

MARKETPLACE

Victorian Majolica

by Frank Donegan

Despite their prosaic image, the Victorians were not immune to flights of whimsy, a trait abundantly evident in the majolica pottery that was ubiquitous in their homes. These brilliantly colored, flamboyant wares—which include teapots shaped like monkeys and plates that resemble butterflies or shells or sunflowers—cannot by any stretch of the imagination be called sober or dull.

During the past decade, trendy New York decorators and an avid though small group of serious collectors have pushed this market to surprising heights. "I've seen things go for ten and twenty-five times more than they did ten years ago," says Dr. Marilyn Karmason, a leading authority on the subject who bought her first piece for \$15 about fifteen years ago. Today, common examples sell in the \$100-to-\$500 range, and rarities command five-figure prices.

Even in a recession that has affected many segments of the antiques market, majolica prices have remained buoyant.


Joan Bogart, a Roslyn, New York, dealer in Victorian furniture and decorations, reports, "It's one of the strongest markets out there right now. The shelter magazines have been picturing majolica in fancy homes, and it has become very chic among a certain group of people." How chic? "I was exhibiting at a show in the Park Avenue armory in New York," continues Ms. Bogart. "An elderly lady who lived in a building opposite the armory came to my booth and looked and looked. Finally she bought a majolica cup and saucer. She came back three hours later and bought another piece. She came back again and again, and by the end of the show she had cleaned me out. She replaced all her early Chinese export porcelain with majolica."

Victorian Majolica. Although the Victorians didn't invent majolica-style pottery, collectors who use the word *majolica* today invariably mean the Victorian product. Actually a type of pottery, a soft earthenware covered with bright tin


and lead glazes, majolica has been around for at least a thousand years and was made by Persian, Arab-Hispanic, and Italian potters during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. The word derives from *Majorca*, the island in the Mediterranean where the clay that the early potters needed was plentiful. Victorian majolica is a distinct market, and the term *majolica* in this article refers only to the popular Victorian product.

With a few notable exceptions, Victorian majolica was never meant to be particularly valuable. Although such great English firms as Minton, Wedgwood, and George Jones produced some fine examples, hundreds—if not thousands—of other companies in Europe and America also made majolica, the vast majority of it aimed at a middle-class market. It injected an affordable note of color and playfulness into Victorian decor, and between 1850 and 1900 there was hardly a home that didn't contain at least one piece.


Victorians loved novelty. Majolica satisfied that craving by drawing its inspiration with indiscriminate cheerfulness from history and nature. Classical gods and goddesses romped about pieces that




The wit and charm of a cat-and-mouse teapot (left), made by Minton in 1881, helped it fetch a record price of \$14,300.



Despite minor chips in the spout and collar insert, this circa-1874 monkey teapot (left) brought a respectable price of \$2,640.



An 1867 Gothic lazy Susan (right), boasting a stylized design and a shaped rim, sold for \$880.



With a serving spoon, this matching set of strawberry servers, ca 1876, went for \$3,025.

imitated the works of Renaissance potters Luca della Robbia and Bernard Palissy. Other examples were loosely based on medieval, ancient Egyptian, and Oriental sources. Plants and animals were everywhere—sometimes as surface decoration, sometimes as the very form of a piece. In a way never envisioned by the modernists who coined the phrase “Form follows function,” the forms of majolica often define the piece’s function. Dr. Karmason, a psychiatrist and coauthor with Joan Stacke of the recent book *Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey*, says, “A game-pie dish may have rabbits and game birds on it; a nut dish may have a squirrel as its handle.” One turkey pie tureen in the authors’ joint collection is a yellow covered basket resting on blue turkeys; a white turkey is the handle on the cover.

Price Trends. Majolica is appealing because it is fun. Even though the prices may be serious, the forms rarely are. Take, for example, a teapot that sold last winter for \$14,300 at Skinner’s auction gallery in Bolton, Massachusetts. A fully modeled cat sitting atop its handle looks down hungrily at a mouse forming the knob on the teapot’s cover. Made by the

Flamboyant and playful, majolica adds its own bit of whimsy to a recession market

Minton firm in England, it had what every majolica collector dreams of: wit, charm, high-quality modeling, beautiful light-blue color, and rarity.

The majority of majolica table wares sold in this country don’t cost that much, but they are not cheap. The most desirable pieces start at about \$2,000. At Skinner’s, for instance, a charming pair of strawberry dishes with flower-shaped cups sold for \$3,025; an 1874 Minton teapot in the form of a monkey brought \$2,640, and a surprisingly austere Minton wine cooler went for \$2,640.

Not all majolica was destined for the dining or tea table. Indeed, many of the earliest pieces that Minton produced starting about 1850 were palace-size articles designed for the homes of the British upper classes. The firm once made a thirty-six-foot majolica fountain depicting Saint George and the dragon. Other rarities include full-size statues of blackmoors and wonderful garden seats. Stuart Slavid, ceramics expert at Skinner’s,

reports, “One of those mammoth pieces—a ten-foot fountain or a blackmoor—could bring \$30,000 or \$40,000.” Although none has surfaced at auction recently, some rare examples sold in July, 1990, at a London auction. A wonderful pair of garden seats shaped like monkeys sold for the equivalent of \$14,000; another pair of Oriental-style garden seats brought about \$10,500; and a thirty-three-inch statue of a fawn fetched more than \$12,000.

American Majolica. Not surprisingly, there is avid interest in American majolica. Although some six hundred American firms made majolica, serious collectors focus on a few of the better ones, such as Griffen, Smith and Hill of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, which marketed its product under the “Etruscan” name; Chesapeake Pottery in Maryland (whose products are often marked “Avalon” or “Clifton”); and the New Milford-Wannoppee Pottery in Connecticut. Collectors continue to seek American wares, even though they didn’t equal the quality of the best English factories. The most popular American pattern is probably Griffen, Smith and Hill’s delicate shell-and-seaweed design, which was produced in such a huge variety of forms that collectors can assemble large sets. Linda Ketterling, a Toledo, Ohio, antiques dealer who specializes in majolica, adds, “Eight-inch plates run about \$300 to \$400; teapots, \$800 to \$1,200; cake platters, \$900 to \$1,200. Rare forms, like humidors, can bring \$2,500 or more.”

Rarity alone does not make a piece of majolica expensive. “This is a very visual collectible,” says Stuart Slavid. “The pieces become part of people’s homes, and if they’re not beautiful, they’re not valuable no matter how rare they are.” Color has a crucial impact on price. “Greens, pinks, and turquoises are the most popular,” explains Linda Ketterling. “Brown is the least desirable.”

Because majolica was mass-produced in molds, identical pieces appear in different colors. Slavid reports that he recently catalogued another cat-and-mouse teapot—this time with a white background—for an upcoming sale. “Even though the other one brought \$14,000,” he remarks, “I’m estimating this one at



Despite its jeweled border, the 1865 Minton wine cooler above, which sold for \$2,640, is austere compared to similar pieces.

The late-nineteenth-century cheese dish at right sold for \$1,210, well above the \$700 estimated price.



The array of designs appearing on this 1867 three-part butter dish raised its price to \$7,700.



Boasting fine texture and glass eyes, this seated cat, circa 1873, sold for \$5,775.



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\$1,500 to \$2,500 because it's just not as beautiful." (The cat-and-mouse teapot was also made in cobalt blue; one in that color would be extremely valuable.)

The quality of detail also affects price. "Muddy modeling diminishes the price no matter how colorful the piece is," Slavid explains. Examples that aren't crisp and bright don't interest advanced collectors, but they can tempt beginners because they are available in abundance. "There's lots of horrible majolica out there," Slavid adds.

Some knowledgeable observers feel that this market is relatively unsophisticated. "You get a lot of people who buy what their interior decorator tells them to buy," says Linda Ketterling. "Once they fill up a shelf or cupboard, you never see them again."

Condition. That lack of sophistication may explain a relatively lax attitude toward repairs and restoration. Although many collectors will not abide even small cracks or hairlines, they may pay substantial prices for pieces with major damage that have been artfully restored. "Damage that people can't see doesn't bother them so much," says Stuart Slavid. A piece with a major restoration may bring fifty percent more than an unrestored piece with the same amount of damage. Joan Bogart says that persuading majolica buyers *not* to buy overly restored pieces can be difficult: "I went with a client to England, where she saw a rooster teapot whose whole head from the neck up was new. It was £3,500, and she wanted it so badly that I had to shout at her not to buy it."

Repairs are sometimes difficult to spot. "Unfortunately, restorations have become the norm," Linda Ketterling explains. "Many pieces coming in from England have been so expertly restored that you need an eagle eye." She also relies on her sense of touch. "I feel the edges carefully," she continues, "run my hands over the piece, and feel for differences in thickness." Even the best restorer's repairs are slightly thicker or thinner than the original.

As majolica has become more popular, the number of reproductions and fakes has risen. "Reproductions are made in the Orient, the United States, and in Europe. Some are perfect," Dr. Karmason says. She notes that both the Metropolitan Museum and the Horchow catalogue have marketed reproductions. "Some places incise their names so you know the pieces are reproductions," she

More on Majolica

Organization. The **Majolica International Society** (Suite 103, 1275 First Avenue, New York, New York 10021) sponsors an annual meeting with a show and dealer sale. Membership (\$25/year) includes a subscription to the society's newsletter.

Museums. Examples of Victorian majolica can be seen at a number of small museums. The **East Liverpool Ceramic Museum** (400 East Fifth Street, East Liverpool, Ohio 43920, 216/386-6001) features pieces produced by the Morely Company of Ohio. The **Historical Society of Phoenixville** (P.O. Box 552, Phoenixville, Pennsylvania 19460, 215/935-7646) displays more than one hundred pieces of Etruscan majolica by Griffen, Smith and Hill. In New Hampshire, majolica works produced by local potters are on view at the **Keene Colony House Museum** (104 West Street, Keene 03431, 603/357-0889).

Books. Authoritative works on the subject are *Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey*, by Marilyn G. Karmason and Joan B. Stacke (Abrams, \$75), and *Majolica*, by Nicholas M. Dawes (Crown, \$40).

says, "but the ones with paper labels could be problems later." Although recognizing reproductions is difficult, she says, they often seem a bit lighter in weight, and their glazes may lack the depth of earlier glazes.

No one in the field believes that the past price escalation will last. "Prices went up by leaps and bounds, but I don't think that will continue during the next five years," Stuart Slavid says. Indeed, high prices have caused some earlier collectors to abandon the market. Linda Ketterling adds, "A client of mine who owns a steel company came back from England with only one plate because she had sticker shock." On the other hand, she notes, "while people are dropping out, just as many are coming in who accept these prices." That's rare in the antiques market—perhaps even rarer than cat-and-mouse teapots. □