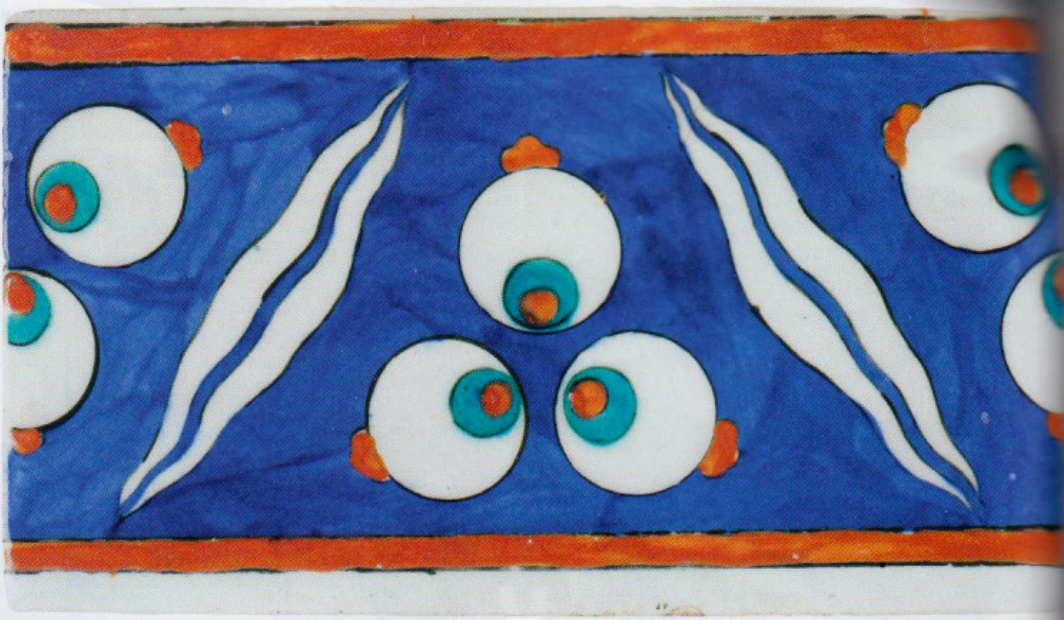

Top: two tiger stripes alternate with three *cintamani* triple spots on this border tile of c1565. Similar tiles can be found in the library of Ahmet III at Topkapi Palace in Istanbul. Right: interlaced palmettes sit above a scroll on a border tile of c1575. Opposite: four split leaves, edged in sealing-wax red glaze, form a medallion on this c1580 dish

As early as 1570, Iznik pottery was prized in England, and in the 19th century, ceramicists from William de Morgan to fabrics. With the sumptuous catalogue of the Omer Koç Collection now available, John Carswell examines the 300-year

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fell under its spell. Even today its bold motifs and vivid colours hold sway over designers of high fashion and furnishing formerly Byzantine town near Istanbul, explaining how a style so heavily influenced by other cultures can be so strikingly singular ▷

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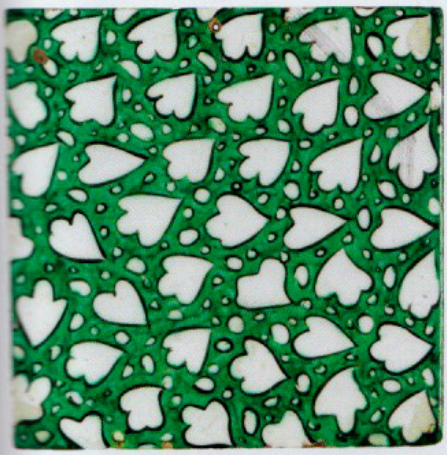

WHEN I was asked to review *Iznik: The Omer Koç Collection*, it struck me there were two coefficients to consider: the evolution of Iznik pottery, which spans the beginning of the 15th century to its demise 300 years later; and the history of the Koç family from its humble origins to the heights of the dynasty, as represented by the present patriarch, Rahmi Koç, Omer's father.

Iznik today is a sleepy little town on the north shore of the lake of the same name, 100km south-east of Istanbul. In earlier times it was an important Byzantine town – the ancient Nicaea of the Christian creed – with its own cathedral, and it flourished due to its position on a main trade route across Anatolia from the East. It was one of the first centres occupied by the Ottoman dynasty in the late 13th century, but achieved real distinction after the Iznik pottery industry became established there. The particular fascination with Iznik lies in the fact that, while representing a technical innovation in the history of Turkish pottery, it also symbolises the extraordinary combination of external influences from China and central Asia, and even from Europe. But instead of producing a predictable eclecticism, the end product was so distinctive and original that today its impact is as striking and fresh as when it was first produced.

I became interested, and later deeply involved in, the study of Iznik pottery after discovering a series of tiles depicting scenes from the Old and New Testaments tucked away in the recesses of the Armenian Cathedral of St James in Jerusalem. Primitive in design and execution, they nonetheless had a Matisse-like vitality that intrigued me.

Why did such an industry develop at Iznik? The answer is probably the existence of an established ceramic tradition and the ready availability of fresh water, fuel, clay and minerals to make glazes. The white frit body was crucial, and in the 1670s we have evidence from an English traveller, Dr John Covel, that just the right clay was available: 'no staple commodity of note there but your earthenware… digged out of pits on ye side of ye hills… this earth is whitish, very fine and mealy not gritty… they paint ▷

The confidence of later 16th-century Iznik designs – like those seen here – suggests the potters have broken free from the constraints of the court. Clockwise from top left: a tile glazed with tulips and rosette flowers; stripes accentuate this jug's distinctive form, which was derived from a metal prototype; a tile with an infinite pattern of hearts and dots

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Above: a snaking stem of hyacinth rising from a clump of greenery divides the decoration on this dish of c1575. Top right: vivid branches of blossom – some polka-dotted with sealing-wax red glaze – rise diagonally on this tile. Similar designs can be seen in Istanbul's Atik Valide mosque. This, and the tile beneath (above right), date from the later 16th century

them in what colours they please… of that same earth they make dishes, pots, pitchers, Jarres etc'.

Typically, the designs combine purely Turkish motifs with elements transposed from imported Chinese blue-and-white porcelain. We know that the English prized Iznik thanks to a licence of 1570, granting four gentlemen the right to manufacture 'earthen vessels and other earthen works with colours of portraictes after the manner of Turkey'. Its influence lived on through 19th-century European imitations by such potters as William de Morgan and Cantagalli. Even today, its motifs find their way on to the most exclusive fashion and furnishing fabrics.

Iznik pottery did not spring on to an empty stage; it was the culmination of a long tradition of fired earthenware in Anatolia. The earliest such wares were decorated in shades of cobalt blue, giving them an obvious parallel with Chinese porcelain. Its chronology is based on two objects, both at the British Museum: a ewer, inscribed on the base in Armenian and dated 1510; and a *surahi*, or flask, with a pear-shaped body painted in two shades of cobalt blue and with two Armenian inscriptions dated 152[illegible]. Paradoxically, both were clearly made in Turkey other great centre of pottery production, Kütahy[illegible]. But this does not affect the later development of th Iznik industry.

Over time a subtle painterly style and comple palette developed, culminating in the brilliant com bination of cobalt blue, turquoise, manganese purpl olive green and red that became the internationall recognised Iznik hallmark. The introduction of brigh ceiling-wax red occurred during the reign of Seli II (1566-74). Compared to the sobriety of the ea lier palette it always struck me as slightly vulgar an when I said so at a lecture I was happy when the au dience clapped in agreement. For all that, we kno little of the potters who made these wares and ca only presume that most were practising Muslim[illegible]. We have no clue as to why they chose a specific se of motifs and combined them in such a distinctiv and particular way.

The Koç family is one of the richest in Turkey Omer's grandfather Vehbi Koç started selling [illegible]

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Decorated with *rumi* motifs, this jug of c1590-1600 (above) is similar to one with silver-gilt mounts in the British Museum. Top right: an unusually large plate (42cm diameter) decorated with *cintamani* triple spots and tiger-stripe motifs, c1535-1540. Above right: tiles like this one from the early 17th century can be found in the Sultan Ahmet mosque in Istanbul

vegetables in Ankara, but soon moved on to more lucrative commodities; Koç Holding now owns all the country's oil refineries. As its vice-chairman, Omer can easily afford 'nothing but the best'. When it comes to Iznik, however, the supply is limited, as the greatest pieces are already stabilised in permanent collections. But one obvious target might be the blue-and-white candlestick sold for £616,000 at Sotheby's in 1993 to an anonymous buyer; it has now disappeared without trace.

Turkish museums are often eccentric. That of Rahmi Koç, dedicated to the history of transport, education and communication, contains a diverse mix of displays: a submarine, industrial machinery, mechanical toys, a working London telephone booth, the Barbarossa pub and a French bistro. A collector of contemporary art, books and self-portraits by painters from Egon Schiele to Francis Bacon, Omer Koç's tastes are similarly wide-ranging.

The Omer Koç Iznik Collection is almost 600 pages long, with myriad examples lavishly laid out over double-page spreads. At five kilograms it is indeed a weighty tome. The collection is largely drawn from works of the second half of the 16th century and comprises tiles, vessels, but mostly dishes. The vertical decoration on the latter leads one to consider to what extent Iznik was meant to be displayed rather than simply used as tableware. That it was functional can be observed in the deep scratches on the working surface. But I have examined hundreds of Iznik dishes and with rare exceptions they always have holes drilled in the foot ring for suspension. These cannot all be down to later collectors, or just to keep them out of the way when not in use. It remains an enigma.

Simon Ray's design is astonishing, with ample use of details. For this reviewer the most interesting section was a survey of European imitations of Iznik in the 19th century. There is also a useful compendium of sale catalogues and a detailed index. The endpapers – of Iznik wares by the painter Patrick Caulfield (c1964) – are simply dotty. Phew! ■

'The Omer Koç Iznik Collection', by Hülya Bilgi, is sold by John Sandoe Books, 10 Blacklands Terrace, London SW3 (020 7589 9473; johnsandoe.com), rrp £375