



Photograph by Peter Harholdt

## Sheer Exuberance

One of the most extraordinary items currently touring the country as part of SPNEA's exhibition *Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy* is this set of mantel ornaments, known as a "garniture," from the Codman Estate in Lincoln, Massachusetts. The Minton Pottery Company had introduced this type of ceramic, called "majolica" after the Renaissance maiolica pottery that inspired it, at the Great Exhibition in London in 1851, where it was a runaway success. Minton's immensely talented art director, French émigré Léon Arnoux (1816–1902), is credited with inventing majolica. Arnoux combined the skills of a chemist, an engineer, and an artist. He developed glazes that made a whole new range of brilliant, opaque colors available, including pinks, turquoise, plum, amber, a

whole range of greens, and a velvety chocolate brown. He also designed a patented kiln, which, because it burned more cleanly than previous kilns, produced the brilliant shine characteristic of this ware.

The garniture was purchased as part of a general furnishing scheme devised by Ogden Codman, Sr., when he purchased the most up-to-date mantelpieces, furniture, and fabrics from New York's premier decorator, Leon Marcotte. The result was essentially the Victorianization of the Codman family's eighteenth-century home. Remarkably, when Ogden Codman, Jr., redecorated the house around 1900 and cleared away the previous generation's accumulated bric-a-brac, he did not altogether banish this archetypal example of Victorian taste, suggesting instead that it would be more suitably displayed in the family's Boston home.

By the end of the nineteenth century, majolica had fallen out of fashion. This was partly because its popularity had made it ubiquitous and partly because arts-and-crafts reformers condemned incongruous ornament. But what later generations have seen as excess could equally be viewed today as a culture calling out, "Look at us! See what we can do!" Who can fail to delight in such exuberance?

—Nancy Carlisle  
Curator

**ABOVE** Victorian majolica is characterized by elaborately shaped forms glazed in lustrous bright colors.

*Cherished Possessions: A New England Legacy* will be on view at the Amon Carter Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, from June 12 through August 22, 2004.