chemical analysis is needed to possibly add more objects to the list.

Motamed passed away in 2013. His remaining collection was sold by Christie's London in two parts. This indicates the undiminished reputation of Motamed up until his passing. The auction catalogues show the wide range of the objects he collected and also shed some light on his biography.

## Conclusion

It is evident that many objects obtained from Motamed are at least not entirely original, some are misdated, and some were probably acquired through illegal excavations. This article attempted to show the inconsistencies of the objects from his collection such as the figurines from the Weltmuseum Vienna and the cup in the Linden Museum and Folkwang Museum. Despite this, Saeed Motamed remained an important figure in the art

<sup>48</sup> Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 177-178.

<sup>49</sup> Erduman-Çalış 2017 (see FN 5), 178-179.

<sup>50</sup> British Museum, Online collection, Saeed Motamed, URL: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1977-1211-6](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1977-1211-6), <13.09.2025>.

<sup>51</sup> Witkam 2017 (see FN 8), 2017, 245-246.


<sup>52</sup> Witkam 2017 (see FN 8), 2017, 245.

<sup>53</sup> British Museum, Online collection, URL: [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W\\_1977-1211-6](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/W_1977-1211-6), <13.09.2025>.

scene until the end of the 1990s. Beginning in 1953, Motamed's dealings can be traced in the archives of various museums in German speaking countries. He started as an art dealer in western Europe and established himself as an expert on Islamic objects who was always ready to help the curators. In cases such as that of the Hetjens Museum Düsseldorf, he even became the unofficial curator of an Islamic ceramic collection. Motamed can be described as a person behind the scenes of exhibitions, collections and auctions. He was actually much more influential than it seems at first glance.

More research on Motamed's biography and the extend of the objects he provided to British and US Museums is needed to fully grasp the extend of his suspected forgeries. This should include an extensive archival survey of western European museums with Islamic objects to see whether Motamed provided excavation licenses to the museums and to further examine his networks.

## ORCID®

Lara Deniz Ersoy 

<https://orcid.org/0009-0008-4928-2156>

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Figure 2: © Weltmuseum Vienna

Figure 3: © Folkwang Museum Essen

Figure 4: Source: Auct. cat. London (Christie's London 22nd April 2013): Saeed Motamed Collection Part 1, London 2013, 2.

Figure 5: © MK&G Hamburg

## Reference

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