

What distinguishes maiolica (ma-yolicka) from majolica (ma-jolicka)? About 300 years—and \$300,000.

# What a difference a “j” makes

By Christie Brown

IT'S MAJOLICA in English; *maiolica* in Italian. But we're talking two very different piles of pots here.

Maiolica is the colorful Italian Renaissance ceramicware that reached its peak as an art form in the mid-to-late 1500s. Painted with coats-of-arms and historical scenes, many pieces of maiolica remind one of miniatures of old master paintings on pottery. Indeed, many of the designs were copied directly from paintings by old master artists, including Ra-

phael and Dürer.

Made as show pieces for the wealthy, maiolica used innovative pottery techniques, like a tin-glaze, which produces lustrous opaque colors. The Italian potters picked up the technique from Spanish wares imported from the island of Majorca—hence the name of the pottery.

Long prized by museums and collectors such as J. Paul Getty, maiolica has never gone out of favor; prices have climbed slowly but surely over

the centuries. Today the biggest buyers are Italian collectors. “All the major American collectors are dead,” sighs New York dealer Ruth Blumka. “The Italians are buying it back like crazy.”

And paying hefty prices. A 16th-century plate with a scene of Coriolanus being tossed out of Rome fetched \$316,000 at Christie's in 1991—the record for a piece of maiolica.

And then there is pottery known as majolica—pronounced with a hard “j.” Majolica is the wacky Victorian lead-glazed pottery famous for its exuberant designs—everyday plates and bowls shaped like seashells, dolphins, flowers, cabbage leaves and fish. The venerable English porcelain firm of Minton & Co. first introduced a line of these lively wares in 1851. When exhibited, they were advertised as “colored after the style of the old maiolica.” Nothing like a marketing stretch. Majolica and maiolica are both glazed earthenware, but otherwise they are as different as chalk and cheese.

Victorian majolica tableware was made for the middle classes who couldn't afford fine porcelain. Then Queen Victoria decided she fancied the stuff, and it became all the rage. Dozens of manufacturers in America, England and France began churning out majolica.

By the 1920s tastes had changed; majolica was banished to the attic. It has come back down only in the last decade as it became a hot collectible.

As you'd expect, the biggest supply of Victorian majolica is still found in England. And prices can get lofty. A cobalt blue Minton & Co. covered dish decorated with two bright yellow rabbit ears sticking up from the lid brought a record \$84,500 last year at Sotheby's in London.

But Americans are doing most of the majolica buying. “I'd say 99% of our clients are Americans,” says Rita Smythe, a majolica dealer who owns Britannia Antiques, at Grays Antique Market in London. “The British will probably wake up once it's all gone.”

If they do, they can find a lot of it in the apartments of two New Yorkers, Joan Stacke and Marilyn Karmason. Old friends, Stacke and Karmason started collecting 15 years ago, when Karmason, a psychiatrist, picked up a



Marilyn Karmason and Joan Stacke with some of their majolica  
**They bought entire collections together, and divided them up like kids.**



tiny majolica pitcher at an antique shop for \$15.

Since then Stacke and Karmason have amassed over 2,000 pieces of majolica, ranging from garden seats to wine coolers. Their apartments feel a little like the Land of Oz. There are life-size majolica storks, teapots shaped like monkeys, camel figurines with saddlebags for sweetmeats, cheese bells shaped like beehives and punch bowls supported by jesters.

Haunting weekend flea markets and antique shows, the pair turned up several caches of majolica, one time paying \$4,000 for 288 pieces. "Every time that happened, we sat down on the floor and said, 'One for you, one for me,'" laughs Karmason. Trips to London and the shops along Portobello Road and Kensington Church Street netted them more finds.

Their collections include pieces made by over 50 different American, French and English manufacturers. About 80% of their collections duplicate each other; both have complete sets of "shell and seaweed," a dinnerware pattern made by the American firm of Griffen, Smith & Hill, in Phoenixville, Pa. Plates of "shell and seaweed" are the most sought-after American pattern. The plates were originally promotional items, given away free at A&P stores in the 1880s. Now, a single plate goes for \$200.

Indeed, majolica prices have risen across the board. "When we started out, we could find anything for under \$100; now anything I want would be at least \$3,000 to \$5,000," says Stacke. Of all majolica the most prized are pieces made by Minton & Co., Wedgwood and George Jones, a former Minton craftsman.

Reproductions of majolica are popping up all over the place. For instance, ABC Carpet & Home in New York carries many pieces now made in Portugal or Italy for under \$100 each. Collector Karmason uses her real majolica for special occasions, but often serves dessert on her reproduc-



Majolica terrine made by Minton & Co., 1877

**Brought a record \$84,500 last year at Sotheby's in London.**

tion "shell and seaweed" plates, which she bought from a Horchow catalog several years ago; they cost her only \$10 per plate.

Knockoffs of majolica are easy to spot; the original pieces are highly detailed, and there hasn't been much economic incentive to produce fake pieces intended to fool collectors.

But maiolica is—again—a different

story. Maiolica fakes have been commonplace since the 19th century. Usually, experts can tell by harder edges and untrue colors. When they are in doubt, they use thermoluminescence tests.

The difference in value between fake maiolica and the genuine article is enormous. Take a big, 20-inch, 16th-century maiolica plate. The real thing can be worth \$180,000. "A 19th-century copy would be worth about \$800 on a good day," says Jody Wilke, head of porcelain decorative arts at Christie's. Meanwhile, the Ceramica shop in New York's Soho district sells a good legitimate copy of a 20-inch historical maiolica plate for \$900.

For more information on majolica, Karmason and Stacke have written one of the best books available on the field, *Majolica, A Complete History and Illustrated Survey*, published by Abrams. Price: \$75. To find out about the stuff without the "j": both the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the J. Paul Getty Museum in Malibu, Calif. have terrific collections.



Maiolica dish, circa 1540, fetched \$316,000

**The Italians are now the big buyers.**