

Potter of the Pond

On the hunt for the animalistic works of Bernard Palissy and his followers.

By Amy Gale

Snakes and lizards are not the usual motifs of Victorian ceramics. But during the 19th century there was a taste for these naturalistic wares, which were inspired by the work of Bernard Palissy (circa 1510–90), the fabled French potter. During his lifetime, Palissy was known for his developments in lead glazes, which he applied to a range of objects, from medallions to salt cellars. Today, though, he is associated with the “pond platters,” the oval dishes depicting shallow ponds filled with reptiles, fish and mollusks. His motives for making these strange pieces were both scientific and practical. Palissy was a student of natural history, disseminating his observations in lectures, treatises and rustic wares, which he molded from life. At the same time, he was learning to fire



A 19th-century Palissy-style nautilus vase, 19", fetched £2,350 (\$4,414) at a 2002 Christie's South Kensington auction.

multiple colors simultaneously. The pond platters, with their greens, browns and blues, were useful subjects for experimentation. The works of Palissy and his followers are rare, and most pieces are in public collections—a situation dating back more than a century. “Nearly every possibly genuine piece is known and its whereabouts fixed,” one critic was already writing in the 1890s.

There was a renewal of interest in Palissy during the second half of the 19th century. His life, which began in poverty and ended in the Bastille, made for colorful copy in the art press, which relished tales of his persecution and neglect. The legend that he fueled the kiln with the family furniture was the type of story circulated to support the myth of the misunderstood artist. In pottery circles, however, the emphasis was on his achievements. His work was studied closely by ceramists, and in France, Portugal and England there was a flourishing Palissy revival. These modern works were sometimes dismissed as failed copies.

Palissy-style vases with serpent handles, c. 1900, sold in 2002 for \$920 at David Rago Auctions.

“Palissy ware, so called,” wrote one 19th-century critic. However, in most cases, the revivalists did not really want to see their works attributed to Palissy. Typical of the period, they moved beyond mere emulation to make Palissy’s style their own.

In France, Charles-Jean Avisseau (1795–1861) was a pioneer in the rediscovery of Palissy’s work. Avisseau studied his technique for 15 years, and by the 1840s he was well known for adapting the Palissy idiom to many pieces, from fountains to clocks. His repertoire also included traditional rustic wares, which tend to be more densely inhabited than the 16th-century models. This was typical of modern Palissy ware and it led to the charge that such pieces were “overloaded with ornament.” One circa-1880 platter was sold for \$7,170 at auction in New York in 2004; it has, among other delights, a snake and salamander slithering through the fronds.

Avisseau attracted other talented ceramists to his native Tours, including Joseph Landais (1800–83), who became his brother-in-law and a deceptive rival. Landais was a productive artist, whose work often comes up at auction. One typical pond platter, circa 1850–70, decorated



with a lizard, frog and insects, failed to sell in London in 2004.

Paris was the other center for French Palissy production. One important workshop was under the direction of Victor Barbizet (circa 1805–70) and had dozens

of craftsmen turning out rustic wares that suggest Palissy's attenuated influence.

Parisian Palissy ware is less graphic and borrows more broadly from 16th-century French ceramics. One vase by Achille Barbizet (Victor's son) has snake handles,



Palissy-style charger, Portugal, c. 1900, \$900–\$1,200 estimate, at David Rago Auctions.

an ivy-covered base and Classical masks for an effect that is more decorative than ecological; it went unsold at auction last year in New York. However, the Barbizet workshop also produced its share of pond platters, though these sometimes lack the luscious verdure and detailed relief of the Tours School. One simple, circa-1880 piece depicting a fish resting in a bed of greenery sold at auction for only \$3,107 in New York last spring.

Portugal was a prolific manufacturer of Palissy ware. In Caldas, Manuel Cipriano Gomes (1830–1905) ran a successful ceramics workshop for nearly half a century. Early on, in the 1850s, Gomes adopted the name of his nearby hometown, and it was as “M. Mafra” that he developed the mossy ground that is a characteristic of Portuguese Palissy ware.

Another characteristic is the use of round chargers instead of oval platters; hence, the moss-covered charger by Mafra that was sold at auction in Dallas last spring for \$3,000. Mafra also produced a range of vases and ewers. One pair of his mossy vases with toads and lizards sold at auction in New Jersey in 2002 for \$920.

In England, Palissy was associated with majolica, which was first exhibited by Minton in 1851. Stylistically, early majolica often copied from, or was heavily inspired by, the works of Palissy that were available for study in public and private collections. Other pieces were more broadly inspired by 16th-century French ceramics, though they too were, at least

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in the early days, promoted as “Palissy ware.” Representative of this second category is Minton’s “Palissy” ewer with Bacchic putti, 1870, which was sold at auction in New York in 2002 for \$7,638.

Modern Palissy ware never really earned the respect of art writers, who were forever comparing it to the rare 16th-century exemplars found in museums. It must have been popular with collectors, though, judging by its steady production for half a century. The 19th century was marked by great scientific advances that were reflected in widespread amateur interest in natural history. At a time of unsettling evolutionary theory, the pond platter must have seemed particularly relevant. With many quality pieces on the market, prices remain low for this curious conflation of science and art. ❖

Palissy Ware Specialists

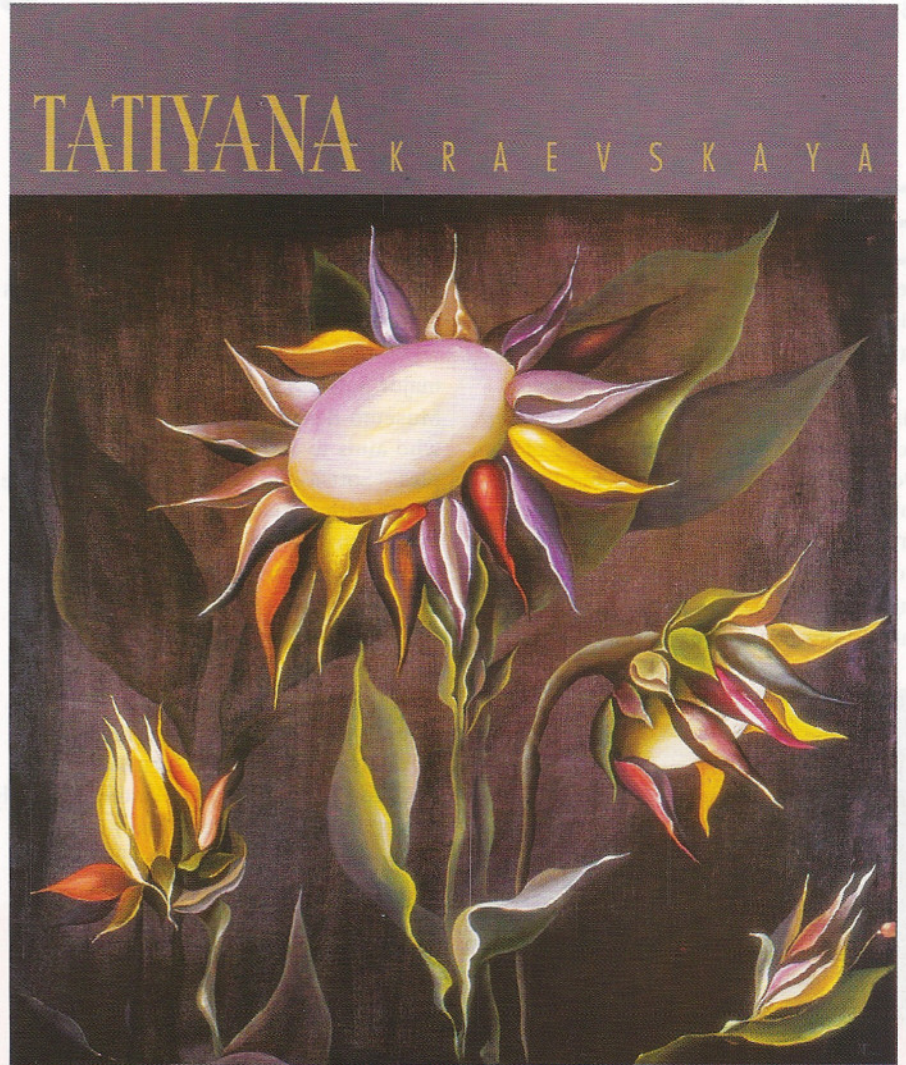
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- ◆ **Cleveland Museum of Art**, Ohio. (888) 269-7829.
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- ◆ **New Orleans Museum of Art**. (504) 488-2631.
- ◆ **Palissy Ware: 19th-Century French Ceramists From Avisseau To Renoleau** by Marshall P. Katz and Robert Lehr (Athlone Press, London, 1996), \$120.

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