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IRON BUCKET WITH A UNICORN

IRAN OR SYRIA; 13TH CENTURY

H: 16.5; DIAM: 21 CM

The unicorn does not seem to have any clear iconographic significance in Islamic art and was generally used in large animal friezes, often in the company of other mythical creatures such as the griffin and the sphinx. The single horn on the snout of both the mythical creature and the rhinoceros was, however, highly coveted for its magical powers. It was believed that horns of this kind could detect the presence of poison and protect against misfortune. The horn was also considered a miracle drug against impotence.

The medieval Islamic conception of a unicorn, like this one, was a winged creature with the paws of a lion, a long tail, and an antelope-like head with a pointed horn. Later another one-horned mythical being was introduced, the Chinese *qilin*. This creature, which was decidedly auspicious, was often depicted as a deer-like or feline animal.