



**IZNIK OR PARIS?
IMITATIONS OF OTTOMAN POTTERY IN THE COLLECTION
OF THE WEST BOHEMIAN MUSEUM IN PILSEN**

Jindřich Mleziva¹

ABSTRACT: The article focuses on imitations of Asian craftsmanship, manufactured during the 19th century and found in the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen collection. The collection was created at the end of the 19th century. During that period the museum acquired both original Asian products and products manufactured in Europe under the influence of Asian art. In some cases, however, it happened that objects acquired for the collection a hundred years previously were later thought to be Asian originals. The Pilsen ewer is described in accounts records as a teapot made according to a Persian model. Although in the past it was confused with original work, today objects like this are an indication of the influence that Ottoman ceramics had not only on ceramics production in the second half of the 19th century Europe, and a reflection of the interest in and considerable popularity of Middle Eastern and Oriental arts and crafts in Europe.

KEY WORDS: Iznik – Kütahya – Paris – Ottoman pottery – West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen – Edmé Samson – applied art – Asian art – Oriental art – museum collections – Chinese porcelain – Josef Škorpil – 19th century – Middle East – World Exhibition in Paris

The collection of what is now the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen was created at the end of the 19th century, and among other things contains a number of period items manufactured in various places in Europe. This was a period when a number of companies were producing objects under the influence of Asian art, which was highly popular in Europe. During that period the museum acquired both original Asian products and products manufactured in Europe under the influence of Asian art. In some cases, however, it happened that objects acquired for the collection a hundred years previously were later thought to be Asian originals.² In this contribution I shall

¹ The curator of the collection of the Applied Art Department of the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen, e-mail: jmleziva@zcm.cz. The author would like to thank Mgr. Monika Bechná for help in translating some of the French texts.

² This is particularly the case with the records for the period after the Second World War.

concentrate on the collections in the museum's department of applied art, which have a rich history in themselves – a history that is being further enriched by the newly-uncovered stories relating to the various objects. We shall focus on imitations of Asian craftsmanship, manufactured during the 19th century and found in the Pilsen collection and many others.

The present-day collections of the museum's applied art department come from the original collection of the West Bohemian Arts and Crafts Museum, created in 1888 when the Municipal Museum of the City of Pilsen and West Bohemia (founded in 1878) was divided into two independent institutions.³ A representative selection from the applied arts collection was included in the museum's permanent displays in the new building that was opened to the public in 1913. The applied art department's collection was conceived as a cross-section of the development of European applied art above all, an approach also taken by other, similar European institutions founded during the 19th century. At the end of the 19th century, and especially at the beginning of the 20th century, the museum managed to gain an extensive collection of "oriental" items of Chinese and Japanese origin, which went on to become the foundation of the museum's oriental collection. These acquisitions came mostly from the Hamburg firm Sanger, which was involved in the trade of oriental antiquities. However, the acquisition of objects from the Middle and Far East had started when the West Bohemian Museum of Applied Art was first founded at the end of the 1880s. During this period, for example, two Ottoman ceramic plates, originally from Turkish workshops, and Ottoman ceramic tiles, originally from Turkey and Syria, were acquired. These and other objects were bought by the museum's first director, Josef Škorpil, at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1889. The Asian items fitted into the concept of the development of the collection of applied art 19th century European craftsmanship drew great inspiration from oriental objects, which thanks to exhibitions like this were presented to both the lay and specialist public in Europe and America. The growing popularity of oriental goods in Europe led not only to old patterns being imitated in their actual countries of origin (such as, for example, porcelain objects in China and metal objects in the Middle East⁴), but the imitation of Eastern production by European workshops, which became an independent phenomenon. It is this phenomenon that we intend to deal with here.

In 1900, as in 1889, Josef Škorpil attended the World Exhibition in Paris, where he also bought a number of items for the museum's collections. They included a group of porcelain and ceramic objects that became part of the already-rich applied art collections. One part, known as the Chinese porcelain, was later included in an independent oriental sub-collection, taken out from the applied art sub-collection in the 1970s.⁵ The ceramic ewer (Inv. No. UMP 16549) continued to remain a formal part of the applied art sub-collection, like the "Chinese" porcelain, was later put into the depository with the oriental art and craftsmanship. Nevertheless, when in the mid 20th century the records were revised, these objects were treated as authentic Chinese or Turkish items. The ceramic ewer (Inv. No. UMP 16549), like the "Chinese" porcelain, was then put into the depository with the Oriental art.

³ The second one was the City Historical Museum (Fryda – Metličková 1995: 155).

⁴ Here we should mention the revivals of the old styles, such as Safavid products in Iran and Mamluk ones in Egypt and Syria (see Vernoit 1997: 229-239).

⁵ It was generally typical of most of the Middle Eastern objects in the museum's collection that a number of them were not recorded in the Oriental sub-collection. It is still not quite clear what the reasons were for this non-systematic division.

The curators trusted the inventory records, although they were several decades old, and so did not confront them with the original archive records from the period when the collections were acquired. Here it should be mentioned that many purchase records contain a description of the objects that is only very brief, making it difficult to identify them with a concrete object. The original archive records do not, of course, contain the later inventory numbers, while the records in the inventories, on the other hand, often lack information relating to how the item was acquired. However, the objects that were acquired at the world exhibitions are described in the archive records in relative detail, and can be identified on the basis of these descriptions. Moreover, the original purchase documents have also been preserved in the archive, and there is thus direct evidence of the seller from whom Josef Škorpil bought the objects. The ceramic ewer (Inv. No. UMP 16549) is listed in the record from the acquisitions book of 1965 as a “Porcelain ewer, Persian...” and dated to the 18th–19th century. It was also later presented as such at exhibitions. During a recent revision of the record and a comparison with the object, however, the idea that it might be Persian work was ruled out, and the ewer was included in the Turkish area, although the dating did roughly correspond to the original record. However, doubts regarding its classification led to the finding that a similar ewer can be found on the antiques market but is described as a French product, in the Iznik style, from the 19th century.⁶ Is the Pilsen ewer thus an original Iznik product, or an imitation? The two ewers differ in the details of their execution, but in essence (form, execution, type of decoration) they are the same vessel. Further consultations with experts in Middle Eastern ceramics, however, brought us no closer to a definitive conclusion. The information on the origin of the ewer needed to be checked in the archive, which would also be able to throw light on its real origin. There is no information on the object’s origin in either the collection’s basic documentation, i.e. the acquisitions book, or in the more recent records. In searching for information on other Middle East objects⁷, however, we managed to find interesting documents in the archive that relate to further acquisitions. The museum’s archive contains a file with accounting documentation relating to Josef Škorpil’s trip to Paris to the World Exhibition in 1900. They consist of the accounts for his journey, including documents relating to the purchase of objects for the collection. Among them is a document regarding the purchase of objects from the French firm Samson.⁸ The document, in French, and the subsequent museum accounting document in Czech provides a list of objects that Josef Škorpil bought for the museum, including an ewer that, going by the description, corresponds to this one. In addition to this list of purchases, the document indicates what the Samson firm’s field of business was.⁹

The firm, which made ceramics and porcelain, was founded by Edmé Samson (1810–1891) in 1845, and had its headquarters in the third arrondissement of Paris, in the rue de Saintonge. In 1849 Edmé Samson showed his porcelain at the Industrial

⁶ E.g. <http://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/samson-aiguere-couverte-en-ceramique,-dans-le-st-154-c-090e696ac8> and <http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/15257/lot/217/>.

⁷ The author was mainly interested in metalwork, acquired for the museum’s collections in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

⁸ Samson, 7, Rue Béranger, 7. Succursale: Avenue de l’Opéra, 30.

⁹ The header of the document from 1900 states: “Manufacture de Porcelaines, Faiences & Terres Suites à Montreuil. Ateliers de Peinture – Fabrique de Bronzes & Magasins a Paris. Maison fondée en 1845.” And then: “Spécialité pour la fabrication de pièces de grandes dimensions. Dans les genres: vieux Sèvres, Chine, Japon, Saxe, Perse, Italien, etc. Émaux Peints & Translucides Sur Or, Argent & Cuivre de tous Styles. (...)”

Exhibition¹⁰ in Paris. In 1852 he moved to the rue Vendôme. In 1863 he took part in the Exhibition of Applied Art and Industry¹¹, where he exhibited porcelain that imitated Japanese work. A little earlier the firm had been taken over by his son Émile Samson (1837–1913), who in 1864 set up a factory in Montreuil.¹² The firm also took part in the World Exhibitions in Paris. In 1867 it exhibited ceramics in the Saxon, Chinese and Japanese style. The firm's atelier moved to the address 7, rue Béranger. Samson took part in the World Exhibitions in 1878 and 1889 with imitations of Sevres, Saxo, Japanese and Chinese products, as well as imitations of objects kept in the museums in South Kensington and Dresden. In 1891 Émil's son Léon (1868–1928) became a partner, and the company continued to expand its production (Slitine 2002: 9-12). It made imitations of objects from famous workshops in Europe and Asia, as well as imitations of Sevres and Meissen porcelain, Italian majolica, Chinese and Japanese porcelain and also Persian and Turkish ceramics, or rather of products from the workshops of Iznik and Kütahya.¹³

In addition to imitations of imported goods, the firm also made copies of items from collections in established museums such as the Louvre and the Musée de Cluny in Paris, or in the already-mentioned institutions in South Kensington in London (from 1899 the Victoria and Albert Museum) and the museum in Dresden. The last family member to take over the firm was Pierre Samson (1892–1976). During the 20th century, market demand changed and production volumes fell. In the 1960s Pierre Samson handed the firm over to Christian Richardière, but not even organisational changes and the modernisation of production could revive the firm's fortunes, and it ceased trading at the start of the 1980s (Slitine 2002: 12-13). The firm's products were presented as imitations, and were generally branded with the firm's mark. The mark itself frequently copied the original mark. The Samson marks were removable, and indeed were removed (Craddock 2009: 205). This meant it was possible for an imitation to become, indirectly, a fake, regardless of the fact that the material used for the originals was different to that used by Samson.¹⁴ Meanwhile, Samson's products became highly-valued collector's items in themselves, and are today sold as such on the antiques market.¹⁵ The Pilsen ewer is described in Samson's accounts records as a teapot made according to a Persian model¹⁶, and in the original Czech accounting records as "an imitation of a majolica Rhodes-Persian ewer" from a 15th century original. The shape resembles China export wares based on the older metal ewers shapes from Islamic world (see ewer from Victoria & Albert Museum collection, Museum Number 240B&C-1876 (China, ca 1710) and Zebrowski 1997: 162-163."). It was an imitation of a decoration

¹⁰ L'Exposition nationale des produits de l'industrie agricole et manufacturière.

¹¹ L'Exposition des beaux-arts appliqués à l'industrie.

¹² It included a workshop for making bronzes (Slitine 2002: 10). The company also made enamels. (Craddock 2009: 205).

¹³ The products from these workshops gained popularity after the exhibitions in London and Munich in 1885, 1907 and 1910 (Slitine 2002: 74).

¹⁴ Samson used hard porcelain, regardless of the material of the original (Craddock 2009: 205).

¹⁵ Imitations of Turkish ceramics were also made by other firms, such as Joseph-Théodore Deck (1823–1891), Edmond Lachenal (1855–1930), the Hungarian firm Zsolnay (founded 1863), etc. (Topuz 2014).

¹⁶ "Théière plate, reproduction [...] Perse, [...] XV^e siècle." (Archive of the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen, accounts documents, 1901, no. 65.)

from an Iznik or Kütahya workshop in Ottoman Turkey. The “Rhodes style” dominated Iznik production from the 1590s, the ceramics being thus named after finds of objects on the island of Rhodes.¹⁷ The style of this period typically features a floral decoration with four flowers – a carnation, a rose, a hyacinth and a dominant tulip. New colours appear that are not found in older periods – tomato red and emerald green (Brožková–Kybalová–Nováková 2003: 11–12). The Pilsen ewer, however, decorated with figural (a human figure with a flower, Fig. 1¹⁸) and architectural motifs (a kiosk, Fig. 2), would have fallen into the later Iznik period in the 17th century, or the products made in the workshops at Kütahya. Since I have not been able to find a model, I am inclined to classify the ewer as a product in the Iznik style – a French product inspired by the objects produced in the Iznik workshops in Turkey.¹⁹ Samson himself seems to have followed models kept in museums such as the Musée de Cluny, South Kensington and the British Museum, or in private collections. The Pilsen ewer is branded (Fig. 3) – but not, like similar products from the Samson workshops, with an Arabic “ص”,²⁰ The green brand mark that appears on the bottom of the ewer corresponds to a similarly-branded plate from the collection of the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, also produced by Samson.²¹

The above-mentioned accounts documenting belonging to the Samson firm from 1900 contains a total of 13 objects. In addition to the ewer there are ten imitations of Chinese porcelain²², an imitation of French majolica²³ and an imitation of German majolica.²⁴ All the objects met the same fate. They were bought as imitations of older work, but in the inventories and later records they were entered as original work.²⁵ They were also treated as original work in the collections. It can thus be seen that an imprecise transcription of the original record in the second half of the 20th century caused these objects to be mistakenly classified. Since the work was of good quality, and materials analysis was not the norm in the 20th century, it is, I believe, difficult to decide without the original records whether this was an original product or a successful imitation. Luckily in this case the original purchase records have been preserved in the museum

¹⁷ Knowledge of Turkish ceramics in France was spread through the collection of the Musée de Cluny, which came from Auguste Salzmänn (1824–1872), a French archaeologist and photographer who lived among other places on Rhodes.

¹⁸ Similar figures with flowers in their hands are found on Iznik ceramics in the 17th century, or on products from Kütahya (viz e.g. Brožková – Kybalová – Nováková 2003: 64).

¹⁹ A ewer similar in shape has been published (Slitine 2002: 75), but it has different decoration, which the author classifies as Iznik, from the second half of the 16th century. A similar ewer has appeared in an auction (see <http://www.invaluable.com/auction-lot/samson-aiguierre-couvert-en-ceramique-dans-le-st-154-c-090e696ac8>). However, the firms did not make only precise copies, but also their own creations inspired by Turkish ceramics (Carswell 1998: 118).

²⁰ I.e. the Arabic “š” (šād) (see Slitine 2002: 16, 76).

²¹ Object Number: C.3-1909 (<http://webapps.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/explorer/index.php?qu=samson&oid=74460>).

²² Current inventory numbers: O/74, O/75, O/92, O/110, O/119, O/120, O/121, O/122, O/123, O/151.

²³ Inv. No. UMP 8140.

²⁴ Inv. Nos. UMP 8143 and UMP 8144 – the vase and lid were entered under different inventory numbers.

²⁵ Imitations of Chinese work was one of Samson’s main product fields. The firm specialised in particular in the imitation of products from the end of the 17th and the beginning of the 18th century – the reigns of the emperors Kangxi (1662–1722), Yongzheng (1722–1735) and Qianlong (1735–1795) (Slitine 2002: 161).

archive, and the mistake can be put right. In addition to providing a precise classification of the objects, the document also confirms that the museum followed a strategy of adding to its collections shortly after it was created. As is also shown by other collections²⁶, Josef Škorpil and later curators of the collection acquired copies and imitations of which the originals could not, for various reasons, be gained for the collection, but which were considered important enough to be at least represented in this way. Samson products are today considered a significant phenomenon in the development of artistic craftsmanship, and the creation of museum collections in the 19th and early 20th century. Although in the past they were – whether deliberately or not – confused with original work, today objects made by Samson and other firms are an indication of the influence that Ottoman ceramics had not only on ceramics production in the second half of the 19th century Europe, and a reflection of the interest in and considerable popularity of Middle Eastern and Oriental arts and crafts in Europe of the second half of the 19th century.

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²⁶ For example copies of old metalwork created by the museum workshops at the start of the 20th century (e.g. a copy of Baroque lock Inv. No. UMP 3744 made in 1908–1909).



Fig. 1 Photographs by Ivana Michnerová, the West Bohemian Museum in Pilsen.



Fig. 2

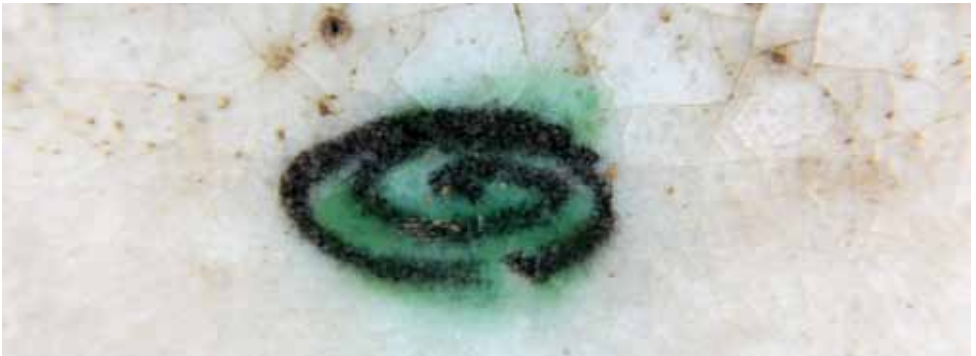


Fig. 3