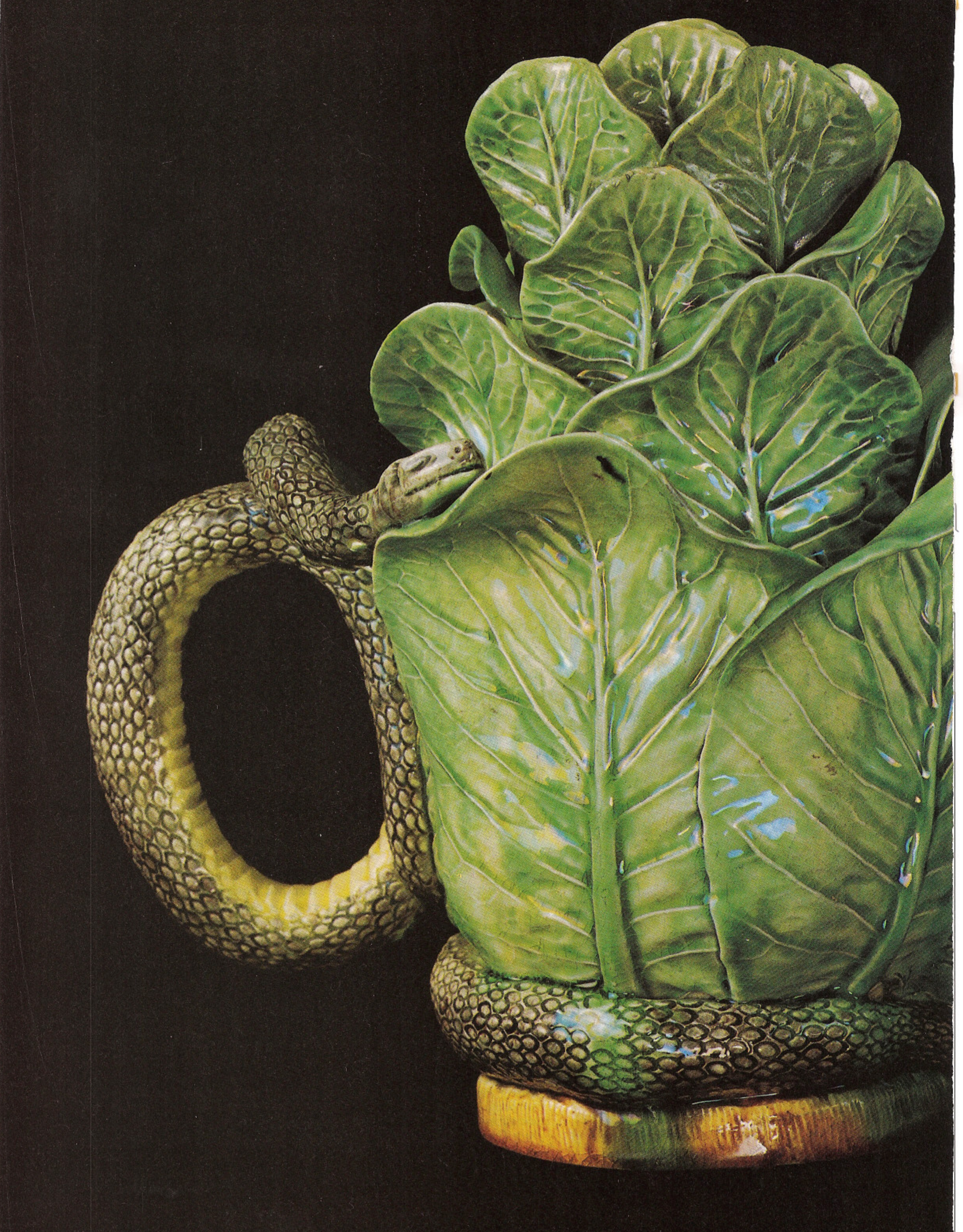

MAJOLICA MANIA

BY JOAN LERRICK

Not within present memory has any fashion in collecting taken off so fast or gone so far. It was color, intensified by glittering lead glazes, that captured the heart and the eye of the Victorian public when majolica ware was first presented by Minton & Company at the Crystal Palace exhibition in 1851. And it is color now that explains majolica's extraordinary appeal.

Fostered by Victoria's Prince Albert, the Crystal Palace celebrated the marvels of an infant industrial age and majolica was a part of it—its bold décor and virtuoso modeling after nature offered new technology for a new audience, that of the rising middle class. "Made for the Millions" became the Minton slogan, and other factories, on both sides of the Atlantic, rushed to brighten even more modest tables. Soon, most of the vast kilns of Wedgwood were devoted to majolica making. "It was nickel-and-dime stuff, it was Woolworth's," is the wry assessment of Jerome Hoffman, a New York real-estate investor. Together with his physician wife, Marilyn, he has made a major commitment to Minton collecting and was the source of some of the most spectacular pieces in the recent show of English majolica at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York City.

Far-flung ceramics traditions combined to create majolica, but the name itself is a misnomer twice over. Italians of the Renaissance became enamored of a pottery made in Spain, which they first imported, then copied and called by the name

<u>Left</u>: A cabbage teapot, seemingly freshly plucked from the kitchen garden. Natural roots, whimsy, and brilliant lead glazes all prove majolica's debt to the art of 16th-century French ceramist, Bernard Palissy. <u>Below</u>: Plants were a Victorian passion and conservatories were fitted out with garden seats, wild creatures, and cachepots like this one made of water-lily tiles by Minton.

Matsumoto

of the island of Majorca from which it was shipped (just as Coromandel screens made in China carry to this day the name of the Indian port from which they once traveled to the West).

Pronounced *mai-yo-li-ca,* this rare 16th-century earthenware was shaped into giant chargers, ewers, and urns, covered with an opaque but brilliant white tin glaze, and elaborately painted with classical and Biblical scenes. It was the metallic glitter that intrigued Herbert Minton and led him to invest in research to develop a gleaming and vividly colored surface for modest low-fired earthenware, but the new glazes were transparent and made with lead. The look of the new majolica was far more akin to the craft of Bernard Palissy, a 16th-century French potter whose naturalistic relief sculptures of gentle snakes and appealing frogs on mossy mounds were much copied in the 19th century. Palissy originated the first lead glazes as well as the tortoise-shell mottling that appears on the underside of many majolica pieces. There were ancestors in the English potting past as well, 18th-century creamware sets from Whieldon and Wedgwood in the form of cauliflower or pineapple, again with brilliant glazes. These provided molds that were pressed into service as the demand for majolica burgeoned. Anything with Renaissance flavor fascinated the Victorians, the reason for the majolica name, which seemed to offer surefire sales appeal. Although some of the more elaborate pieces carried out the classical promise with dimpled putti and robust female figures in various stages of undress, these heavier, more dated expressions are outside of the mainstream of current collecting. It is the naturalistic forms and trompe l'oeil textures of Palissy that prevail, forms reinforced by color that follows the sculptured surface rather than simply paints on a design.

The product of an era that romanticized the rustic life and sentimentalized charms of nature, majolica was an unabashed and exuberant paean to field, forest, and farm and to the birds, the beasts, and the fruits thereof. Wild dogwood and giant corn, cauliflower and lettuce, *(Continued on page 136)*

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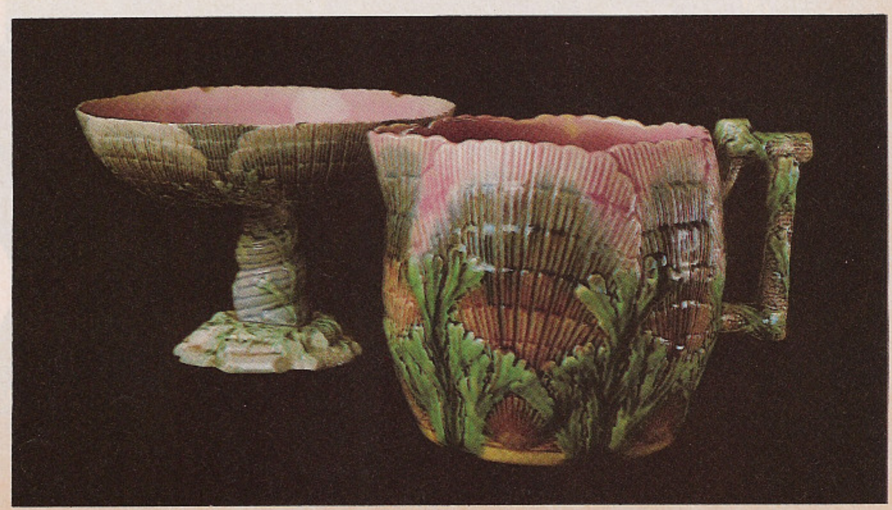
Above: *What was on the menu often shaped majolica forms. A woodcock nested amidst wild fernery tops a game pie dish with the much-sought-after mark of English master potter George Jones. Other versions preview good dining with a brace of hares, just as strawberry leaves make a plate for berries.* Right: *Briny flavor tempted Victorian appetites, not just in sets for serving fish. "Shell and Seaweed" with the Etruscan stamp was and still remains the most wanted pattern in American majolica. Nineteenth-century homemakers stacked up sets as a bonus for buying baking powder from the A&P. All pieces courtesy of J. Garvin Mecking.*



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geraniums and pansies, ferns and water lilies, twigs, logs and leaves, shells, seaweed and coral: These were the models for majolica patterns, some cast from nature, others re-created by noted sculptors and colored by skilled painters. The result was incredibly tactile; it invited a touch to distinguish the real from the clay. Victorian taste for the exotic added other dimensions—from trade with the East came the bamboo, fans, and birds of Oriental inspiration, while animals both familiar and imagined people a whole medieval bestiary.

For the Victorian matron, majolica was never an heirloom dinner service but rather an irresistible extra and, in a time noted for serious eating, often food and plate were inextricably and amusingly one. Fish services showed a life-sized salmon on which to place a real one or offered an ocean bed of encrusted shells and coral. Asparagus platters presented a welcoming curve of life-size replicas. Strawberry leaves and flowers made a bed for real berries, complete with cups for sugar and cream, while handled baskets mimicked wicker weaves to proffer sweetmeats. Larger ornamental pieces linked house with garden—cachepots for the giant ferns of conservatories, garden seats on which to rest, umbrella stands like a slice of gnarled log, and always the birds and beasts that seemed to stray in from the parkland.

Long spurned by serious ceramics people who favored the handwrought output of the 18th century and before, maligned as garish and vulgar, and greatly undervalued, majolica is now being plucked with both hands from country flea markets, auctions, and big-city shops. The country passion for decorating and the revival of interest in all things 19th century explain in part a three-year escalation that has seen prices move from throwaway to investment levels, but experts point to other reasons why.

In contrast to the darkness and dignity of more traditional choices, "it's upbeat, it's alive, and it's fun," explains Christopher Horn, who first began starring majolica in his *Secret Garden Antiques* less than a year ago. "And, treated with care, it's usable," he adds. Diane Love, who has also sold majolica, points to the whimsy of a ware that doesn't take itself too seriously, of forms and bold color mixes that are so unexpected and delightful that they demand a highly sophisticated taste.

It is majolica's infinite variety that intrigues and lends excitement to collecting, according to Garvin Mecking, who sends rare finds as far away as Dallas and Kansas City from the overflowing cabinets of his miniature uptown shop and the larger one hidden down in New York's wholesale antiques district. "Every time you go out, you see something you've never seen before. It never stops fascinating the imagination and never stops changing. There's nothing else like it except jewelry!"

To most eyes, majolica looks best en masse so the intense colors and strong shine reverberate and reflect, each piece reinforcing the impact of the whole. From that point on, most collectors take a point of view: Some concentrate on form, others on subject or pattern, on maker or color.

Decorator Georgina Fairholme has concentrated on a lineup of pouring jugs, from tiny cream ones to tall cider sizes, for the shelves of her own country cottage. Craig Williams confesses to a 10-year penchant for majolica, but doesn't present it in the formal English background of his *Hyde Park Antiques* or in his drawing room. Visitors who stray into the library and bedroom will be rewarded by étagères piled with amusing finds—four monkeys in graduated sizes, sitting cheek-by-jowl with tall cockatoos. It is the way majolica interacts with other materials that has always charmed interior designer Mario Buatta—with faded old chintzes because the rainbowlike colors bleed into each other in the same way, and with the dull silvery tones of antique pewter, to which it provides a shiny counterpoint. For a client in Charlotte, North Carolina, he grouped majolica plates and platters and hung them, in traditional European fashion, all over cantaloupe-colored walls.

Once in a room or in a lifestyle, majolica often seems to take over, like the lush greenery that was much of its inspiration. The Hoffmans, whose collecting began 15 years ago with the chance find of an enormous bowl that seemed to suit an overscaled dining table in their huge 1890s replica of a French château, now own up to some 500 pieces (sets of plates count for one), all Minton—a case of collecting by maker. "Guests think they've arrived at a museum or an antiques shop," laughs Hoffman, whose majolica has become an admitted passion during the past five years, fueled by frequent trips abroad and a network of agents from London to the piny woods of Georgia. Although most of the collection is housed under glass (to minimize dusting), pieces are out all over—on three sideboards in the dining room, on the grand piano, and mingled with lacy wicker in the morning room, where a whole menagerie of life-size majolica animals and birds browse among the plants, as they did in the Victorian conservatories for which they were designed.

Amassing a freehand mix of what she calls "the happiest kind of pottery" has become an all-consuming adventure for Joan Graham, who assures a smooth-running office for her surgeon husband and bankrolls her collecting with the proceeds of her earnings. She has gathered 1,000 different pieces, half English and half American, in some three years, often by simply checking the yellow pages in cities like Atlanta, Phoenix, and Chicago when she travels to medical conventions. The result is the planned transformation of the Graham's sleek modern apartment into an English country house high above the city. For the inevitable overflow, Joan Graham has drawn in a storage closet on the remodeling plans, in which pieces will be classified by size, shape, and color and rotated into rooms as the seasons change or mood inspires.

Lighthearted majolica does not demand the scholarly expertise that attends more serious ceramics collecting, for the ground rules are far from arcane. Dates are clear—from 1851 to the end of the century for the most part, when labor struggles in America and the final prohibition of lead glazes for health reasons in England set a finis to production. Some did spill over to the beginnings of the First World War, though it was mostly Continental in origin and Art Nouveau in style. Marks do command a premium—such as the diamond-like identification for 19th-century English makers (stamped with the date and factory), the names of Minton, Wedgwood, Holdcroft, the linked GJ that denotes the work of master potter George Jones, and the Etruscan insignia of Griffen, Smith & Hill, an American stamp that automatically triples the value of a find. But the vast majority of majolica is purposefully unmarked, for as factories proliferated in England and exported vast boatloads to America and Australia, and as the potters themselves moved to man hundreds of new kilns overseas, designs from the original makers were pirated and names omitted. Almost every European pottery, especially in France, Austria, and Germany, made their own versions of the majolica style, usually well-identified and clearly different in subject, a presently neglected area that might attract beginning collectors. Problems of authenticity used to be almost nonexistent (when prices were low, there was little motive for forgery), but rare pieces are now being duplicated in England and Portugal, a good reason to depend upon the advice of an expert dealer.

Condition is important, although connoisseurs do not concur on the criteria. Majolica was made for everyday use and much of it comes down to us

chipped, cracked, and worn; other defects were built-in, for production was fast and unrefined. Hairline cracks, firing faults that occurred in the making, age lines, and even a bit of crazing are acceptable, in the view of Bonnie Heller, whose all-majolica booths at antiques shows in the Northeast have earned her the title of "The Majolica Lady." A repair to a major element, such as the knob on a tureen cover or the handle on a teapot, is a definite no. The shinier the better is the watchword, so dullness or wear spots in the brittle lead glaze are other reasons not to buy. On the question of chips, opinion differs. Since these can be invisibly repaired, the placement of the chip, the price, and the scarcity of the piece dictate the individual decision.

Although majolica is no longer "a sleeper," you can still afford it, particularly when browsing away from Eastern city centers. Leaves, almost the original majolica, still abound, both the plain round emerald-green plates of Wedgwood and the begonia-leaf shapes of American makers, each delightfully and differently multicolored since they were painted at home in the evenings and returned to the factory for firing. Barbara Munves, who was one of the first to show majolica at her James II gallery, still ranks these as favorites, both as ornament and for serving salads. At the other end of the collecting spectrum, good pieces seem scarce, but experts like Garvin Mecking and pioneer enthusiasts like Jerome Hoffman agree that more interesting confections that have not yet been seen will begin to emerge as the collectors of the '40s (a time when majolica was somewhat of a fad) begin to auction their stores, and as heirlooms long hidden in attics and closets are searched out and sold. □

Editor's note: Joan Lerrick is a journalist who specializes in antiques, interior design, and fashion.

To read about majolica:

Rebert, M. Charles. *American Majolica: 1850–1900.* Wallace Homestead Book Company, Des Moines, Iowa, 1981.

Rickerson, Wildey C. *Majolica—Collect It for Fun and Profit.* The Pequot Press Inc., Chester, Conn., 1972 (out of print).

The Encyclopedia of Collectibles, 16 volumes, Volume #9, pp. 104–121. Time-Life Books, Alexandria, Va., 1979.

Aberback, William. "Wedgwood Majolica." *The American Wedgwoodian,* March 1982. WINS, 55 Vandam Street, New York, N.Y. 10013.

King, Jean. "English Majolica." *Wedgwood International Seminar Proceedings,* fall 1982. WINS, 55 Vandam Street, New York, N.Y. 10013.

BUILDING FACTS

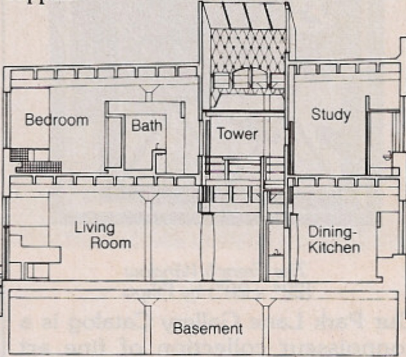
Materials and equipment in the house on pages 94–97

ARCHITECT: Kenneth Schroeder
CONTRACTOR: Kenneth Schroeder
SIZE OF HOUSE: 1,550 square feet

STRUCTURE
Foundation: Existing loft building.
Framing: Heavy timber, 6 x 10" fir.

EXTERIOR OF HOUSE
Exterior walls: Common brick, sandblasted.
Exterior paints: Cabot.
Roof: Existing.
Insulation: 2" rigid at roof, by Celotex.
Windows: Steel industrial by Boca to match existing.
Skylight: Custom made, glass.
Doors: Wood French doors custom-made.

INTERIOR OF HOUSE
Interior walls: Drywall by U.S. Gypsum Co.
Ceilings: Existing, sandblasted.
Floors: Existing maple, two new coats of polyurethane.
Interior paints: Pratt & Lambert, Inc.
Fireplace: Metal prefabricated by Majestic.
Lighting fixtures: Tracks by Juno. Dimmer by Leviton. Lights by Hubbel.
Hardware: Brushed aluminum lever handles by ASSA.
Kitchen and bathroom cabinets and countertops: Custom white laminated by Macor.
Plumbing fixtures: Just S.S., Chicago Faucet.
Kitchen equipment: Dishwasher by Kitchen Aid. Ovens by Jenn-Air Corp. Range by Chambers Corp. Refrigerator by Sub Zero. Exhaust fan by Nutone.
Hot-water heater: 50 gallon by Rheem.
Heating: Gas forced air. Furnace by Tappan.



Cross section of Chicago house

Materials and equipment in the house on pages 114–117

ARCHITECT: Richard Sygar
CONTRACTOR: Dick Schaefer, Islip NY
SIZE OF HOUSE: 1,600 square feet
SIZE OF LOT: 1/8 acre

• STRUCTURE
Foundation: Existing.
Framing: Wood studs, 16" on center.

Continued on page 167

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