

# The Marilyn Karmason Collection of Majolica Sold

by Lita Solis-Cohen

Photos courtesy Strawser Auctions

Two hundred collectors, designers, and dealers from all parts of the U.S., the U.K., and France gathered at the Alderfer Auction Company gallery in Hatfield, Pennsylvania, on October 28 and 29, 2005, for the auction of Marilyn Karmason's collection of Victorian majolica. They witnessed a landmark event.



A Minton teapot in the form of a vulture with a serpent in its beak sold for \$71,875 (including buyer's premium); a Minton flatiron teapot with a cat reclining on the handle peering at a mouse eating a carrot on its cover finial brought \$69,000; a Minton cheese keeper, formed as a beehive with blackberry vines growing over it, sold for \$74,750; and the same price was paid for a Minton urn-shaped wine cooler decorated with heads of foxes and dogs and by boys with hunting dogs and topped by an urn full of grapes on top of a wine barrel flanked by boys snitching grapes.

For the sale, auctioneer Michael G. Strawser of Wolcottville, Indiana, rented the Alderfer auction facility in rural Pennsylvania for the weekend. The 669 lots covering the entire range of majolica—British, American, French, Portuguese, and even a German bottle—sold for a total in the region of \$1.5 million. Strawser furnishes a prices-realized list on request on his Web site but does not divulge sales totals.

Marilyn Karmason's name is known to every majolica collector because, with her friend Joan Stacke, she wrote *Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey*, published in 1989 by Harry Abrams. It

became the bible in the field. Karmason, who died in April 2005 at the age of 77, was a psychiatrist who began collecting majolica in the early 1980's.

"We were both married to physicians, and our husbands worked on weekends, so we went antiquing," said Stacke, who came to the sale and bought a few pieces for her own collection. "When we started collecting, there was nothing published on majolica, so we traveled abroad and in the U.S., and we both did research. When we had enough information for the book, Marilyn wrote as I continued to do research and arrange for the photography. Abrams published the book we needed," she said. A second edition with an added chapter with more pictures, "Majolica in the Millennium," was published in 2001.

Marilyn Karmason's husband, Dr. Norton Spritz, asked Michael Strawser to hold the sale because Strawser founded the Majolica International Society in 1989, and he and Marilyn became good friends. Strawser owns and operates two auction businesses, Majolica Auctions and Strawser Auctions, which are subsidiaries of his real estate company specializing in lake properties, Real Estate Sails, Inc. He began auctioning majolica in 1994. He uses a country auctioneer's sing-song patter, asking for huge opening bids that he rarely gets and then dropping down to something more reasonable.

Although there was no new record price for Victorian majolica at this sale, there were some strong prices and some records for certain forms. "The beehive-shaped cheese keeper is probably a record for the form, and I do not think the George Jones quail game dish has ever brought more than the fifty-seven thousand five hundred dollars it brought here," said Strawser after the sale. "It was a record auction total for me."

It certainly demonstrated that majolica, once considered the epitome of vulgarity and pretension, is now embraced by top decorators and sought after by a large group of collectors who enjoy the often whimsical ewers, urns, pitchers, fountains, garden seats, umbrella stands, oyster plates, butter pats, teapots, and strawberry dishes in luscious cobalt, turquoise, lavender, and green and decorated with masks and figures, birds and animals, sea creatures and flowers. Majolica, with its rich and brilliant glazes, was made by Minton, Wedgwood, George Jones, and Holdcroft in the U.K. and by several potteries in France and Portugal and elsewhere on the Continent and in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania.

Private jets and commercial airlines and plenty of vans and SUVs brought more than 200 collectors from Florida, Texas, North Carolina, Maryland, and New York to an unpretentious Best Western motel in

**Kulpsville, Pennsylvania, in the Pennsylvania Dutch region of Montgomery County, convenient to the auction site in Hatfield. The Majolica International Society held a get-together at the Kulpsville motel on Friday night after the first session of the sale. Members who attended said they were looking forward to seeing their fellow collectors again at the annual spring meeting of the society to be held in Dallas in 2006.**

**In the meantime, they will be kept up to date on upcoming events by the Web site ([www.majolicasociety.com](http://www.majolicasociety.com)) and by reading the quarterly newsletter, Majolica Matters, which will report on the sale.**

**The Friday night session offered 258 lots of less expensive majolica, much of it made in America by Griffen, Smith and Hill in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, best known for the shell and seaweed pattern the firm exhibited at the Industrial and Cotton Centennial Exposition in New Orleans in 1884. Shell and seaweed dishes were given away as premiums with the purchase of baking powder by the A & P. The ceramics firm also made begonia leaves, sunflowers, and other patterns and often marked its wares "Etruscan Majolica."**

**Etruscan cauliflower plates sold for strong prices: \$149.50 and \$172.50 for 8" plates and \$207 and \$218.50 for 9" plates. A cauliflower teapot and sugar bowl sold for \$258.75. Etruscan shell and seaweed platters, 13¾" in diameter, sold for \$575 and \$402.50. One shell and seaweed plate, a rare 9¼" size, sold for \$258.75. A set of four 8" plates sold for \$546.25. Sets with condition problems brought less.**

**An Etruscan shell and seaweed humidior with shells on the cover and good color made a whopping \$2415. An Etruscan lily-shaped celery vase sold for \$1897.50. An Etruscan cheese keeper, decorated with lily, daisy, wheat, and fern, sold for \$1495. It is a rare form at a fair price. Joan Stacke bought it and said she has not seen another for sale since Marilyn Karmason bought this one.**

**Butter pats brought astonishing prices. A multicolored pansy Etruscan butter pat sold for \$149.50. A begonia leaf on wicker butter pat fetched \$161. A Wedgwood horseshoe-shaped butter pat went at \$345, and a Fielding shell and fishnet butter pat brought \$460.**

**American majolica is always less expensive than the English. Although rare forms by Minton and George Jones brought big prices, they were not higher than ten years ago. "The market took a dip even before nine/eleven, and it is just recovering. When prices were low, a lot of new collectors got in at the low end, and for a while midrange majolica was static; now it seems to be going up again," observed Joan Stacke. "Butter pats and oyster plates are immune to recession. They are**

always in demand."

Melissa Bennie, a vice president at Christie's, a specialist in glass and ceramics, and a member of the Majolica International Society, came to watch the sale. "The fact that this huge volume of majolica was well received shows the strength of the market," she said. She confirmed that Christie's sold a Minton porcelain serpent and vulture teapot in the spring of 2004 for \$89,626, a record for the form. (The one sold in this sale for \$71,875 is not porcelain.) Christie's also sold a flatiron teapot for a record \$94,750 in 2001. Sotheby's sold a large Minton majolica stand of an African male figure holding a basket on his head for \$115,750 at the Harriman Judd sale in January 2001. In July 2002 Bonhams in Knightsbridge (U.K.) sold a life-size model of a peacock for \$186,045, which may be the all-time record for majolica sold at auction.

"When something makes a record price, then more turn up, and we realize it isn't quite as rare as we thought," said Strawser after the sale. He thought the Minton stork and heron walking stick stands were the bargain of the Karmason sale. "I have sold the pair for forty-five thousand dollars," he said. This pair went at \$12,500 each hammer (\$14,375 with buyer's premium, which would be \$28,750 for the pair). Strawser offered them individually and then as a pair. If anyone had topped \$25,000 hammer for the pair, he said he would have sold them as a pair, but there was no further bidding beyond that, and the birds were bought by two different collectors. Each said he had one bird and bought the other to make a pair.

"Overall, the important things brought what they should bring, perhaps a little more," said Charles Washburne, a major dealer who sells at shows and who was one of the few dealers bidding successfully at the sale. Other dealers said they would not bid against their clients, and they had plenty of stock. They said the sale did not have the excitement or the broad support of the high rollers that turned out at Sotheby's in March 1997 for the sale of another New York private collection and who also came to the Harriman Judd sales. Nor was this sale presented in an elegant catalog with scholarly descriptions in the Christie's and Sotheby's tradition. It attracted a large and enthusiastic crowd of majolica aficionados, those who really love it and knew the pieces well from the illustrations in the Karmason-Stacke books.

The Karmason collection was a good one, a pioneering collection, not as grand as the collections put together in the last decade by collectors with very deep pockets who are buying only the best. Marilyn Karmason bought everything, entire collections, box lots, whatever took her fancy, so there was something for every taste and every pocketbook at this sale. It was a good barometer of the majolica market, which seems alive and well.



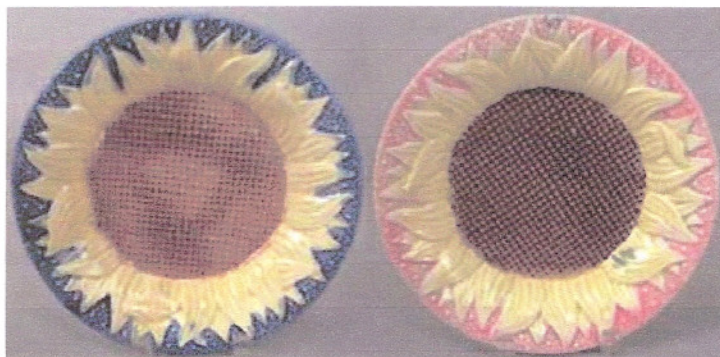
**Six Choisy-le-Roi 8" and 8¾" rabbit plates, each one a different scene, sold for \$2012.50.**



**A 6¾" high figural teapot with shell on waves, and with the finial broken off and in need of gluing, sold for \$862.50 to Chappaqua, New York, dealer Charles Washburne. There was a chip to the handle and a repair to the spout.**



**Large (8" high) figural humidor in the form of a bulldog wearing a red jacket and smoking a pipe, with a hairline on the base, sold for \$1207.50.**





**There were two Etruscan cobalt sunflower underdishes for syrup jugs. One sold for \$480 on the Internet; the other brought \$632.50. They are rare. The blue syrup pitcher with pewter top brought \$805. A bid of \$488.75 bought a pink one. Solis-Cohen photos.**



**The Etruscan shell and seaweed humidior with shells on the cover and in fine condition sold for \$2415.**



**A hard-to-find Etruscan lily celery vase, 8½" tall, sold for \$1897.50 to a collector in the salesroom, underbid on the Internet.**

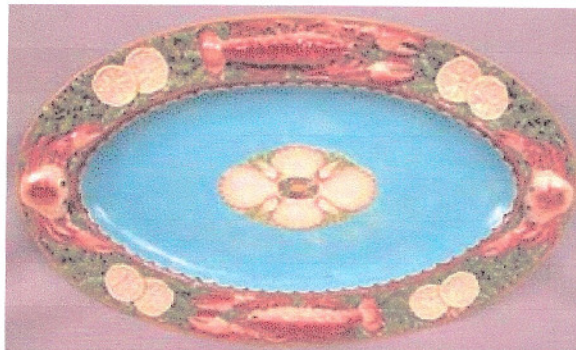


**This hard-to-find Etruscan lily, daisy, wheat, and fern cheese keeper, 11" in diameter, sold for \$1495 to New York collector Joan Stacke, coauthor with Marilyn Karmason of *Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1989).**





**George Jones butterfly patch box, 4" wide, illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, page 102, professional repair to rim of cover, sold for \$6325.**



**The tureen with a lobster, in excellent condition, sold for \$11,212.50 to collectors from North Carolina. They also bought the tray decorated with lobsters, crabs, lemons, and with a seaweed border and a shell and seaweed center for \$9200. It is not an underplate.**



**The highest-priced tiles were this George Jones swan in water, 8" square, that sold for \$2300 and the companion cobalt water lily and cattail tile that sold to the same buyer in the salesroom for \$1265.**



**The George Jones turquoise, small size (11" diameter) "Punch" bowl, illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, page 102, in excellent condition, sold for a strong \$24,150 to a collector in the salesroom, who said he was a professor of journalism at Syracuse University. It also comes in orange, which is more desirable.**



**Chappaqua, New York, dealer Charles Washburne outbid a phone bidder to buy this 15" high German figure bottle in the form of a bird gentleman with top hat, glasses, and an umbrella for a strong \$6440. It was cataloged as Krause Continental Avian and illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, second edition, page 228. "Bottle collectors will love it," said Washburne. "It has whimsy, and people relate to animals dressed up."**



**The Minton heron and fish jug, modeled in the 21" high form of a**

**heron with a large fish in his mouth, was designed by Hugues Protât, a major designer who signed some of his work. This is not signed, but it is a firm attribution. It is illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, page 57, and sold for \$6612.50. A similar one sold for \$10,200 at the Harriman Judd sale at Sotheby's in January 2001.**



**The Minton vulture and serpent figural teapot, 9" high, is illustrated in the group of teapots on page 2 of Karmason and Stacke's book. Designed by Colonel Henry Hope Crealock in 1874, it is also illustrated in Minton: The First Two Hundred Years of Design and Production by Joan Jones on page 152. It is the only Minton teapot with its design known and documented in the archives. The snake handle has been professionally repaired. It sold for \$71,875. Several said it was the bargain of the sale. The buyer was a collector in the salesroom, who said he was from Hobe Sound, Florida, and Rockport, Maine. According to the British Antiques Trade Gazette, the estimate was \$40,000/50,000. No estimates were printed in the catalog, but some had been given on Strawser's Web site. Solis-Cohen photo.**



**Minton flatiron-form figural teapot with cobalt ground, cat resting on handle peering over mouse with a carrot on the teapot finial. The sides are decorated with three mice on each side. The handle was professionally reattached. It stands 7½" high and is illustrated on page 2 of Karmason and Stacke's book. It is believed to be shape number 1924, possibly designed by Christopher Dresser, but the attributions are unsure. It sold for \$69,000 to a collector in the salesroom who said he lived in Hobe Sound, Florida, and Rockport, Maine.**

**Another teapot, called number 622, circa 1876, described as the most desirable and cutest of all the dozen or so teapots produced by Minton in majolica, with the white and ginger cat dangling from the cable handle gazing down upon the finial formed as a mouse nibbling on a carrot, sold in September 2005 at Neales in Nottingham for £23,000, which translates to \$40,661.70. The record for a flatiron teapot was made at the height of the majolica market in June 2001 at Christie's South Kensington: £58,000 (approximately \$90,000). It was pristine. Another sold at Christie's East in New York City in March 2001 for about \$40,000. According to the Antiques Trade Gazette, the teapot in the Karmason sale was estimated at \$30,000/40,000. A reproduction made by Minton five years ago sold for \$2415. They are not made anymore, and to get a period one would cost \$50,000 or more. Solis-Cohen photo.**



**Auctioneer Strawser asked for an opening bid of \$15,000 for this Minton monkey and cockerel cobalt teapot with a snail finial. He could not get it, so he started the bidding at \$2500 and went all the way to \$13,000 and knocked it down to a young Philadelphia area collector there with his decorator, Bennett Weinstock. With buyer's premium, he paid \$14,950. It is shape 624, illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, page 2, and had some professional repair to the cover and the neck of the cockerel.**



**Minton spiky fish, another rare figural teapot, 7¼" high, illustrated on page 2 of Karmason and Stacke, marked with the date code for 1878. With poor restoration to the spout and lid rim repair, it sold for \$8625 to Charles Washburne, a dealer from Chappaqua, New York. It seemed like a good buy. One in somewhat better condition sold for \$35,250 at the Harriman Judd sale at Sotheby's in January 2001. It has a great presence, but it is not as super-rare.**



**The Minton figural monkey with a coconut teapot, illustrated in Karmason and Stacke, page 2, sold for \$4600. It has some rim repair to the cover and a new spout. In good condition, they sell for \$6000, but they are not hard to find.**



**The Minton Renaissance-style jardinière with Della Robbia wreath, circa 1855, 41" high, is illustrated on page 219 of Karmason and Stacke, second edition. It is a monumental piece that comes apart in three pieces. Strawser tried to start the bidding at \$20,000 but had to drop to \$5000 and sold it to New York City dealer Linda Horn for \$18,400.**