Minton Condition

COLORFUL BRITISH MAJOLICA IS WHITE-HOT
OF A FAMOUS COLLECTION MAKING BUYERS, DEALERS

BY PAUL JEROMACK

RIGHT NOW, SO WHY IS THE SALE AND CURATORS SEE RED?

Unlike Scotch, oysters or German opera, British majolica, the richly colored, inventively modeled ceramicware of the Victorian era, is not an acquired taste. "You either love it or loathe it," says London ceramics dealer Nicholas Boston. "Fortunately for me, more and more people are unafraid to admit they adore it, and the more they have the more they like it."

Over the past three decades, British majolica has become one of the hottest collecting categories in ceramics. Ironically, this lead-glazed pottery was produced for only about 50 years, primarily by Minton & Co., Josiah Wedgwood & Sons, Joseph Holdcroft, George Jones and Moore & Co. Yet a large supply is still available at prices ranging from a few hundred dollars to hundreds of thousands.

Indeed, the $200,000 mark could well be surpassed—and auction records shattered—on July 2, when Sotheby's London offers a pair of Minton & Co. torchères from 1866 in its 19th-century ceramics sale.

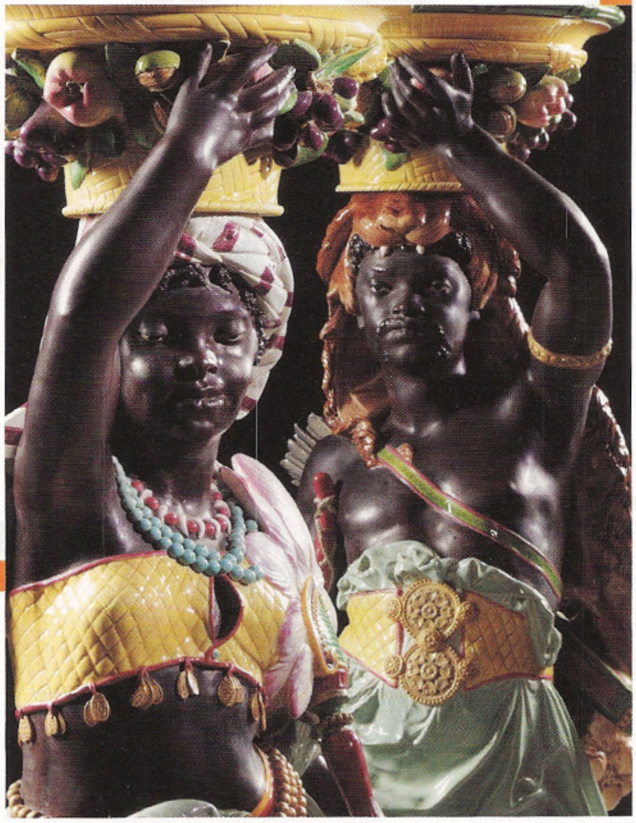
Prices were more modest at the most recent of the twice-yearly majolica auctions organized by Michael Strawser, a Wolcottville, Indiana–based specialist, on April 5 and 6 at the Alderfer Auction Center in Hatfield, Pennsylvania. More than 1,000 pieces on offer sold for a total in excess of $500,000. Among them were an unusual neo-Gothic jardinière and underplate by William Brownfield, from circa 1870, and an 8½-inch flat-side water pitcher with fish by Joseph Holdcroft, from circa 1880, which sold for $1,320 each; a garden seat with herons by George Jones, from circa 1880, for $18,700; and a pair of 28-inch-high Joseph Holdcroft "Stork" and "Heron" walking-stick stands, from circa 1880, for $24,200. The top price of $38,500 was achieved by an extremely bizarre Minton object: a slightly repaired game-pie dish from circa 1870, with the heads of two rather confused rabbits and ducks peeking out from the lid.

A highly anticipated sale at Bonhams in London—provided it actually takes place—is generating both excitement and dismay. On July 23, the auction house is planning to offer more than 500 pieces, dating from 1820 through 1970, from the collection of the Minton Museum in Stoke-on-Trent. Royal Doulton, which acquired Minton in 1968, has been in a severe financial crisis in recent years, and last year sold its corporate headquarters at Minton House. The Bonhams sale may be a last-ditch attempt to rescue the ailing firm.

Still, collectors and dealers are salivating at the chance to own such treasures as a life-size peacock, designed by Paul Comolera in around 1875, which is estimated to sell for £100,000 ($146,000). Ceramics historians and museum curators, however, are alarmed that Doulton is selling off material from the Minton collection.

Company founder Thomas Minton and his son Herbert built up a large collection of Italian *maiòlica* and early

These rare Minton & Co. torchères from 1866 are based on the work of sought-after majolica designer Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse. They are estimated to sell for £150,000 to £200,000 ($220-294,000) at Sotheby's London on July 2.



European pottery to inspire staff artists. The company sold that collection in 1921 but continued to retain examples of its own production to be used primarily as teaching aids. Exceptional or exhibition items were displayed in the museum.

"The Minton Museum is a unique survivor of a 19th-century entity," says ceramics historian Paul Atterbury, who has been leading efforts to oppose the sale. In *Majolica Matters,* the newsletter of the Majolica International Society, editor Moe Wizenberg writes: "What saddens many of us is the dispersal of a great collection in its historical milieu. It is an invaluable resource for all collectors and for scholars interested not only in majolica and ceramics but also in a vital component of Britain's industrial and artistic history. If Doulton cannot afford to keep the collection, or does not have the space to properly house and protect it, let us pray that some other appropriate institutor or benefactor comes forth to provide the collection with a more fitting end than what is currently planned."

A potential savior is the Potteries Museum of Stoke-on-Trent, which has applied for a £2 million ($2.9 million) grant from the National Heritage Memorial Fund to purchase the entire Minton collection. (Last year, the Victoria & Albert Museum in London, also an opponent of the sale, expressed interest in acquiring the collection, which includes an archive of company stock books, pattern books and original watercolors and drawings of majolica. Doulton rebuffed the offer.)

IT TOOK A LONG TIME FOR ENGLISH CERAMICS to come into its own. With the notable exception of Josiah Wedgwood's elegantly pristine Neoclassical basalt, rosso antico and Jasper-dip wares, British pottery and porcelain of the late 18th and early 19th century tended to follow European models, particularly Sèvres, the lushly colored French porcelain. Despite its distinctive charm and popularity, British-made Sèvres was something of a stylistic dead end that did little to advance the British pottery industry.

Then the Victorians rediscovered the Renaissance. Along with an increasing interest in the paintings of Fra Angelico and Perugino came a fascination with lead-glazed pottery, specifically the highly modeled ceramic sculptures of Luca della Robbia (1400–82) and the startlingly naturalistic ceramics of Bernard Palissy (circa 1509–89), which featured colorful, three-dimensional snakes, frogs and fish writhing on large mossy chargers.

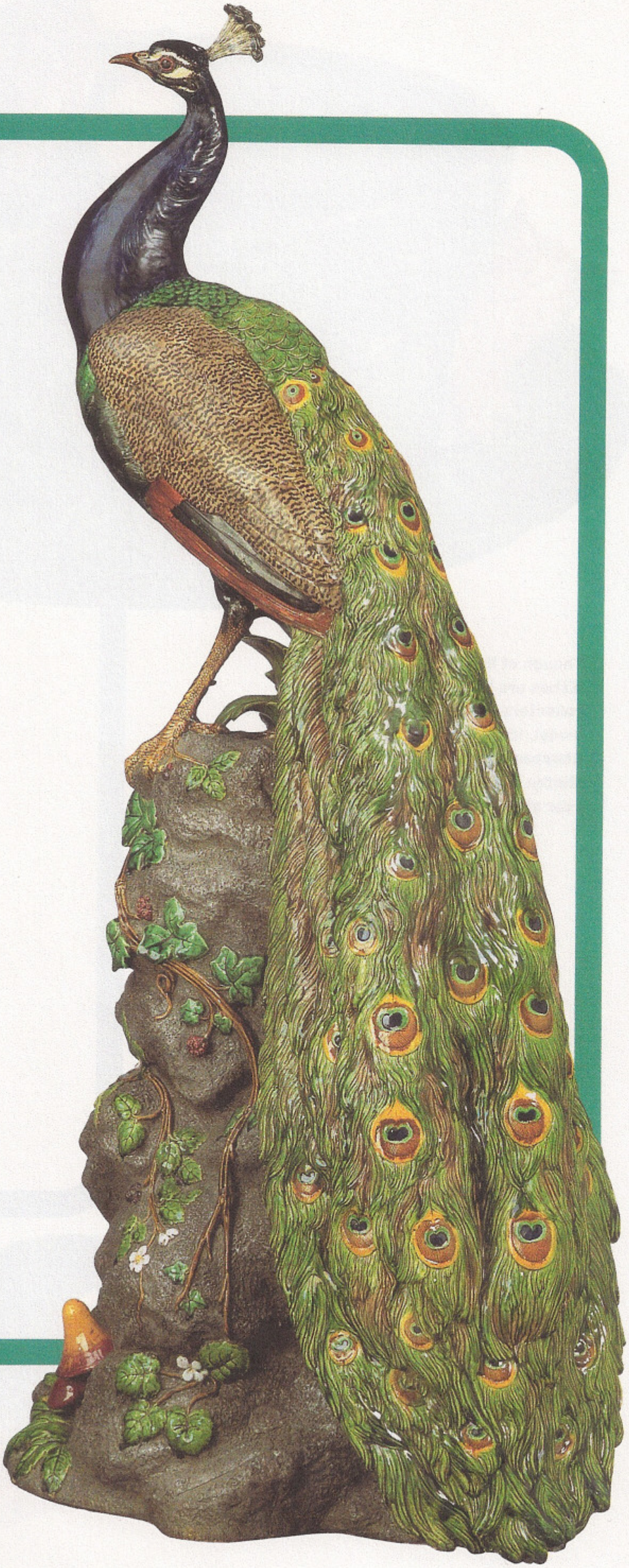
Such interest did not escape the attention of Herbert Minton, who owned the most sophisticated and artistically daring pottery in Great Britain. Minton's primacy was largely due to the French artists and designers who found shelter in Stoke-on-Trent from the unstable political and economic climate across the Channel. The most important of these émigrés was the ceramic engineer, designer and chemist Leon Arnoux, who became indispensable to the firm. Among other advancements, Arnoux invented a more efficient firing oven and developed a wide spectrum of new glazes, including a rich-colored lead glaze inspired by Palissy: majolica for the machine age.

"The development of majolica glaze was a tremendous economic breakthrough for ceramic production," notes Atterbury. "Unlike other pottery and porcelain, which had to endure multiple firings at different temperatures for each color, majolica glazes could be fired at one go, so it was cheap to make, and much less expensive than porcelain. It was also exceptionally sturdy and practically weatherproof."

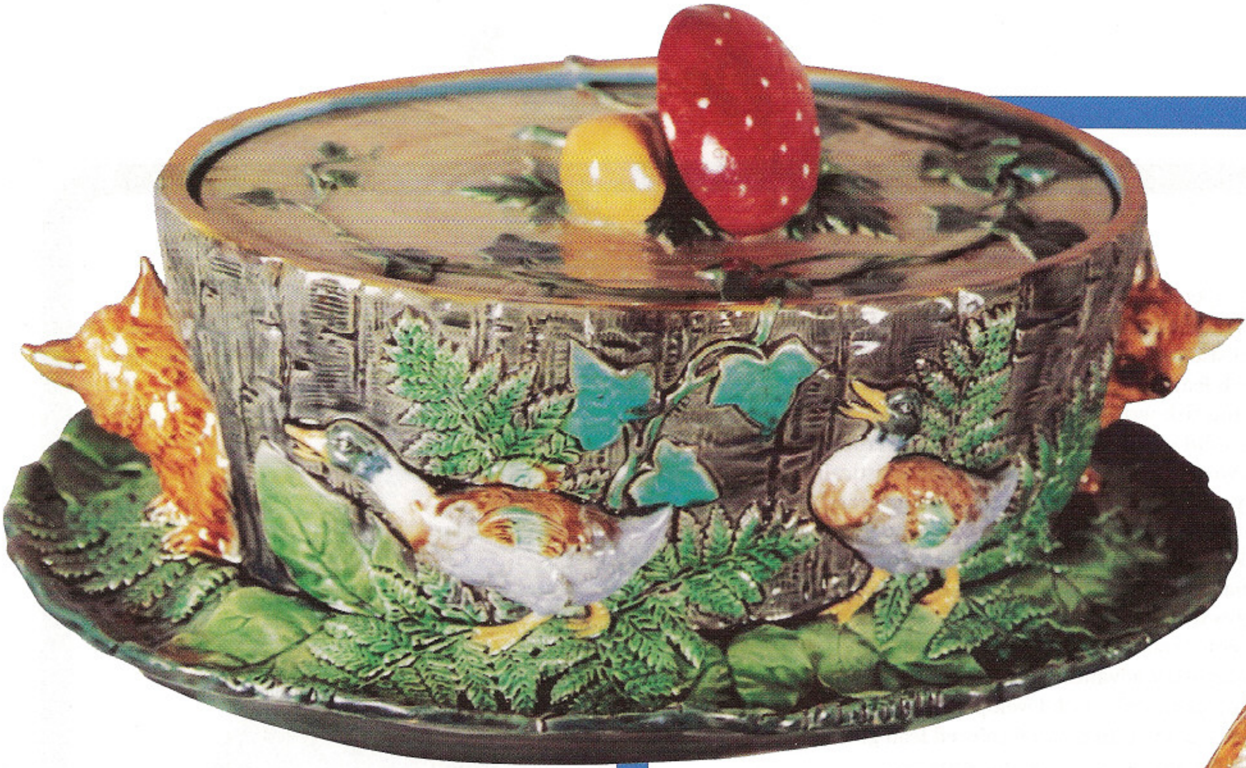
Majolica was introduced at the 1851 Great Exposition in London to a huge and receptive audience. "Today many people think of the Victorian era as being rather drab, but the Victorians were mad for color," says Atterbury. "The introduction of majolica coincided with the improvement of color printing, the development of new dyes for textiles and fabrics and the rise of leisure-time gardening and the cultivation of new flowers."

Minton's majolica (sometimes referred to by contemporary commentators as "Della Robbia faience" or "Palissy ware") started a revolution in the pottery industry, causing nearly every British firm to follow its lead. While Minton employed the best modelers (many of them European sculptors, notably Comolera, Pierre-Emile Jeannest and Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, whose figures were distinguished by a suave elegance), all the major firms produced excellent, crisply modeled wares.

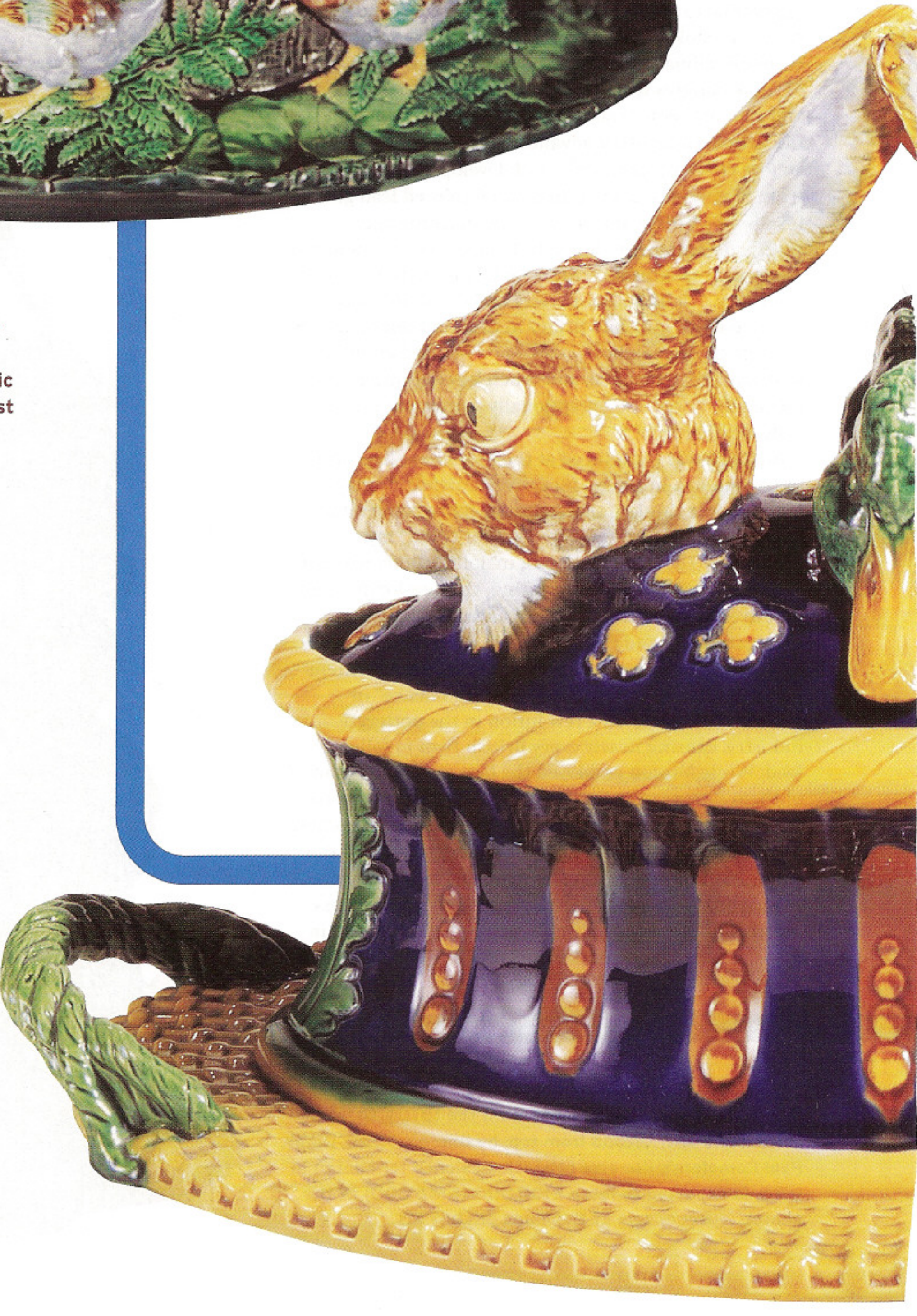
Majolica unleashed an unprecedented inventiveness among modelers and artists. Nearly any shape found in



Opposite: Four classic teapots from the 1870s, three by Minton and one, second from top, by George Jones. Right: Paul Comolera's life-size peacock, designed for Minton in 1875, is expected to fetch £100,000 ($146,000) at the Minton Museum sale at Bonhams on July 23.



Though of limited use today, game-pie dishes are prized by British majolica collectors. Above: A Minton fox-and-geese model, 1887, from Charles Washburne, Chappaqua, New York. Right: This eccentric Minton rabbit-and-duck dish, 1877, sold last year at Sotheby's for $40,000.



nature—animal, vegetable or mineral—was likely to be adapted, and nearly every household accessory imaginable was made: teapots, oyster plates, game-pie dishes (the three most popular items among collectors today), walking-stick stands, cheese bells, sardine boxes, ice cream servers, planters, punch bowls, candelabras, toilet sets, jewel trays and garden seats.

Within a few years of its introduction, majolica mania spread to Continental Europe and America, although few firms produced wares of the quality of Minton, Wedgwood or George Jones. By the early 1880s, its novelty had largely worn off ("Majolica ... has become too common," sniffed the *Pottery Gazette* in 1882) and its vividly naturalistic appearance was eschewed by the proponents of the Aesthetic and Arts & Crafts movements, who favored simpler Japanesque stylizations in pottery design.

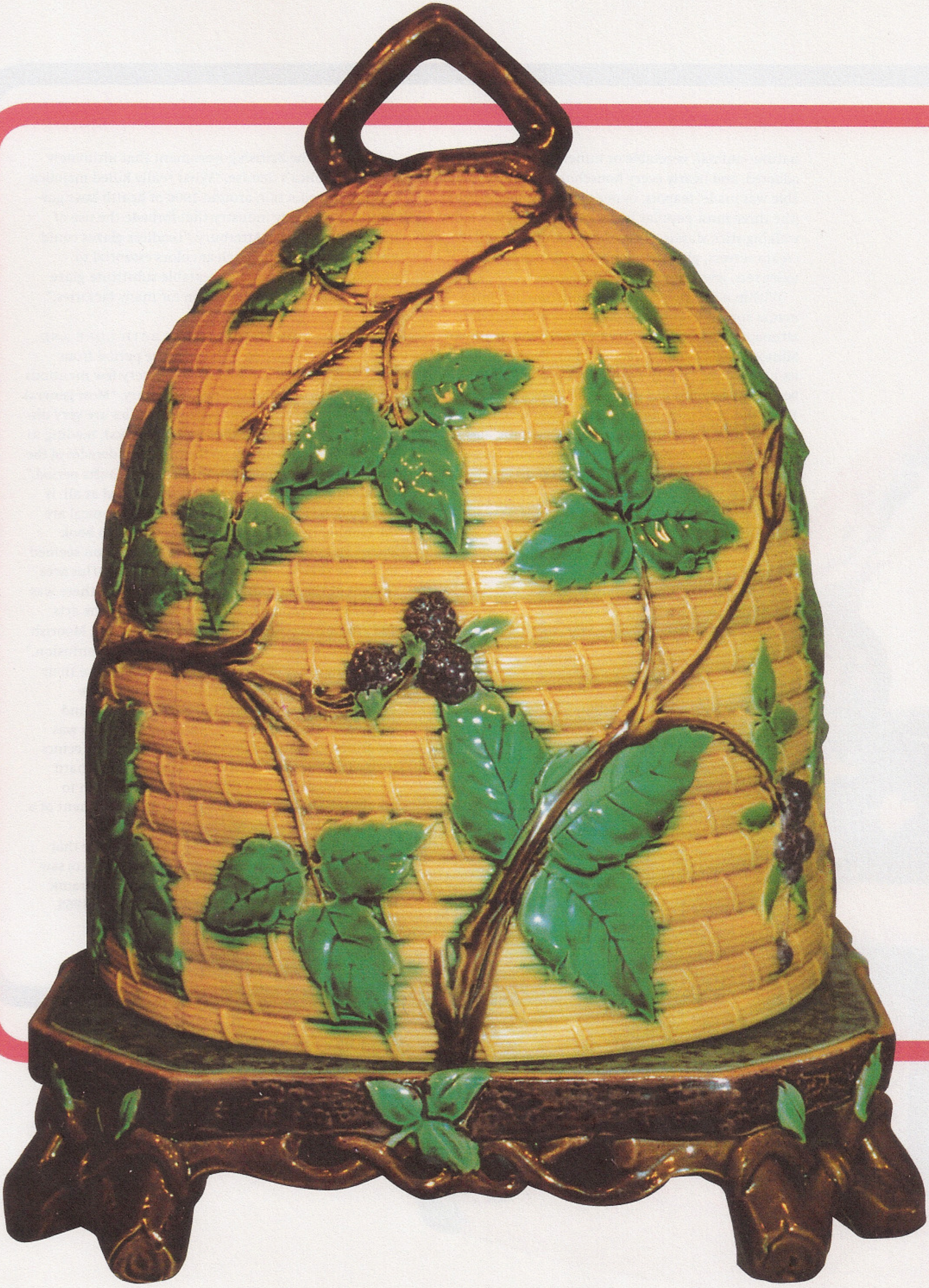
But it was the British government that ultimately caused majolica's demise. "What really killed majolica was the introduction around 1900 of health laws governing the pottery industry that forbade the use of lead in glazes," says Atterbury. "Leadless glazes could not obtain the brilliant, clear colors essential to majolica, and to find an acceptable substitute glaze was too expensive a proposition for many factories."

SOON MAJOLICA WAS BOTH GONE AND forgotten. "Through the period from 1920 to 1960, there are very few mentions of majolica," says Atterbury. "Most general books about British ceramics are very dismissive of the Victorian period, tending to concentrate on the first three decades of the 19th century and then skip to the Arts & Crafts period."

Indeed, the 1840–80 period, if mentioned at all, is usually described as vulgar and tasteless. Typical are the comments of Cecilia Sempill in her 1944 book *English Pottery and China*: "The Great Exhibition seemed to set the seal of approval on all the worst influences current at the time, and from then onwards there was an endless stream of grotesque styles in all the arts and crafts and pottery did not escape. Indian, Moorish and Greek jostled each other in undigested confusion."

So many areas of Victorian taste seem to owe their revival to the pioneering exhibition held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in 1952, "Victorian and Edwardian Decorative Arts," in which majolica was prominently featured. Later in the decade, collectors such as Charles and Lavinia Handley-Read, Richard Dennis, Peter Rose and Albert Gallichain began to purchase majolica, though usually as one element of a broader interest in Victorian decorative arts.

The acquisitive years of the 1960s (the decade that rediscovered both Aubrey Beardsley and Art Deco) saw an increasing acceptance of majolica among ceramic historians. In *Collecting Victoriana,* published in 1965,



Mary Peter notes that the field is "relatively cheap to collect and delightful in use." A similar sentiment is expressed by Geoffrey Godden in his fascinating *Antique China and Glass Under Five Pounds,* from 1966: "Majolica earthenwares are typically Victorian in feeling and are both inexpensive and often very decorative."

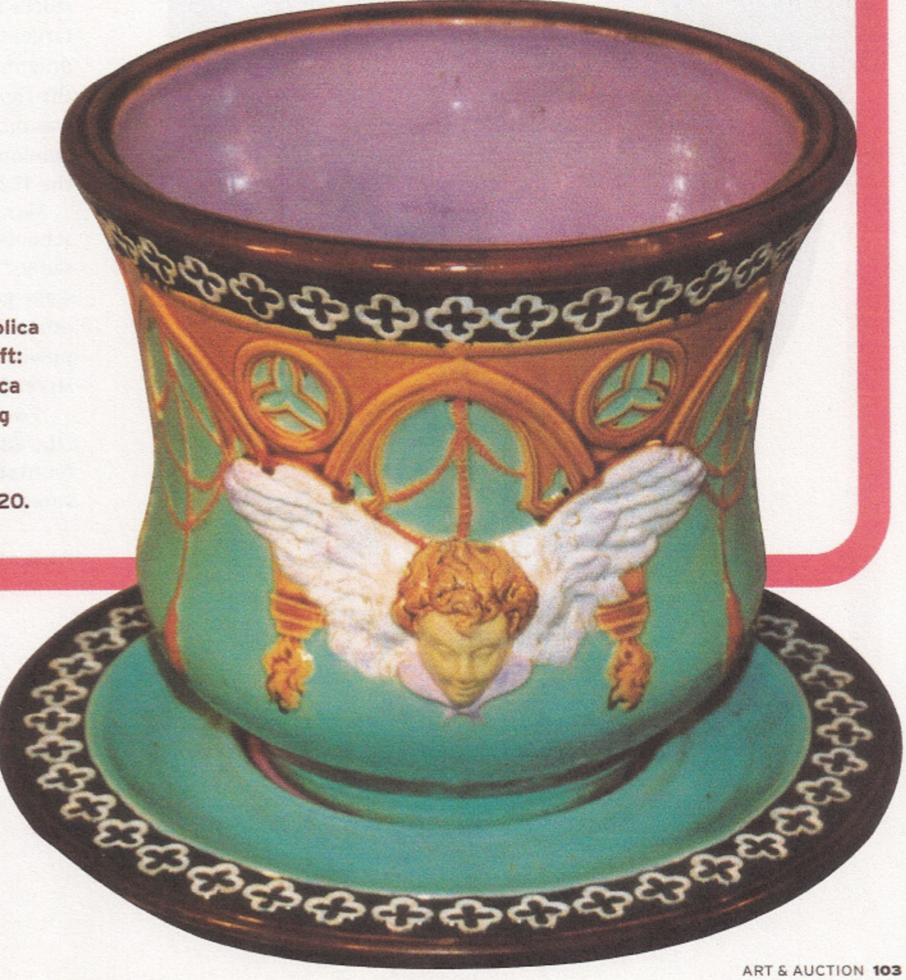
Sotheby's defunct Belgravia salesrooms, then led by such experts as Jeremy Cooper, David Battie and Christopher Wood, also played a pivotal role by launching the first sales of majolica on its own.

TODAY, HOWEVER, COLLECTORS OF British majolica are rarely British. "Over 90 percent of my customers are American," says Boston, the London ceramics dealer. And unlike many major collecting fields, majolica is not an exclusively urban phenomenon. Pieces do show up in auctions at Sotheby's and Christie's in New York, but most of the important American majolica events and shows take place in smaller cities like Atlanta, where the Majolica International Society held its annual convention this year.

Majolica collectors often have very particular tastes. "Most of my customers tend to specialize in specific forms," says dealer Charles Washburne of Chappaqua, New York. "Meat-pie dishes and teapots are particular favorites. And most collectors I know especially like anything with specific animals—if it has a rabbit or bird on it, it's an easy sell. People have a harder time with the Palissy-inspired snakes, lizards and frogs."

Collectors favor smaller pieces over monumental exhibition urns and vases, which can stand several feet high. As a result, these larger examples are surprisingly underpriced. According to Boston, "anything with a faux finish like wood grain or malachite, and Renaissance-inspired pieces" are also undervalued.

Boston also notes an increasing interest in works by particular designers. "I have clients who specifically ask for things by Carrier-Belleuse and Christopher Dresser—they are the two best-known majolica designers. Both worked for Minton, and Dresser sup-



Michael Strawser's twice-yearly majolica auctions cater to all pocketbooks. Left: A Minton "beehive" cheese cover, circa 1883, generated enough buzz to bring $46,750. Right: William Brownfield's jardinière and undertray, circa 1880, sold for a much more affordable $1,320.

plied designs and drawings to Wedgwood as well."

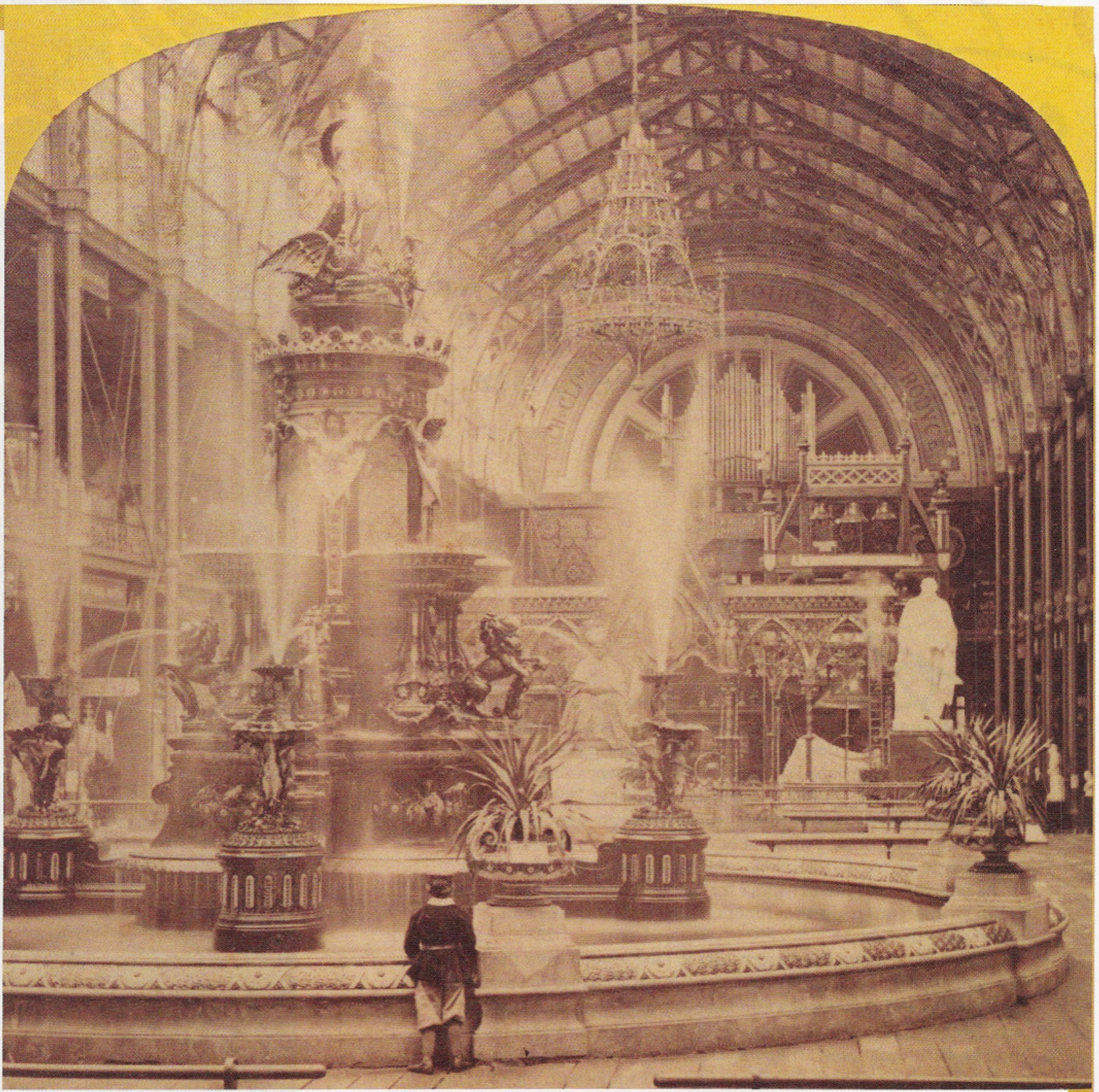
No single piece shows just how far majolica has come in the collecting world than a Minton teapot from circa 1875, featuring Dresser's design of a white-and-ginger cat dangling over a cheese-nibbling mouse on an iron-shaped base with stylized mice running around it. One example (est. $15–20,000) sold for $47,000 as part of the Ripley collection of 19th-century arts at Christie's East in March 2001; another (est. £15–20,000; $21–28,000) fetched a record £58,000 ($82,000) at Christie's South Kensington in June 2001.

BUT THE ULTIMATE MAJOLICA masterpiece is Minton's monumental fountain depicting Saint George and the Dragon. This 30-foot-high showstopper, first seen at the London International Exposition of 1862, featured heraldic lions, storks amid rushes and sea nymphs, all topped by a larger-than-life Saint George in battle with the dragon, as perfumed plumes of water spurt from all the figures. After the exhibition closed, the fountain was moved to the Bethnal Green Museum in East London, where it remained until it was dismantled in the 1920s and put into storage.

Alas, all trace of it has vanished. "There are two schools of thought," ceramics historian Atterbury says sadly. "Some people hope that it's still lying crated in some government warehouse gathering dust. But others believe the fountain was simply pulverized into gravel for a parking lot across the street from the museum."

"I don't know any majolica collector or dealer who doesn't fantasize about finding the Saint George fountain," says Boston. "It's one of the great lost treasures of 19th-century art."

Paul Jeromack is a contributing editor of *Art & Auction.*



Opposite: The Minton "Prometheus" vase, 1867, from the Victoria & Albert Museum, London. The V&A attempted to purchase the entire Minton archive. Above: A stereocard detail of the Saint George fountain at the London International Exposition of 1862.