



Majolica

Decorative pottery with emotional appeal.
By Rufus Foshee

The response to the word "majolica," is often, "Oh, that's the pottery made in Italy. . . ."

Most people don't know that the colorful glazed pottery made in Spain in the 17th and 18th centuries was also called majolica; in France and Germany it was called faience; and in England and Holland, delft. All had a strong tin glaze that held together a very porous and very poorly potted body.

Here our discussion is about Victorian majolica, made between about 1850 and 1890 in England and America, though other countries produced majolica too. Contrary to popular opinion, this later majolica's glaze was not tin, but lead.

Many American and English pieces are marked, but most are not. Many dealers hear customers say, "I only want marked examples." There's no reason to support such a demand, since few reputable makers marked most of their wares, and many good makers marked none.

Numerous myths that have no foundation have been built up around majolica collecting, as is true with most categories of antiques in today's market. For example, there are those who, by chance rather than by design, buy a piece by a certain make or of a particular pattern, holding that it is "the best." Such collecting patterns are common, but are not the most productive.

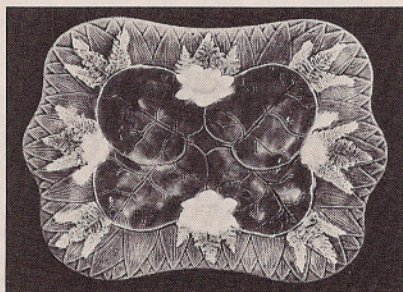
From the beginning, designers of majolica in England and America had their eyes on nature. Flowers of many kinds dominate majolica, as do birds and fish; animal motifs are rare. A large segment of American majolica, varying in size from sauce dishes to meat platters, is in the form of leaves. While the begonia leaf dominates the smaller pieces, others, including oak leaves, show up on larger examples.

English majolica is the best potted

Writer Rufus Foshee is an antiques dealer in pottery and porcelain. He is a member of the Maine State Commission on the Arts and the Humanities. His article on yellowware appeared in the March 1984 issue of Country Living.

and best glazed. While such makers as Wedgwood, George Jones, and Minton were exceptional designers—and widely recognized as stars among majolica manufacturers—the English firm of Holdcroft, 1865 to 1939, is in the top class too, but has not yet come to have

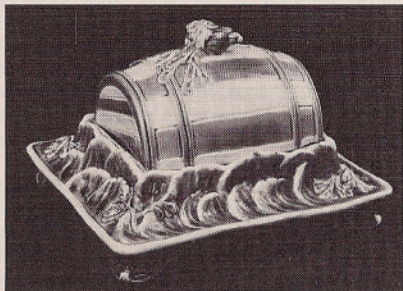
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Holdcroft fruit tray is a fine example of English majolica.



This white bark jug departs from Holdcroft's usual pond-lily motif.




Subtle and beautiful in coloring, this Wedgwood soap dish echoes the sea, and has a sea-green-painted interior.

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such broad appreciation. In part, this may be because most known examples of Holdcroft majolica are variations of the so-called pond lily; an exception is the white bark, medium-size jug (see photo, p. 36) whose crabstock handle extends its flowering branches into the major floral motif on the sides.

No known majolica maker shows the imaginative range one sees in a comprehensive collection of examples from Griffin, Smith & Hill of Phoenixville, Pa. Such a collection is owned by M. Charles Rebert, whose book, *American Majolica 1850-1900* (Wallace-Homestead, Chicago, \$17.95; call (312) 323-3800 to order) is required reading for majolica collectors. It is regrettable that the publisher produced such poor color work.

There are a great many inconsistencies in American majolica. You may own what appears to be a pair of a particular form. A closer look may indicate that one piece is much heavier than the other, meaning that the molds may have been worn down, or were from different makers. One piece may be stronger in color than the other, or have less detailed decoration. Unless both examples bear the same maker's mark, there can be little certainty that such pieces are from the same maker.

Until about 15 years ago, little majolica was seen in shops and at shows in the eastern United States. Just the same, certain collectors in the East and Southwest found enough sources to assemble remarkable collections. The demand from these avid, sophisticated collectors has encouraged imaginative dealers to search out and purchase outstanding pieces of majolica. Such dealers have brought these pieces (a little at a time, if not in whole) into the marketplace, revealing examples infrequently, if ever, seen before. The appearance of such quality collections has caused many collectors to say, "I never thought I liked majolica, but I've never seen such beautiful pieces before."

The collector looking for majolica should begin by finding a reputable dealer. The dealer should have 10 to 20 examples of both American and English majolica, so the collector doesn't have to just settle, but can select the piece he really wants. If collectors merely grab the first piece they find, they will form poor collecting habits that are not likely to be the most productive.

Having found such a source, how is one to choose a piece? Ask yourself and the dealer the following questions: What is the best piece among these examples? Who made it, and where was it made? Most importantly, does it please your aesthetic demands? Then, is it well-potted, colorfully decorated, and well-glazed? The collector will need the help of a knowledgeable dealer to answer these questions. Even a well-informed dealer may not be able to tell you who made the example, but should be able to answer all the other questions you may have about the piece.

As for the best example, it is possible that several pieces have approximately equal merit. If so, choose the one that best pleases your taste.

Majolica is a pottery category that has no shortage of hollow pieces. This includes a fair number of teapots (a form generally in short supply in pottery and porcelain); pitchers of every size, design, and decoration; and cups and saucers (though these are not plentiful). Bowls are uncommon, footed or not.

Some large "families" of majolica are well-known and popular. Among these, none are more outstanding than the cauliflower motif. At a distance some of the cauliflower pieces may appear to be similar to those made by Thomas Whieldon and the first Wedgwood in the mid-18th century. Other designs include at least three different variations of shell and seaweed. Those attributed to James Carr of the New York Pottery Co. are not so well-known, but are among the most outstanding examples of American majolica. Examples by Griffin, Smith & Hill and by Wedgwood are much appreciated.

Griffin, Smith & Hill examples are pink, green, and gray; their shell and seaweed were also made in the not-so-well-known albino. Wedgwood majolica includes yellow-edged shells, as does Carr's, but the Wedgwood pieces are pale and have such finials as open boats and seashells. Carr's examples have alternating shells edged in yellow and coral. The flat examples are colorful and decorative; the covered ones have fish-strap finials, and some pieces, such as the sugar bowl, also have fish-strap handles. The cream jug and the teapot have elaborate serpent handles. 