

Joyful Majolica

These colorful ceramics are a rich realm for collectors.

By Doris Goldstein

In Italian it is “maiolica”; its Anglicized version is “majolica.” Regardless of the spelling, this tin-glazed earthenware decorated with colorful hues has been admired and prized throughout the centuries. The tradition began with Middle Eastern potters who developed a white tin-glaze to cover earthenware and created a surface for applying polychrome decoration. The invading Moors brought this technique to Spain in the eighth century; by the 14th century, Spain was exporting metallic lusterware to Italy via the Mediterranean island of Majorca.

Indeed, it has long been thought that “majolica” was derived from “Majorca,” which Dante referred to in his “Divine Comedy” as the “isola de Majolica.” But there are other theories. For example, Wendy Watson, author of *Italian Renaissance Ceramics from the Howard I. and Janet H. Stein Collection and the Philadelphia Museum of Art*, contends the word stems from the Spanish *obra de Mallequa* (“Malaga wares”), a term used for the lustered pottery of Hispano-Moresque Spain.

Once in Italy, majolica became maiolica, and from the late 14th through 16th centuries the production of ceramics flourished in centers such as Faenza, Florence, Gubbio, Siena and Deruta. A variety of wares were made, including drug and apothecary jars for storing herbs, drugs and spices; *piatto da pompa* (display plate), a specialty of Deruta meant to hang on the wall; tableware

usually bearing a family’s coat-of-arms; and objects for daily use. In March 2003, Christie’s Paris sold a superb maiolica example from the estate of Cecile de Rothschild: a circa-1520 plate from Faenza depicting a young man holding a banner, which brought \$336,386.

One of the most innovative types of maiolica was *istoriato* (narrative wares), which told a story. Introduced in the 16th century in the towns of Urbino and Pesaro, they often were based on the works of Renaissance artists, including Raphael and Albrecht Dürer.

By the 19th century, majolica, as it was now called, had come to mean a white earthenware pottery that had been painted with rich lustrous colors and finished with a clear lead glaze. The most famous name in Victorian majolica is Herbert Minton, a Stoke-on-Trent potter, who introduced his colorful high-relief earthenware at London’s 1851 Great



Exhibition.

Minton’s art director, Leon

Arnoux, was an admirer of Bernard Palissy’s 16th-century faience embellished with realistic three-dimensional snakes, lizards and insects on plates and vases. Minton sought to imitate Palissy’s use of natural themes but chose a menagerie of ducks, rabbits, foxes and geese instead of reptiles and sea creatures.

Other potters followed. In 1861, George Jones introduced majolica oyster plates, sardine boxes and game pie dishes

An Italian majolica plate from Faenza (above), 1510–20. A collection of George Jones’s works (below, left to right): Majolica cobalt blue-ground large mug, 1872; strawberry spoon, c. 1880; majolica cobalt blue-ground “full nest” game pie dish and cover, 1875; majolica cobalt blue-ground “hunting” beer jug and cover, c. 1875.

