

CONNOISSEUR

FEBRUARY 1984 \$3.00 £2.5UK

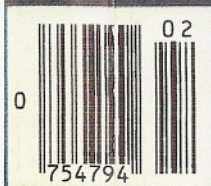
FLYING
ON THE
KNIFE-EDGE

GENEVA:
INSIDE THE
JEWELRY
CAPITAL

AMERICA'S
BEST
CARTOONIST

THINKING
MAN'S
BEACH

CAPT MARK LAURITZEN



DOWN FROM THE ATTIC

MAJOLICA'S ONCE-POPULAR
COLORS AND DESIGNS ARE LOOKING GOOD AGAIN

BY LISBET NILSON

Invariably, it starts with a delighted glimpse—of a little brown pitcher with a butterfly poised, fluttering, to form the spout; of a bowl decorated with bulging fruits whose gleam and color outdo life; of a plate with leaves so vivid, the pattern could only be a direct impression from nature upon earthenware paste. Long-time collectors always seem to have tales of smiling epiphanies in obscure corners of flea markets and antiques stores, where they first discovered majolica's nineteenth-century charm. For decades, this fanciful Victorian earthenware, which was all the rage a century ago, went so completely out of fashion that it wasn't even *seen*—not by antiques dealers, who admit they walked right past it, not by scholars and writers, and only unsystematically by a very few museums. Until recently, majolica suffered the fate of those popular crazes that slip by history, and was dismissed as just one more example of eclectic Victorian excess. But today those scattered collectors who have quietly been accumulating hoards of English and American majolica stand vindicated. Majolica's time has come around again.

"Majolica is one of the most attractive ceramic traditions of the nineteenth century—and it's been overlooked for much too long," says David Revere McFadden,



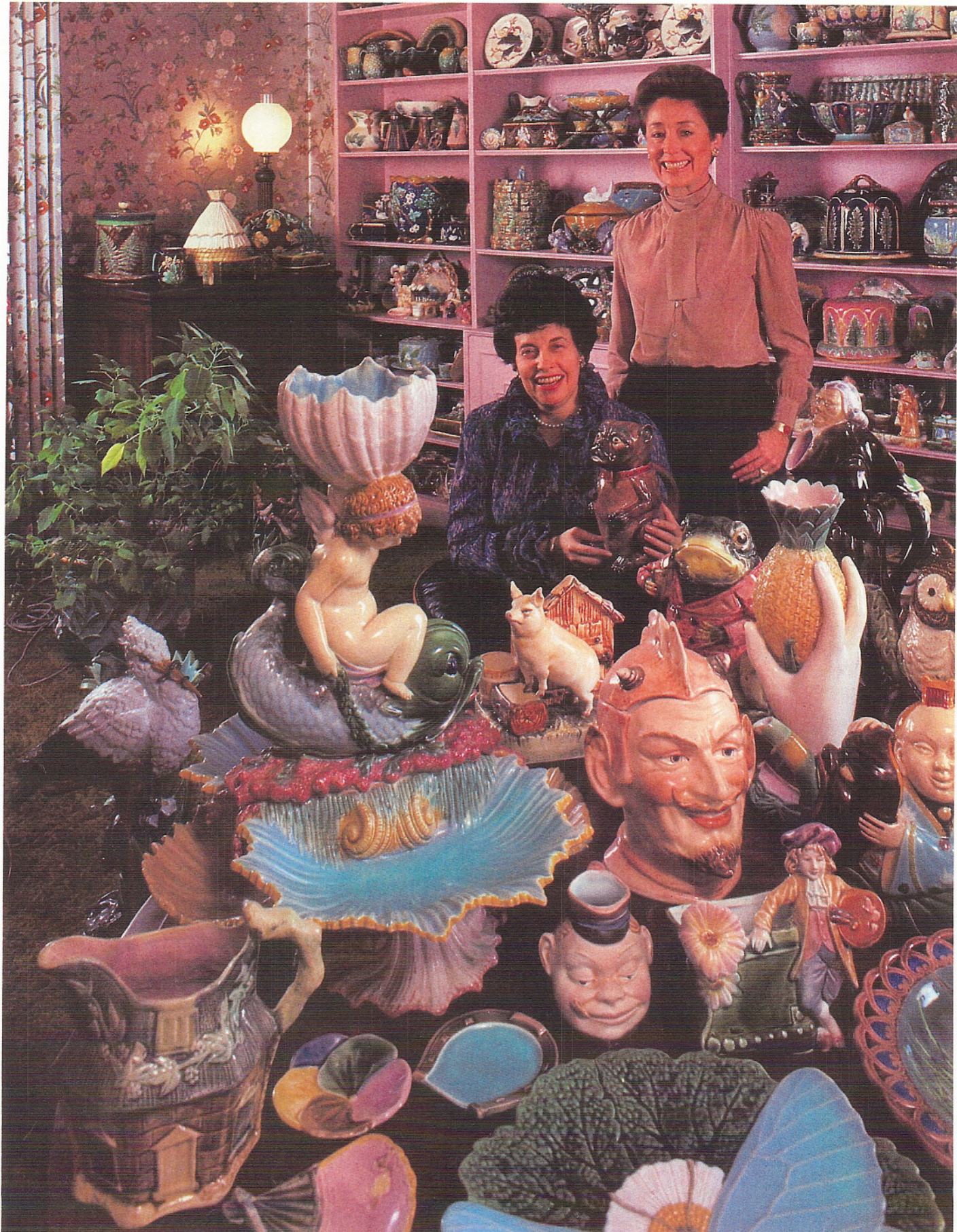
the curator for decorative arts at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, which in the spring of 1982 mounted one of the first major museum exhibitions ever. "Majolica contradicts all of our ideas about Victorian pottery: that it is overdecorated, dreary, with dark colors. Majolica's designs are wonderful; the richness of its colors is extraordinary. It can be so very fresh."

That's no news to Jerome Hoffman, a New York real-estate investor who, together with his wife, Marilyn, has over the past seventeen years assembled a 600-piece collection devoted exclusively to majolica by the British firm of Minton: "It was an industrial art and not a fine art—and yet it really almost crosses the line sometimes." Geraldine Stutz, the president of Henri Bendel, has been onto majolica even longer. She bought her first piece at a Paris flea market twenty-five years ago. "Majolica," she says, "is innately stylish, because of its combination of sophisticated coloring and intricate patterns."

Those colors! Until London's splashy

JEAN KING

The sea fantasy of a Victorian pitcher by Minton extends to its deftly curved handle.



IAN STAHER

Marilyn Karmason, seated at her now-invisible grand piano, and Joan Graham, surrounded by a few dozen of their two thousand favorite things.

Great Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations, in 1851, the British middle classes used simple whiteware, or at most the blue-and-white transfer-printed ware that was also being mass-produced. Multi-color ceramics were beyond the means

You can see something new in it each time you look," says one collector after fifty years.

of anyone except the rich. But, according to Jean Callan King, who is currently at work on a book entitled *English and American Majolica*, "Mass-production techniques, in combination with newly perfected colored glazes, made bright, multicolored pottery available for the first time at a price the middle class could afford." Léon Arnoux, the French-born art director of Minton and Company, developed this new product and showed it at the London exhibition.

Soon, majolica was everywhere. It was used for everything from table settings and garden accoutrements to dressing-room ring stands, ceramic sardine boxes, and elaborate presentation pieces that the potteries produced for succeeding industrial exhibitions, in hopes of bolstering the appeal of their more functional designs. Minton outdid itself for the London exhibition of 1862 with the largest majolica concoction ever: a fountain, thirty-six feet high, topped by a sculpted Saint George and dragon, colored with due observance of heraldic convention and adorned with an intricate system of flower vases. By then, Minton was sensing some hefty competition. Wedgwood was throwing its considerable resources into producing majolica, as were other English and Continental factories; and before long, the third big-name English majolica producer—a Minton veteran by the name of George Jones—would open his own factory.

Unlike loftier Victorian ceramics such as *pâte-sur-pâte* porcelain, majolica was made for use; it was always and openly meant to delight. Majolica regaled a wide public with detailed, lively designs and ingenious reliefs often drawn from nature or agriculture: a rabbit peeking from a burrow on a game terrine; a forlorn frog tucked under the claw of a full-sized stork jardiniere; lifelike tangles of berries, stems, and flowers on a dessert dish. "You can see

something new in it each time you look," says Cornelia Rodock, a Maryland collector who grew fascinated with majolica fifty years ago and, at eighty-six, is still collecting.

If majolica had any pretension at all, it was the affectation of the name, which harks back misleadingly to *maiolica*, the bright ceramics that were produced during the fifteenth-century Moorish occupation of Spain and reached Italy by way of the island of Majorca. But *maiolica*'s distinctive look derives from a tin-based, opaque white glaze, while the glaze used on majolica's soft-paste bisque is clear and has a lead base. The romantic name made good marketing sense, but majolica actually owes more to the eighteenth-century ceramics of Whieldon and Wedgwood, who developed earthenware patterned on the pineapple and cauliflower. And it owes a debt to the much grander tradition of the sixteenth-century Frenchman Bernard Palissy, who used a lead glaze to sleeken the reptiles and other wildlife that populate his naturalistic pottery. With its casual abandon, majolica also appropriated homely and exotic elements from decorative traditions dating as far back as the Romanesque and classical periods, as well as from mannerism. Many of the ideas were simply in the Victorian air.

Derivative though majolica was aesthetically, its popularity proved remarkably durable through 1880. It declined precipitously around 1900, as the British government began to discourage the use

of lead-based glazes because of the risks it posed to pottery workers' health. But taste already had been shifting away from bold colors and ornamentation to simpler styles of ceramics, such as art pottery. The craze held on a bit longer in the United States, where it ran an equally dramatic course. At first, a wealth of majolica was imported to America from England, but by the 1870s there was also considerable indigenous production. The newer American potteries were turning out lower-priced copies and free-form offshoots of the fashionable British ware. Griffen, Smith and Hill, of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania (whose initials were often used to signify "good, strong, and handsome") made an "Etruscan" shell-and-seaweed pattern that today is considered the prize collectible of American majolica. The Chesapeake Pottery Company, of Baltimore, was renowned for its Avalon and Clifton wares, with their distinctive, cream-colored base. Inexpensive majolica was even more widely available in the United States than in Britain; at one point, it was given away by the A&P as a premium with the purchase of baking powder and with a product with the cozy name "Mother's Oats."

In general, collectors agree that the British majolica is of higher quality—more elegantly modeled and painted—than its American counterpart. But the top British potteries had centuries of ceramics tradition and training to draw on, while in America the decorating staffs were often made up of girls and young women.

VICTORIAN CINDERELLAS

In the days when majolica was out of fashion, pieces could be bought in the high—or even in the low—single figures. No longer. Price and supply still vary with location, but certain guidelines hold generally.

Prices are highest for marked pieces from the major English potteries (Minton, Wedgwood, George Jones). They are lower but climbing for fine marked works from the leading American factories (Griffen, Smith and Hill; Chesapeake Pottery Company; Wannopee Pottery Company, of New Milford, Connecticut; Edwin Bennett Pottery Company; Morley & Co., of Wellsville, Ohio). But with American majolica, the absence of markings is not necessarily a defect. Some very ambitious work was left unmarked in the hope that it would be mistaken for the finest English ware.

The shapes and patterns in vogue today, in no particular order, are shell and seaweed, strawberry, cauliflower, pineapple, corn, leaves, and other motifs from nature.

For now, a fine but commonly available plate from an English maker can still be turned up for under \$100, with terrines and similar objects of medium size running several hundred dollars. Large marked pieces from England, such as umbrella stands, command prices starting at \$1,300. The top price for a large and complex American piece, say, a GSH inverted-shell-and-seaweed cigar stand, is now grazing the \$1,000 mark. In the stratospheric reaches of ornate English exhibition pieces (often marked by the artist as well as the manufacturer), prices can soar as high as \$50,000.

JEAN KING



In the fanciful designs of majolica, form may or may not follow function. This covered dish, by George Jones, makes an appealing "garnish" for the sardines it was made to contain.

STEVEN MAYS



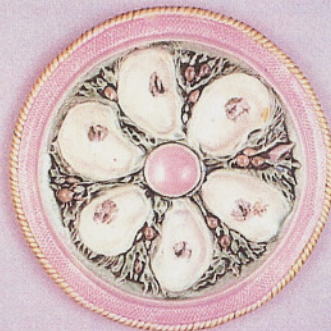
This pitcher, probably American, would be perfect in an earthenware menagerie.

STEVEN MAYS



The cauliflower motif combines the vegetable image with strict geometry.

STEVEN MAYS



The shells painted on this oyster plate might be mistaken for the real thing.

JEAN KING



This strawberry plate, attributed to Wedgwood, has its own creamer and sugar bowl.

JEAN KING



A jug by George Jones has the stout sturdiness of an object made for use.

STEVEN MAYS



Though many collectors go after majolica for its wild quirks and surprises, others prefer the patterned, almost abstract simplicity exemplified in this punch bowl.



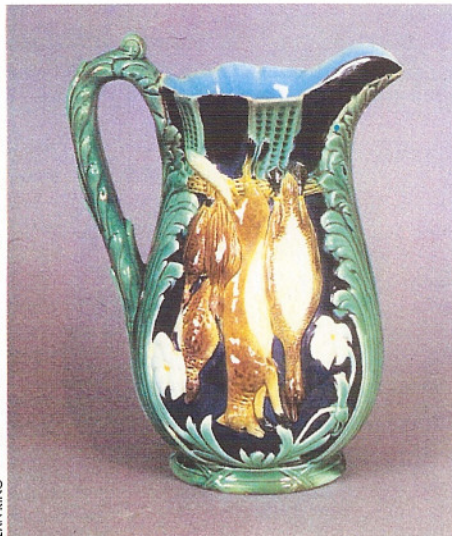
JEAN KING

The design for Minton's asparagus dish is as ingenious as it is fitting.



STEVEN MAYS

In these strange vases, tapered hands grip ears of corn like uplifted torches.



JEAN KING

Motifs from the hunt—a rabbit, a duck, and a pheasant—decorate a Holdcroft jug.



JEAN KING

The monkey on this Minton teapot has, perhaps, a vaguely Oriental air.



JAN STALLER

The table is laid in Etruscan shell-and-seaweed pattern. With its chiseled textures, deep hues, and free radial symmetry, it was a favorite in its own time and is a classic today.

"There is a spontaneity to much of the American majolica—it is like a gem in the rough compared to the very slick, sophisticated, planned work of the best English potteries," says M. Charles Rebert, a Pennsylvania majolica collector and author of a book, *American Majolica, 1850–1900*.

The same criteria of excellence apply no matter where a piece comes from. "Majolica should be crisply modeled, with wonderful, deep colors that are well defined," says Barbara Munves, of the James II Galleries, in New York. "It shouldn't be fuzzy, even if it is a 'soft' piece." It should be in mint condition—a tough requirement for objects made for use. "Condition is very important in a piece that is replaceable," says Stuart Slavid, of the Den of Antiquity, in Boston. "But if it is a piece whose form you've never seen before or a piece that is very rare, it's silly not to own it, if that is the only example you'll ever see."

There are many such instances. One of the most intriguing hallmarks of majolica is the seemingly infinite variety of its designs. "You never know what is going to turn up," says J. Garvin Mecking, who first bought majolica simply to offset the brown-furniture look of his New York antiques store and who now sells it widely to clients all over the United States. "One of the reasons majolica is so hot is that you can keep finding things that you've never seen before."

And more and more, people are enjoying living with it. "Majolica has a very warm and welcoming feeling," says the interior decorator Susan Zises Green, who is a majolica collector herself. "Even in a rather formal setting, a not quite serious accessory such as majolica is very inviting. It says, 'Come sit next to me, touch me.' It breaks the ice and is very reassuring."

There are two kinds of people: those who love majolica and those who hate it. No one is lukewarm or neutral on the subject. There are those who claim that majolica collectors have a special joy about them: a liveliness, a love of beauty, a love of nature. In the opinion of one collector, "They tend to be pretty happy people, who exude a sense of fun."

"Let's face it," says Joan Graham, co-owner with Marilyn Karmason of a two-thousand-piece collection, "life is very serious. So it's wonderful when you have something that you can come home to and smile at." □

Lisbet Nilson last reported for *Connoisseur* on the ins and outs of Stockholm.