



majolica

Technicolor fantasies fit for the table.

Few collectibles earn their place on the table with as much charm as majolica. Pick up a teapot disguised as a head of cabbage, or a sardine box writhing with impossibly plump fish; these pieces feel lush and sturdily made, the clay crisply modeled under brilliantly colored glazes. Now catch a glimpse of them from across the room: what you see is pure whimsy, crockery replete with all the visual jokes, novelties, and outrageous patterning (and, some would add, the tooth-aching sweetness) beloved by the Victorians, who fell hard for majolica when it was first introduced in the 1850s. Despite its incongruous looks, majolica was made to be used, and today it remains as robust and ready for dinner as ever.

Unlike costly porcelain and bone china, majolica was intended for the masses. Working with native metals, minerals, and cheaply available labor, English ceramics maker Minton & Company formulated two glazes—one an opaque white, containing lead, the other translucent and highly pigmented—that when used together gave lowly earthenware an unmatched luster. Majolica was an immediate hit; this was partly due to the marketing genius of Herbert Minton. He cleverly named his product after *maiolica*, the valuable tin-glazed earthenware of the Italian Renaissance, a period whose luscious female nudes and beaming

OPPOSITE: Improving on nature—trompe l'oeil modeling on 1860s sardine boxes and underplates by English maker George Jones & Sons.

cherubs captivated the Victorians. While both ceramics were made of porous earthenware dipped in metal-based glazes, the “new” majolica was sculptural, playful, and robed in fondant-icing colors vibrant enough to make an impression in even the dimmest gaslit home.

Early Minton majolica was festooned with plump putti in the Renaissance style. But the public's appetite for novelty led Minton and other quick-to-respond manufacturers, including Wedgwood, Holdcroft, and George Jones & Sons, to develop new motifs taken from nature, gastronomy, cultural history, and the fine arts. As the technique of making majolica spread to ceramics factories in Europe and the United States, natural motifs were some of the most frequently copied.

America's majolica craze—and it truly was a craze, with A&P markets giving away pieces as premiums with the purchase of baking powder—began in the late 1870s and lasted for nearly thirty years. Production here and abroad finally halted around 1910, when the dangers of working with raw, unfired lead-based glazes became known.

Having survived a swing out of fashion earlier in this century, majolica now seems to us an enduring classic, like the glossy Technicolor animations of Walt Disney. This is what we admire today and illustrate on these pages: fanciful pieces of majolica inspired by nature, functional as well as beautiful additions to any table. Set against a raft of dignified white china, a single piece of majolica—charmingly off-kilter—will shine.

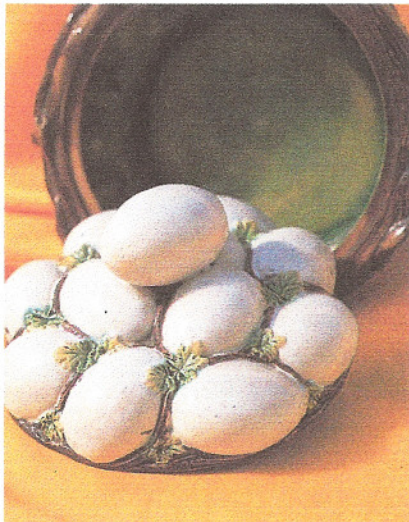
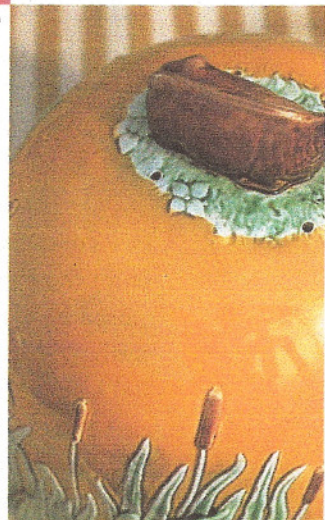
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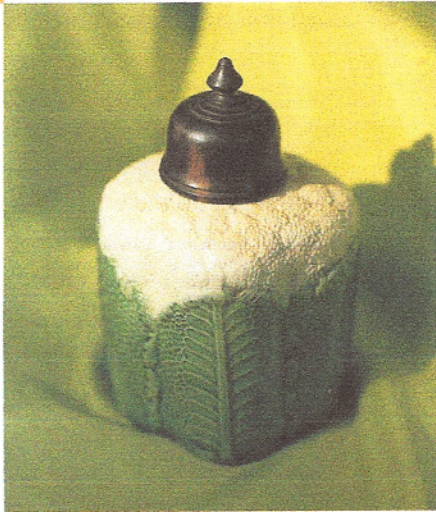
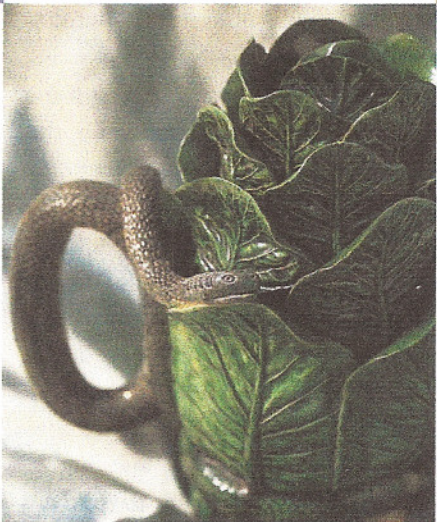
LEFT: An 1870s woven-mat-pattern bread tray, one of 102 bread-tray types made by Wedgwood. The cobalt-blue background glaze was a Wedgwood favorite. **RIGHT:** An unmarked strawberry serving dish with separate wells for cream and sugar.



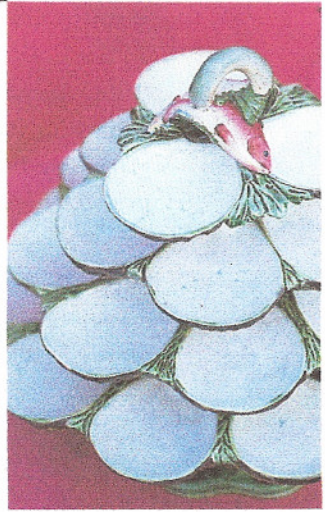
LEFT: A scalloped cake tray and dessert plates in the most famous American majolica pattern, Shell and Seaweed by Griffen, Smith and Hill of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. **RIGHT:** A cow serves as handle on a fourteen-inch-high unmarked cheese bell.



LEFT: The unusual green lining glaze and dramatic modeling on this egg dish distinguish it as French majolica. **RIGHT:** Mafra and Son of Portugal adapted this unsettling teapot design, circa 1880, from the work of French Renaissance potter Bernard Palissy.



LEFT: A precursor to majolica, this 1755 cauliflower cachepot by Whieldon is fanciful earthenware that lacks majolica's lustrous lead glaze. **RIGHT:** Twenty-seven oysters could be served on this revolving four-tiered stand by Minton, circa 1856.





LEFT: Two George Jones game-pie dishes of about 1875, topped with woodcock and prowling fox. Ovenproof liners were sold with the dishes so that a meat pie or casserole could be cooked in the liner and nestled into the dish before serving.

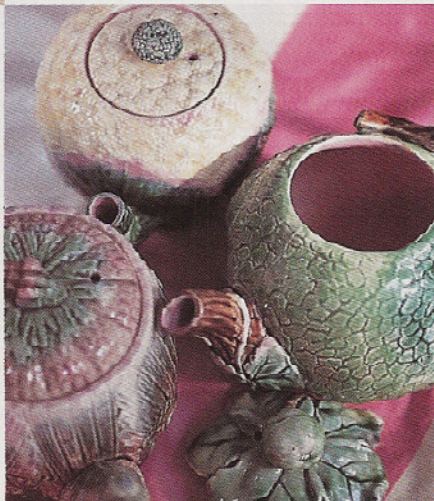
RIGHT: Muted colors, flowing glazes, and low-relief modeling identify these unmarked pitchers as American, about 1885. While English design motifs dominate—wickerwork, shell, fern, sunflower—the pieces have a rough charm all their own.



LEFT: Bread trays, integral to many Victorian breakfast services, were often inscribed with slogans. One of these unmarked trays reads: "Where Reason Rules, the Appetite Obey." Designs include sheaves of wheat, ears of corn, and wickerwork.



RIGHT: Through the spouts of cabbage, cauliflower, and seaweed teapots comes a piping-hot brew. Cauliflower and Shell and Seaweed patterns are by Griffen, Smith and Hill; the proud cabbage with its begonia-leaf hat is by Forester & Sons.

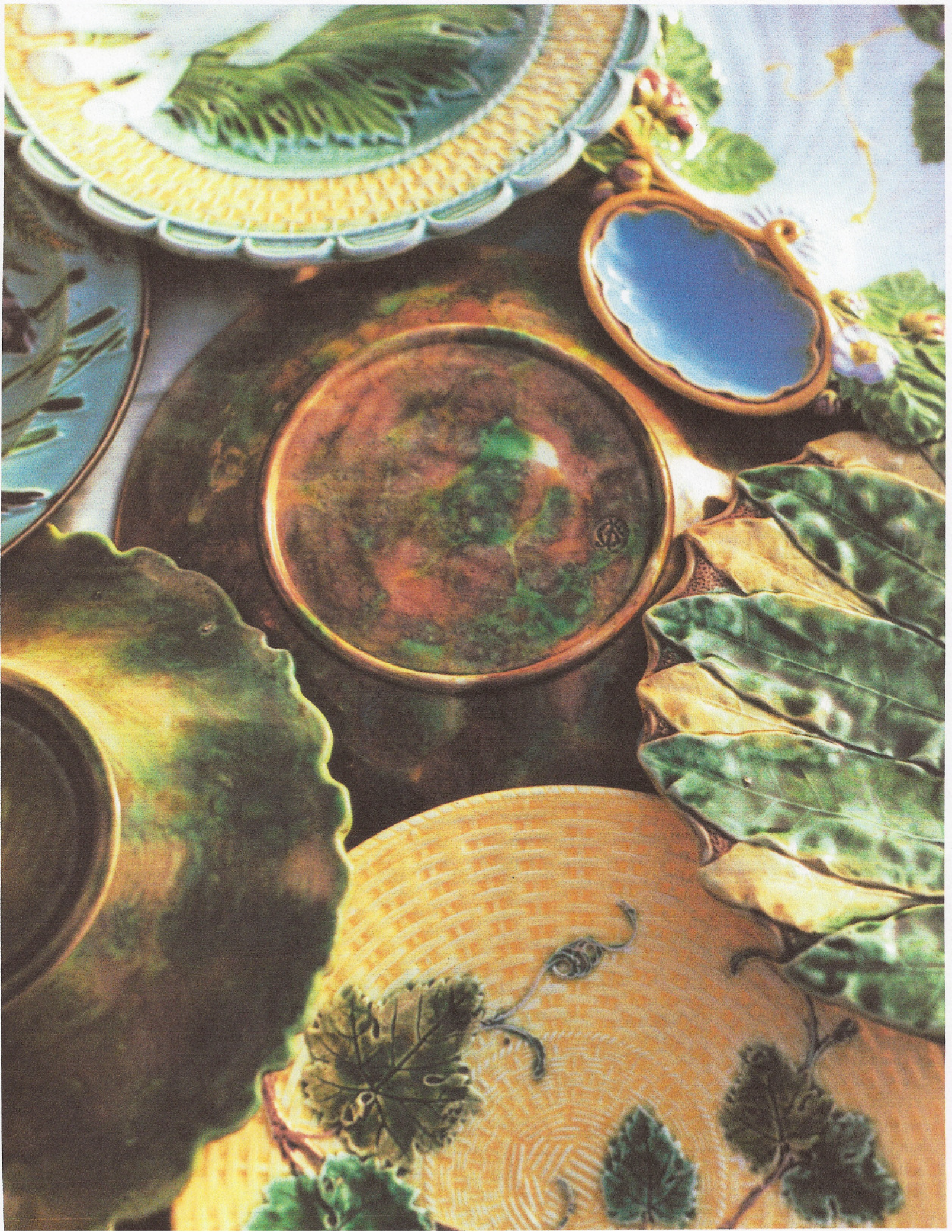


AN ARTFUL TECHNIQUE

The process of making majolica combined new mass production methods with highly skilled handwork. Based on hand-sculpted plaster-of-paris prototypes, molds delicate enough to capture the vein of a leaf or the scumbled finish of an animal's coat were made of the same material. For plates and other flat forms, clay was rolled out as thin as piecrust, pressed into a mold, and turned out to dry before firing. Hollow ware, such as pitchers, pots, and game-pie dishes, was molded in segments and pieced together with slip (clay thinned with water) after drying.

After an initial "biscuit" firing, the earthenware was dipped in a colorless or opaque white glaze with a quantity of lead added. Once the lead glaze had dried, colored overglazes were applied by hand and the majolica returned to the kiln. The unusually brilliant luster of the resulting glaze was caused by two processes: first, lead in the underglaze caused it to melt at a lower-than-usual temperature, creating a crystalline backdrop for color; second, iron in the porous clay body reacted with various metal oxides in the colored-glaze layer to produce a high degree of reflective shine. Occasionally the glossy coating would craze (crack) or crawl (slip off) in firing, leaving the porous clay open to penetration by liquids. Still, the number of "wasters" was low and production efficient.

A major innovator in the making of majolica was Léon Arnoux, a Frenchman who went to England in 1848 to become the art director of Minton's. A masterly chemist, Arnoux formulated the standard majolica clay body as well as Minton's influential color palette of glazes. In his "recipe book," Arnoux listed fourteen different reds, ten yellows and oranges, thirty-one greens, and twenty-seven blues (fourteen of them turquoise), among other colors. As other manufacturers caught on to his palette, Arnoux created fresh hues, keeping Minton ahead of the competition. He also supervised the artists who painted the majolica with colored glazes. The job was painstaking, since no erasures were possible and majolica surfaces were often highly modeled. The real trick was to apply color to the sculpted design without its looking painted on; majolica of the highest quality has a glaze that doesn't bleed from one design element to another.





By the turn of the century, the bright colors and fanciful shapes of majolica were losing ground to the subtler, more basic designs favored by the Arts and Crafts movement. THIS PAGE: The fluttering form of a lettuce-leaf teacup, made in the United States by the Wannopee Pottery Company around 1900, reflects this growing interest in art pottery. OPPOSITE: The haphazard melding of colors that occurred on the backs of majolica ware bears an uncanny resemblance to glazes of the newer ceramics style.