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Not Just a Souvenir: The Untold Story of Turkey's Iznik Tiles

By Yulia Denisyuk

Gorgeous Iznik tiles cover the city of Istanbul, and cheap replicas have long been popular souvenirs. But a recent revival of the centuries-old, traditional techniques for creating these lovely ceramics is proof that, when it comes to Iznik tiles, beauty is more than glaze deep.

Detailed, colorful Iznik ceramics are a popular Turkish souvenir. So much so that mass-produced replicas—with printed rather than handmade designs—are sold in droves on the streets of [Istanbul's](#) Sultanahmet area for as low as \$5 each. But the real pieces are valuable beyond the sentimental: a [2006 Christie's](#) lot of 15th-century Iznik pottery dishes sold for over \$500,000. The cheap knock-offs are lovely and plentiful, but once you learn the difference, you'll know why tracking down a real Iznik is worth the effort. The intricate production process is more than just craftsmanship; it also draws upon a rich cultural heritage. Here's what you need to know about genuine Iznik pottery—and where to find it.

What makes ceramics from Iznik, an Anatolian town of bygone fame, special? The region's pottery tradition stretches back to prehistoric times, but the art form blossomed under the Ottomans. In the late 15th century, craftsmen of Iznik replaced the traditional clay used in ceramics with quartz. The innovative technique produced a bright white base that made the four traditional colors found in Iznik pieces—turquoise, cobalt, malachite, and coral—stand out under a thick transparent glaze.

Ottoman sultans favored the new look and soon exquisite Iznik Çini (pronounced "chee-nee"), as the tiles are known locally, adorned public spaces and important buildings in Istanbul, including the court's main residence, [Topkapi Palace](#). Iznik ceramics spread far and wide, even piquing the interest of Genoese and Venetian merchants. This golden era lasted for about 100 years. The decline of the Ottoman Empire meant a loss of protection for the craft, which had all but disappeared by the late 17th century. For the next several hundred years, original Iznik pieces appeared solely in art brokerages and museums worldwide (including the Louvre and the Smithsonian).