

YILLIK

Annual of Istanbul Studies

2025

7



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204 Genovefa and Minas: The Revival of Narrative Painting in Kütahya Ceramics

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On December 18, 2007, a unique group of Kütahya plates appeared on the art market.¹ They came from the collection of Jean Louis Thau, a famous collector who traveled around the souqs of Fez in his red Volvo and amassed a reputable Moroccan jewelry collection.² In addition to this collection, Monsieur Thau had a passion for Islamic art, within the scope of which he acquired the four Kütahya ceramic plates shortly before his death. Depicting the popular folk tale of Genovefa, the plates were all signed by Minas Avramidis, a renowned ceramics master of Kütahya. After a fierce bidding process, the Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation acquired the plates at auction and included them in its Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Collection, one of the foundation's three collections housed at Pera Museum.

Apart from exceeding estimated values and setting new records for early twentieth-century Kütahya ceramics, the plates' multilayered history inspired a new permanent exhibition.³ Entitled *Extraordinary Minas: The Story of Inspiration and Innovation in Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics*, this ex-

hibition explores the Genovefa plates and Minas Avramidis from a micro-historical perspective, revealing how Kütahya's masters in the early twentieth century passed down their innovative ideas to future generations.⁴ Political and social messages were becoming increasingly apparent on Kütahya ceramics during the early twentieth century as part of the innovative character of the products, and it was in this context that the Genovefa plates were brought to life. Yet the inspirations for this unique group of ceramics date back further, to Minas's early life and his environment in Kütahya.

Minas Avraamoglou (later known as Minas Avramidis) was born in 1877 in Kütahya's Greek Orthodox neighborhood. Baptized in the Taksiarches Church, he attended the primary school next door, where he nourished his unbounded imagination.⁵ The ideas that would later inspire him to produce the Genovefa plates can be traced to 1885, when the school curriculum was revised to include ancient history, mythology,⁶ and other related subjects as part of an effort to hellenize the Turkish-speaking Greek Orthodox community in the region.⁷ Minas most likely first encountered the story of Genovefa during this period, as it had become an important morality tale used to promote Christian faith and virtue among children, with Genovefa presented as a model Christian.⁸

Because of his family's poverty and the loss of his father at an early age, Minas began working as a stonemason after completing primary school. Alongside his stonecutting work, he also developed an interest in tile-making, which was becoming increasingly popular at the time.⁹ Kütahya's tile and ceramics industry experienced a revival in the second half of the nineteenth century, spurred on by a wave of restorations of old Ottoman buildings and growing interest in tiles and ceramics showcased at world fairs.¹⁰ Minas became an apprentice in one of Kütahya's larger workshops, most likely the Minasian brothers' workshop, and there would have become familiar with innovative practices, such as depicting lithographs, engravings, and photographs on Kütahya ceramics. These novel ideas would later lead to the creation of the Genovefa plates.¹¹

After attaining the rank of master, Minas opened a smaller workshop together with his brothers in the beginning of the twentieth century.¹² Located in Kütahya's Greek Orthodox neighborhood (now, İstiklal neighborhood), his workshop often collaborated on commissions with larger workshops. Between 1910 and 1913, Minas was among the smaller partners of Hafız Mehmed Emin Efendi's workshop.¹³ This workshop, along with that of the Minasian brothers, partnered with other smaller workshops to produce the necessary tiles for buildings constructed in the First National Architectural movement. There, craftsmen drew inspiration from floral and vegetal motifs reminiscent of earlier Seljuk and Ottoman examples and added minor innovations to the designs.¹⁴ This idea of novelty through detail shaped Minas's interpretation of the designs he worked with and might well have inspired the minor details in the Genovefa plates that make them so distinctively original.

The story of Genovefa that Minas Avramidis depicted in these plates was a version first popularized by Christoph von Schmid, a Catholic priest, who in 1810 incorporated themes of Christianity and morality into an older folk tale, transforming



Figure 1: Greek Orthodox neighborhood in Kütahya. Postcard, early twentieth century. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation Photography Collection, FKA_010315.

it into a key educational tool to instill piety in young readers.¹⁵ The tale narrates the plight of the virtuous noblewoman Genovefa of Brabant, who falls prey to the machinations of a jealous chamberlain named Gollo while her husband, Sizefri, is away at war. After spurning Gollo's romantic advances, Genovefa is accused by the chamberlain of adultery and jailed. Convinced of his wife's infidelity, Sizefri—still on campaign—gives Gollo his permission to have her executed, but, aided by her would-be executioners, she manages to escape at the last moment. Together with her son, Benon, Genovefa flees into the forest and is watched over by a deer, who guides her and her son to the shelter of a cave. When Sizefri returns from the war some time later, he finds a letter Genovefa entrusted to the daughter of her lady-in-waiting in which she reaffirms her innocence and forgives him for believing Gollo's lies. Realizing the truth of things, he found his wife and son years later, weakened by her years in the wilderness.¹⁶

Schmid's version of the story Genovefa spread rapidly across Europe in German, English, and French versions, and later in the eastern Mediterranean. The story was translated into Armenian in 1840, followed by Arabic, Ladino, Greek, and Bulgarian versions. Notably, Evangelinos Misailidis translated the story into Karamanlidika and serialized it in the newspaper *Anatoli*, after which it became one of the most widely read tales among the Greek Orthodox communities in Anatolia.¹⁷ Genovefa's serial publications were even listed as the top requested books among the Karamanlidika publications in a list from the early twentieth century.¹⁸

The story's popularity led to demand for illustrations, some of the most prominent of which were a set of chromolithographs produced by Sotiris Christidis in 1900 for a Genovefa adaptation published by D. Papadimitriou. The first two editions of this work were published bilingually in Greek and French and reached a wide audience in the early twentieth century. Christidis's illustrations focused on four pivotal moments:

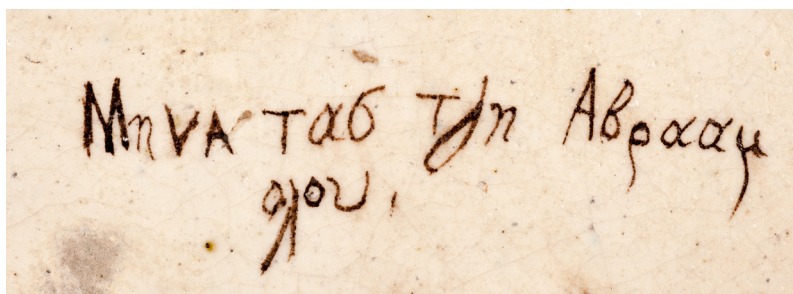


Figure 2: The signature of Minas Avramidis (Mina tas tzi Avraam Olou). Suna and İnan Kırac Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Collection, PMK 546.

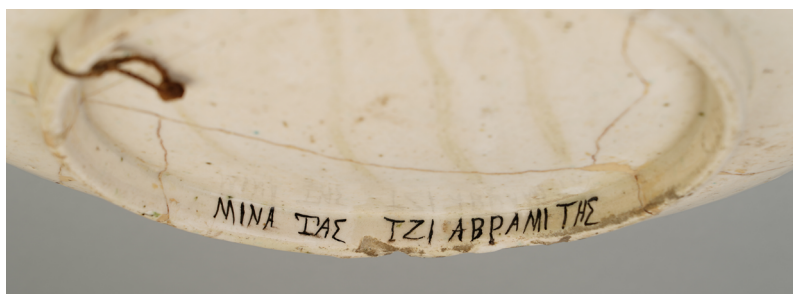


Figure 3: The Signature of Minas Avramidis (Minas tas tzi Avramitis) on the back of the Alfonso XIII plate. Panagiotis Stavridis Collection. Photograph: Nikos Dionysopoulos.

Sizefri's departure for battle, the executioners sparing Genovefa, Sizefri's discovery of Genovefa and their son in the forest, and the family's reunion.¹⁹

These chromolithographs were displayed in Greek coffeehouses across the Aegean, as well as in private homes. Minas Avramidis would most probably have encountered them at one such establishment, perhaps the coffeehouse of his friend Iordanis Telaloglou, where he was a regular, and then reinterpreted them on ceramic plates in his own style.²⁰

The version produced by Minas was likely a commissioned work, possibly from the Greek Orthodox community in Izmir. This assumption is supported by the fact that Minas's probable dealer, Pierre Pezzer, was based in Izmir, near the Basmane train station, which connected Kütahya to Izmir.²¹

These plates are among the few known pieces that Minas Avramidis produced in Kütahya, but exactly when he produced them has long been difficult to

pinpoint. When they were sold at auction, only a rough estimate was given, dating them to the late nineteenth or early twentieth century.²² For a more precise dating, it is important to look at Minas's possible inspirations. Since the plates depict the story of Genovefa, the most evident inspiration is, of course, the four chromolithographs by Sotiris Christidis. As noted above, these were popular among the Greek Orthodox community in the Aegean and western Anatolia and became an indispensable part of Greek coffeehouses in the early twentieth century.

Another hint at the plates' chronology is their signature. Minas signed the back of all four plates with the same signature: "[Work] of Stonemason Minas, son of Avraam" (Mina tas tzi Avraamolou). This marks it as likely earlier than his other signatures, for there was a move afoot among members of the Turkish-speaking Greek Orthodox community to hellenize their surnames.²³ In line with this, Minas eventually changed his surname to the more Greek-sounding Avramidis, as attested in another plate he is known to have produced



Figure 4: Ceramic plate, 1910-1915. Workshop: Minas Avramidis. 35 × 5.3 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Collection, PMK 545.



Figure 5: The story of Genovefa (scene 1). Chromolithograph, early twentieth century. Artist: Sotiris Christidis. 63 × 47.2 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Collection, KCVSA_000001.

in Kütahya, which he signed as Minas Avramitis. For that plate, depicting Alphonso XIII, the terminus ante quem must be 1917, which suggests that the Genovefa plates date to an earlier period.

A final element that can help with the dating is the colors used on the plates. Specifically, the cobalt blue that Minas used on the plates possesses a hue similar to that used by

Hafız Mehmed Emin Efendi, with whom Minas partnered between 1910 and 1913. This, coupled with the considerations detailed above, suggests that Minas most probably produced the Genovefa plates in the first half of the 1910s.

One of Avramidis's most striking innovations in the Genovefa plates was his choice of medium, which enhanced the story's impact.²⁴ Rather

than using a flat tile surface, Avramidis chose concave ceramic plates, which add depth to the composition—the plates' curvature enhancing the three-dimensionality of the figures, which appear to turn toward the viewer, particularly those positioned at the corners. In addition, while painting the scenes on the four plates, Avramidis gave dimension to the figures by combining different Kütahya colors.

While reinterpreting Christidis's engravings, Minas emphasizes key characters and themes. The first scene, depicting Sizefri's departure from Brabant, highlights the protagonists. At the center, Genovefa, the Duke of Brabant's daughter, embraces her husband, Sizefri, a virtuous soldier of the duke. Minas captures their sorrow, emphasizing the pain of their recent marriage being interrupted by Sizefri's departure for battle. With his left hand, Sizefri reaches for his helmet, which is held by a soldier. To maintain the composition's focus on Sizefri and Genovefa, Minas omits the standard-bearer, instead incorporating a soldier carrying Brabant's emblem—an eagle with its head turned to the left. This preference ensures no figure disrupts the focus on Sizefri and Genovefa at the center.

Avramidis gives special attention to Genovefa's portrayal, emphasizing her innocence within the story. In Christidis's lithograph, Genovefa is dressed in light blue with rosebud decorations, yet Avramidis reimagines her in a yellow dress. Upon closer examination, it becomes clear that Avramidis initially intended to apply a rosebud motif but left the decoration unfinished. He places a single rosebud on Genovefa's chest and leaves the motif he began on her shoulder incomplete. This decision may reflect his intent to reinterpret Genovefa. In reference to Genovefa's devotion to Christianity, Avramidis depicts her dress entirely in yellow—a color traditionally associated with sacredness and often used to represent religious figures in Kütahya tiles and ceramics. Additional details in Avramidis's composition further demonstrate his deep knowledge of the story. Unlike Christidis,

who positioned Gollo, the treacherous chamberlain, away from the central figures, Avramidis deliberately places him at the center, emphasizing his pivotal role in the narrative.

Despite the plate's spatial constraints, Avramidis carefully includes other key figures, including the lady-in-waiting and her daughter, the latter of whom played a particularly crucial role in the narrative. It was the daughter who visited Genovefa in her jail cell and was entrusted with the letter in which Genovefa proclaimed her innocence and forgave Sizefri for ordering her execution. Avramidis also includes the executioners' dog, foreshadowing a significant event in the scene on the second plate.

In the second plate, Avramidis depicts four central figures: two executioners, Genovefa, and her infant son, Benon. In this scene, one executioner interrupts the execution, stopping his companion—who has already drawn his sword—from killing Genovefa. To keep the focus on the figures, Avramidis omits the background landscape, depicting only the ground and the rock where Genovefa placed her son. Once again, Avramidis reinforces Genovefa's sanctity by depicting her in a yellow veil. Like Christidis, Avramidis emphasizes a central theme in Schmid's version of Genovefa—the devotion of a true Christian. His portrayal of Genovefa and Benon closely mirrors traditional depictions of the Virgin Mary and Christ Child. Since the tale revolves around faith, loyalty, and moral instruction, Avramidis makes sure to include a cross around Genovefa's neck, further reinforcing her devotion.

Despite simplifying the composition, Avramidis ensures the executioners' dog remains present, a crucial detail introduced in the first plate. The dog plays a pivotal role in the story: Gollo demands proof of Genovefa's execution, ordering the executioners to bring him her eyes. When mercy stays their hand and they decide to let her go, they substitute the dog's eyes instead. By including the dog, Avramidis once again demonstrates his careful attention to narrative detail,



Figure 6: Ceramic plate, 1910-1915. Workshop: Minas Avramidis. 36.5 x 5 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Collection, PMK 546.



Figure 7: Ceramic plate, 1910-1915. Workshop: Minas Avramidis. 74.5 x 4.6 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Archive, PMK 547.

enriching even minor elements in his composition with symbolic weight.

In the third plate, Avramidis depicts Sizefri's reunion with his wife and their son, Benon. Avramidis includes only a single tree to suggest the forest setting, keeping the background minimal to focus attention on the figures. He depicts Genovefa extending her hand to Sizefri, emphasizing their reunion. Avramidis changes the color of Genovefa's dress because,

from the story, he knows she used the fur of an animal to keep warm, so he applies manganese purple to depict the fur—a color that was very unstable in the firing process and required significant expertise to execute. Avramidis positions Sizefri at the center of this composition, flanked by Benon on the left and Genovefa on the right. Here, Avramidis emphasizes Benon's role in the story by depicting him gathering plants—a task he performs to provide food for his mother



Figure 8: The story of Genovefa (scene 3). Chromolithograph, 1900–1902. Artist: Sotiris Christidis. 71.4 × 60 cm. Suna and İnan Kırac Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Archive, KCVSA_000002.



Figure 9: Ceramic plate, 1910–1915. Workshop: Minas Avramidis. 35.5 × 5 cm. Suna and İnan Kırac Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Archive, PMK 548.

before Sizefri's arrival. With Genovefa weakened by illness, she relies on her son, whom she has raised as a good Christian. Additionally, Avramidis makes sure to include the Bible that Genovefa always kept with her, thereby emphasizing her faith and morality. Understanding the deer's symbolic importance, Avramidis ensures its presence in the scene as well. In the story, the deer serves as a guardian, providing protection and sustenance to Genovefa and Benon throughout their years of exile.

In the fourth plate, Avramidis depicts Sizefri leading his wife, Genovefa, and their son, Benon, on their journey home. Alongside the central figures, Avramidis includes a soldier accompanying Sizefri, reinforcing the sense of their return to Brabant. With his left arm, Sizefri embraces Genovefa, while his other hand clasps Benon's. He specifically depicts Genovefa with a pale face, differing from Christidis's version, to foreshadow her impending death after reuniting with her family.

Avramidis shows Benon embracing the deer, which had helped them survive during their exile. The deer is adorned with a wreath around its neck, symbolizing its crucial role in the story. To integrate Benon into the central composition, Avramidis adjusts the placement of the deer. Finally, Avramidis prominently depicts a yellow cross around Benon's neck, reinforcing the story's moral and religious themes of faith and virtue.

The overall details indicate that Minas Avramidis knew the story well. Rather than simply copying Christidis's lithograph, he emphasized key figures and elements to convey the story's central message. Yet in his unique adaptation of Genovefa, Avramidis not only demonstrated his creative and aesthetic skills; he also, perhaps unintentionally, revived Kütahya's tradition of narrative painting on ceramics after an interlude of nearly two centuries,²⁵ since the painting of the tiles in the Surp Hagop Church illustrating scenes from Christ's life.



Figure 10: The story of Genovefa (scene 4). Chromolithograph, early twentieth century.. Artist: Sotiris Christidis. 63 × 47.2 cm. Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation, Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics Archive, KCVSA_000003.

The Genovefa plates symbolize what Minas Avramidis and his fellow artisans achieved in the field of Kütahya tilework and ceramic art. From a distance, one might criticize the composition as merely copying Sotiris Christidis's lithograph. However, Avramidis incorporated his own original perspective into the details, drawing on his knowledge of the story. His approach aligns with that of the other early twentieth-century masters of Kütahya, who, while respecting tradition and drawing inspiration from established compositions, reinterpreted traditional İznik and Kütahya motifs by introducing unique and genuine innovations in the details. The Genovefa plates stand as a testament to this artistic and technical achievement and reflect decades of training in tile and ceramics craftsmanship.

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<https://doi.org/10.53979/yillik.1843559>

1 Christie's, "Quatre plats par Menas Avraamoulou (Mina Avramidis), 1877-1954," lot 39 in Live Auction 5505: Arts d'Orient, incluant l'exceptionnelle collection de bijoux du Maroc de Monsieur Thau, Paris, December 18, 2007, <https://www.christies.com/lot/lot-5018774>.

2 Sanaa Afous, "Jean-Louis Thau: Grand collectionneur de bijoux marocains," Come4News, October 15, 2012, <https://come4news.com/jean-louis-thau-grand-collectionneur-de-bijoux-marocains/>.

3 Previously, these plates were featured in two exhibitions at Pera Museum—one permanent and one temporary. They were part of the permanent collection exhibition Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics between 2008 and 2014. In 2023, marking the centennial of the Republic of Türkiye, the Suna and İnan Kırâç Foundation organized a temporary exhibition curated by Ulya Soley, entitled *Souvenirs of the Future*; the plates were displayed in *Memory of Objects*, one of the exhibition's four thematic sections.

4 This exhibition, opened on 28 May 2025, marks the twentieth anniversary of Pera Museum.

5 For Minas Avramidis's early life, see A. Charitonidou and N. Melidou-Kefala, *Ο Θανααστός Κόσμος του Μηνά Αβραμίδη, Κατάλογος Έκθεσης Δημήτρια ΚΕ' (Λαογραφικό και Εθνολογικό Μουσείο Μακεδονίας, 1990)*, 11.

6 Savvas Ephraïmidis, *Ιστορία-Λαογραφία του Κοτναίου (Κιουτάχειας) πόλεως της κεντρικής Μ. Ασίας* (Σπανίδη, 2011), 199.

7 Stefo Benlisoy, "Education in the Turcophone Orthodox Communities of Anatolia During the Nineteenth Century" (PhD diss., Boğaziçi University, 2010), 105-16.

8 David Blamires, "The Later Texts in Gustav Schwab's *Volksbücher*: Origins and Character," *The Modern Language Review* 94, no. 1 (1999): 112-14.

9 Charitonidou et al., *Ο Θανααστός Κόσμος*, 11.

10 See Beatrice St. Laurent, "From Bursa to Je-

rusalem: From Yeşil Türbe to the Dome of the Rock," in *History from Below: A Tribute to a Tribute in Memory of Donald Quataert*, ed. Selim Karahasanoğlu and Deniz Cenk Demir (Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2016), 338-47.

11 For an iconographic analysis comparing the Minassian Brothers' products and Minas Avramidis's works, see Yavuz Selim Güler, "Taşçı Minas Avramidis ve Genovefa Hikayesi / Stonemason Minas Avramidis and the Story of Genovefa," in *Sıradışı Minas: Kütahya Çini ve Seramiklerinde Esin ve Yeniliğin Hikayesi / Extraordinary Minas: The Story of Inspiration and Innovation in Kütahya Tiles and Ceramics* (Pera Museum, 2025), 84-87.

12 Ephraïmidis, *Ιστορία-Λαογραφία*, 80-81.

13 See the Mustafa Kerkük Archive; Rifat Çini, *Ateşin Yarattığı Sanat Kütahya Çiniciliği* (Celsus Publication, 2002), 164-65.

14 See the discussion in Müjde Dila Gümüş, "Esin ve Yenilik: Milli Mimaride Kütahya Çinileri / Inspiration and Innovation: Kütahya Tiles in National Style," in *Sıradışı Minas / Extraordinary Minas*, 36-77.

15 See Blamires, "The Later Texts in Gustav Schwab's *Volksbücher*," 112-14.

16 The summary of the story above is from a Karamanlidika version of the tale. See Evangelinos Misailidis, *Genovefa Hikâyesi: Tanzimat Dönemi'nin Unutulmuş Klasığı; Karamanlı Türkçesiyle*, trans. Perihan Kaya Tokbudak (Kabalcı Yayınları, 2020).

17 For the sources of the story of Genovefa, see Evangelia Balta, *Karamanlidika Studies Between the Greek and Ottoman Literary Legacy* (Koç University Press, 2025) 103-104.

18 Kaya Tokbudak, *Genovefa Hikâyesi*, 12.

19 Apostolos Dourvaris, *Σωτήριος Χρηστίδης 1858-1940* (Ε.Α.Ι.Α., 1993).

20 Ephraïmidis, *Ιστορία-Λαογραφία*, 80-81; Charitonidou et al., *Ο Θανααστός Κόσμος*, 11.

21 See *Annuaire Oriental: Commerce, industrie, administration, magistrature de l'Orient*, 33^e année (Annuaire oriental, 1913), 1713 (digitized version available through the website of Salt Research at <https://archives.saltresearch.org/handle/123456789/2878>).

22 Christie's, "Quatre plats par Menas Avraamoulou."

23 There were also attempts by the head of the Greek Orthodox community school in Kütahya, Kyriakos Panaretos, to encourage the community to hellenize the names of their pupils. See Ephraïmidis, *Ιστορία-Λαογραφία*, 205-6.

24 This iconographic analysis is based on my arguments in Güler, "Taşçı Minas Avramidis," 106-12.

25 In the early twentieth century, Armenian masters began to explore religious narrative painting, as evidenced by a hanging ornament dated 1912 in the Armenian Church of Surp Kevork in Didymoteicho.