

# **Majolica Matters!**

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

## **“Beasts, Bugs, and Begonia Leaves”**

**Lightner Museum**

**St. Augustine, Florida**

*“A book is good but museums show the real thing.” -- Austin L. Rand*

So it says on the frontispiece of the Lightner Museum’s brochure. Residing in the lavish former Hotel Alcazar, the Lightner Museum in St. Augustine, Florida was founded by Otto C. Lightner, the wealthy Chicago publisher of Hobbies Magazine who was “an ardent collector of Victoriana” with two mansions full of the “glittering relics of that bygone era.” The hotel was built in 1887 by the renowned Florida developer Henry M. Flagler, a man whom Lightner “idolized as one of the 19th century’s greatest Americans.” Designed by the architects of the U.S. Senate Office building and the New York Public Library, the Alcazar featured Tiffany windows and glassware, which fifty years later Lightner was eagerly collecting.

The prescient Mr. Lightner said that, “Father Time is the only manufacturer of as the decades go by Victorian material will become more and more scarce and valuable.” In keeping with its avowed purpose of “collecting, preserving, and exhibiting objects from the 19th century,” the Lightner Museum will be featuring until November 6 an exhibit of Victorian majolica on the third floor in its Transition Gallery. After several years planning for this exhibit, the Museum’s storehouses were scoured for majolica and contributions were sought from private collectors, and since there are antiques shops adjacent to the rear of the Museum, some dealers also lent special pieces. “Beasts, Bugs, and Begonia Leaves” features massive museum-sized pieces as well as many smaller examples.

If you find yourself in Florida this fall, please set aside a day to visit the Lightner Museum in St. Augustine and see the majolica exhibit and the Museum’s wonderful collection of Victorian delights in the regal space of the former Hotel Alcazar. You will not be disappointed.

“Beasts, Bugs, and Begonia Leaves”

For more information, please call: Lightner Museum Ph: 904-824-2874

## **Letter to the Editor**

**Re: Ian Smythe’s “Letter from London” in the Summer 1994 issue of Majolica Matters**

In connection with research I have been conducting on a forthcoming book, your readers may be interested in some additional comments.

First and foremost, to date there are no plates that anyone can state with certainty are the work of Bernard Palissy for he never signed his pieces. Most museums have consequently revised their

# Majolica Matters!

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

signage to say, “In the style of Bernard Palissy” or “In the manner of the workshop of Bernard Palissy.” (See article by Leonard Amico, 1987, The Authentic Rustic Ceramics of Bernard Palissy, and an article by Dominique Poulain, 1993, Rustic Wares from the Lyon Museum of Fine Arts.) On the other hand, there are literally thousands of fragments from Palissy’s workshop near the Louvre that have been recovered and can be found in various museums in France such as the Carnvalet in Paris and the Ceramics Museum in Sevres.

The photographs in Ian Smythe’s article show a plate that is certainly in the style of Bernard Palissy, and who knows, could be an authentic work from the master’s hand. It could also have been made in the 17th, 18th, or 19th century, unless thermoluminescent testing proved otherwise; in which case, the date of firing can only be determined plus or minus 100 years depending on the composition of the clay. A similar plate is found in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art which thermoluminescent testing at Oxford University revealed to be from the nineteenth century.

With respect to the plate shown, it appears to have been made from a one-piece mold with hand worked hollows in the reverse side. Based on my studies, this method would have been simpler and less time consuming than press molding the individual animals and arranging them with slip on the plate. It is likely that several or more casts were made from the same mold. According to various accounts of Palissy’s life, the “Master of Saintes” made his original plaster molds by affixing actual animals, leaves, shells, pebbles, etc., onto a metal or ceramic plate from which the plaster impression was made.

The hollows on the reverse were probably dug out by hand. Hollows can also be found on some 19th century plates, particularly very large pieces with very high motifs. The reason for hollows is as true now as it was in the 16th century. Even with today’s sophisticated electric kilns, it is very difficult to fire a solid thickness of clay greater than an inch or so. As a result, the thickness is usually hollowed out from the back, or more commonly, the animal would be hollow molded in a separate step and then attached to the plate with slip before firing. I do hope these additional comments will help to elucidate Ian’s very interesting article.

Very truly yours,  
Marshall P. Katz  
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

*“It was during the nineteenth century that time changed from a phenomenon rooted in nature and God to an arbitrary abstraction based on a machine. The mass production of watches and clocks, including time clocks to be punched by shifts of workers, imposed new patterns of discipline. And this, in turn, prompted nostalgic laments for the restoration of what was thought to be the frugality and simplicity of an earlier time, before regimentation was synchronized by the clock.”*

Wendell Garrett, The Magazine Antiques, March 1994

# **Majolica Matters!**

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

## **Majolica: The Real Thing or Phony Fake?**

by Polly Wilbert

As a compulsive reader of home decorating and antiques magazines (to the point where when House & Gardens met its demise in the U.S. market about a year ago, I began to read House & Gardens from the U.K.) and as a majolica collector, I am always interested to see majolica pictured in the glossy pages of a colorful periodical. It delights me to find that there are others who love majolica and I am always curious to see what someone else collects.

Therefore, it was with great interest that I noted several pieces of majolica in the September issue of Country Homes (also from England) in an article on the “Mediterranean look” in pottery. One very attractive majolica platter was described as a “sweet corn plate” (price 125 pounds), which made me wonder whether the editors even knew that it was majolica. (This same issue also featured a photograph of the kitchen in a French house with a cupboard full of majolica mouth pouring pitchers.) A few days later, as I was going through my mail, I was further struck by a picture in the September-October issue of Southern Accents of a collection of majolica in the Virginia country home of two decorators, wherein both antique and reproduction pieces were displayed together. This last casual and somewhat jarring mixture of majolica, old and “new”, was something that I first encountered in a visit to an antiques shop on the main street of Franklin, Tennessee this past spring. In fact, many reproduction pieces were displayed right alongside the real thing in a very colorful display that filled the shop’s street window. Friends who were with me and who don’t collect majolica kept asking, “Is that majolica?” I explained that, as far as I was concerned, some was and some wasn’t, but the mixture was very confusing to them.

A year or so ago, in an exclusive antiques shop on Boston’s Newbury Street, I saw three majolica pitchers with an identical strawberry pattern that I had never seen before. I asked to look at one of them and wondered how there could be three identical pitchers in a pattern new to me in one place? Had they all come from the same collector? A little warning bell went off in my head, however, and when I saw several more of these very same pitchers at the next large antiques show in my area, I knew I was seeing my first “majolica fakes.” What was most disturbing about these pieces, however, was that their weight seemed right, the colors and glaze were certainly in line with the real thing, and there was an indecipherable English registry mark embossed on the bottom. Where was this “majolica” coming from?

Over the past few months, I have received a number of notes and phone calls from fellow Society members remarking on the number of “fakes” they are seeing. In addition, Maine Antiques Digest ran an article this summer describing the trail of a man in a car with Virginia license plates selling “phony” majolica. These included pieces with “quilted strawberry and stork-in-marsh patterns.” This “majolica” was further described as “looking so good that unless you’re a real connoisseur, you are not going to know [that they are fakes].”

# Majolica Matters!

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

What does one conclude from all of this? Apparently, someone somewhere (and possibly more than one someone) is producing majolica of a caliber as to be fairly readily mistaken for the real thing. Doubtless the ever-increasing prices of antique majolica would give the dishonest plenty of incentive to produce the fakes. That activity in conjunction with the flood into the marketplace of reproduction majolica and its ready mixture with antique pieces results in confusion for the collector.

So, how do we protect ourselves? While there is no one foolproof way to separate the very good fake or reproduction from the real thing, there are a number of guidelines that one can use when examining a piece of majolica.

The following guidelines and recommendations were published in the April 1994 issue of Antique & Collectors Reproduction News (and are reprinted here with permission):

1. **Handles on new majolica - pitchers, creamers, urns, etc. - are generally hollow and form a hole where they join the body.** This is because the new pieces are cast in a mold as one single unit. Handles on old pieces were made separately as a solid piece and then applied to the body.
2. **The pattern on the outsides of new majolica can usually be clearly seen on the inside.** This is also from the new pieces being cast. Old pieces were generally made by hand pressing strips of clay into a mold. You may find the occasional bump or depression on the insides of old pieces, but virtually never find distinct shapes such as flower petals, vines, etc. The walls of most new pieces, though, are much thinner because they have been slip cast.
3. **A solid white colored bottom generally indicates a reproduction.** Almost all - old majolica has colored bottoms or at the very least some type of spattered or sponged-on color that hides imperfections and random paint drops.
4. **A bisque finish on insides and bottoms of pieces usually means a piece is new.** Almost all Victorian majolica was meant to be used. You couldn't very well serve milk out of a pitcher that wasn't glazed inside because the bisque surface could never be properly cleaned.
5. **If the decoration, design or shape prevents a piece of tableware from functioning as a piece of tableware, it usually means a piece is new.** Again, original majolica was made for everyday use. Reproductions are made to be looked at. If a piece appears impractical or too delicate to be used at a 19th century dining table, it is probably new.

# **Majolica Matters!**

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

## **Other Considerations:**

New pieces made in new molds taken from old originals can include the old marks that were on the originals. Colored and painted bottoms don't necessarily guarantee a piece is old nor is weight alone a reliable indicator of age. True, many new pieces, particularly ones with hollow handles are lighter than old counterparts but many new pieces, particularly plates and trays are also very nearly identical in weight to the originals.

Your best protection is not to rely on any one test or guideline but to base your decision on as many tests and general guidelines as possible.

*Quoted portions of this article are reprinted from the April 1994 issue of Antique & Collectors News (ACRN), the monthly illustrated newsletter on antique fakes and reproductions.*

*1 yr. subscription: \$32.*

*ACRN, P0 Box 71174, Des Moines, IA 50325*

## **Another Majolica First...**

Seen careening from antiques show to auction up and down the East Coast, the MajoliCar is ready to deal! In what may or may not be a healthy sign that our hobby is coming into its own, John Collins of Saratoga Springs, New York has purchased what may be the first "MAJOLICA" automobile license plate. Our other New York State members are now out of luck. But, will this set a trend? Will MIS members in other states that offer personalized plates also sport MAJOLICA front and back? Well, honk if you love George Jones! !

## **What Keeps Majolica Collectors Going Through Winter's Dark Days?:**

### **Visions of Sunny Atlanta!**

As the days get shorter, those of us who live in the east and perhaps others across the country as well, are dogged by the painful memories of last year's awful winter.

But wait, this year a majolica solution to abate dread of the coming winter season is at hand! Plan a Majoliholiday with fellow congenial Society members in sunny southern Atlanta in early April! Have this warm and gracious southern locale in mind to get you through the coming snows. Attend the 1995 Annual Meeting and thaw out, see the spring blooms, and go back home tanned, re-charged, and with wonderful majolica in hand!

More information will be forthcoming in our next issue about the terrific programs in the works for our first annual meeting in the South. We can let you know this much now though: confirmation has just been received from one of the United Kingdom's most erudite and sought-after antiques experts that he will be joining us as our featured speaker on Saturday evening. This renowned and quite dapper gentleman is a featured star of one of the BBC's most popular television series, "The Antiques Road Show" and he is oft-quoted and his picture seen in many British antiques

# Majolica Matters!

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- *Fall 1994*

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

periodicals such as "Home & Antiques." A prolific author, an innovator of museum exhibits, and a "riveting" speaker, he has impressed his listeners with even the most off-the-cuff of remarks, as was the case when he was called upon not long ago to substitute for another presenter who was taken ill at the last moment.

Your Executive Committee is quite excited about our plans for Atlanta, for the chance to hear this highly regarded speaker, and for the opportunity to see a beautiful part of the country in its finest season in conjunction with two major antiques shows: Scott's and Lakewood! We will be devoting much of the winter issue of Majolica Matters to tell you about the plans for the annual meeting and the historical and sightseeing opportunities that Atlanta offers all of us. We've also arranged to hold our meeting at a luxurious 4-star hotel for a terrific room rate!

Save the dates now: Friday, April 7, Saturday, April 8 and Sunday, April 9, and fill your piggy bank as the snows pile up so that come the earliest signs of spring you can pamper yourself by heading south for a wonderful, warm Majoliholiday! (To Our Southern Members: We can't wait to partake of your famous Southern Hospitality!)

## **MajolicAds Work!** **"Together Again"**

You may recall that in the last issue of Majolica Matters John Collins included a photo of a candlestick with a request to find its mate. Well, it worked! The sharp-eyed Ron Guernsey of Orlando, Florida spotted the mate in the Baytree Delectable Collections in Micanopy, Florida. It had been consigned there by Max Nickerson of Gainesville, and Max provided the piece to John. John wishes to personally thank Ron, Max, and the staff of Majolica Matters for their collective help in uniting these two interesting pieces.

Clearly, if you're looking for a piece of majolica, your membership newsletter Majolica Matters can be of assistance.

## **Leo Lerman: 1914-1994 Legendary Figure. Legendary Friend**

by Marilyn G. Karmason

Leo Lerman, who spent more than half a century as editor, writer, critic, and the last ten years as editorial advisor to Conde Nast magazines, died on August 22 at the age of 80. His life was filled with music, literature, theater, art, the world of publications ... and with a tremendous network of famous friends in these fields. His home was a salon, he greeted visitors with, "Tell me all!" His knowledge, aesthetic appreciation, and his ability to predict trends resulted in the development of such magazines as: Mademoiselle, Vogue, Vanity Fair, Gourmet, and The New Yorker.

Leo's greatest legacy may be his inspiration and his kindness to his many protégés: I was one of them. Not an editor of The New York Times nor of Vogue, but a majolica collector.



# **Majolica Matters!**

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF THE MAJOLICA INTERNATIONAL SOCIETY

Originally Published- **Fall 1994**

This online version has minor omissions from the original.

Majolica International Society, Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, NY 10021

I was introduced to Mr. Lerman in 1984 by a very generous and erudite friend who said, "Leo feels it is very important to have a book on majolica!" I met Leo who then immediately wrote to the right person at Harry N. Abrams, special editor Robert Morton. There was a majolica love-fest among us and work was begun.

Leo really did love his majolica and he gleefully described his first purchases of plates in the early 1940s, for one dollar apiece ... and he still treasured them. He felt that majolica captured the art and spirit of Victoriana. He was delighted with the formation of the Majolica International Society, enjoyed being a charter member, and asked frequently about our progress!

Joan Stacke-Graham and I visited and took photographs at Leo's home. There was a veritable treasure trove of Victoriana, complete with Belter furniture, beaded needlepoint pillows, flowers under glass domes, treenware, shell-decorated etageres, agate wares, gouaches of erupting volcanoes, Tiffany lamps, paintings and needlepoints of dogs, mountains of books ... and majolica. No other home ever was like that.

And no other man was like Leo, except for Gray Foy, his companion for 47 years. Together they knew everything, and imparted everything to us that made writing Majolica such a special adventure. I visited Leo in the hospital just before he died: he admonished me that it was time to start another adventure. He was ill, frail, could barely see, heard everything, forgot nothing, and kept uppermost in his mind that research and learning must go on, that new adventures must be pursued.

Indeed, in the last months of his life, he continued, despite his infirmities, to work on his memoir for Random House, Call It Friendship. Call It Love. Leo had written three books: one each on Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo, and the third, The Museum: 100 Years and the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Our last meeting at Leo's "salon" will be his memorial service, to be held appropriately at the Metropolitan Museum.

We hope that Gray will complete Leo's memoirs so that we may have magical memories of this legendary figure and friend.