Μια συλλογή κινεζικής κεραμικής στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη

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Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

**THE EIGHT HUNDRED** Chinese ceramics, donated to the Benaki Museum by the Greek-born British businessman George Eumorfopoulos (fig. 1), are the most exotic among the Museum’s wide-ranging collections. They are little known and have remained in storage for more than a decade despite being the largest collection of Far Eastern works of art in Greece. This article introduces an ongoing research project into their history and heralds their study and re-display.

Silks, metalwork, sculpture and lacquerware from China have been collected for millennia in Asia, the Islamic world and Europe. However, it was ceramics above all that fascinated those who could afford it. Overland and sea trade routes had been taking hardwearing vessels from Chinese kiln sites to the Mediterranean and Africa since the first millennium AD. The opening up of global networks by European seafarers during the sixteenth century even brought them to Mexico, Brazil and the western coast of North America. Distant markets appreciated their light weight, translucent body and attractive glazes.

Customers in these remote destinations inventively adapted Chinese pots, often fitting them with mounts and using them for novel purposes (fig. 2). Gradually, foreign buyers were able to commission specially-made items, the so-called ‘export’ wares. These hybrids blended Chinese, Japanese, South East Asian, Indian, Islamic, European and American shapes and decorative motifs/decoration (figs 3 and 4). Foreign demand and the business acumen of Chinese potters resulted in a specialized industrial production. By the Song period (960-1279) up to 100,000 pots could be accommodated at a single firing in one kiln. The superior quality and extensive production of Chinese pottery items prompted one of the longest-lasting collecting traditions both in and outside China.

By the time George Eumorfopoulos (18 April 1863 - 19 December 1939) started collecting Oriental art in the 1890s, there were already enormous collections of Chinese ceramics in England accumulated through centuries of trade. Underglaze blue and polychrome enamelled ‘export’ porcelains with vegetal decoration or scenes from classical Chinese stories appeared evocative to Western eyes (fig. 5). In the late Victorian period, a fashion for Kangxi (1661-1722) blue and white porcelains increased the demand and the prices paid for them (fig. 6). It was championed by the painter James Abbott MacNeill Whistler (1834-1903) and conformed to ‘aesthetic’ ideals. In France, Second Empire and Belle Époque decoration opted for ornate bronzes, intricate lacquers and Chinese vases with strong colours and gilding. Eumorfopoulos, a Liverpool-born and London-bred trader whose parents came from Chios, followed these fashions in his early purchases. He also favoured eighteenth-century European porcelain and early Islamic glass and metalwork, similarly popular with Orientalist aesthetes. But he soon diversified into a fresh collecting field, encouraged by lower prices and circumstances thousands of miles away.

During the first years of the twentieth century a network of train lines was being built in China around the capital Peking (Beijing). Excavations for the railway brought to light thousands of tombs furnished with suites of terracotta human figures; models of animals and buildings as well as vessels were unearthed beside them (figs 7, 8). These trap-
pings would accompany the high-ranking deceased to the afterlife. Similar items had been found in China before, but owning tomb wares was (and remains) taboo for the Chinese. However, foreign employees of railway companies had no such qualms and the items quickly found their way into the European art market. Eumorfopoulos must have been one of the first to realize their aesthetic merits back in 1906. When the Burlington Fine Arts Club organized the first exhibition of early Chinese ceramics in particular (fig. 9) combined sensuous surfaces, sophisticated manufacture and the imprint of the potter’s hand, qualities appreciated by artist potters. Such wares were the polar diametrically opposite of industrial British kiln production. They evoked the simplicity and honesty of medieval craftspeople and accorded well with modern sensibilities (fig. 10).

This mixture of contemporary and antique art objects, selected for their aesthetic appeal and exhibited within a modern setting, is exemplified in a set of photographs of interiors from Eumorfopoulos’ house. By 1934, his spacious residence and the mews annexe behind it housed one of the largest Chinese art collections ever amassed. His eclectic style married a late Victorian structure with mock-Georgian ornamentation, Renaissance and eighteenth-century French and English antiques, Art Deco display cases and Oriental artefacts (fig. 11). His interest in ceramic tomb goods from the Han (206 BC-AD 220) and Tang (618-907) periods had expanded to include ceramic, metal, silk, stone and lacquer items from all epochs. The collection satisfied an appetite stimulated by his ‘eye’ for beauty. Chinese paintings hanging alongside medieval tapestries in front of contemporary sculptures by Barbara Hepworth (1903-1975) and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska (1891-1915) bear testimony to a well-heeled bohemian worldview. His omnivorous encyclopaedism was impervious to collecting traditions and the social norms dictating them (fig. 12).

While Eumorfopoulos was combing the docks of London in search of vases, another collector was following an alternative path to a smaller but more select collection. Sir Percival David (1892-1964) belonged to an eminent family of Jewish bankers in colonial India originating from Baghdad. Highly educated and with considerable funds and time at his disposal, he became fluent in classical Chinese, visited China several times and wrote many essays.5
Fig. 2. Porcelain cup with moulded animal and vegetal decoration. Made in the region of Dehua, Fujian province, southeastern China, during the 17th century.
Fitted with a gilt metal handle, lip and foot in Europe during the 18th century, height 8.5 cm.
Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2577.
The function of the cup as a libation vessel for a domestic altar or a wine cup was changed into a tea or chocolate cup with the fitting of a handle. Many copies of similar plain white vessels were produced in Europe during the 18th century, named *blanc de Chine* (‘China white’).

Fig. 3. Porcelain censer with underglaze blue and overglaze enamel vegetal decoration and Arabic inscriptions within medallions. Made in Jingdezhen town, Jiangxi province, southern China, in the 16th century (Ming dynasty), height 9.5 cm.
Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2589.
This censer bears Arabic inscriptions within a purely Chinese decorative scheme on a Chinese-shaped vessel. It was probably commissioned by Middle Eastern clients or Muslims living in China. Arabic calligraphy is commonly found on palace orders for the court of the Zhengde emperor (1491-1521, reigned 1505-1521), a Muslim sympathizer and possible convert to Islam.

Fig. 4. Porcelain cup with overglaze enamel decoration of cartouches and C-scrolls around the rim and an armorial device. Made in Jingdezhen town, Jiangxi province, southern China, during the reign of the Qianlong emperor (1711-1799, reigned 1735-1796), height 7 cm.
Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2887.
The sinuous profile of this cup is inspired by 18th-century European silverware, the decoration features rococo scrolls and the front is branded with the coat of arms of some noble European family. The stylistic features entirely deny its Chinese provenance. Large quantities of porcelain continued to be commissioned from China after the secret of its manufacture was discovered in the West. The high quality and low cost made these pieces competitive in comparison with the output of European kilns.

Fig. 5. Porcelain scroll stand with overglaze enamel decoration of men reclining under trees. Made in Jingdezhen town, Jiangxi province, southern China, during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1654-1722, reigned 1661-1722), length 26.5 cm.
Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2719.
His collection consisted of ceramics covering a small time span (tenth to eighteenth century) and tried to emulate the taste of the eighteenth-century Qianlong emperor (1711-1799, reigned 1735-1796). David favoured specific wares and shapes and avoided, even excluded, anything outside the imperial canon. He insisted on sparsely decorated Song stonewares (figs 9, 13), Yuan (1271-1368) and Ming blue and white (fig. 14), Qing enamelled porcelains of superior quality (1644-1911) and monochromes (fig. 15). The canon excluded earthenware and other materials. The few magnificent paintings and early printed books simply

Fig. 6. Porcelain hookah base with underglaze cobalt blue painted decoration. Made in Jingdezhen town, Jiangxi province, south China during the reign of the Kangxi emperor (1654-1722, reigned 1661-1722), height 38 cm. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2682. This bottle was originally fitted with a metal device to enable its use as a water pipe (hookah). The shape copies hookahs produced in Mughal India during the 17th century and it was probably made for export to this part of the world. However, the decoration is purely Chinese in technique and subject matter.

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Fig. 7. Glazed terracotta figurine of a camel. Made in the Henan or Shaanxi provinces, central China, during the Sui (581-618) or early Tang (618-906) dynasties, height 35.5 cm, length 33.5 cm. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2186.

This figurine is probably one of the earliest Chinese archaeological items to reach Europe, possibly between 1906 and 1910. The trade in excavated artefacts started in 1906 and Eumorfopoulos was the first to collect them on a large scale. This is one of the earliest Chinese burial models ever to be collected anywhere, since these tomb offerings were not considered auspicious in their homeland. Like most animal statuettes, its legs have been broken, perhaps by the gravediggers themselves, to facilitate packing and export.

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complemented the ceramics at the heart of his collection. This collection was donated in 1950 to the University of London and was known as the ‘Percival David Foundation’ until its recent closure. Sir Percival David and George Eumorfopoulos were the two individuals who promoted more than any other the practice of collecting Chinese art in twentieth century Europe. They were both of foreign extraction and, albeit affluent, were not part of the upper classes in the rigid class structure of early twentieth century Britain. For the meticulous and scholarly Jew collecting fulfilled the urge to explore and organize the mysterious universe that was China. For the passionate and entrepreneurial Greek collecting satisfied his personal aspirations and longing for beauty. He probably followed a pattern established by the Ionides family of Constantinopolitan Greeks. Alexander Constantine Ionides (1810-1890) and his extended family were enthusiastic art lovers. They had gained fame (and even notoriety) in Victorian England through their lavish spending, socializing and dallying with avant-garde artists. This association resulted in the creation by Alexander Alexander Ionides (known as ‘Aleco’, 1840-1898) of a ‘palace of art’ at Holland Park, near the house of the most established painter of the time Frederic Lord Leighton (1830-1896) and other Royal Academicians.

Similarly, Eumorfopoulos moved in 1922 to 7 Chelsea Embankment, at the heart of an elegant artistic neighbourhood where Whistler, Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) and Dante Gabriel Charles Rossetti (1828-1882) had lived. The Ionides family had purchased what they considered the highest contemporary art form, painting, and donated the fruits of their collecting to the Victoria and Albert Museum in 1901. Eumorfopoulos and David donated to the Benaki Museum and University of London respectively.

Fig. 8. Glazed earthenware tripod vessel. Made in the Henan province, central China, during the Tang dynasty (618-906), height 16.5 cm. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2242.

Despite the simplicity of its shape and monochrome decoration, this vessel is generously covered in a cobalt-rich glaze. Cobalt, a mineral pigment that fired a deep blue colour, was imported during the Tang dynasty from Central Asia and was expensive. Consequently, it was only used for the best quality wares. The individual accompanied by such luxurious burial gifts must have enjoyed an elevated status.

Fig. 9. Glazed stoneware tripod censer. Made in the Longquan kilns, Zhejiang province, southeast China, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), height 7.5 cm. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2388.

The subdued colour and soft lustre of this vessel epitomize the aesthetic appeal of Song dynasty monochrome ceramics. Thickly applied on a dark body, the glaze appears deep and glossy. Such wares enjoyed a great reputation in both China and Japan from early times. The metallic areas on the foot and rim are gold lacquer repairs made while the item was in a Japanese collection. Such treatment was only reserved for the most valuable of ceramics.
what to their generation was the essence of Chinese art, ceramics.7

The predominance of ceramics among other arts and the long European tradition of collecting porcelain encouraged Eumorfopoulos to create a teaching collection initially of 104 pots. They encompassed the breadth of Chinese ceramic traditions from the Bronze Age to the eighteenth century and were first loaned to the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. They later formed the nucleus of his donation to the Greek nation, 341 items that reached Piraeus on 4th May 1929. He had approached Antonis Benakis (1873-1954) to act as intermediary and arrange an exhibition venue. Benakis suggested their inclusion in the museum he founded in memory of his father Emmanuel (1843-1929) in 1930. After Eumorfopoulos had sold the bulk of his collection to the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert in 1934 because of the economic recession, he presented another 452 pieces to the Benaki (May 1936). He also commissioned, shipped and paid for the mahogany display cases. Finally, he arranged for Leigh Ashton (1897-1983), a keeper at the Victoria and Albert Museum, to compile a catalogue in English. His entries were based on the six-volume publication of Eumorfopoulos’ ceramic collection.8

An analysis of the donation as catalogued by Ashton reveals the discrepancies between the aesthetic preferences of the private collector and the educational priorities of a
museum institution. Eumorfopoulos intended his eight-hundred-strong ceramic group to educate the Greek public. Therefore he made some surprising choices, given his modernist ideals and partiality for early Chinese pottery. Densely decorated, exotic and representational Qing pieces, considered derivative by his generation, represent nearly 40% of the collection. Tang ceramics represent 12.8%, Song 19.57% and Ming 18.8%. A study of the remainder of his private collection, as auctioned in 1940 after his death, reveals that when he followed his ‘eye’ and personal taste, the choices were different: Tang 9.75%, Song 23.60%, Ming 31.43% and Qing 29.34%. ‘Degenerate’ products of the last dynasty were closer to the European stereotypes of China which had not been updated along with aesthetics.

Fig. 13. Glazed stoneware dish with incised and carved decoration. Made in the Ding kilns, Hebei province, Northern China, during the Song dynasty (960-1279), diameter 22 cm. Athens, Benaki Museum, inv. no. 2372.

The decoration on this dish was carved and incised on the stoneware body. The vessel was then dipped in a fine glaze that fired an ivory-white colour. The delicacy of the resulting product anticipated the translucency of porcelain. The output of the Ding kilns was elevated to legendary status within the Chinese collecting tradition that Sir Percival David emulated.
If the public was to be introduced to an alien culture, strong colours and lively images had to predominate.10

An earlier attempt at donation by Eumorfopoulos to Greece adds a further dimension to his gesture. It is documented in a letter from the painter Nikolaos Hadjikyriakos-Ghika (1906-1994) to his friend Angelos Katakouzenos (1904-1982): “It was Eumorfopoulos who suggested donating his entire collection to Greece if they only built an appropriate museum. But Plastiras, in the name of Greece, declined”.11 Nikolaos Plastiras (1883-1953) could only have given his negative answer while in office (i.e. from late 1922 to December 1923). Only months earlier, Eumorfopoulos had founded the Oriental Ceramic Society, an institution dedicated to the promotion of Chinese studies in England.12 However, he was eager to donate all his treasures to a country he first visited on the occasion of the Benaki Museum’s inauguration nine years later. Tellingly, he offered Greece a second helping of vases once he had sold the remainder of his collection to the British state for £100,000.

This generosity testifies to the idealistic veneration of an expatriate Greek for a homeland he only knew from a distance. He had been educated at the London Greek College and remained an active member of the Greek community in the British capital. He worked in the trading firm of Ralli Brothers, originating in Constantinople, and served as a churchwarden in the Greek Orthodox Cathedral of Saint Sophia in 1891 and 1919. The somewhat antiquated Greek he used in his correspondence with Benakis is flawless and his library included several books on Greek art, although his collection excluded it.13 This evidence explains the nostalgia evident in the 1922 gesture, meaningfully coinciding with the implosion of Hellenism after the Asia
A collection of Chinese ceramics at the Benaki Museum

Minor catastrophe. The second, more successful, attempt to donate took shape in 1928, the year of Eleutherios Venizelos’ (1862-1936) return to power. Eumorfopoulos admitted how very pleased he was that his collection would arrive in Athens under a Venizelan government. Venizelos in his turn was ‘enthusiastic’ and promised to do “all he could to display it as it should [be displayed].”

His awareness of Greek culture and current affairs confirms Eumorfopoulos’ philhellenic romanticism. His contribution materialized as works of art, just as the Ionides’ gifts eighty years earlier had taken the form of schools and hospitals. By the 1920s the young state was considered mature enough to appreciate the value of art (even foreign art) to educating the people. The donation fitted well with the vision of a progressive Greece crystallised in Venizelos’ policies, the Benaki Museum and the ideology of the ‘Generation of the Thirties’ group of artists and intellectuals. By accepting his generous offer, the enlightened political and cultural leadership of his Greek homeland endorsed the gentle London businessman’s claim to posterity.

Museum objects can be viewed within multiple contexts: creation, consumption at the time of manufacture, resale and collecting and eventual public display. This article has delved into the historiography of the Eumorfopoulos donation to the Benaki Museum. It has also examined a few objects in the light of twentieth-century European collecting and Greek politics. These are only two of the contexts within which the ceramics can be read. However, they are the contexts that resulted in this collection being offered to the Athenian museum. If the idiosyncrasies of the collection are to be understood, the motives and circumstances of its assembling have to be appreciated. The personality, tastes and ideas of Eumorfopoulos shaped this chapter in the story of the eight hundred pots. When redisplayed, they will carry the mark of his choice as they now bear the fingerprints of the potter who fashioned them.

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Notes


5. Eumorfopoulos wrote scholarly essays as well: G. Eumorfopoulos, Ying Ch’ing, Ju and Ch’ai Yao, Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society (1922-1923) 24-28; idem, Han and Chou Pottery, Artibus Asiae 1 (1925) 202-09; idem, Glazed Pottery of the Han Dynasty, Artibus Asiae 2 (1927) 140; idem, A Bowl in Stockholm (Note on Coloured Plate), Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society (1931-1932) 10-12; idem, Descriptions of Specimens: IV – Lacquer Toilet Box, Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society 15 (1937-1938) 12. However, he had no knowledge of the Chinese language and limited himself to small-scale contributions.


12. George Eumorfopoulos was a founding member and lifelong President of the Oriental Ceramic Society. The Society is still based in London but has a worldwide membership. It presents monthly lectures on Oriental art, organizes catalogued exhibitions with items drawn from members' collections and publishes the Transactions of the Oriental Ceramic Society. For more information on the work of the O.C.S. and membership: www.osc-london.com.


ΠΙΩΡΘΗΣ ΜΑΓΓΙΝΗΣ
Μια συλλογή κινεζικής κεραμικής στο Μουσείο Μπενάκη

Η συλλογή κινεζικής κεραμικής του Μουσείου Μπενάκη δορύθηκε ανάμεσα στα έτη 1927 και 1936 από τον χαιρετισμό και καταγγελία του Βρετανού ευχαρίστηση Γεώργιο Ευμορφόπουλο (1863-1939) (εικ. 1). Αποτελεί ένα από τα πρωτότυπα σύνολα αποανατολικής κεραμικής που αποθηκεύονται με σκοπό την έκθεσή τους σε μουσείο και αντιπροσωπεύει ό,τι για τους μελετητές της μεσοπολεμικής Διάστημας καραμπέρα την τέχνη της Κίνας. Περιλαμβάνει αποκλειστικά έργα κεραμικής, της δημοφιλέστερης έκφρασης της κινεζικής καλλιτεχνικής παραγωγής. Η γενιά του Ευμορφόπουλου εστάθη στις πρώιμες περιόδους της κινεζικής τέχνης, αναγνωρίζοντας στα τεχνογνώματα τους τις αισθητικές αρχές που επένευσαν τις ανακάλυψες πρωτοπόρων καλλιτεχνών του πρώμον 20ου αιώνα: αξιόπιστη γραμμή, απλήτη διακόσμηση, αισθητικές ευμαθίας, πεθεριμένα "ημετέλες" αποτέλεσμα (εικ. 7-10, 13). Μολονότι τα χαρακτηριστικά αυτά απαντούν στη συλλογή του Μουσείου Μπενάκη, η πλούσια σύγκλητων του αντικειμένων φαίνεται πως συνάδει με στρατηγική του 19ου αιώνα, εμμένοντας σε στοιχεία με αντικειμένα με "εξωτική" θεματολογία (εικ. 3-6). Η επιλογή αυτή παραλείπεται υποδεικνύτηκε από τον παρευρέων ρόλο της συλλογής. Παρά ταύτα, ο Ευμορφόπουλος ήταν πρωτοπόρος στις αποκαλύψεις των πρωτοπόρων της συλλογής του, εμπνευσμένος από ευρύτερους αντικειμένες από συγχρόνους του ακαδημαϊκούς συλλέκτες, όπως ο Sir Percival David. Η εγκυκλοπαίδευτη και αισθητική προσέγγιση στην ευρύτερη συλλογή της συλλογής του, εμπνευσμένος από γνώσεις της ιστορικής τέχνης, ευρωπαϊκές αντίκες και αποανατολικά και ισλαμικά τεχνογνώματα (εικ. 11, 12). Ο φιλελληνισμός του προσέγγισε εκείνον των Ελλήνων συλλεκτών της φύσης Βρετανίας, όπως ο Στέφανος Λινάτος, εκείνης όμως επέλεξαν να προσφέρουν εκπαιδευτικά ιδρύματα.
και νοσοκομεία, παρά έργα τέχνης στο νέο κράτος. Ο Ευμωρφόπουλος, εντερνιζόμενος τις αντιλήψεις μιας νέας εποχής, προσέφερε άλλη την εντυπωσιακή συλλογή του στο ελληνικό κράτος κατά τη ημερομηνία 1922-1923, μια δωρεά που αγνοήθηκε από την κυβέρνηση Νικόλαου Πλαστήρα. Ύστερα από πέντε χρόνια, μια ευτυχεστερή συγκυρία έφερε κοντά τον Βρετανό συλλέκτη με τον Αντόνι Μπενκ και τον Ελευθέριο Βενιζέλο ως πολιτικό αποδέκτη μιας νέας, μικρότερης δωρεάς. Το ενθουσιώδες καλοσφυγμα της οφείλεται στην επιρροή της "γενιάς του '30" που ευαγγελίζονταν την οικουμενικότητα, την πνευματικότητα και την προοδευτικότητα της νέας Ελλάδας μετά το τραύμα της μικρασιατικής καταστροφής. Συμπερασματικά, η συλλογή Ευμωρφόπουλου αποτύπωσε με ενάργεια όχι μόνο την ιστορία της κινεζικής κεραμικής, αλλά και τις ιστορικές πραγματικότητες της Βρετανίας και της Ελλάδας την εποχή κατά την οποία συγκεντρώθηκε και δωρήθηκε.