

# Herbal Jars of Syria

There is not much to do in Kuwait apart from shopping and eating. However there are a few gems if one knows where to go. One of these is the Tareq Rajab Museum which houses an extensive private collection of Arab and Islamic art illustrating different aspects of its civilization from the earliest period until the present day. The ceramics are stunning especially the Persian ware. Elsewhere are glass, brass, miniature paintings, costumes, jewellery, musical instruments and weapons. The museum opened to the public in 1980 and escaped looting during the occupation by Iraq as it is housed underground in a residential area and was not discovered. Sadly the National Museum was not so lucky and is still not fully open.

On my most recent visit I noticed a new exhibit of colourful jars and was very interested to read that they were ancient herbal jars. During the middle ages it was the Islamic world that provided numerous kinds of herbs for medicinal purposes, not only to the Islamic world, but also to Europe and to the Far East. The centre of this trade was in Syria where potters manufactured several types of special vessels for storing and transporting the herbs. The earlier types, which had globular bodies and high necks were known and used since pre-historic times. A specific medicinal jar was invented at some time during the 11<sup>th</sup> or early 12<sup>th</sup> century in Syria. This was known as an albarello and had a cylindrical or polygonal body and short neck with a rolled rim. Later on, during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> centuries a new type was introduced, which was modelled on the Chinese Kuan jars. They have the same basic shape but have unusual illustrations, identifying the herb which was stored and transported in them. They appeared on the upper part of the bodies in lobed cartouches or were painted vertically or covered the entire body of the pots. I was reminded of the jars to be found in older pharmacies today.



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