GINGKO
ART SERIES

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IZNIK CERAMICS
AT THE BENAKI MUSEUM

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With
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There is a well-known saying that ‘Every Object Tells a Story’. Like many such adages, it encapsulates a truth, but only partially. An object can tell not one story, but a multitude. How many, and what stories depend first and foremost on us—on the questions we choose to ask. The answers, and ultimately how rich those stories are, rests on the ’generosity’ of the object, the vagaries of its historical circumstances, the availability of documentation, and our powers of enquiry, observation and investigation.

We can question an object from a myriad of perspectives. Let any words such as taxonomy, technology, trade, sociology, economics or, God forbid, style trip merrily off your tongue, and an orchestra of questions on these and any number of other topics will start ringing in your mind. It might be this endlessly rich potential that leads some to regard the traditional museum catalogue as less rewarding—simply put, less rich in their questions and responses—than, for example, a multi-disciplinary study. To some the traditional catalogue seems inert, when an emphasis on description crowds out inferential reasoning. Yet there are values in such catalogues that deserve greater appreciation.

Museum catalogues have customarily offered the opportunity to record objects in fuller detail than other printed contexts. The present catalogue is exemplary in presenting not only views of the front face of dishes and close-up details, but photos of the underside, as well as profile drawings, a combination that has not been systematically provided in previous catalogues of Iznik pottery. John Carswell began his career in the Middle East as an archaeological draughtsman working in Jericho under Kathleen Kenyon, and remained committed to the value of profile drawings, which he produced with an artful combination of accuracy and elegance. The backs of Iznik dishes are often sparsely, even perfunctorily, decorated, and have tended to be ignored by scholars, but, as with Morelli’s earlobes, they can provide clues to groupings and workshops. The value of providing this range of visual information will only be fully appreciated when other catalogues follow the lead provided here, so that thousands of objects can be arrayed and compared. Digital platforms will enable future scholars to coordinate data from multiple collections, once museums become more willing to collaborate. So, a catalogue such as this should be
seen as the harbinger of huge databases that would allow statistical analyses across several variables, and the training of AI to establish groupings, a field still in its infancy. John Carswell would have appreciated the potential, recalling how in the early 1950s, in the era before the personal computer, he had to cut out cards to compare the profile of charts showing chemical data from the analyses of different types of Ottoman ceramics. There is often an unspoken tendency to privilege the period when objects were created and their early history. But objects, particularly those that remained in circulation above ground which is the case with many examples of Iznik pottery, accumulate different stories with the passage of time. What justifies assuming that an object’s initial history is more important than its later history? The Benaki collection of Iznik ceramics is a perfect case in point. The history of the collection is intertwined with not just the identity of an individual collector, but of a family, a community, and even a nation. It reflects above all Alexandros Benaki’s taste and interests, and it is intriguing to read how these came to influence the interests of his elder brother Antonis and the public persona of the museum. The collecting of Iznik ceramics was, however, more broadly shared by other members of Alexandria’s Greek community in the first decades of the twentieth century. This was a topic that fascinated John Carswell: he wrote an article on the skins of the Benaki family connections and collecting and was visibly enthused when elements of the Lagonikos collection came up for sale at Sotheby’s. Mina Moraitou’s essay in this catalogue paints a vivid and more detailed picture of the collecting scene in Alexandria.

What makes the Benaki collection of Iznik ceramics so intriguing compared to the great collections in Paris and London is how it both responded to and, in its modest way, promoted Greek national identity. As Mina has shown, the early association—albeit legendary—of Iznik ceramics with the island of Rhodes engendered a Greek interest and pride that paralleled the way an Armenian component vivified Calouste Gulbenkian’s interest in Ottoman ceramics. Christoforos Nomikos, who was a much-respected scholar in the Alexandrian community, debunked the notion that many of the ceramics were produced in Rhodes, but the growing attribution of the pottery to Iznik, the ancient Nicaea, a city that was so important in the history of Early Christianity and Byzantium, and the presence of Greek inscriptions on some examples served to underscore the sense of a major Greek quotient in the production of Iznik ceramics. In other words, what were for some were decorative, salon objects also had a nationalist resonance at a critical period in the history of Greece—the period of the ‘Great Idea’.

After the establishment of the Benaki Museum, the Iznik collection enjoyed a prominent position in a national institution and provided inspiration for potteries set up by Greeks who had left Kütahya in the 1920s, meeting an intention explicitly stated by the museum’s first director, Theodore Makridi Bey. The collection was not, however, static and later donations have broadened the range of quality, providing a fuller conspectus of Iznik production. John Carswell took particular pleasure in the large group of sherds donated in 1931. They are said to have been found when the foundations were being excavated in 1905 for the great Post Office in Sirkeçi in Istanbul, but understandably there was no precise location, let alone stratigraphy. Nevertheless, these sherds gratified the archaeologist and the draughtsman in John, and of course included many types not otherwise represented in the collection. He would have been delighted to know that the Museum has included sherds in this publication, a lead other museums should follow. By also including the Benaki Museum’s fine collection of tiles, this book serves as a highly welcome source for the study of Iznik ceramics in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Yet it also raises questions about life and aspirations among the elite of the Greek community in Alexandria in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Benakis and their friends and relatives were collecting Ottoman ceramics when this collecting interest was beginning to wane in Europe, but their interests were freighted with potentially more complex associations than many of their counterparts in, for example, the Burlington Fine Arts Club. For this was a time of considerable tension between Greece and Turkey, and there was an Alexandrian community through which ran currents of colonialism, cosmopolitanism, and irredentist Greek nationalism.
1. ANTONIS BENAKIS AND THE FORMATION OF THE IZNIK COLLECTION AT THE BENAKI MUSEUM
MINA MORAITOU
ANTONIS BENAKIS, the founder of the Benaki Museum, was born in Alexandria in 1873 into one of the most important Greek families engaged in the cotton trade. His childhood as a mischievous boy is captured by his sister Penelope Delta in the Greek popular children’s book *Trelantonis* (Crazy Antonis). After completing his high school education at the Rossall School, near Liverpool, he returned to Alexandria to take his place in the family firm Choremis, Benakis & Co. The firm was established in 1875 by the brothers-in-law Emmanuel Benakis and Ioannis Choremis, and was considered the greatest cotton exporter in Egypt, a promoter of Egyptian trade, and a key player in world cotton production with numerous offices in various cities abroad. In the nineteenth century foreigners took advantage of the Capitulations, a system implemented by the Egyptian ruler Muhammad Ali (r. 1805–48), who was seeking to uplift the economy and revive the city as a centre for trade. Greeks, who had been living in Egypt from the nineteenth century, constituted the largest foreign population in Alexandria.

Through their business activities, the Benakis family acquired considerable wealth and held an important position in the city. Members of the family sponsored a number of philanthropic institutions such as hospitals, schools and orphanages, and kept Greek traditions alive. They maintained close ties with the homeland and had, as all Greeks did, a strong sense of Greek identity. In a time of irredentist ideas, Antonis contributed to Greece’s struggle to expand its borders by pushing away neighbouring states. He took part in the Greek–Turkish conflict of 1897, financially supported the Macedonian Struggle, and with his brother Alexandros voluntarily joined the Greek army during the Balkan Wars in 1912–13.

Antonis Benakis was a man of many interests: he was an ardent supporter of scouting, loved sailing, played polo and was a car enthusiast. He was impeccably dressed. But he is best known for his passion for the arts and especially for collecting, something that he shared with his siblings: Penelope Delta was a famous writer, Alexandra Choremis, Alexandros Benakis and the beautiful...
To understand the significance of the Benaki Museum collection of Iznik ceramics it is necessary to situate it in the general history of the pottery manufacture of this city. The parts of the collection—the whole vessels, the tiles and the sherds—illustrate different patterns of evolution at Iznik and complement each other.

It is evident that the emergence of Iznik as a major pottery manufacturing site was directly connected to the swift expansion of the Ottoman Empire after the conquest of Constantinople in 1453 and the creation of Istanbul as the third and ultimate capital of the Ottoman Turks. Building on the foundations of the ancient city, Mehmed the Conqueror (r. 1451–81) exploited the military benefit of its strategic situation, poised between Asia and Europe and commanding access to both the Balkans and Anatolia, but also its psychological advantages. When he began to build the palace at Topkapı Sarayı he could hardly have demonstrated a more effective sign of his power. Whilst retaining an emotional attachment to Bursa as the cradle of the dynasty, and an affection for Edirne, the second capital on the European mainland, like successive Ottoman Sultans he realised that Istanbul was destined to become the epicentre of the empire, a position it retained for the next 450 years. Only the establishment of the new republic in 1923 and the transfer of the capital to Ankara could affect its primacy, and in many ways, it still retains its importance as the intellectual and artistic powerhouse of modern Turkey.

If Istanbul was so important, why was the ceramic industry so far away from the capital? Iznik is, after all, almost a hundred kilometres to the south-east, across the Sea of Marmara, and not easily accessible from Istanbul. The answer is both complex and also quite simple. First of all, Istanbul did have a tile industry in the early sixteenth century, producing tiles for the decoration of the Sünnet Odası (circumcision kiosk) and adjacent structures in the palace at Topkapı Sarayı; secondly, for the first half of the sixteenth century, Iznik was essentially fabricating glazed vessels, rather than tiles. Finally, there was an already well-established tradition for ceramic manufacture within the empire from the early fifteenth century, for the production of tiles...
At Bursa, such as those in the Yeşil Cami and Yeşil Türbe, built c. 1453–57 and subsequently at Edirne, such as those in the Murad II mosque, datable to c. 1457. Here, evolving technology played an important part. The tiles at Bursa were made in the cuerda seca technique (literally ‘dry cord’) where the coloured glazes were outlined with a black pigment. Whilst this was a faster method of tile production than tile mosaic (that is, individual parts of the design cut from single glazed tiles and fitted together as a mosaic set into a plaster bed) it was in turn superseded by a more sophisticated method in which the whole polychrome design was painted under a single transparent glaze, a technique that necessitated stable pigments that did not diffuse during the kiln firing. Cuerda seca was a specifically Persian technique that appears to have evolved at Tabriz: many tiles where the craftsmen are identified by name bear the nisba (name indicating place of origin) ‘al-Tabrizi’. The technique has been in continuous use in Iran up to the present day, and was also widely practised in Central Asia in the Timurid period. Indeed, whenever cuerda seca tiles are present one can almost be certain that they were the work of Persian craftsmen.

The underglaze technique was also used concurrently in Persia, but for the decoration of glazed white stonepaste wares rather than tiles. The ingredients and method for making this type of siliceous body are described in a treatise by Abu’l Qasim Kashani written in 700/1300–1. Its first appearance in Turkey was at Edirne, where the cuerda seca moulded tiles on the mihrab of the Murad II mosque and zaviye (monastery) of 1426 are supplemented by tiles decorated in underglaze cobalt blue and turquoise, and the dozens of hexagonal tiles lining three walls of the building are entirely painted in underglaze colours. It is tempting to imagine that these potters and their successors then moved on to Istanbul and finally settled at Iznik, but technical analysis has proved that this was unlikely.

The industry at Iznik appears to have been an entirely independent initiative. The city had already been a centre for the manufacture of lead-glazed sgraffito, underglaze and slip-decorated pottery, like the ‘Miletus ware’ produced elsewhere in Anatolia in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. The difference was in the reddish earthenware body, quite different from Abu’l Qasim’s recipe for white stonepaste. When pottery decorated in underglaze cobalt blue began to be manufactured at Iznik towards the end of the fifteenth century, it was on a white body, using a source of white clay not far from the town. Iznik’s other assets, apart from the established pottery tradition, included the ready supply of fresh water, wood for firing and the necessary minerals, all available close at hand. The disadvantage was its distance from the capital, but when the industry was initially concerned with the production of vessels these could be transported carried across the hills by pack-animals to the little port of Karamorsel, and then shipped with ease across the Sea of Marmara to the capital. Indeed, there are documents referring to the shortfall of tiles during this period and demanding that the potters concentrate their energies on fulfilling imperial commands.

The pottery and tiles made in Iznik were composed of silica, finely ground lead-rich glass (frit)
round petals links up with a similar feature on the early Iznik ware. This particular dish thus sums up what was to come. Whilst it is easy to trace its debt to Chinese porcelain, it represents an amalgam of technical and decorative features without restraining its own internal dynamics.

We are thus faced with an extremely eclectic situation at Iznik in the early sixteenth century, with a technology deriving from various sources and designs from east and west alike, at least initially governed by the prevailing aesthetic of the nakkaşhane. But the genius of the Iznik potters was to extract themselves from all these influences and evolve something completely novel. In this they may be compared to the artists and architects of the early Islamic period, who managed to absorb and amalgamate influences from a wide variety of sources. Something similar happened during the Mamluk period in Syria and Egypt, and it is not difficult to claim that one of the prevailing characteristics of the arts of the Islamic world over the past 1400 years has been to effectively mutate, responding to political and economic events, whilst still retaining an essential component.

What is this characteristic? It might be defined as a strong sense of pattern inspired by the extension of simple geometric forms to the point of infinity, the use of floral and other natural motifs and the development of the arabesque, and the inspiration of calligraphy and iconic use of the Holy Qur’an (nor should one forget the human and animal world). Looking carefully, all of these are important components of the design of Iznik pottery, which is far removed from being simply decorative serving ware for the Ottoman court.

It can be claimed that Iznik reached its zenith by the middle of the sixteenth century, towards the close of Sultan Süleyman’s reign (r. 1520–66). The colour-scheme had been extended to include, besides cobalt blue and turquoise, subtle shades of olive green, grey and purple. Technically the wares were flawless, and achieved a new dimension in scale. Two figures are significant: the supreme Ottoman architect Sinan (d. 1588) and the greatest of all Turkish calligraphers, Ahmed Karahisari (d. 1566). At Iznik, there was a catalyst, and we even know his name from one signed work. This was Musli, who made the famous hanging lamp for the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem in 1549 and also the spherical ornament suspended above it (cat. no. 7).

Something similar happened during the Mamluk period in Syria and Egypt, and it is not difficult to claim that one of the prevailing characteristics of the arts of the Islamic world over the past 1400 years has been to effectively mutate, responding to political and economic events, whilst still retaining an essential component. For instance, the extraordinarily elegant tile panels in the Hadim Ibrahim Pasha mosque in Istanbul designed by Sinan in 1551, have elements which suggest they were the work of Musli. There are also at least a dozen vessels which bear the imprint of his style (including cat. no. 8), and the two tiled inscriptions above the north and south porches of the Dome of the Rock can also be linked to him in their details.

The dish (cat. no. 8) is painted under a clear and well controlled transparent glaze with shades of cobalt blue and turquoise, and is technically flawless. By the 1550s when it was produced, the Iznik potters had completely mastered the manufacture of such dishes. The bottom of the foot ring was left unglazed to support it in the kiln, and any surplus glaze that might have trickled down was ground off after firing; the glaze and slip coming right down to the edge of the foot. One unusual feature which is found on this and two other dishes (cat. nos. 6 and 9) is a mark at the centre of the base which suggests the use of a
Dish

Iznik, c. 1580
Buff-coloured body, white slip, decorated in underglaze cobalt blue, viridian green and dark relief red, with greyish-black outlines.
Diameter 29.4 cm, height 6.3 cm, cracked, chipped and with a pitted glaze; unglazed bottom of foot ring with one suspension hole
Inv. no. 14, in red on the base

The rim is decorated with a debased pattern of breaking waves and spirals. In the centre are two curving serrated laurel leaves with dark red spines, springing from a clasp. Hanging between them is a pointed floral medallion with smaller leafy motifs. The design is on a ground of overlapping blue and green scales. The back is decorated with six circles and trefoil sprigs.

Donated by Emmanuel Benakis. From the collection of Alexandros Benakis, acquired in Alexandria from Tawa in 1920.

Migeon, Exposition d’art musulman, catalogue no. 36.
DISH

Iznik, c. 1600
Buff coloured body, white slip, decorated in
underglaze cobalt blue, viridian green and relief red,
with brownish-black outlines
Diameter 35.3 cm, height 5.9 cm; rim abraded, chipped
on the back, unglazed bottom of foot ring with one
suspension hole
Inv. no. 35, in red on the base

Benaki Museum No. 35

The rim has a stylised design of breaking waves
inside single and double rings.

In the centre there is a large three-masted sailing
ship with bowsprit and rounded stern with a
rudder. In the sea, three fish swim vigorously to
the right. A mask-like shield projects from
the front of the boat. On the exterior, there are six
stylised flowers.

Sailing ships on Iznik pottery are basically of
two types, the European vessel with square sails,
sometimes with a triangular sail at the stern,
as here, and Arab ships with a distinctive large
triangular latus sail as on the four previous
examples. Both were familiar in the Indian Ocean,
and an English engraving of Lisbon in 1672 shows
both types in the harbour. 145

Donated by Emmanuel Benakis. From the
collection of Alexandros Benakis, acquired from
Matossian pre-1922. Previously in the A. Imbert
collection, Rome.