

Middle-eastern pottery in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



1. Some of the display cases of 16th century Iznik pottery in the Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon. Photo: the author.

There are many examples of museums housing the collections of a single collector: Augustus, the Strong's in Der Zwingler in Dresden, J. Paul Getty's in The Getty in Los Angeles, Sir Richard Wallace's in the Wallace Collection in London, and Baron Ferdinand de Rothschild's in Waddesdon Manor in Buckinghamshire are outstanding examples. The Calouste Gulbenkian Museum in Lisbon (1), housing the personal collection of its namesake, is most definitely in that league.

In this short paper, a number of ceramic pieces have been selected not only for their outstanding quality of design, but also for the timeless quality of them. To choose just a few pieces from this extraordinary collection is a daunting challenge, given the high quality of the objects throughout this collection.



2. Calouste Gulbenkian in 1900

Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian (2) was born to Armenian parents in Constantinople (now Istanbul) in 1869. He was an oil magnate and philanthropist, who became a British citizen in 1902, studied at Kings College, London, and died in Lisbon in 1955. He is buried in the St. Sarkis Armenian Church in London, a church built with his funding in memory of his parents. In his busy and most successful life, he managed to amass an outstanding collection of art objects covering Egyptian art, Greco-Roman art, Mesopotamia, The Islamic Orient, Armenia, the Far East, Western sculpture and paintings, 18th century French decorative arts and works, and jewellery, by René Lalique purchased from the artist. His Lalique collection is considered to be unique in the world for its quality and quantity.

Pottery production at Iznik, a town in the north west of Turkey, has a history dating back to the 7th century B.C. From the late 15th century to the end of the 16th century, the pottery produced there thrived under the patronage of the Ottoman court, which guaranteed commissions of high-quality pieces.¹ Iznik potters were heavily influenced by the high quality porcelain wares from China, and, like potters in Western Europe, tried to emulate the fine quality and designs of the Chinese, whilst also developing designs more in keeping with the demands of their court masters, thus incorporating arabesque elements. The high point in this development culminated in third quarter of the 16th century, after which both the quality of design and manufacture no longer emulated what had gone before.

The first piece chosen for this paper is a large footed bowl or basin made c.1510 in the typical underglaze-painted fritware. It is painted purely in cobalt blue – typical of early Iznik wares, but the decoration stylistically owes much to Chinese Ming porcelain. (3)



3a. Iznik underglaze-painted fritware, diameter 42 cm, height 22 cm, c.1510, side view. Photo: the author.



3b. Iznik underglaze-painted fritware as in **3a.** above, top view. Photo: the author.

The group of dishes in (4) is from the mid-16th century and demonstrates the great variety in the decorative style of that period with the addition of turquoise and green to blue of the earlier pieces. These designs represent plants only, but in imaginative and intricately balanced designs, reflecting the delicacy and restraint of Islamic art of the Ottoman dynasty.



4. Iznik underglaze-painted fritware dishes of the mid-16th century. Photo: the author.

In the third quarter of the 16th century, animals, both real and fantastical, appear in Iznik decoration on their pottery on major pieces. Though some animal decoration was used on lesser pieces such as flasks, tankards and cups earlier in the century, the popularity of these additions to decoration increased significantly later. Some late 16th century dishes were decorated with designs incorporating plant and animal forms arranged in symmetrical geometric arrangements, extending the variety of earlier pieces to an extraordinary degree. (5a) This tour-de-force piece uses a relatively subdued palette of cobalt blue, green and white in a dazzling design of plant, animal (birds), border, reserve and geometric elements. A rather alarming aspect of this piece's presentation in the museum is that it hangs in an old metal hanging clamp much frowned upon by curators and collectors today. (5b)

The jug with engraved and embossed silver mounts (6) was made at the very end of the 16th century, when the golden age of Iznik production had passed. Nevertheless, this piece was held in sufficient high regard to have the European mounts made for it in the period of its manufacture.²

Tiles were also made throughout the golden age of Iznik manufacture, and just one example is included here. (7) This extraordinary panel includes all the already discussed elements of these wares, but here in wall tiles also in underglaze-painted fritware.

Syria has been in the news over the past nine years due to the catastrophic civil war there, but that country has a long and important history in the decorative arts. In coastal north-west Syria, the craft of handmade glass objects goes back some 4,000 years. Their ceramic production goes back to Neolithic times. It is tragic therefore to see on our television screens the ancient city of Raqqa reduced to rubble,



5a. Iznik underglaze-painted fritware dish of the late 16th century. Photo: the author.



5b. Iznik dish in image 5 above, showing its metal hanging clamp. Photo: the author.



6. Iznik jug, underglaze-painted fritware, c.1590-16, H. 20 cm. With engraved and embossed silver mounts. Photo: the author.



7. Iznik panel of glazed tiles in the form of a tympanum, c.1573, 172 x 77.5 cm. Photo: the author.

when Raqqa ware, (8) as it is often called, is still greatly admired and treasured in the world's major collections. The final piece presented here is a vase and cover dating to the late 12th century. (9) This piece shows the typical features of Raqqa ware, with inscriptions and pseudo-inscriptions combined with plant motifs. The dark brown lustre painting is also typical of work from this centre, which did not survive the Mongol invasions in 1259.³



8. Syria, Raqqa, brown lustre ware, late 12th century. Photo: the author.



9. Syria, Raqqa, late 12th century, brown lustre-ware vase and cover, H. 26 cm, D. 27.7 cm. Photo: the author.

In conclusion, this great museum has so much more than the ceramics chosen. The images that follow give a brief glimpse of the treasures that await the visitor to this great city and this wonderful museum. (10, 11, 12)



10. Chinese porcelain gallery. Photo: the author.



11. French 18th-century fine and decorative arts gallery. Photo: the author.



12. Calouste Gulbenkian Museum entrance. ©Calouste Gulbenkian Museum.

Patrick Hagglund, December 2020

References

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- ¹ Queiroz Ribeiro, Maria, *Iznik pottery and tiles in the Calouste Gulbenkian Collection* (Lisbon: Scala, 2009), p.15.
 - ² Queiroz Ribeiro, *Iznik pottery*, p.94.
 - ³ Carvalho Dias, J (ed.), *Calouste Gulbenkian Museum Guide* (Lisbon: AGIR, 2016), p.51.