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Majolica: A Guide to the Authentic, Repros. ANTIQUE VICTORIAN MAJOLICA

A Collector's Guide to Authentication & Spotting Reproductions and Fakes

What it is, what it isn't, where it came from, and how to recognize it.

Where it came from: Majolica (pronounced “mah-joll-ick-ah”, with an accent on the “joll”), as we think of it today, is a fairly recent invention, having been created in 1851 by Herbert Minton and Leon Arnoux, of the famous Minton company in Great Britain. Both men were fascinated by the arts of the Italian Renaissance, including the Italian pottery known as *maiolica*. Inspired by the historic maiolica, the two men developed a modern version and called it “imitation majolica” as an homage to the pottery’s Italian roots.

What it is: By definition, majolica (with a J) is soft-paste earthenware that has been fired to the biscuit stage, then coated with an opaque lead or tin (or both) glaze, which is allowed to dry. After this preliminary glaze dries, the decoration is painted on with bright, colorful metal-oxide glazes. The piece is then fired again, resulting in the brilliant and glossy finish for which majolica is most well-known.

What it isn't: Being brightly colored and glossy doesn't make a piece majolica, nor does the use of metal oxide glazes render a piece majolica. Stoneware, parian, and creamware have all been known to be glazed with metal-oxide glazes—but they are still stoneware, parian, and creamware, not majolica. *Maiolica*, the Italian forebear of majolica, also used an opaque tin glaze, which was allowed to dry, then painted with metal oxide glazes, which were then fired. After this firing, the piece was then coated with a clear lead glaze and fired again. This second glaze protected the colorful surface. Majolica’s Italian predecessor, Maiolica, is often seen without relief molding on the surface, while Victorian majolica is almost always relief molded.

Some Majolica Myths

Myth 1: All majolica has a “wet bottom” (wet = glazed). This is completely untrue. There are many majolica pieces that have unglazed bottoms or unglazed feet. This myth arose because all majolica had a preliminary opaque glaze of tin or lead enamel on which the bright colored designs were painted in metal-oxide glazes. Sometimes pieces were dipped in this preliminary glaze, hence the “wet bottom” myth, but just as often the preliminary glaze was painted on with a brush. A dry bottom, feet, or table ring does not mean the piece is fake. Most often, dry bottoms are encountered on examples from continental Europe, especially France.

Myth 2: Majolica was not made in a mold. This, too, is nonsense! Almost all majolica was made in molds. In fact, I’ve never seen a piece that wasn’t produced in a mold, although I suppose theoretically it is possible. Every reference work on majolica mentions the molds, and the fact that the molds wore out often and had to be replaced. Sometime in the latter half of the 20th century, the famous French majolica firm, St. Clement, purchased the molds of the defunct, but just as famous, French majolica firm, Sarreguemines. If majolica wasn’t made in molds, I would think the St. Clement company would have known it!

Myth 5: Majolica was not mass-produced and each piece is unique: This is really more of a half-myth, than a full one. Majolica was mass-produced for the expanding middle class of the Victorian era. Thousands of nearly identical pieces were made with only tiny variations between each piece. No two pieces came out of the factory absolutely identical because each piece was hand-painted by a worker (usually a young girl) who tried to duplicate a master's copy of the piece. This "master copy" sat before her on the workbench as a sample of how the piece should be painted.

Myth 6: Majolica was a very expensive, and "high art", product at the time: The vast majority of majolica produced during the Victorian era was mass-produced, easily available, and relatively cheap. The whole purpose of its introduction was to make the niceties indulged in by the wealthy available to the middle class. It made it possible for this middle class to mimic at least some of the sumptuous lifestyle of the wealthy—a majolica strawberry or oyster service was significantly less expensive than a fine porcelain one. With the exception of a handful of makers such as Minton and Wedgwood, which did produce pieces which would qualify as "high art", majolica was a fairly pedestrian product. In fact, as majolica lost public favor in the 1920's and 30's, it devolved to the status of carnival favors and fairings.

Myth 7: All majolica crazes over time and its presence is an indication of age: Uhh, not quite. Crazing is a confusing topic, so let's start at the beginning. Crazing is the tiny spiderweb-like crackled lines you can see in the glaze on many pieces of pottery, including majolica. It is caused by the clay cooling and drying at a different rate than the glaze. Crazing can happen immediately upon firing because the potter used unstable glazes; it can happen because of incompatibility between the clay and the glaze; it can happen due to exposure to extremes in temperature and humidity; or it can happen as part of the normal aging process of a piece of earthenware. Unfortunately, in an effort to deceive us, many modern reproductions are intentionally crazed at the factory. The crazing on these pieces is oddly uniform and it is distinguishable from true age-crazing. The photo below shows intentional crazing on modern majolica reproductions. Note the uniformity and the strangely flat appearance of the crazing.

Compare the photos above to the photos below. The pictures below show true age crazing on pieces that are more than 100 years old. Note that the tan glaze is not stained while the aqua is. Crazing can stain due to exposure to water, food, smoke, etc. But the presence of discoloration on crazing is not necessarily an indication of age. The fakes shown above both demonstrate intentional staining. Notice that the authentic crazing below has sharper edges and generally speaking, more acute angles than the fakes above.

It is very difficult to put this across with pictures on the internet, and I urge you to compare pieces in person. You will be able to see the differences clearly when you have the pieces in hand. Once you become familiar with the look and feel of the intentional crazing, you'll be able to distinguish it fairly easily, even in photos.

OK, If Those Are Myths, What Should I Look For?

Incomplete Glaze on Interior: OK, let me be clear here. The color may not extend all the way down the interior of a vase or other piece, it may fade to a natural biscuit color, but the glaze does extend all the way. If you can see raw clay on the interior of a piece, it is recent (and probably Chinese).

Exterior relief pattern is clearly visible on the interior: New majolica is made by slip-

casting, and the exterior relief is clearly visible on the inside of the piece. Old majolica was made by pressing the clay into the molds, making for thicker walls. If the piece is thin and you can see every detail of the relief design on the interior, you are looking at a new piece. Now that doesn't mean you can't see any change in shape on the interior, but if you can see each flower petal, or twining vine, shy away from it unless you want a new piece!

A solid interior, but a tiny hole in the handle: Some fake-makers are getting slick. They've learned that collectors are looking for the tell-tale signs of a hole on the interior. So they've adapted, and are putting a tiny firing hole in the hollow handle (or other projecting hollow part), but they're trying to hide it from you. Turn the piece upside down and look at the very base of the handle—it's a favorite spot for hiding a firing hole!

Incised letters M and W on the base: Some of the best reproductions carry this mark. Now, this isn't to say that there are no authentic old pieces that might have these letters on the base. But if you find them, and see other indicators that make you suspicious, it might be a good idea to take a pass on that piece!

Reddish-tan clay used on "European" figural humidors: This one is a big tell! Just take a look at the interior rim of the lid, or the table ring on the base, if it's red-tan, leave it alone. These fakes were made in imitation of highly collectible antique Austrian and German figural majolica humidors. The genuine pieces will have a whitish clay, nothing you would ever mistake for the fake reddish ones. Another good indicator of a true vintage continental European piece is if it has impressed numbers in the base.

A brief word about Sarreguemines and St. Clement French Majolica

St. Clement, which is still in business, is currently producing reproductions of some of their most popular vintage patterns, including dinnerware, vases, and figural pitchers, such as the duck, rooster, duckling hatching, cat, penguin, and marabout (among others). All of these pieces are available new in the St. Clement factory store in France. To complicate matters, St. Clement acquired some of the old Sarreguemines molds when Sarreguemines went defunct, and they are producing some of the old Sarreguemines products. None of these are being made or marketed by St. Clement as fakes; they are making them as current reproductions of vintage pieces, but unfortunately, some people are selling them as vintage. The pitchers, especially, are popular targets. Here are a few points to distinguish old from new.

Very glassy, glossy, glaze: See the photos below of the parrot and duck. Notice the glaze is not glassy, as it is in the detail photos of the feet on the new rooster and duck pitchers.

A very acid lime-green used on the piece: Compare the greens used on the feet of the new duck and rooster pitchers to the green found on the old parrot and duck pitchers. This neon green was beyond the technological scope of the time. If this color is present—it's not old!