

The Nature of **Majolica**



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SOMETHING ABOUT majolica must have caused its creators to break out in uncontrollable rashes of frogs and mushrooms—some ceramic-based swamp disorder, perhaps. It's a curious affliction, one that seems 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

in England—birthplace of the modern umbrella and cabinets full of boggish, Victorian majolica pieces. In more recent years, collectors have caught quite a case of the bug, too.

Majolica is a richly colored, heavyweight clay pottery that 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

LILY PADS AND FERNS

Serving pieces take dramatic form. **OPPOSITE:** This oversize Minton fish platter, twenty-four inches long, is rare. It may have been a singular presentation piece or perhaps part of an extensive fish set. Its design of sinuous cattails and lily pads is attributed to Victorian decorative arts virtuoso Christopher Dresser. **THIS PAGE:** Majolica wares filled every requirement of the Victorian table. The scalloped, speckled tiers and the ferny cup at the apex of this "ice stand" held shaved ice and sweet sauces.



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



A SOLITARY PERCH The cheese stands comfortably alone, as this fourteen-inch-high cheese bell can hold a full wheel of Stilton. The cover protects cheeses from marauding insects, like the one caught by the bird-shaped handle on the cobalt-blue dome (a color that collectors especially love). Manufactured by George Jones, this extravaganza of cattails, water lilies, and pond life may have been made in various sizes.





NATURE'S BOUNTY Many plates depict the food to be served on them. (If using majolica for food service, keep in mind that some glazes contain lead.) **LEFT, FROM TOP.** A leaf-shaped plate; a lotus blossom plate—for ambrosia, perhaps; and corn-shaped plates (on stand), possibly American. **CENTER, FROM TOP.** A corn platter; pear clusters adorning a brown platter; a bread plate is marked by a starburst of wheat; a plate with (and for) grapes. **RIGHT, FROM TOP.** A banana-leaf fruit plate; a berry plate; a strawberry plate (on stand) decorated with flowers and leaves.

OUTSIZE STYLE A wonderful survival, this huge Minton majolica jardiniere was undoubtedly made for a Victorian conservatory. With a base plate that's sixteen inches across, and its cheerful decoration, it easily accommodated potted palms or tall bamboo plants.





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 damage—small 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 three-foot-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 bamboo-pattern 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 jardinières and umbrella stands incorporating life-size 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.

