The Nature of Majolica



is coated with enamel, ornamented with paints, and, finally,

glazed. The name is likely derived from the Spanish island of

Majorca-said to be known once as Majolica-where the first

to have been as prevalent in fifteenth-century Spain, where

the predecessors of this tin-glazed earthenware originated

(and where, of course, it isn't especially damp), as it became

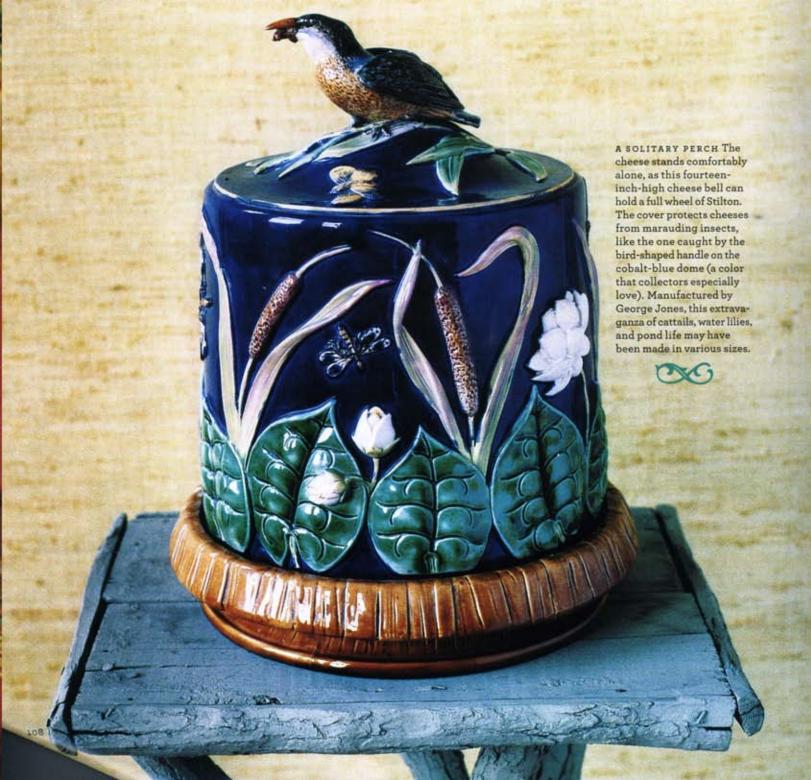


of these pieces were made. Later, they were also crafted in Italy and France (where they were called faenza and faience, respectively, after the Italian city of Faenza, famous for its pottery). Majolica, in forms ranging from elegant to outlandish, was popular throughout Europe for centuries.

The pieces that today's collectors particularly covet are quirky Victorian English wares awash in mosses, water lilies, ducks, herons, and reeds. Add twigs, boughs, and shoots, and it's possible to own majolica bird's nests, willow baskets, grapevines, and even a tree trunk or two. On the whole, if you

collect this earthenware, you'll almost certainly be a dedicated nature lover. You unquestionably love color, too, because majolica plates, pitchers, saltcellars, and garden seats are rendered in lustrous ochers and chocolates, with more brilliant hues glinting from surprising spots. You'll find the full panoply of greens as well—blue-greens, olives, kellys, hunters, and poisons—in the usual leaves, lichens, and shoots, with green woodpeckers and dragonflies hiding among them.

Currently majolica, especially those English-made pieces manufactured by Wedgwood, Minton, and George Jones











from 1850 to 1900, is wildly collectible in the United States and Britain; it's also extraordinarily pricey. A pair of Minton garden seats, for example, can bring as much as \$60,000. Thankfully, nineteenth-century French, German, Austrian, and American majolica is often considerably less expensive. All kinds enjoy one particular advantage: For some unexplained reason, majolica enthusiasts, unlike most ceramics collectors, don't seem to mind if their treasures have some surface damagesmall cracks, for instance. (The same is not true for structural damage, such as a missing or broken part.) Joan Stacke Graham, veteran collector and coauthor of Majolica (Abrams; 2002), says that there are still terrific opportunities for new collectors, particularly in the realm of American plates and pitchers, many of which can be found for \$250 or less. "It's just as



beautiful as English majolica, and a wonderful complement to a folk-art collection," she says.

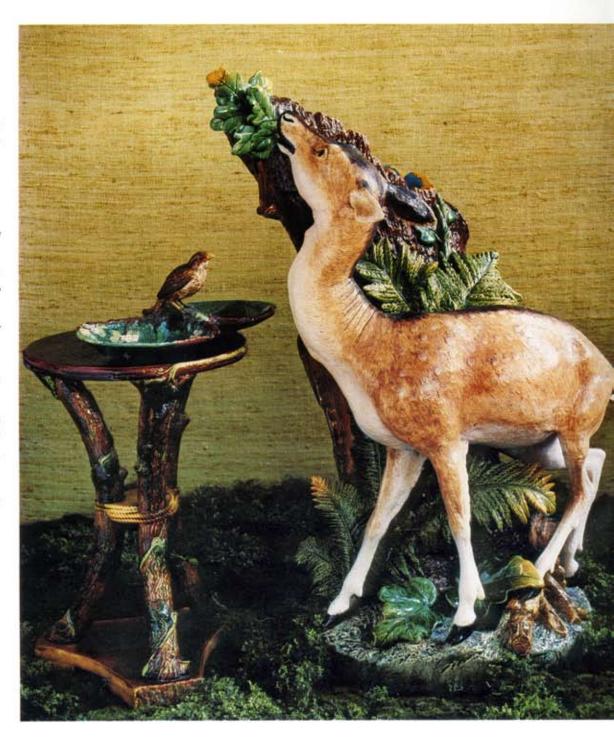
Philip English, president of the Majolica International Society, based in New York City, speculates that many collectors are passionate FROM THE WOODS Creatures figure prominently in this tableware. ABOVE LEFT: A bird weaving a nest makes a dainty vase (left); to create a Minton saltcellar, a dove cradles an ivy leaf on its outstretched wings. ABOVE RIGHT: Nuts were a staple of Victorian dining. Here, an acorn-eating squirrel makes a convenient handle for a Minton nut dish. Resting on it is a Royal Worcester toothpick holder, which features field mice investigating a broken egg. LEFT: This Victorian game-pie dish, a specialty item and rare find, appropriately depicts a fox stalking its prey.



RARE WILDLIFE Coveted pieces come in all sizes. THIS PAGE: A nearly threefoot-tall Minton stick stand (for walking sticks and umbrellas) designed by Paul Comolera masquerades as a tree stump (far right); greenery sprouting on it is being nibbled by a life-size fawn. Beside it, a two-part dish with a bird-form handle rests on a George Jones plant stand, opposite: All the components for an English tea-creamers, pitchers, teapots, jars, and serving plates—are gathered. Teapots, especially those featuring monkeys and serpents, are popular with collectors. The one formed by a monkey hugging a coconut (top shelf) is by Minton. On the center shelf is a rare teacup (far left), once part of a large service. Majolica cups often have hot pink or turquoise interiors. The cabbage teapot with a snaky handle and spout (bottom shelf) is Portuguese; the bamboopattern plate (to its right) is especially rare.

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about his favorite ceramic because its detailed ferns and ducks, warm colors, and adaptable shapes make it almost universally accessible. It's in limited but adequate supply as well—a prerequisite for any successful collectible. English advises potential first-time purchasers to seek out pieces that are both beautiful and useful. That isn't hard to do, he adds, since most majolica is functional.

But functional never means dull. Majolica's brilliant glazes, startling interiors in jaw-dropping pinks and turquoises, and glassy, cobalt-blue details are sumptuous and regal yet somehow fun. And functional isn't necessarily "normal size," either. The best majolica factories mastered the technique of firing gigantic objects in their kilns. Huge pieces were the tours de force of the British factories, which specialized in giant jardinieres and umbrella stands incorporating lifesize creatures such as herons, fawns, and bear cubs.

So, if you'd like to share your home with some (possibly very big) earthenware that recalls the outdoors and, as Joan Stacke Graham says, "makes you smile all day," try some earthy, ebullient majolica. It's a natural.

