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## Chess Sets

*As interest in  
chess has risen,  
so have prices  
of sets*



# The Brightest Heaven of Invention

The greatest success story of the ceramics industry in England in the nineteenth century was majolica. The brightly coloured pottery wares were exported all over the world and have found a second coming in an extraordinarily devoted following in America, which also had its own factories. At first copying the wares of Renaissance Italy and the Frenchman Bernard Palissy, the potters took flight in fancies of their own. **David Battie**, who bought his first piece thirty years ago, gives his enthusiasm free rein.



La grande "success story" de l'art céramique anglais du XIXe siècle fut celle de la majolique. Ces faïences aux brillantes couleurs furent exportées en abondance dans le monde entier et connaissent un regain d'intérêt en Amérique, qui eut elle aussi ses propres fabriques, et où les amateurs sont particulièrement assidus. Après avoir imité les faïences de l'Italie de la Renaissance et du Français Bernard Palissy, les potiers donnèrent libre cours à leur imagination. **David Battie**, qui acheta sa première pièce il y a trente ans, nous fait partager son enthousiasme.

Den größten Erfolg innerhalb der Keramikindustrie im England des 19. Jh. hatte Majolika. Das farbenfrohe Steingut wurde in die ganze Welt exportiert und erlebte eine zweite Blüte in seiner begeisterten Anhängerschaft in Amerika, das auch seine eigenen Fabriken besitzt. Die Töpfer, die zuerst die Waren der italienischen Renaissance und des Franzosen Bernard Palissy kopierten, ließen sich dann allmählich im Höhenflug ihrer eigenen Fantasie emportragen. **David Battie**, der vor dreißig Jahren sein erstes Majolika-Objekt erwarb, lässt seiner Begeisterung freien Lauf.

Fra i prodotti dell'industria ceramica inglese del XIX secolo, senza dubbio quelli di maggiore successo furono le maioliche. Esportate in tutto il mondo, coloratissime, hanno trovato un pubblico appassionato anche in America, dove c'era stata una fioritura di fabbriche apposite. Da una produzione iniziale nello stile del francese Bernard Palissy e del Rinascimento italiano, i ceramisti sbrigliarono il loro estro creativo. **David Battie**, a trent'anni dall'acquisto della sua prima maiolica, ne è ancora innamorato.

**L**ady Charlotte Schreiber, indefatigable collector and commentator, visited the Paris Exhibition of 1878 and wrote of Minton's exhibit, where majolica was much in evidence, 'Minton does wonderful things, but he cannot attain the *tone* of the old people'. By this she meant the Renaissance wares of Palissy and della Robbia. However, time has not seen fit to follow Lady Charlotte. The further the majolica potters drifted from their first attempts at somewhat uninspired Renaissance-influenced plaques and vases, the more deeply that collectors, largely in America, have fallen in love. It is an interesting commentary on the market that a genuine sixteenth-century Palissy dish will fetch much the same as a Victorian majolica dish in a rare pattern.

The word 'majolica' was the English spelling of *maiolica* (itself derived from Majorca), the tin-glazed earthenware produced in Italy from the fifteenth century. It came to serious attention in the general revival of interest in Renaissance works of art in the mid-nineteenth century. An exhibition in London of the French Soulage collection of Renaissance works of art (bought by the South Kensington Museum, now the Victoria and Albert) attracted 100,000 visitors in two years. The Staffordshire potters were encouraged to try and reproduce these Renaissance models and their 'j' spelling has now been retained to distinguish it from its ancestors. Other contemporary names, no more appropriate than majolica, were 'Palissy' named after Bernard Palissy the French seventeenth-century potter of fish- and

Previous page:  
1. Head of a  
lifesize Minton  
African figure,  
designed by  
A. Carrier de  
Belleuse,  
71¾ in (1.85 m)  
impressed  
MINTON and date  
code for 1864  
some  
restoration.  
Harriman Judd  
Collection,  
Sotheby's New  
York, 2001  
US\$115,750  
(£80,944).

animal-encrusted dishes under turgid glazes but much admired at the time, and della Robbia to whose reliefs and coloration majolica was closer. The English manufacturers, not just of ceramics, but furniture, bronzes and jewellery were on a Renaissance roll, reproducing and adapting designs to contemporary techniques and taste. The Stoke-on-Trent potters, largely Minton, conquered the problems of moulding, colouring and painting and then went on to use their skills to make ever more bizarre objects. The soft earthenware body was dressed in a tin and/or lead glaze producing the sizzling colours which make majolica so attractive. These colours are the glory of majolica, the most prominent being a brilliant turquoise which is common to many factories and which is often combined with a pink on interiors. It is no longer possible to achieve such brilliance as lead glazes are now banned for health reasons and the innumerable forgeries coming from the Far East do not have the same depth of colour, making them easily distinguishable from the real thing.



2. A Minton  
oyster dish,  
11 in (28 cm),  
impressed  
Registration of  
Design mark for  
1881 and date  
code for 1889.  
£400-£500  
(US\$588-735)  
with small chip.  
Private  
Collection.

**M**arks were applied erratically. Minton used an impressed name adding an 'S' after 1872 and a date code.

George Jones is much more rarely marked and where there is a mark it is in the form of a JG monogram. It does, however, use a mottled 'tortoiseshell' glaze on the base which leaves a small blank patch to take the pattern number. This, once seen, is unmistakable. Wedgwood also rarely marks but the less strong palette combined with a soft grey is easily recognised.

**Damage:** the majolica body is soft and pieces are prone to chips and, less commonly, cracks. Restoration can usually be achieved with considerable success and large complex pieces need to be carefully checked. In fact, the loss in value through damage is nothing like as dramatic as on, say, a Meissen porcelain figure.

There is a Majolica International Society for collectors, contact: Marilyn G. Karmason, 1275 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue, Suite 103, New York, N.Y. 10021.

The subjects are legion and heretofore undiscovered patterns appear frequently. The designers let their imagination run free and some forms appear conceived as if in a dream or through an hallucinogenic vision. Small objects are blown up in size, seashells to form jardinières for example, and large animals shrink on the lines of Alice's 'Eat me, Drink me'. Some of the forms would now give a sensitive child nightmares; particularly the various dead animals draped over tureens or the truncated bunny heads staring pop-eyed from the top of a lid.

There were three major makers of majolica, all in Stoke-on-Trent: Minton, George Jones and Wedgwood. The debate as to which is the better of the first two will rage forever, but the Wedgwood pieces are less good in strength of colour and inventiveness, seemingly hide-bound by their classical past. Arguably, George Jones was the most wacky, at times his pieces appearing almost surreal. Stoke-on-Trent was the unlikely beneficiary of the upheaval in France in the 1840s and again from the Franco-Prussian War of 1870 when artists, potters and sculptors sought refuge in England. Amongst these were Joseph-Léon-François Arnoux (1816-1902) who met Herbert Minton in 1848

and who was at Minton's from then until retirement, remaining a consultant until his death. His knowledge of clays, glazes and kilns enabled Mintons to become the most successful ceramics factory of the second half of the nineteenth century. Others were Hughes Protât, responsible for numerous ewers and bowls and Paul Comolera who, amongst other things, sculpted a life-size peacock on a rock, one example of which was shipwrecked off Australia but miraculously floated ashore in its box.

Philippe Burty wrote of this cross-channel pollination: 'Unfortunately, as soon as the French artists have spent some few years across the water, they become entirely and purely English; or again, having returned to France, the pupils they have educated forget their original teaching.'<sup>(1)</sup> Burty was wrong. The English ceramic industry benefited immeasurably from its French imports. Although the French dominated the artistic scene, there were also talented Britons who designed for majolica. One, who supplied designs for Minton, was A.W.N. Pugin whose work in the Gothic style is avidly sought after. Dr. Christopher Dresser, famed for his silver and plate, books, textiles and

wallpaper, also designed ceramics for both Minton and Wedgwood.

While majolica was always decorative, it was also, usually, practical.

It would be possible to recreate a Victorian dinner by setting out the wide variety of wares made for the purpose. One might start with oyster dishes formed of six fishes, each depressed to take a shell and with a central reservation for sauce, (fig 2) there could be a Pugin bread dish inscribed in Gothic letters 'Waste Not Want Not Spare Not', a shell-form spoon warmer, fish, game pie and asparagus dishes, water ewers and, to finish, strawberry or nut dishes with their guardian squirrels. In fact much majolica was made for table use and the honey skeps and cheese bells are amongst the most sought after of all majolica. Sardines were one of the first satisfactorily tinned comestibles and were, when they appeared, on a par in *haute cuisine* with today's foie gras. Numbers of sardine dishes, covers and stands were made, usually with the knop formed of very unsardiney-looking fish. Some of the most beguiling are the teawares. England had, even then, a long tradition of making weird teapots and the majolica potters drew inspiration from their Staffordshire forebears, from Meissen, China and Japan as well as letting their own imaginations run riot. There are fish pots, monkey pots, gourd pots, cockerel pots and three-legged sailor pots.

Aside from food, the other major inspiration for the majolica potters was the conservatory. There are numbers of fountains, jardinières, *cache-pots* and the all-important garden seats. In those days, when a woman's chest was tightly bodiced, the lack of oxygen and the tropical heat was enough to engender hyper-ventilation or a swoon and sinking back onto a cushion supported by an ape would have been welcome relief. Monkeys and apes appear frequently in majolica as the debate about man's descent sparked off by Darwin's evolutionary theories was raging.

The devotion of the Victorians to the collection and study of botanical specimens – witness the numerous books on the subject published then, often with brilliantly-coloured illustrations – were a source for the potters. The majolica jardinière is the perfect container for those archtypical Victorian plants: the fern and the aspidistra. Lilies were common as they symbol-



3. A George Jones camel sweetmeat, 9 1/4 in (23.5 cm) blurred impressed Registration of Design mark, c 1875, £3,000-£5,000 (US\$5,880-7,350). Private Collection.



4. A Minton cheese bell of large size, 14 in (35.6 cm) impressed mark and code for 1865. Britannia Antiques £10,000 (US\$14,700).

A Sarreguemines tobacco jar, the piano lid forming the cover, the book entitled 'operas', 9 in (23 cm) c 1870. Britannia Antiques £2500 (US\$3,675).



ised purity; sunflowers appear later as symbols of the Aesthetic Movement. This movement, which drew its inspiration from Japan, was largely unable to distinguish what heralded from there and what from China. It was in full swing as majolica was at the height of its popularity. Chinese boys clamber over coconuts, hold *nō* masks or form jugs, and fans and cranes drift over dishes and ewers. Many of the garden seats and urn stands are based on Chinese prototypes.

One of the most attention-grabbing of all the Minton pieces is the pair of blackamoors dating from 1865, 72 in (183 cm) high, which were based on bronzes by Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse – another French import (fig 1). They were large, certainly, but were beaten by the Minton St. George fountain, modelled by John Thomas and shown at the London International

(1) *Chefs-d-Oeuvres of the Industrial Arts*, edited by W.Chaffers F.S.A., 1869.

(2) *Pottery and Porcelain from Early Times Down to the Philadelphia Exhibition of 1876*, Charles Wyllys Elliot, D.Appleton and Company, New York, 1878.

Exhibition of 1862. This was thirty feet (9.15 metres) high and was topped by a life-size figure of the Saint. It was bought by the Victoria and Albert Museum, separated into its 379 individual parts and stored at the Bethnal Green branch until the 1920s when it was disposed of. Rumour has it that it was bought by a builder who used it as hardcore for a car park. Sic transit (transport?) gloria mundi!

Aside from the triad of major English factories making majolica, there were numerous others of varying skill. The worst are rubbish; poorly potted with muddy or weak glazes. There are also a number of American, French and other factories, particularly the Mafra concern in Portugal. There was a large display of majolica at the Philadelphia Centennial exhibition in 1876 which sparked off American interest. The American writer Charles Wyllys Elliot wrote in 1878<sup>(2)</sup>; 'A very large sale has been found within the last twenty years for imitations of Pallisy ware, and these have been made with great skill by Barbizôt and Abiso, of France, and by Minton, of England; indeed some of these seem much better than any I have seen supposed to be the genuine thing'. The American eye was unclouded by the European reviewers'

baggage of the glories of the past. Significant American names here are Griffen, Smith and Hill of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, the Eureka Pottery, Trenton, New Jersey and the New York City Pottery. However, much American majolica is unmarked and attribution is tenuous or impossible. Bizarrely, there is a U.S. factory which used the mark 'TENUOUS MAJOLICA'. All these have their devotees, but the position of Minton and George Jones is unassailable; they are the twin peaks of majolica manufacture. Not only is the quality there, so is unparalleled inventiveness and – so often missing in works of art – ownership brings a smile at the quirky humour.

Majolica faded from popularity and production at the beginning of the twentieth century and, after the Great War, Victoriana was banished to attics or disposed of. There was barely an inkling of a revival until the mid-1980s when one or two American collectors began to appear. The George Jones camel sweetmeat or posy holder (fig 3) is a good example of how prices have changed. It was illustrated on the front cover of my book *Nineteenth-Century British Pottery* which came out in 1979. It had fetched £150 at auction the year before. The last example to come to notice was sold in New York in 1997 for US\$6,900 (£4,690). ◆

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