



Fig 1. View of Corfu Town from the Old Fortress.

## Sun, Sea and a Little Surprise on a Greek Island The Asian Art Museum, Corfu

In September 2016, I travelled to the Greek island of Corfu, which is situated in the Adriatic Sea just off the Greek mainland and Albania

During my stay, I visited Corfu town, which is located on the eastern part of the island. After a steep climb up to the old Venetian citadel fortress, I was rewarded with a wonderful panoramic view of the city. Looking out to the northeastern tip of the town, (far right of Fig 1.) my curiosity was piqued by a large classical styled building.

Despite the heat, I decided to investigate, which took me past a cricket pitch (a remnant of colonial days) to the Palace of St Michael and St George. (Fig 2.) To my pleasant surprise, I discovered that it was a museum dedicated to Asian art, which was something that I did not expect to find in this part of the world.

The palace was designed by Colonel George Whitmore and was built between 1819 and 1824 in the Neoclassical style. It originally served as the residence of the British Lord High Commissioner of the Ionian Islands. The raised ground floor level to the front of the building is shaded with a colonnade of Doric columns. (Fig 4.)

On entering the building one arrives at a grand entrance hall flanked with Ionic columns and a red carpet that takes you up to the galleries. (Fig 5).



Fig 2. Palace of St Michael and St George, which houses the Asian art Museum.



Fig 3. View from the window of one of the galleries.

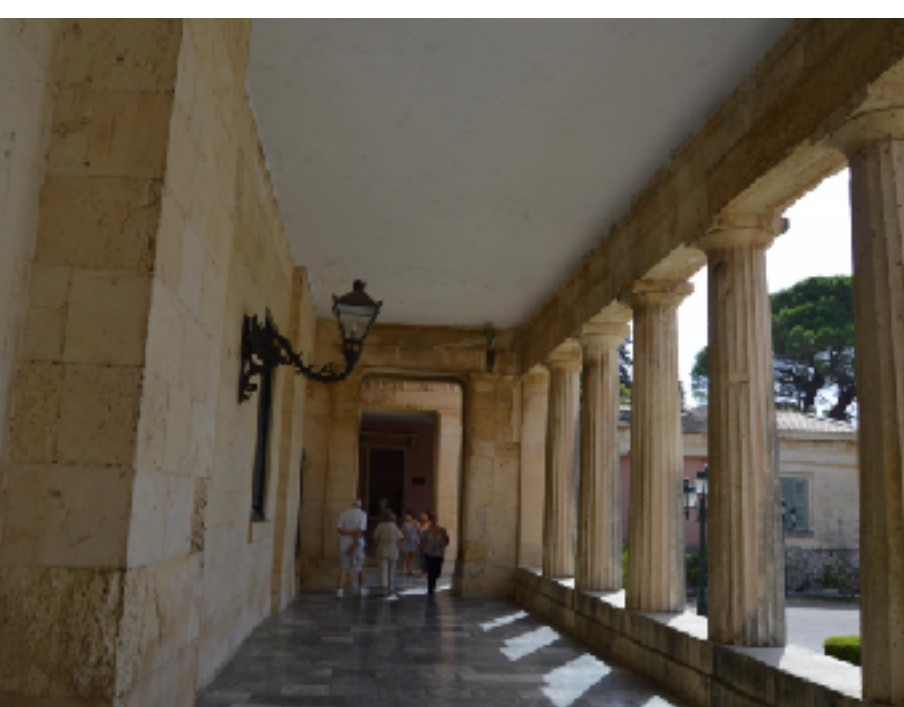


Fig 4. The colonnade at the entrance to the Palace of St Michael and St George.



Fig 5. The entrance hall to the Palace.



Fig 6. Portrait of Gregorios Manos (1850-1928). Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.

The building was opened in 1927 as the *Museum of Sino-Japanese Art* after a donation from the collector Gregorios Manos (1850-1928). (Fig 6.)

Manos was born in Athens and after initially studying law, he moved to Leipzig in 1872 to study literature. He received a doctor of philosophy in Berlin in 1875 and joined the diplomatic service and was later to become the Greek ambassador to Austria (1897-1910) 1.

During his posting in Vienna and in his retirement in Paris, Manos was an avid collector of Chinese and Japanese art, which he acquired at a number of auctions in these two cities. His collection comprised of around 9,500 items of ceramics, bronzes, wood sculptures, paintings, prints, armour and weaponry.

His enthusiasm for collecting eventually put him in financial difficulty and in 1919, he offered the Greek state his collection. In return, he requested that a museum be set up in Corfu and that he receive a small monthly pension. As he took a great personal interest in the collection and had already catalogued most of it, he also requested that he be the museum's first curator. Sadly this was only to last a year as he died in 1928. 2.

The museum was re-named the *Museum of Asian Art* in 1973 after a

donation of 400 items from Nicolaos Hadjivassiliou, whose collection covered works from India, Gandhara, Cambodia, Siam, Nepal, Tibet and Japan. 3. Today, the Asian collection comprises around 15,000 items, which is impressive for a small regional museum.

The Chinese collection is exhibited in the east wing on the first floor, where Manos lived for the year he was curator. Its recently refurbished galleries are quite a contrast to the rest of the building, which still has a number of state rooms in their original condition from the early 19th century. (Figs 7 & 16-18.)

The exhibits are arranged chronologically and by type and are thoughtfully laid out within each cabinet and are well lit. I will now take a brief chronological look at some of the exhibits and highlight some of them.



Fig 7. The Chinese Galleries in the east wing on the first floor. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.



Fig 8. The Tang dynasty pottery exhibits.

In the cabinet of early ceramics from the Tang dynasty, there are five sancai-glazed pottery exhibits. The largest is a tomb guardian which stands solemnly with his arms crossed in front of his chest, on a high base. The head is unglazed and the green and amber glaze is applied to the tunic, which has run down the robes during the firing.

The tripod censer stands on three animal paw feet and is carved with three linear bands to the upper part of the compressed globular body. The glaze is cleverly applied, where the amber colour is concentrated at the shoulder and alternates with green, which is applied in vertical stripes to the whole body.

My favourite piece from this cabinet is the small flower form dish (Fig 10.) The rim and ridges of the interior, as well as the corresponding recesses to the exterior are all covered in an amber glaze and each lobe is partly covered in cobalt blue. Pieces with blue glaze are quite rare in the Tang dynasty and unusually, this also has moulded leaves and flowers to each lobe of the exterior.

The cabinet of Song dynasty pieces (Fig 9.) is comprised of a number of different wares including two Jian hare's fur tea bowls; two Yaozhou celadon bowls, one of which is moulded and a Junyao blue-glazed bowl.



Fig 9. The Song Dynasty ceramic exhibits.



3.

Fig 10. The Tang dynasty sancai-glazed flower-form dish. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.



The cabinet of Ming wucai pieces comprises a small 17th century jar with figures; an unusual ribbed cylindrical tripod censer and the Wanli period circular sweetmeat dragon box and cover. (Fig 11.)

The most interesting of the three pieces is the box and cover and it is unusual in that the centre of the cover is comprised of a pierced diaper ground with five ogival panels of dragons in underglaze blue, red, yellow and green enamels. The interior of these boxes are usually compartmented for various sweetmeat offerings.

Wucai wares are popular in Japan and the combination of underglaze blue and overglazed enamels on this piece, with the bright red and green diaper grounds, mirror the decorative effects of brocade textiles.

The next cabinet is comprised of Qing monochromes and features a Qianlong blue glazed bottle vase and two Yongzheng mark and period dishes, one in copper red and the other covered in a yellow glaze and delicately carved with flowers. (Fig 12.)

Monochrome wares have a very different aesthetic to detailed pictorial blue and white and enamelled pieces. The focus with these is on the formal elements of the piece, that is its shape, through the quality of the potting and its colour, through the effects of its glaze. Different effects could be created with the colours depending on the thickness of the glaze and thus its translucency to the porcelain layer below.

This aesthetic was essentially a revival of the monochrome glazes of the Song dynasty, which reflected an understated literati scholar taste.

The blue and white Kangxi period 'Bacchus' dish (Fig 13.) illustrates a complete contrast to this aesthetic and here the design is drawn from a European print. The gadrooned rim draws its influence from European silver and with the preoccupation of Western design elements, it is clear that this piece would have been made for the European export market.



4.



Fig 13. A Kangxi period European export 'Bacchus' dish. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.

Fig 11. The Ming dynasty wucai wares.

Fig 12. The Qing dynasty monochrome wares.

The jade cabinet contains a number of high quality pieces, such as the 18th century yellow and russet-flecked jade carving a tree trunk with a branch of prunus and a magnolia flower. (Fig 14.) Yellow jade is particularly rare and has a beautiful translucency to the stone, which effectively contrasts with its darker russet areas.

Next to this is a large 18th century pale celadon jade flattened hu-shaped vase and cover. The Qianlong Emperor (1736-1795) had a deep appreciation of archaic bronzes from the Shang and Zhou dynasties and commissioned numerous pieces in a variety of media, including jade, to revive the designs of these wares. As a foreign, Manchu dynasty, it would also have lent a sense of legitimacy to their rule by reviving designs from a distant Chinese past.

The lower shelf contains a group of 18th century animal and figure carvings, including a yellow jade horse; a pale celadon recumbent buffalo and a white jade figure of a boy. These smaller handling jades are usually carved from river pebbles and the best examples combine finely detailed observations with a highly worked, polished surface that is somewhere between a glossy and matt finish.

The last cabinet to be examined is the cinnabar lacquer exhibits. (Fig 15.) This contains an 18th century peach-shaped box and cover carved with a figure scene; a pair of rectangular panels; a small 16th century bowl carved with birds and a Qianlong period circular panel on a scrolled stand carved with the character *chun* (spring).

The design for the circular panel is usually found on the upper surfaces of the covers of circular boxes from the Qianlong period and looks somewhat incongruous on this stand. It is possible that it has been cut from a box that was probably damaged and was later mounted onto this stand.

According to the Archives of the Qing Imperial Household Department (*Zaobanchu*), twelve cinnabar lacquer boxes of this type were presented to the Emperor Qianlong in 1760 and were used for royal banquets at the *Yuanmingyuan* (*Summer Palace*). The design adorning these boxes is steeped in auspicious symbolism and derives from Jiaping period (1522-1566) originals. 4.

It is clear that the Chinese collection at the Asian Art Museum in Corfu reflects one man's taste and his desire to tell part of the story of Chinese art through a variety of objects. It was a much welcomed surprise on a holiday visit to this beautiful Greek island.



Fig 14. The cabinet of 18th century jades.



Fig 15. The cabinet of 18th century cinnabar lacquer.



Fig 16. The Throne Room at the Palace of St Michael and St George. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.

Notes

1. Corfu Museum of Asian Art, Donors.
2. *Ibid.*
3. *Ibid.*
4. Sotheby's Hong Kong, *The Baoyizhai Collection of Chinese Lacquer Part 2*, footnote to lot 3224.



Fig 17. The State Dining Room at the Palace of St Michael and St George. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.

Fig 18. The Rotunda at the Palace of St Michael and St George. Photograph © Corfu Museum of Asian Art.

