



PHOTOGRAPHY BY AMY HEER

Happy Glaze

Majolica charmed the Victorians, and now this cheerful ceramic is capturing our hearts too.

BY BETSY CROSBY

IN 1851, A GLITTERING IRON-AND-GLASS STRUCTURE AROSE out of the dreary London shroud of the Industrial Revolution. Dubbed the "Crystal Palace," it housed Prince Albert's pet project, an international exhibition of manufactured goods. From its early summer opening in May until its closing five months later, over six million visitors passed

through its doors, "completely dazzled," as one journalist effused, "by the rich variety of hues."

In the midst of over 17,000 entries, Herbert Minton's brilliant display of "Majolica," inspired by maiolica pottery produced during the Italian Renaissance, proved to be a showstopper. Its lustrous surfaces were decorated in

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bold new colors: turquoise, yellow, lavender-pink, pale blue and sea green. The inventive collection captured the high summer spirits of the crowd, garnering for Minton & Co. a Special Council Medal—one of only two—for “originality and beauty of design.”

Few anticipated that this striking earthenware would seize the world’s hearts and pocketbooks and turn the ceramics industry on its head. But a slew of manufacturers immediately jumped on the bandwagon. Some, such as Wedgwood and George Jones in England, Sarreguemines and Villeroy & Boch in Continental Europe, and Griffen, Smith & Hill in the U.S., competed head-to-head with Minton for style and quality. Majolica remained popular in England for nearly 50 years, and even longer in the States and on the Continent.



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STYLISH SERVICE The Christmas plate, previous page, and cheese bell, top of this page, are both by George Jones, a 19th-century designer known for deep colors. Game turines, like the Minton piece above, were a status symbol in Great Britain because they implied access to restricted hunting grounds.

For the middle-class housewife perusing a mid-century catalog, this dramatic pottery was nothing like the plain and practical transferware and ironstone that had graced her table until then. She was amused and delighted by whimsical cheese stands in the shape of beehives, plates that looked like begonia leaves and pitchers resembling cornucopias bursting with golden kernels. It was all so cheerful and charming—and so very affordable.

“There was no porcelain in the middle-class price range,” says Gail Dearing of Dearing Antiques on Atlanta’s Miami Circle, one of the premier dealers of English majolica in the

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United States. "With majolica, they could finally have something pretty."

Unlike porcelain, which was expensive to produce, majolica was made of locally available clay that could be sculpted or molded easily. New opaque glazes, devised by

Minton's art director Leon Arnoux, fused into a lustrous finish at a relatively low temperature. The bright, shiny colors easily masked imperfections in the body of the piece, and the low firing temperature resulted in less breakage in the kiln. It was

the perfect recipe for mass production at a reasonable price point.

Majolica had its following among the elite as well. Low kiln temperatures made it easier to produce large-scale pieces, such as fountains, jardinieres and life-sized storks doubling

NOVELTY ITEMS British Victorians adored motifs of still-exotic native American produce like corn. Whimsical bees, mice, bunnies and daisies are as charming now as they were then.



MAJOLICA AND WIREWORK: TWICE AS NICE

Though majolica production was winding down in England toward the end of the 19th century, it was still going strong in France, Germany and Austria, where it remained a favorite of the bourgeoisie. At the same time, wirework—everyday objects made of wire—was gaining widespread popularity.

A craft born in Slovakia among tinkers in the 17th century, wirework became a respected trade in Austria and Hungary in the 18th century, and an established industry in France, Germany and America by the end of the 19th. First used as a means of repairing broken crockery, wirework developed in the hands of talented artisans into an art in its own right. Utilitarian kitchen objects such as spoons, colanders and baskets grew ever more fanciful.

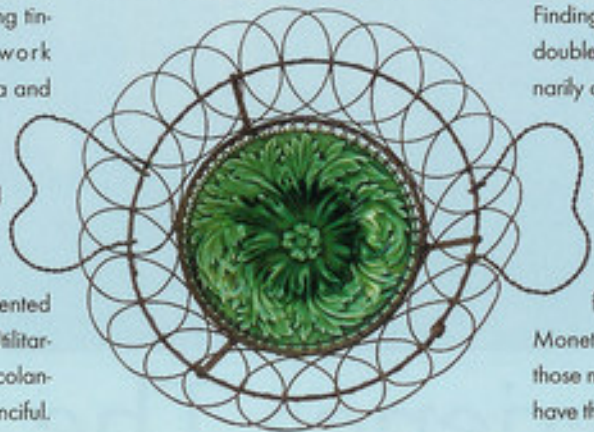
Soon, workrooms were also producing wire birdcages, plant stands and candelabras with garlands, curlicues and spirals.

Eventually, wirework moved out of the kitchen and into the dining room. A small majolica saucer or plate “married” to a woven frame of wire with heart-shaped handles was transformed into a basket for

fruit, pastries or candy suitable for display on the sideboard or wooden dresser of a middle-class home.

Caren Monetta, of Mostly Majolica (mostlymajolica.com), stocks a generous collection of antique, wire-framed plates, in her monthly booth at Scott Antique Market. Most are from France or Germany. Finding a plate of majolica in wire nearly doubles the price, turning what would ordinarily cost \$150 into a piece worth \$285.

Original wireware pieces are becoming harder to find; decorators have found that they make a great impact when hung on the wall. Though reproduction wire frames for plates are available, Monetta says they are less intricate than those made a century ago. “They just don’t have the art work in them.” —B.C.



as plant stands—just the thing for garden conservatories. There were also ice compotes for ice cream, fish platters and five-tiered oyster stands, ideal for groaning Victorian banquet tables.

Though majolica fell out of favor at the beginning of the 20th century, it is in vogue again at the beginning of the 21st. Today, there are collectors who will pay tens of thousands at an antiques store for a piece marked by British potter George Jones; and there are those who cruise flea markets looking for just the right unmarked oyster plate in the more modest price range of \$150 to \$200. (Fans of antique majolica collect for display rather than table use, as most majolica glazes contained lead.)

Since *Forbes* magazine reported the sale at auction of a Minton game pie tureen for \$83,000 some 10 years ago, Dearing has seen an

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increase in the number of customers looking for investment pieces. Most people are originally attracted to majolica for decorative reasons, she says, but some develop into serious collectors.

One such Atlanta connoisseur is Susan Kraft. Twenty years ago, her first plate cost \$19. Now majolica is her “passion,” leading her on a search

across the United States and England. “When you find a piece you’ve coveted, you just pay what the dealer is asking because you’ll never see it again,” she says. Her husband has been caught up in her enthusiasm too. “He views it as an investment,” says Kraft.

Belgian dealer Liesbeth Depoorter specializes in Continental majolica, usually exhibiting her wares locally the second weekend of every month at Scott Antique Market. Because Continental majolica tends to be less formal than English, her customers are drawn to decorative pieces that strike their fancy. There are ceramic banks in the shape of pears, asparagus dishes made of ceramic “spears” and a little snail with holes in its back for escargot forks. “Atlanta is really a decorator’s market,” says Depoorter. “But who wouldn’t want to decorate with this?” ■ See Resources