

Victorian Majolica

MINTON LINE CREATED A SENSATION WHEN UNVEILED
AT THE GREAT EXHIBITION IN 1851

By Nick Dawes

2009 was an “annus horribilis” for the English ceramics business. Wedgwood and Royal Worcester, veritable monarchs each founded 250 years earlier, both went “into administration,” a characteristically discreet British term for massive financial failure. Royal Doulton, fortified by swallowing up many historic potteries (including Minton, purchased in 1968), is almost the last company standing in a field once heavily populated with prestigious names, boasting distributors throughout the British empire and medals galore at every principal event since the Great Exhibition.

Wedgwood and Royal Worcester steered parallel but very different paths through the industry, but for a brief period in the mid-Victorian years they both manufactured highly comparable Majolica, in the shadow of Minton, which invented Majolica and led the field in production, profits and prestige. Today, collectors focus attention on Majolica bearing the marks of these three companies, and those of smaller and lesser-known makers George Jones, a former Minton employee and entrepreneur, and Joseph Holdcroft, a local potter with a great eye.

The Great Exhibition of the Arts and Industry of All Nations was opened in 1851 by Queen Victoria and displayed in the Crystal Palace, Joseph Paxton’s magnificent glass and iron structure erected over London’s Hyde Park (an architectural ancestor of the Dallas Infomart). It was the largest trade show the world had ever seen and was an ideal setting for Herbert Minton to unveil his new Majolica line to a rapidly expanding industrial world. The bold and colorful ware, ideal for the modern middle-class home, was invented by Frenchman Léon Arnoux, a genius known as the “man who made Mintons” by his death in 1902. Arnoux’s secret was his extraordinary understanding of glaze chemistry and kiln technology, which he combined at Minton to produce the rich and spectacular spectrum of glaze colors, lustrous finish and durability of his new ware. Rivals, notably

Wedgwood, who began making Majolica more than 10 years later, purchased Arnoux kilns from Minton in a gesture of submission.

The name Majolica (an early example of excellent branding) was chosen for its prestigious and historic associations, spe-



Mintons Majolica Jardiniere with Passion Flower decoration, 1882
Height: 15.5 in. – Estimate: \$4,000-\$6,000
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cifically with the stately and colorful pottery produced in Italy and Spain during the Renaissance, which enjoyed collecting popularity and academic respect in Britain at the time. Unlike its ancestor, however, Victorian Majolica is not made in the tin-glazed technique, and is rarely painted by hand.

FRENZY IN AMERICA

The commercial popularity and success of Arnoux’s inven-



Wedgwood Majolica plate of typically high quality in design and manufacture, 1871, Diameter: 15 in. Wedgwood drew on its history and repertoire of earlier neoclassical designs for inspiration in Victorian Majolica production. This model depicts Thetis, a sea nymph and the mother of Achilles.

tion spread across the globe, gaining a foothold in the United States after the Civil War. American interest increased with the enormous success of Minton's stand at the Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, modeled on the Hyde Park event a quarter century earlier. By 1876, a consumer could buy almost anything that could be conceivably made in the best Majolica, from dog bowls and cuspidors (or the less discreet "spit-pots," as Victorians knew them) to magnificent fountains. A host of smaller mak

ers supplied vast quantities of inferior but charming ware at extremely low cost.

The frenzy died down by the mid-1880s as tastes changed away from lavish, revivalist interior decoration toward a simpler, more delicate style predicting Art Nouveau. Majolica production continued in Continental Europe, but was mainly over by the end of World War I. In Britain, little was made after the 1890s, making Majolica a uniquely Victorian ware in taste and period.



Minton Majolica "Tower" ale jug, 1872, Height: 13 in. A superb example of Renaissance revivalism and Minton's ability to produce a vivid spectrum of colored glazed using Leon Arnoux's kilns and glaze recipes.



Minton Majolica teapot inspired by a Chinese original, 1865, Height: 6.5 in. Minton has authentically reproduced this model in recent years, and inexpensive fakes of Asian manufacture are common.

Heritage Auctions will be offering an extraordinary selection of Victorian Majolica, and its collecting partner Palissy ware, named for the French Renaissance potter Bernard Palissy who inspired it, in its "Property of a Lady" auction scheduled for May 26, 2010, in Dallas.

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EVENT

Decorative Arts Signature® Auction #5039, featuring more than 200 lots of Victorian Majolica, made mostly in England and France during the Victorian Years, is scheduled for May 26, 2010, in Dallas. For information, contact Nick Dawes at 214-409-1605, or NickD@HA.com; or Tim Rigdon at 214-409-1119 or TimR@HA.com. For a complimentary Heritage Auctions catalog, call 800-872-6468, ext. 1150, and mention code HM18746 or register online at HA.com/HM18746.