

H&G

HOUSE & GARDEN

Nancy Lancaster, Grande Dame
of the English Country House

Gardening: Bermuda in Bloom

Carly Simon on Martha's Vineyard



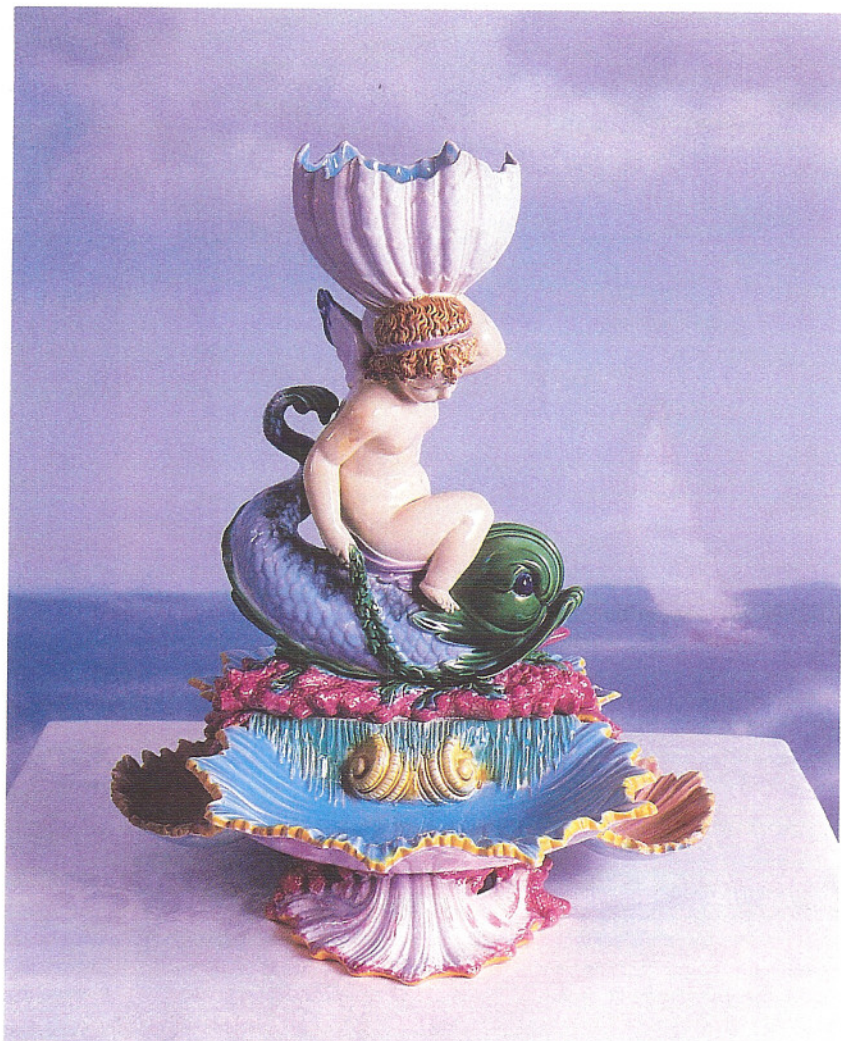
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A Grand Surprise

Devotees of Victorian majolica are drawn to its exuberantly fantastic naturalism. By Leo Lerman
Photographs by Evelyn Hofer



Actually two surprises. One: that I was at all interested in Victorian majolica thirty years ago. Two: but you will have to wait for that surprise. Back to one. I have a passion for “dishes.” I bought or acquired, years ago, quantities of dishes: ironstone, crossed-swords Meissen, transfer ware, “Wedding Band,” anything remotely Russian, patterned peasant pottery, blue and white Chelsea. But I disdained other flamboyantly, ebulliently colored, textured, and shaped plates, platters, and serving pieces that I saw in my favorite “junk” shops. What were these dishes? Their sheen, their glaze frequently reminded me of Renaissance *maiolica*, della Robbia ware, Palissy, but what I saw seemed clunky, kind of cheap, kitschy, even campy. Then one day, after a long session in a hospital, I repaired to my favorite Manhattan bric-a-bracerie.

“What have you got?” I asked Vito Giallo. “I don’t know.” “What are those?” I asked, pointing to two leaf-shaped dishes, naturalistic but somewhat fantasticated, maybe basically begonia leaves, their undulating edges a variegated emerald green and woody brown touched with goldenrod yellow. “How full of life,” I said. “How beautiful. How much?” Vito thought a moment, “Oh, how about a dollar—each? I got them thrown in.” I bought them, dear reader. I now have, thirty years later, some seven hundred pieces of Victorian majolica. At the going price I al-

most cannot afford to buy a single leaf, let alone anything like the glorious examples from Marilyn G. Karmason’s and Joan B. Stacke’s collections shown on these pages. Matter of fact, I haven’t seen a desirable leaf for sale, in my haunts, for a long time. Price and scarcity are, alas, my second surprise.

So I bought and bought what during the sixties and seventies we got to know as Victorian majolica. My treasures are mostly of the domestic rather than the ornamental variety—bamboo-patterned or flower-bedizened teapots; dessert services, including a leaf-green beauty ornamented with Paxton water lilies, the cake stands supported by herons? cranes?; ample bread trays of incredible curvilinear vivacity and high autumn color, with fresh-paint-splashed undersides and inscribed with cautions: “Waste Not Want Not” or “Where Reason Rules the Appetite Obeys.” I bought an umbrella stand straight out of *The Mikado*. And I accumulated a vast tea service inspired buoyantly in design and color by The Pineapple, flotillas of mossy blue-green plates of varied sizes and shapes, even footed dishes, all thickly patterned in realistic greenery exquisitely akin to the meticulous leafy, tendrillous passages in High Victorian paintings. These were almost always Wedgwood. Sometimes while I fondled bunny-rampant, mouse-happy teapots, game-pie dishes, and honey pots, more knowledgeable dealers murmured, “Minton or George Jones.”

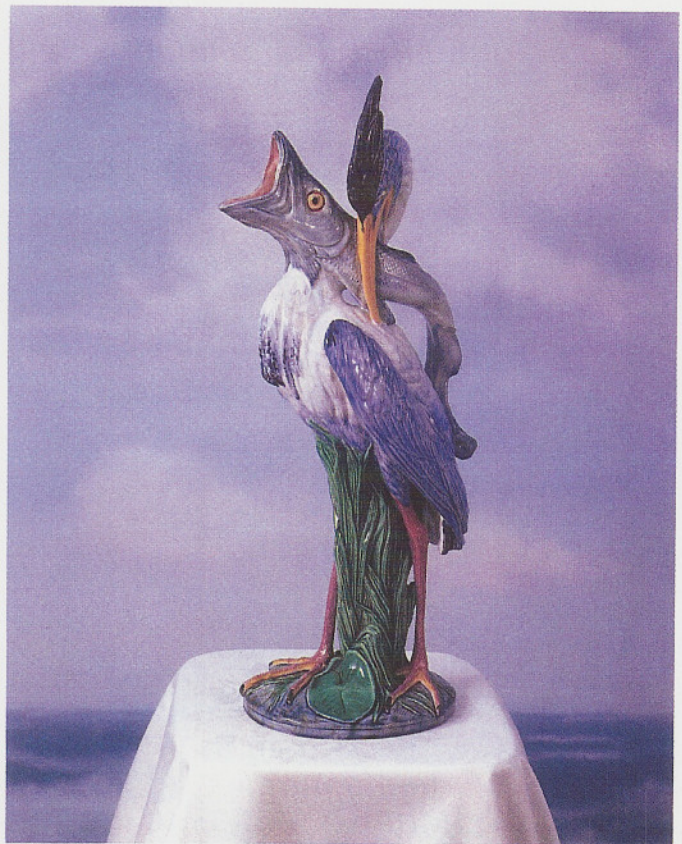


The fish, above, pours tea. A majolica conceit created by Minton in 1878 in the popular japonaiserie mode, this rare tabletop appurtenance sports a seaweed handle, stylized waves on its base, a snail-shell thumb rest, and a dorsal-fin finial. The teapot is lined in party dress pink. A superb example of practical fantasy.

Jones is my favorite because of the pure, shimmering, surprising combinations of color: that special blue, cobalt, yellow, pink, turquoise, and green. While caressing creamy bowls, cups, saucers, teapots awash in seashells and seaweed motifs, I heard not only those great English Victorian majolica maker names but also an American one—Griffen, Smith & Hill.

Nobody, however, could tell me all I wanted to know. No book was comprehensively devoted to what was a glory of ceramic mass production. Mass production! The Industrial Revolution! The Crystal Palace Exhibition, 1851, London—Minton first exhibited its majolica there. Now I saw my serviceable play-pretties as living social history. Here was available splendor for the emerging industrial society, a domestic showiness utilizing the revived interest in nature, the sensibility to “new” colors (like aniline dyes for fabrics, majolica glazes were perfect for a gas-lighted, early electric-lighted world), the passion for anthropomorphism. Majolica makers were also quick to create wares in the modes of art trends: Pre-Raphaelitism, japonaiserie, the Aesthetic movement, Art Nouveau, Jugendstil—but I needed confirmation for my scraps of information, my conjectures. I needed an all-knowing book.

I did find a smattering of guides to some manufacturers and their potter’s marks. Rickerson’s *Majolica: Collect It for Fun*



Clutching a fish in its beak, the heron, above, is a ewer: liquid pours out through the fish’s mouth. Naturalistic violence for household use by Minton, 1871. Opposite left: All-Victorian Christmas in a George Jones holly-wreathed punch bowl, c. 1870. A visual pun, the capacious vessel rests on a supine Mr. Punch.

and Profit and Rebert’s *American Majolica: 1850–1900* helped. Then in 1982 the miraculous began to happen. The Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York presented its “English Majolica” exhibition: seventy pieces (greed and envy!), seventeen of which came from the collections of a Marilyn Karmason and a Joan Stacke. Three years later I met Dr. Karmason (she is a practicing psychiatrist) and then Miss Stacke (who manages her husband’s office—he is an orthopedist in Manhattan). Not only did each possess over 1,500 pieces of Victorian majolica, but Marilyn was completing the writing of an all-inclusive book on this area of our mutual concern and delight, and Joan was abetting research and supervising the photography of hundreds of extraordinary pieces, most of which I did not have. And now here is *Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey* (to be published next month by Harry N. Abrams), a suitably lavish production indeed, answering just about any question anyone could possibly ask about Victorian majolica, its ancestry, its lives and times, its powers of seduction. Fired earthenware with a silky metallic oxide glaze—English, American, French, Portuguese, German, Russian, you name it, it is in this book.

Marilyn, Joan, and I soon became chums. Majolica collectors, at least nearly all I have encountered, are a friendly, sharing company. We all enjoy an identical madness. I was now deeply and selfishly involved in the progress and publication of The

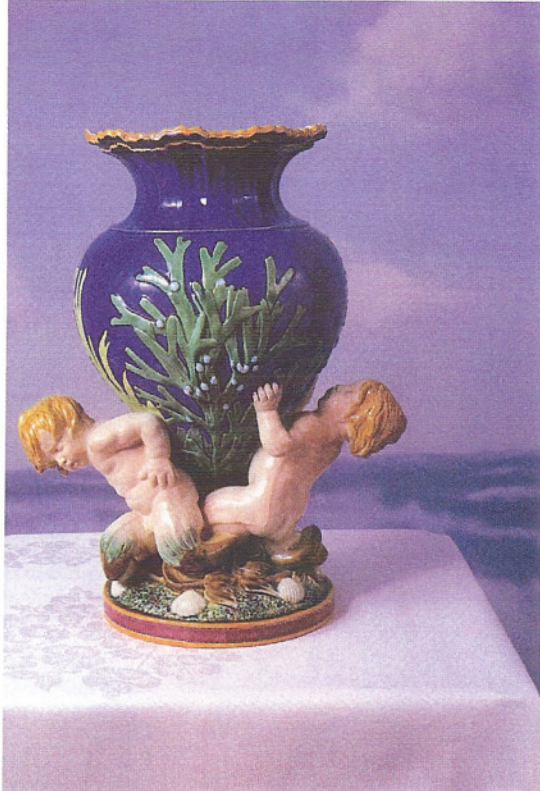


Book. I felt that I was being legitimized when Marilyn and Joan, viewing my holdings, screamed happily, "Look, he has Czechoslovakian! This *must* be Portuguese. Look at the monkeys on those candlesticks. Do you know what you have here?" What did I know compared with what they knew? I just bought because I loved it, but they bought with an informed love. "Look! Look! That cheese bell! That mottled green. Yes, Scottish. So rare. We must get a picture for the book." The sun shone all day and all night long on what was no longer simply a loved accumulation but the Lerman-Foy Collection of Victorian Majolica. It is "official" in Marilyn and Joan's landmark book. "How," I asked Marilyn, "do you and Joan judge a piece worthy of your collections—I mean, other than when it is so rare or so enchanting that you must have it, no matter what?"

"Authenticity of major manufacturers," Marilyn said, "can be determined by the marks on the glazed undersurfaces. Almost every piece of majolica I've seen, as opposed to other pottery, has a glazed undersurface." (Some undersurfaces seem to me as if Gerard Manley Hopkins had them in mind when he wrote "Pied Beauty": "Glory be to God for dappled things—/. . . For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim.") "A complex piece can be made up of several parts, only one of which may bear a company mark. Take a Minton strawberry set. It may comprise as many as five separate parts." Gladly would I take any Minton strawberry set, any part. "Condition, that's impor-

Victorians adored the anthropomorphic. A somewhat rowdy avian gentleman, seriously bespectacled, right, his frock coat fashioned of green feathers. A battered stovepipe hat stoppers this beak-spouted liqueur bottle, hatched on the Continent, c. 1880.



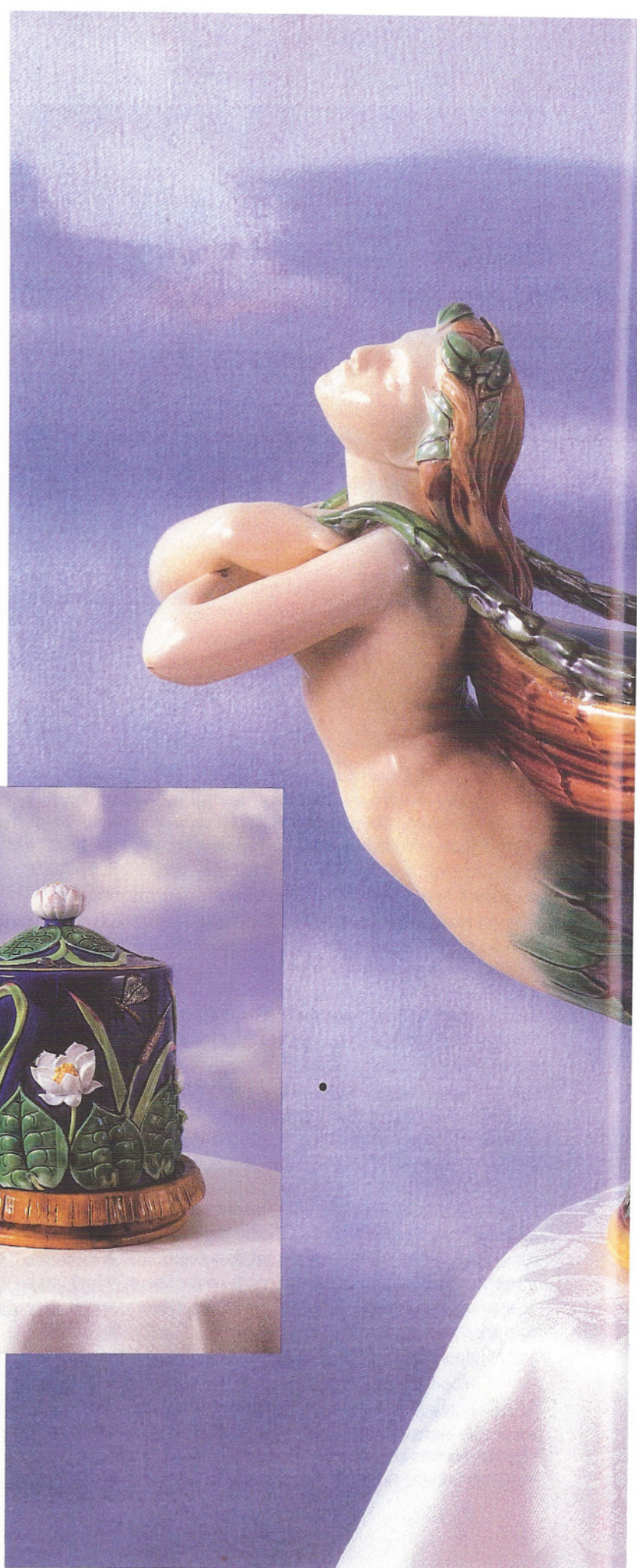


The 19th-century passion for nature and mythology transmogrified domestic wares. **Left:** Tow-headed tritons and sea-finds embellish an 1861 Minton vase. **Below:** Pond lilies, cattails, and dragonflies luxuriate on an 1875 family-size George Jones cheese bell. **Right:** Mermaids hoist the scallop-shell bowl of an 1865 Minton centerpiece.

tant. Evaluation of the glaze: it should be brilliant, not dulled. It should not bleed from one design element to another. Defects: a piece can easily be examined for hairline cracks, especially in heavily ornamented areas. A piece should also be evaluated for completeness. Example: a strawberry set should include creamer, sugar bowl (perhaps with cover), serving spoons, and, of course, the strawberry basket. One of the charms of majolica is that you can always hope to find a piece that you, no matter how much you know, did not know existed. We have!"

The object of our ceramic passion got its big push in America at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition in 1876, after which it burgeoned lustily during the late 1870s and the '80s. Even the Great Atlantic & Pacific Tea Company gave it away as a premium, and, oddly, it was given away at Ford's Theater in Washington, D.C. Potters as far west as Indiana made majolica. How historically satisfying then that the first meeting of the International Majolica Collectors' Association took place this past April in Fort Wayne. It is even more satisfying to greedy-gut collectors such as I to know that both Marilyn and Joan feel that Victorian majolica is ever on the upswing. "In the tumult of today," says Marilyn, "it conjures up what we think of as a Victorian home-loving world, a world of comfort, security, even eccentricity, at least for the rising middle class. Today we want to feel home around us, to eat food cooked in our own kitchens. The Victorians were proud of their gardens, their houses, their food, their crockery."

Victorian majolica is, to parody an old song, awfully nice to come home to! ♣







Evoking past splendors: an 1860s Minton-made Renaissance Revival wine jug and Palissy-inspired ewer. Opposite: A pensive cupid-on-dolphin sweetmeat dish. George Jones made it in 1870; collector-author Marilyn Karmason found it under an antiques stall table in the mid 1980s.