

SMOOTH,  
LUSTROUS,  
AND HIGHLY  
COLLECTIBLE,  
THIS ANTIQUE  
POTTERY  
CELEBRATES  
THE SHAPES  
OF NATURE.

# Majolica

The Victorian Era, known for heavily carved furniture and melodramatic prints, also spawned a popular craze for vividly decorated majolica pottery. Today, it's not at all uncommon still to see pieces of the art: Salad plates masquerading as leaves, shell-shape oyster dishes, and planters adorned with salamanders and butterflies are coveted examples of majolica's blend of function and naturalistic forms.

## NATURE CAPTURED IN GLAZE

One easy way to spot majolica is by the colorful glazes. The best examples combine color with sculptural dimension and fool-the-eye painting, and some have almost-hidden depictions of tiny creatures to discover. Luscious colors—pink, yellow, emerald green, turquoise, sapphire, blue, and brown—accentuate the pottery's variety.

"You can't just pour glaze over a pot and call it majolica," says Charles Washburne, an antiques dealer in Chappaqua, New York. "To me, that's just a shiny pot. Majolica glazes should follow the design, differentiating every detail with color contrast."

High-caliber examples date principally to the peak era of majolica production—from the 1850s to 1900—and command handsome sums. If made by one of the well-known manufacturers, a small teacup without a saucer can fetch \$250, and large serving dishes can bring thousands of dollars.

While connoisseurs vie for the rare and unusual, a great many collectors simply are enthralled by majolica's delight in nature and the whimsy of the designs.

## A CLASSIC ART

With his sights on the public's increasingly large disposable income, Herbert Minton, of the Minton Pottery in England, introduced majolica in 1851. The industrial age had brought rapid





RIGHT: The cauliflower pattern by American producer Griffen, Smith & Hill is a favorite of collectors. If you find this plate, examine it carefully because the granular center star is prone to chipping and discoloration. In good condition, a plate like this fetches \$200. OPPOSITE: Typical of the textured pieces inspired by forest scenes, this unmarked, American circa-1870 pitcher has a bird's nest in high relief against a surface simulating the rough grain of a tree trunk. Its approximate value is \$350.



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LEFT: Various begonia-leaf patterns by American manufacturer Griffen, Smith & Hill are icons of majolica and still widely available. Prices range from \$75 for a single-leaf saucer to \$150 for the small serving tray.

OPPOSITE, TOP RIGHT: A large, desirable circa-1870 Wedgwood seafood platter and matching plate offer a stylized version of shellfish and coral with a border of undulating blue waves. Prices average \$2,500 for the platter and \$350 for the plate.

OPPOSITE, TOP LEFT: Because Stilton cheese was stored at room temperature, cheese bells of this kind helped contain the food's pungent aroma. This circa-1860 cheese bell was most likely created by George Jones, a well-known maker, and is valued at \$1,200-\$1,500.

OPPOSITE, BOTTOM LEFT: Nature is the common theme in all majolica designs. This circa-1870 teacup and saucer by Griffen, Smith & Hill captures a deep-sea vision of shells and seaweed through intricate glaze and sculptural relief. It's valued at \$250.





growth in the middle class. More people entertained with dinner parties, and the pottery made an ideal centerpiece.

The color and brilliance of majolica was unprecedented, thanks to Minton's partnership with French ceramicist-in-exile Leon Arnoux, who made metal-oxide glazes from tin or lead.

At first the duo concentrated on Renaissance forms, encouraged by the opening of England's first public museums and the public's new passion for archaeology. Soon, however, they discovered endless opportunity in the fascination for natural history, including flora, fauna, and especially, conchology—the study of mollusks and shells.

Add to that the advent of refrigeration and railways, and it's easy to understand the public's interest in majolica. Demand for pieces depicting fish, fruit, and vegetables grew alongside a hunger for previously unobtainable delicacies such as coastal oysters and lobsters, and delicate asparagus.

Interest peaked in the 1870s, with Oriental motifs entering the mix. As the century drew to a close, Art Nouveau influences such as trailing vines began to appear. Then, as quickly as it had risen, majolica's popularity waned. Too many inferior copies had appeared on the market, and the metal-base glazes caused health problems for the potters.

One age can't usually be judged by the standards of another, but majolica's appeal seems timeless. Minton, the shrewd businessman, started a collecting craze that may ebb and flow, but it's thriving today. ✨