

Putting Nature on the Table

Victorian Majolica

Charles Washburne, as told to John Fiske

All photographs from the inventory of Charles Washburne.

In 1848, two men, somewhat serendipitously, came together: If they had not, the brightly colored pottery that we know as majolica, or sometimes Victorian Majolica, might not have happened. Charles Washburne explained the origin and history of majolica (the “j” is pronounced to distinguish the ware from the seventeenth-century *maiolica* produced in Italy and Spain).

Herbert Minton was a true visionary in the pottery industry, and majolica sprang from his creative imagination combined with his sound business sense. In the 1840s, the typical English middle-class table was set with transferware or flow-blue, both today highly collectible, but to Minton’s eye, a bit boring and monochromatic. Minton saw all around him how the industrial revolution had increased middle-class prosperity, and he believed that the pottery market was ripe for something completely new.

Minton was himself an expert potter, capable of creating something that had never existed before. But he lacked expertise in glazing. Here, circumstances were on his side. The French Revolution had created economic instability in that country, so Minton was able to persuade a French glazing expert from Sèvres to join him in his new enterprise. In 1848, Leon Arnoux, a ceramic chemist, joined Herbert Minton, and the two set about creating a style of pottery that was unlike anything that had ever preceded it.



Palissy: Coffee pot with cabbage leaves for body and snake spout and handle.

The two men worked in private developing their new product, and then, in 1851, in the Great Exhibition at Crystal Palace, "Imitation Majolica," as it was briefly called, made its debut. And what a debut it was! Bright, clear, glistening colors; realistically modeled forms copied directly from nature; whimsy and humor not previously found on tableware; and all given life in a wide variety of forms that ranged from a six-foot tall peacock to a tiny butter pat dish. The British public loved it. So did Queen Victoria, and that was enough. Majolica boomed. By the 1870s almost every factory was producing its own form of Victorian Majolica, and until about 1890 its popularity soared.



Minton: Teapot with cockerel spout, monkey handle and snail finial.



Choisey le Roi: Swan vase with cat tail reeds.



Worcester: Bowl of shells with dolphin supports for use as a table center.

Minton's timing was perfect. The Victorians loved nature: They built conservatories on their houses so that they could bring it indoors and enjoy it year-round, they spent much of their new wealth on elaborate, romantic gardens, and then, in 1859, came Darwin's *Origin of Species*, which spurred a lively interest in animals and birds. Majolica, Victorian sensibility and nature walked hand in hand.

Production techniques

The most expensive part of making majolica was not pottery at all: It was carving a wooden model. This model was used to create plaster-of-Paris molds, many molds for most pieces. A liquid slip was then poured into the molds, where it ran into the smallest nooks and crannies. (Pressing clay into molds could not achieve the fineness of detail that Minton wanted.) These molds gradually wore down, and the first pieces

made from them show sharper edges and better defined details, and are thus more collectible, at least by specialists. The clay is then fired to 1100 degrees Fahrenheit to produce the biscuit stage. At this stage the biscuit is either an off-white color or sometimes a deep tan, depending on the clay that was used. Continental makers sometimes used red clay, which the English did not.

The biscuit was removed from the mold and then covered with a thick, opaque lead glaze. When this had set, brightly colored metal oxide glazes were painted on, and it was then given its second firing at 750 degrees. In the kiln, the residual moisture in the biscuit, the opaque lead glaze and the metal oxide glazes interacted to produce the deep, brilliant, translucent color that is unique to majolica.

The glazes were often used in powder form, sprinkled or thrown onto the surface. The lead glazes were porous, and we can sometimes see dirt in the crazing.

They were also toxic, and many glazers had short lives. Collectors should never use majolica for liquids, and, of course, should never put it in the dishwasher whose harsh chemicals will destroy the luster of the glaze.

These glazing techniques were developed from third-century Middle Eastern glazes, the appearance and the forms originated in eighth-century Spain and both were brought together in the *maiolica* of Renaissance Italy.

Palissy

There is a sub-category of majolica, known as "Palissy ware," where the love of nature is taken a step further. The sixteenth-century French potter, Bernard Palissy (c. 1510 – 1590) had produced a type of pottery that he called "*rustique*." It was decorated by the forms of usually aquatic creatures, such as fish, snails, lizards and snakes, which had

been cast from the creatures themselves, not from wooden models.

Palissy ware was revived in nineteenth-century France, first by Charles-Jean Avisseau of Tours, his relatives the Landais family of Tours, Georges Pull of Paris and the Mafra Pottery. Palissy ware was produced mainly in France and Portugal: Only a plate or two is known to have been made in England, but the English imported it in quantity.

Decline and dormancy

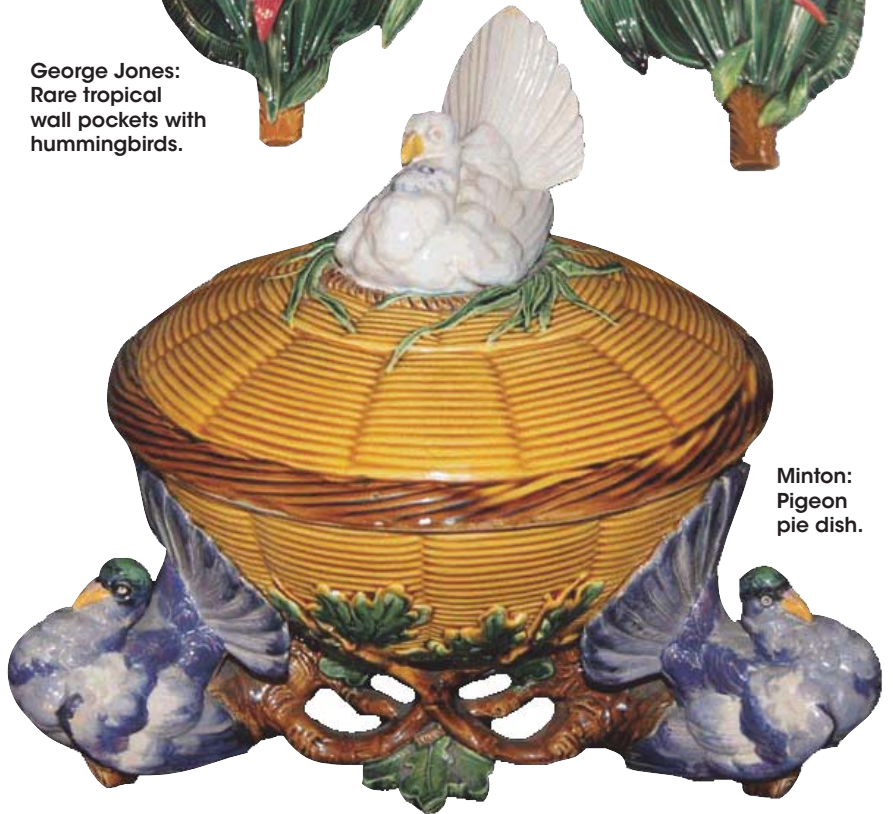
Toward the end of the nineteenth century, sensibilities changed. The Arts & Crafts movement gained momentum, in 1901 the queen died, and majolica's popularity decreased and its quality declined. The heyday was over. The taste for majolica lay dormant for 70 years or so, when it was known "poor man's porcelain," and was almost valueless. And then, in the 1970s and 80s, decorators in New York City rediscovered it and the revival of interest began.



Krause:
Tiger vase.



George Jones:
Rare tropical
wall pockets with
hummingbirds.



Minton:
Pigeon
pie dish.

For the last 20 years or so, demand for majolica has been strong. Its ability to serve as eye-catching accent pieces has endeared it to decorators, and its almost infinite variety of forms has attracted collectors. Never boring, always fresh and original, never like anything else -- majolica has proved to be just what Herbert Minton had hoped.

Charles Washburne is a leading specialist in English Majolica pottery made between 1850 and 1900. He also deals in European Majolica. He has been in business since 1983.

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Makers

Many potteries made majolica and many pieces are unsigned.

The most collectible English makers are Herbert Minton and George Jones (Jones is renowned for the naturalism of his modeling). Other makers include Wedgwood, Brown Westhead Moore, Copeland, Joseph Holdcroft, Brownfield & Royal Worcester.

In France, Sarreguines and Choisey le Roi are the most collectible potteries.

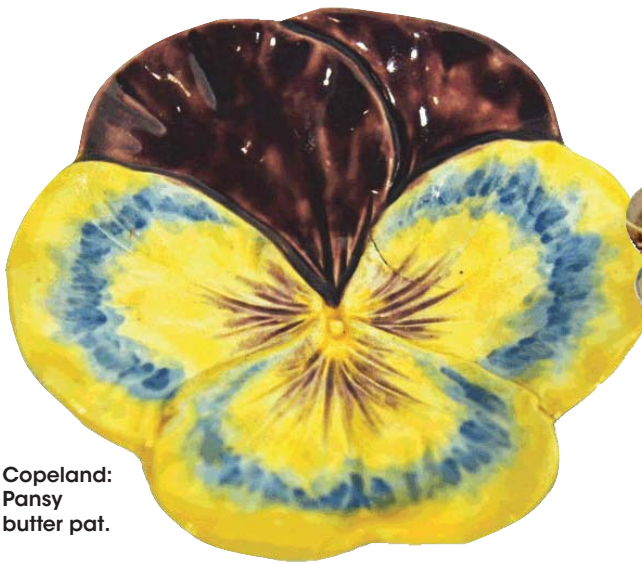
In Germany, Hugo Lonitz is sometimes called "the Minton of Germany," and the Krause pottery also produced quality wares.



Hugo Lonitz:
Pair of
planters.



Wedgwood: Salmon platter.



Copeland:
Pansy
butter pat.



Minton:
Oyster
server.



The St George and the Dragon Fountain

The summit of majolica production was probably this fountain of St George and the Dragon manufactured by Minton and designed by John Thomas for the 1862 Exhibition in London. The fountain was 36 feet high, 39 feet in diameter and was constructed of stone and majolica. On top was a figure of Saint George and the Dragon consisting of 379 pieces of majolica. Below it were smaller majolica fountains supported by heraldic British lions and on the next tier, stork and shell fountains. The fountains ran with scented water, perfumed by Rimmel and Co.

After the exhibition closed the fountain was displayed at the Bethnal Green Museum until 1962 when it was sold off in parts. The statue of George slaying the dragon from the top is now at the Potteries Museum in Stoke-on-Trent.



Palissy

Palissy ware is characterized by its forms cast directly from nature. Below left: A 16th-century platter by Bernard Palissy. Above right: A French, 19th-century lobster platter. Right: A 19th-century platter in the biscuit stage.



For more examples of English and European Majolica visit [Online Exclusive](#).