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The
Magic of
Majolica
Strawberry
dishes and
life-size
fishes

Out of
Obscurity
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decorative artist

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The Magic of Majolica

Strawberry dishes and life-size fishes, by Julie Carter

Wildly imaginative, boldly coloured and dramatic in appearance, majolica was developed at one of the most famous potteries in England, the Minton Porcelain Manufacturing Company.

It was the result of several years' work between Herbert Minton and Leon Arnoux, and its appearance at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851 altered the output of pottery industries on both sides of the Atlantic, at least for a while.

Majolica is a low-fired, soft earthenware ceramic. Its development was preceded by platters made in the ninth to thirteenth centuries by Hispano-Moresque artisans, items that were then shipped in the 14th and 15th centuries from Majorca to Italy, where they were renamed maiolica. In the 16th century, French scientist and ceramic artist Bernard Palissy created Palissyware designs of platters decorated with marine life, using the tin-glaze process; his designs were revived by artists in France and Portugal in the late 1800s.

The tin-glazing technique was not new when it was adopted by Palissy, having originated in Mesopotamia in the 9th century, almost certainly in an effort to copy white stoneware and porcelains imported from China. The white background of the clay is derived from a tin oxide that has been in use for hundreds of years.

Majolica is produced in five stages. Firstly the item is created, either by hand or using a potter's wheel. It is then fired to harden the body into 'bisque', before being covered with a coat of opaque lead glaze, which is left to set or dry (and render the body impervious to water). The fourth stage involves the application of brightly coloured metal oxide glazes on top of the lead coating, before a second firing (the fifth stage). The second firing creates an interaction of water (from the biscuit form),

the opaque lead glaze and the metal oxide glazes, to create the rich, translucent and lasting colour specific to majolica.

Designs were usually realistic, in the form of twigs, leaves, flowers, vegetables and fruit; ocean themes, farm animals and exotically coloured plant motifs all feature in majolica, with typical colours including cobalt blue, aubergine purple, green, brown, ochre yellow and vivid orange.

There was a growing interest in the culinary arts in the early Victorian era, one that Minton was able to capitalise on famously with his majolica ware. Oyster plates, fish platters and individual fish dishes, crab servers, lobster boxes and platters, sardine boxes with life-size sardines, game dishes decorated with rabbit, partridge and venison, strawberry dishes, a bowl especially for roasted chestnuts (the spoons decorated with chestnut leaves), teapots in the form of monkeys, coconuts, pineapples, cabbages... there was no limit to the

majolica production, and potters made sure their wares were representative of every Victorian passion and fancy, resulting in majolica featuring decorative motifs and elements from the artistic movements of each passing decade.

Not all majolica was fanciful, however. Green plates, for example, are both appealing and functional, and because they were produced by a great number of factories they are available in a large number of designs and shades of green.

The presentation of majolica at the Paris and London Exhibitions created a follow-on effect as factories in France, Germany, Austria, Central Europe, the Scandinavian countries and Portugal all added majolica to their wares. The French, German and Austrian companies produced the majority

of majolica in the English style (as opposed to the Renaissance), with the bulk of these wares being produced at Sarreguemines in France; production began there after the 1862 Exhibition, with the company producing ornamental, figural, novelty, architectural and useful wares to rival Minton. The factory continued manufacture into the early 20th century.

Herbert Minton

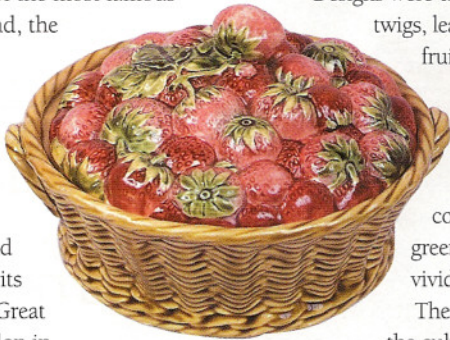
Herbert Minton – son of Thomas, founder of Minton & Co. – presented majolica to the world at the Great Exhibition of 1851. He and the French ceramic chemist Leon Arnoux – himself inspired by 16th century Italian Renaissance majolica – had developed the production technique two years earlier, creating an art form that was totally new to the world, although it could also be seen as 'a true culmination of centuries of ceramic

inspiration and technical achievements,' according to author Charles L. Washburne of the Antiques Council (US). In his capacity as Art Director, Arnoux was expected to introduce and promote new products. Observing an

interest in classical design and bright colour, he turned to the work of 16th century potter Bernard Palissy, whose brightly coloured maiolica wares had been highly popular; using a thicker body, Arnoux was able to make the Minton majolica more sturdy.

Washburne adds that the introduction of majolica came at the peak of the Industrial Revolution, 'when prosperity allowed one to look beyond the dull white ironstones, blue and white, terra-cotta and other wares then overused in the average home, and was immediately received by the public at large as well as Queen Victoria.'

The lead and tin glazes used by Minton were impervious to the damp English weather, with many pieces being made for display in the garden or conservatory. The styles used by the majolica artists included Renaissance, Gothic, Palissy, medieval, naturalism, oriental, Islamic and figural. Wares ranged from urns and fountains to umbrella stands, dinner



Lidded strawberry dish.



Reptile majolica plate that more than fulfils the criteria listed by Jeffrey Snyder.

In 15th century Italy, gifts of hand painted majolica were given to celebrate momentous occasions such as births, engagements and weddings.



A monkey jug displaying the bright colours and high glaze typical of the medium.

services, lobster plates and dishes designed specifically for the serving of strawberries. The identifying mark included the name of the factory, the British registry mark and the date of registration of a design and shape, as well as the year and date of design. Major items were also signed by the artist, using either his name or his monogram. Minton ceased majolica production in 1869.

Josiah Wedgwood & Sons

The production of majolica at Wedgwood was around ten years behind that of Minton, beginning in 1862. Although many pieces were similar in design – the factory employed several of Minton’s designers and modellers on a freelance arrangement – Wedgwood tended to use a denser glaze and more formal modelling. In 1878 the company introduced Argenta ware: formal, sparsely decorated pieces featuring limited, colourfully glazed moulded relief designs that offered an attractive contrast to the off-white body. In a market crowded with bright and colourful glazes, Argenta ware proved popular for Wedgwood for some years; the factory was renowned for its useful majolica tablewares.

Identifying marks included an incised Wedgwood, the British registry mark, the Wedgwood date code letters and the potter’s mark. Majolica produced between 1873 and around 1888 was marked with an impressed ‘M’, with an impressed ‘K’ being used for ware produced from 1888 to around 1920.

George Jones

George Jones, an apprentice with Minton in the 1850s, opened his factory behind the Minton establishment. He is recognised for the depth of his glaze, and a naturalistic modelling of birds, fish and game. This, combined with a rich palette of colours,

explains the popularity of Jones’ majolica today – along with his humorous and elegant designs. He used cow finials on cheese bells, created cupids and putti riding dolphins, made garden seats in pond lily patterns and produced tall pedestals in matching designs.

George Jones marked his majolica wares with the name of the maker and identification of the date of production. Unfortunately he concentrated on majolica production to the detriment of other products in his factory, and when the fashion waned and tastes changed, the factory went into decline.

Griffen, Smith & Co.

The American factory Griffen, Smith & Co. – established by brothers Henry and George Griffen and English potter David Smith – were producers of the award-winning Shell and Seaweed majolica design. When it was originally introduced in the late 1870s, Shell and Seaweed resembled a Wedgwood pattern and was glazed in an argenta background. It failed to gain popularity until its release with a nacreous shell pink glaze, after which it became the product upon which the company built its fortune; Shell and Seaweed was manufactured in dinner services for 12, tea and coffee services, an ice cream service, compotes, butter servers and pats, salt and peppers, open salts, toothpick holders, humidors and spittoons. The majority of wares manufactured by Griffen, Smith & Co. were practical, including bowls, covered dishes, compotes, butter pats, tea-sets, tobacco jars and plates. Decorative motifs included sunflowers, vegetables, foliage of all types, and a range of British motifs.

The factory closed in 1893, bowing to manufacturing pressures and the effects of a fire in the factory. The Griffen, Smith & Co. oyster plate, which is thought to be the only American-produced example, is sought after by collectors and reaches prices of US\$6,000 at auction.

The end of majolica

The peak production years for majolica were from 1850 to 1890; in the UK and America, manufacture had largely come to a close by the death of Queen Victoria in 1901. In practical terms, the fatal effects of lead poisoning – or plumbism – were finally linked to the lead in the glazes, and labour and management were unable to resolve the worker’s demands. In artistic terms, the excesses of Victorian times gave way to the new movements of Art Nouveau and Arts and Crafts, and majolica was no longer a popular style. Although manufacture did



Highly glazed crab platter.

continue into the early 20th century, the wares were usually of lower quality and offered as prizes at fairs, promotions and souvenirs for the tourist trade.

Reproductions – spotting the difference

Don’t think you’re getting a bargain if you find a low priced piece of majolica – it could be a reproduction. How can you tell? Well, the glaze will be less intense and have less uniformity. The weight of the body will be lighter, and the details of the design will usually be less exact and less graceful. Sometimes the colours are inappropriate; brown for ocean waves, for example. Vintage majolica was almost always glazed on the undersurface, including the outer rim; such attention to detail is unlikely in a reproduction. Finally, check the marking because some examples do carry the appropriate mark of factories in Japan, Thailand, Indonesia, China and Italy.

The Majolica International Society numbers over 1,000 members, with regular newsletters, events, new information and member benefits. For more information you can visit their web site at www.majolicasociety.com, www.majolicasociety.com, or write to 1275 First Ave., PMB 103, New York, NY 10021. □

Reference:

Majolica: Colourful Wares from Britain, Europe and America by Jeffrey B. Snyder. *Majolica on Both Sides of the Atlantic*, by Marilyn G. Karmason.

What is Majolica? by Charles L. Washburne.

Majolica Matters, from the Majolica International Society.

A Victorian Fantasy by Dodi Lake.

Further reference:

Marvellous Majolica by Jeffrey R. Snyder, and also *Majolica: British, European and American Wares (2nd Edition)* by the same author. Both are available through Schiffer Publishing.