

majolica

BY CAROLYN HULTMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTINE HALL

Left, A corner cupboard houses a collection of majolica plates and vases. *Right*, A colorful donkey figure carries barrels designed to hold cut flowers.



During most of the 1900s majolica pottery was relegated to Grandma's house. Only in the last 20 years or so has the pottery become a desired collectible again. The history and the whimsy of the figures—and of course the colorful translucent glazes—have made what's old new again in homes across America.

I am always on the lookout for superb examples of my favorite collectibles. Majolica, a style of decorative ceramic, is one of my favorites. I love the colors and designs, and I turn to it whenever I'm decorating a home. My friend Claire has an abundant collection of some of the most beautiful and unusual pieces I've ever seen, which she purchased over many years of traveling to England.

While earthenware and pottery have been around for thousands of years, it is believed that the Italians first used metallic oxides on a tin glazed surface, a technique they called maiolica. The clay was gently fired and covered with an opaque enamel of sand, lead, and tin. Some of the earliest colors were copper green, manganese purple, cobalt blue, antimony yellow, iron red, a dark inky blue, and an opaque white. The Della Robbia family of Italy abandoned sculpture in 1438 to create religious subjects surrounded by fruits, such as lemons and oranges, and mixed with leaves and flowers. In France, Bernard Palissy produced glazed ceramics and added reliefs of reptiles, beetles, lizards, and shells to his designs. Spain, China, Portugal, the Netherlands, and Germany developed their own designs, as well.

The English are best known for majolica even though they studied other countries' designs for patterns and changed the name from maiolica to majolica. Renowned potters, including Wedgwood, Minton, Staffordshire, and Toft, would become the leading producers of majolica pottery.

Thomas Minton and his family developed ceramic creations later known as Victorian majolica. These humorous and whimsical pieces were loaded with charm and natural beauty. By 1844, the family had developed the use of hydraulic presses and steam hammers for enameling to produce tiles, oyster plates, colorful urns, and cachepots with pond lily designs. Minton pieces can be viewed at the Victoria and Albert Museum and at Thomas Goode and Company in London.

Americans began making majolica when English potters began immigrating to this country in the 1840s. Griffen, Smith, and Hill of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, became known for their modeled and glazed shell and seaweed patterns. Japanesque designs of butterflies and flowers were made by Eureka Pottery Company of Trenton, New Jersey.

Many American potters did not mark their pieces in hopes these would be more marketable if they were thought to be English. Other American producers of majolica-style pottery were James Carr, George Morley, Chesapeake Pottery, Philadelphia City Pottery, and the New Milford Pottery Company.

By the early 1900s "majolica mania" had subsided, and the pieces were stored in attics for years. Recently, however, majolica has become very collectible—and very pricey. It has become a bit of an addiction for Claire, and, ever since I used it in several rooms of her Savannah, Georgia, home, Paula loves majolica as well. 🍀



The corn and wheat sheaf patterns indicate that the renowned English potter Minton probably designed these garden seats.

Worth Collecting



This page, A collection of cabbage-leaf plates varying in color and design is displayed with unusual majolica figures in a small cupboard.



Opposite page,
Left, A small three-dimensional bird perches on the tree branches in the design of this colorful plate. *Right,* While out for a stroll, Mother Goose is escorted by one of her flock. *Below left,* A cobalt-blue teapot with a fish design sits in front of a brilliantly colored plate. *Below right,* A unique hunt scene with dogs and prey decorates the top of a majolica box.





“Humorous and whimsical majolica pottery is my favorite accessory to use when I’m decorating a home.”

—Carolyn Hultman



Worth Collecting



Basket-weave-patterned coffee mugs and basket, green cabbage-leaf plates, a sunflower tray, and even a dog show the variety of designs included in the majolica style.



Above, Even though several animals are included in Claire's collection, animals made in majolica pottery are quite rare. It is thought this antique rooster originally was used for storing fresh milk or cream. Today the back could be removed, and the rooster could hold fresh flowers. *Below*, The very old French asparagus set includes plates, a platter, and a serving piece. Having an entire set of a pattern makes the pottery much more valuable.

Collecting Majolica

If you love majolica pottery but don't insist that it be old or signed, you can easily put together a collection without spending a fortune. Prices vary from a few dollars to hundreds, depending on the rarity of the piece. Antique stores, thrift stores, and eBay are sources to search for your treasures.

When you start collecting, try to narrow your focus to a particular color, plate design, or figure. Some people collect just flower plates, others collect mugs, while others want only whimsical animals. If your collection has some cohesiveness, it will make a much more interesting display.

