

Nicholas Dawes – May 2006 – From Charles Dickens to Charlie Washburne: Why Majolica Happened

Speech to MIS 2006 Convention, Listeners Notes

Art objects are reflections of people, markets and the consumer behavior of the times in which they were made. I would like to take you back on a journey before the Great Exhibition (1851) to Dickens' A Tale of Two Cities, around the 1780's, to attempt to explain, "Why Majolica?" It was 'the best of times and the worst of times'. The nobility, dilettante, who were proud of their amateur status as students of many things, were enjoying the best of times. They loved the Ancient World, especially the Greco-Roman Era, as represented by the surviving objects from that period. Many of these objects were sculptures or replicas. Perhaps unaware that these objects had originally been adorned with brilliant multi-colored glazes, the dilettantes admired the pristine white that had been revealed after thousands of years of exposure. Their preferred style of architecture was Greco-Roman, and their houses often resembled the ancient villas of the Mediterranean. They saw themselves as the modern counterparts to ancient nobility and desired that their houses express their fitness for such comparison. Colors in household décor were tempered to fit their owners' manorial status. Although they admired the frescoes of Pompeii, they eschewed the bright colors there for subtle pastels and near-monochromatic color schemes in their own lives.

How is it that Majolica arose? The houses of the landed gentry were richly ornamented but largely monochromatic. (The technology that made Majolica possible did not yet exist. While buff-colored earthenware was being used plentifully, there were no sophisticated kilns in the manner of Leon Arnoux, so the brilliant glazes were not yet possible.) Even so, the aristocracy would have had no interest in brilliant colors for its ceramics, for they emulated the Romans in matters of taste. If they had remained the dominant social force, members of the Aristocracy would not have wanted Majolica in their homes.

In the 1780's and 1790's, they began moving into town homes, which were still outfitted with the pretty, pale colors they believed were correct representation of ancient style. Table settings were mostly porcelain, but they did contain some creamware, and some Chinese exports. A popular dish was the 'savory' pie, so there were game pie dishes on the table, but they were of 18th century designs and had the dry look of biscuit wares.

It was also the "Worst of Times". The French Revolution (Slide of Louis XVI beheaded) began in 1789. George Washington was President in the United States. One could say this is the year Feudalism ended. It was the end of the era for the single market place for goods, and the beginning of a new era of market behavior- a new consumerism. The new French Republic took on new habits and a new look.

In Britain, it was the beginning of the Regency period. George III followed by his son Prince George, later George IV, who was flamboyant. In the 1840's, British taste, guided by its monarchs, veered away from Neo-Classicism. There was a new love for the exotic input of the ever-expanding British Empire. Much of this stimulus emanating from Africa and India would have a profound influence on Majolica. Prince George threw memorable parties and built the colorful Royal Pavilion, in Brighton, by the seaside on the English Channel. It was the Las Vegas of Britain.

By the 1810 and 20's, a new class of people emerged, bringing in a new kind of consumerism. It was the beginning of the cash economy. This was the first appearance of the middle class, ordinary people who were neither of nobility nor indentured to that class. They weren't even wealthy merchants. Members of the middle class were not sophisticated; maybe even illiterate. This was the new Urban class.... a new group participating in a huge migration from the countryside into the cities, attracted by the hope of wealth and prosperity. It was a largely agrarian group and not well educated. Charles Dickens' novels describe many characters who would belong to this group. (1830-50's) They certainly lacked the benefits of education that so typified the previous social leaders.

In 1820, the English potters were good at making porcelain and there were many companies making it. Numerous factories sprung up in the Midlands, and floral decoration became popular.

However, they held new purse strings and they bought decorative objects for their homes. These would have been things like the Staffordshire chimneypieces that are so beloved today. (POLITO'S BRIGHT MENAGERIE was a popular example.) In general, while the aristocracy continued to enjoy the subdued reminders of historic times, the Middle class moved away from historicism and into freshly beautiful and romantic themes, or they bought items that exhibited a contemporary relevance.

Dickens also describes in detail the change wrought by the introduction of the Railway system. The impact that train travel had on the day-to-day lives of the Britons cannot be overstated. Cities grew rapidly. One should read "Great Expectations" and contemplate Pip's role, as England moved from stagecoach travel to trains. Between 1830 and 1860, the railroads upended the transportation infrastructure and allowed the cities to expand. By 1860, London had eleven railroad terminals. Train tracks sprawled across the countryside. They were built and operated without any consideration for ecological concerns. The engines, their belching smoke stacks and their noise were unwelcome newcomers.

The introduction of train travel was an unprecedented improvement on many fronts but, the noise, the pollution, the new hectic urbanity of what had recently been a quiet countryside, quickly stimulated a romantic, (perhaps misplaced) nostalgia for the serenity of pre-railway England. Dickens also lamented the change and documented it well in his books.

There was no urban planning. Life expectancy in Britain was only 17 years. In 1849, the Communist Manifesto was written after Marx and Engels saw Birmingham and Manchester. In "Oliver Twist", Dickens laid bare the cruelties of child labor and disregard for worker safety. The horrors of urban living were symbolized by the black smoke spewing from locomotives, and by the gin palace. It was the predecessor of the modern pub. Yet, unlike pubs, these places were nasty; gin was the crack cocaine of the 1840's, much more addictive and toxic than what we know today. Its victims were often women. Crime and prostitution became serious and common threats.

In short, Britain was in a mess by the 1840's. (Note that this is still the pre-Majolica era.) Despite enormous economic growth and other advancements made in the 19th Century, there was a pressing need for relief. Reform movements, founded and guided by philanthropic members of the upper classes and religious entities, established improved standards for the working conditions of laborers.

One of the many areas of reform was public sanitation. Architectural majolica was a response to the reformists' demands for improved sanitation in public buildings. Railway stations and public baths were paved with ceramic tile to aid in cleaning. Majolica played a part in the Reform movement. The Houses of Parliament were rebuilt in the 1840's and 1850's. Its Gothic style allowed the British government to project its conservative values, harking to an idealized version of pre-Industrial virtue. (The Gothic style also represented something innately English that preceded the expansion of the Empire. This English quality was favored and encouraged as a model for the public to admire.) The tiles that were used in the Pugin-decorated Houses of Parliament were Minton Majolica tiles. It is likely that this was the first Majolica produced. The tiles were not popular, as they were austere and rather formal. Yet the ecclesiastical Gothic style appealed to the social consciousness of high minded 'do-gooders', who were, themselves, the fashionable set, and so, the Gothic style, emblematic of social reform, became fashionable too. Examples of the Gothic Revival style are: the Wedgwood Caterer's jug, and the Minton (Pugin) revolving tray.

William Morris was another reformer. He was idealistic, with leftward-leaning political beliefs. He promoted the idea of a pre-Industrial Society, saying that virtue was to be found in the simpler life. He was a major founder of the Arts and Crafts movement, which advocated a return to hand-labor and encouraged craftsmen to employ time honored methods in making goods, eschewing modern manufacturing methods as somehow corrupting of Man's inherently noble spirit. William Morris was not a fan of Majolica. Aesthetically, he preferred monochromatic or subtly colored wares. His designs were severe and resembled the Shaker designs that appeared in America a short time later. (The Shakers equated simplicity and honesty with godliness.) Later, Morris would himself become much less idealistic as the realities of the marketplace weighed in on him.

One highly colored decorative art that was satisfactory to Morris was the stained glass used in church windows. Stained glass was made during the medieval period and was therefore historically appropriate to the pre-Industrial impulse, but it also was made to glorify the religious experience, an important component of the Arts and Crafts ideology.

In contrast, Herbert Minton and Leon Arnoux "switched on" the Industrialists. In 1849 Arnoux created majolica glazes and the kilns to fire them. The newly created bourgeois class proved to be Minton's customer base. These people were mercantilists and identified with the Medici of Florence, the best example of wealthy and powerful families in Renaissance Europe. They built huge homes and wanted to fill them with monumental objects. This harked back to ancient Rome, where a person's status was defined by the opulence of his estate. The pieces the new comers acquired were elaborate, ornamental and expensive. (The Minton Florentine Wine Cistern, itself a copy of a Roman cistern, epitomized the fact that the ancient style prevailed.)

The next step in the development of Majolica was the revival of the Renaissance style- 16th century art. The work of Bernard Palissy was revered as emblematic of Renaissance art. Wedgwood oyster plates were popular echoes of an authentic design. The dolphin theme was used heavily in

Renaissance art and was popular with the Victorians as well. There were multitudes of shells encrusting majolica surfaces. The customer was dictating his desires and Minton responded by giving the customer what he wanted.

This was in contrast to the continued health of the reform movement, headed by Henry Cole, Felix Summerly and John Bell, all influential designers and educators. Their style was reserved and spare. There was no overabundance of decoration. With a Utopian principle in mind, they made things with reserve. This idealistic trend in decorative arts was one of the forerunners of Modernism, whose tenets match these.

Of course, this is right at the time of the Great Exhibition. Majolica's successful introduction to the public is explained by its perfect appropriateness to the times.

The story of Minton's participation in the Crystal Palace Exhibition is well known and needs not to be discussed here.

Dr. Christopher Dresser's work in ceramics for the Wedgwood factory marked a small wedge where the modern movements of restraint and Asian aesthetics and Majolica coincided.

In general, by the 1880's, the well-to-do (but not fabulously wealthy) in Northern Europe, Britain and America desired a lot of "stuff". These well-informed consumers had learned of new worlds, such as Turkey and ancient Egypt. They purchased ornamental, colorful furniture. "The more bizarre, the better" became the style of the day. Minton trellis-worked garden pots manifest a Louis XVI flavor, while Minton putto candlesticks represent the Rococo tradition. This was the fashion for the wealthy bourgeois customer until the 1880's, when the craze subsided. English Rococo Revival Majolica re-introduced the designs of the original Rococo period, but with the Majolica glazes that appealed to the Victorians. Conspicuous consumption was at work here. In addition, Egyptian aesthetics were popular, even though modern consumers were unable to identify with the values of the Egyptian society, as had happened in the Renaissance Revival.

Louis XV Majolica relies on the vibrant colors that the Victorians were accustomed to seeing in the 1840's, harking back to the Sheraton period and George III. Louis the XVI-inspired Majolica saw the introduction of pastel colors into the modern palette. These were most effective in the most sophisticated wares. The pale colors did not suit the more rustic pieces.

This introduces another level of distinction within Majolica: Formal versus Rustic. Imagine Martha Stewart and Donald Trump buying Majolica. With her love of country-inspired imagery, including animals and flowers, Martha would choose a George Jones strawberry dish. Donald Trump, on the other hand, as a self-made man eager to display his wealth and power, would look for "statement" pieces that would demonstrate his financial success and stability. He would choose the more formal, (usually Minton) often architectural pieces. In this way, two markets within the Majolica market began to develop.

In the 1870's, the Formal style is typified by Eastlake, with its well-made, Japanese-influenced furniture. (Eastlake authored a home-decorating book, "Hints on Household Taste", which became the "Bible" in its field. At the same time, in 1876, at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, the

more countrified majolica made its appearance, albeit with some Asian influence. The Copeland Eagle Vase is an example. Egyptian influence is seen in the Holdcroft lotus leaf pieces, which came in many useful shapes. (Wealth meant being able to afford large families, so the demand for large dinner services fueled the already booming tableware market.)

In spite of their wealth, people still wanted to be reminded of the countryside. In response to Darwin's travels, there was an increased awareness of the rise of Naturalism (1859-1870'). Societies for the study of new scientific discoveries were established, and their lectures were well attended. Conservatories were built onto mansions, and were furnished with Majolica tiling, garden seats, walking stick stands and strawberry dishes. There were Majolica vegetables and flowers, a Wedgwood Fly Match Box. Anything having to do with Natural History was a candidate for use in a conservatory.

Majolica could still be bought inexpensively, so like the Martha Stewart example, Griffin Smith and Hill made Etruscan tableware, unsophisticated but well made for the American market. In Britain, trains made day tripping feasible, and so a souvenir market developed and was satisfied by the appearance of Isle of Man Tea pots, and Punch and Judy pieces, among others. A George Jones Cheese Bell, with a depiction of a seaside resort, may have been designed as a souvenir of a summer holiday.

In the 1880's, the Majolica craze began to wane in Britain. Then, it was exported overseas, to places such as South America and the exotic Colonial market. An Australian company, Bandigo Pottery took up the craft. Majolica glazes were used for a while in the 20th Century in Continental Europe. (See Wiener Keramik for 1925 Majolica glazes.)

The Majolica period ended. Why? Modernism and progressive design turned away from the overwhelming excess of Victorian taste. Looking to the future instead of the past, the spirit of young designers replaced their forebears' love of antiques with the spare look born in the Bauhaus. The importance of the Bauhaus in 20th Century design is unmistakable. Its influence is so far-reaching that we take it for granted now, eighty years later. Yet, we can see it in our chairs, our coffee pots, and our dinnerware. The new look was sleek and futuristic, and immediately became the taste of the fashionable, younger generation.

In a way, it had come full circle, because the urban desire for the Rustic life shows a yearning for a simpler life. In a way, that is what Modernism also hoped to achieve. The washerwomen of the mid 19th Century were Dickensian girls who represent a pre-Industrial simplicity, when, in an ideal vision, honesty, hard work and simplicity reigned.