

'All about texture'

Majolica brings unique look to homes

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Most majolica collectors would salivate over Wanda Matthes' collection.

After starting her collection 15 years ago, she has acquired so many pieces that she can't keep it all in her Plano home.

So whatever she can't use at home goes into her Trilogy Antiques shop at Snider Plaza Antique Mall near the corner of Lovers Lane and Hillcrest Road in Dallas, where she puts it up for sale.

She's done this with countless pieces, including two of her favorite aqua tulip vases of French origin in the Barbotine style, same as the iris studded vase on the living room coffee table. But then, after placing the two smaller vases up for sale in her shop, she had second thoughts.

"I put them up for sale in the shop and then decided not to sell them so I brought them home."

Now they've got a place of honor in her living room next to a plantless jardiniere. All this fits in nicely on a table just below a cabinet housing her collection of majolica butter pats.

Majolica is everywhere, arranged just so, with an animal collection on the mantel and a table setting next to a window.

There's majolica in nearly every room of her home, usually grouped together in a cabinet or on a shelf. But then sometimes there's a surprise piece at the top of the stairs



Pieces from Wanda Matthes' collection show the color and texture of majolica, which can sometimes fetch thousands of dollars.

and other times, there may be a pot holding a small Christmas tree or a tray holding towels in the bath.

It goes without saying that

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What is majolica?

Majolica's origins Victorian Majolica was produced from 1851 through 1900. It was introduced at London's Great Exhibition in 1851. At that time and place 6 million visitors and 13,937 firms attended the event.

Positive aspects of majolica — humor, whimsy, charm, elegance, great natural beauty

What goes into the making of majolica — soft porous molded earthenware fired to biscuit stage, opaque-based glaze of tin or lead enamel, decorated with hand-painted metallic oxide glaze, final firing results are translucent, richly colored with a silky brilliance

Themes — Botany and horticulture, zoology, ornithology, marine biology, conchology
English manufacturers of majolica Herbert Minton, George Jones, Joseph Holdcroft, Josiah Wedgwood, Thomas Forester, Samuel Lear, Simon Fielding, W.T. Copeland, William Brownfield, and James Wardle.

American manufacturers of majolica — Griffen, Smith & Hill in Pennsylvania, Eureka in New Jersey, George Morley in East Liverpool, Ohio, Trenton Potteries in New Jersey, Continental majolica manufacturers from France, Germany and Austria Luneville, Longchamp, St. Clement, Sarreguemines, Choisy-Le-Roi, Orchie, Poet-Laval, Villeroy and Boch, Eichwald, Hugo Lornitz.



Majolica collector loves antique style

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Matthes has come a long way since she bought her first piece of majolica 15 years ago. It was a little early 20th century German plate with a grape motif. A Zell piece that she bought for \$30 at an art and antique show and sale in Richardson.

After that she added begonia leafed-plates and pickle dishes to her collection.

Now looking back on it all, Matthes, a former San Augustine resident who grew up on a farm in that area, says: "I've always been attracted to pottery of this type. I like the look of it."

Like others collecting hard-to-find items, she searched high and low for majolica, which was no problem since she admits that she "was born with a shopping gene."

She says that collecting plates is normal for beginner collectors and then adding the more serious pieces such as compotes and vases and pitchers comes with time. She knows this not only from her own experience but also because she's an officer in the Majolica International Society.

One of her roles is to answer questions about majolica something she does very handily, using several sources as a guide, including Mary Ann Katz-Markes' book, "The Collector's Encyclopedia of Majolica" and "Majolica" by Marilyn Karmason and Joan Stake.

That means she knows more than the average person about collecting the pottery that was a favorite in Victorian households in the late 19th century all the way to the early 20th century and the finished product often reflects influences of that period, including shell patterns and monkeys from the Darwinian period.

For the uninitiated, she talks about majolica being "all about texture. It's form and then function," she says. Then she adds that majolica is a glaze and not a style, with lead glazes most popular in English and American pieces and tin glazes most often seen in French majolica.

Also there's Palissy that has taken the majolica collecting world by storm. Of French origins, these are most often plates and platters with sculptural fruit or sea creatures added. Palissy is quite rare, with only two shops in North Texas carrying it, Matthes' Trilogy and Lovers Lane Antiques, where pieces can go as high as \$7,800.

It's not like in the days when Matthes started her collection and there was little or no majolica to be had in this area.

Her finds come from trips to England and Europe. Also when friends travel they sometimes return with pieces. And then there are always the estate sales and antique auctions.

For her personal collection, she says nothing makes her happier



Wanda Matthes shows a majolica tea set in her home.

than to receive a majolica piece for a special occasion.

"Along the way my husband Duane has learned that gifts of majolica are always hits at birthday and anniversary times," she says. "For our anniversary this year he gave me a beautiful apple blossom muffin keeper."

Also, she says some collectors who started amassing majolica in the 1960s are now getting older and are either paring down and selling their collections or they are leaving their pieces for heirs to sell after their deaths.

Quite pricey, majolica pieces can sell for thousands of dollars, but Matthes says this doesn't seem to deter majolica collectors one bit.

"I have people from as far as Israel buying my pieces from my Web site," she says. "And people in Highland Park, where my shop is located, are into decorating their homes and don't mind spending several thousand dollars on a piece."

Then too there's another upcoming generation that's becoming appreciative of majolica.

"The younger women may have

grown up with these things and are into building collections," says Matthes, who adds, "The good thing is that majolica generally goes up or holds its value. You can't say that about a lot of things."

All the while she's been collecting and selling majolica she has also been teaching school. During the years of teaching music in Richardson, she would work at her regular job during the week and on Saturdays work at the shop she opened in 1996. Since retiring from her teaching job in May of this year she has had more time to devote to working at the shop.

Even though her husband, Duane, is a systems engineer by profession, he also holds office in the Majolica International Society.

Together they hold teleconferences with other officers to plan the annual meetings and conventions usually held the last weekend of April. This year the convention was held in Orlando. Next year it will be held in New York. Along with the convention, there's also a show and sale.

"We call it majolica heaven," says Matthes. "There are usually about 10 to 12 of the top dealers in the country there. You see pieces you've never seen before. It's like going to a museum."

She has some pretty important

pieces as well, including a shell and seaweed-patterned tea set made in Phoenixville, Pa. Sometimes this pattern is referred to as an Etruscan style. If someone feels surprise at majolica made in America rather than England or Europe, she lists the prerequisites for making the pottery and says that area of Pennsylvania fits the bill in every way.

"The clay was good in that part of the country and that was important in making majolica," she says. "Good clay, a location on the river and people willing to work were the main criteria."

She says that only "about 30 percent of majolica is marked." Some of the major manufacturers are Minton, Wedgwood and George Jones, whom she calls "the king of majolica."

She has so many different ideas, including using major pieces for lamps. She just fits the piece onto a wood base, not attaching it in any way so that the piece doesn't lose any of its value. Also, that way it doesn't damage the piece.

The thing to remember about majolica is that it needs light and that "part of the fun of collecting is that there is constantly a little mystery going on." That's mainly because majolica is so old and so closely tied to a period of history