



San Francisco Airport Museums

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The Wit and Whimsy of Victorian Majolica

February 2008 - September 2008

In 1851, Great Britain hosted a landmark international exhibition—the Great Universal Exhibition—to celebrate modern industrial technology and design. Exhibition organizers, led by Queen Victoria's husband Prince Albert, invited exhibitors from around the world to show off the very best that modern life had to offer. Among the products and technologies that debuted at the Exhibition was a line of ceramic ware imitating Renaissance works from France and Italy. Minton and Company, a firm based in Stoke-on-Trent, England, called these pieces "imitation majolica." The term was borrowed from the Italian word *maiolica*, the name given to the pottery produced on the Spanish island of Majorca (known as *Maiolica* in Italian) and imported to Italy during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

Majolica is soft, porous earthenware covered with an opaque background glaze and decorated with brightly colored metallic-oxide glazes. Majolica is most noted for its rich, brilliant coloring and dramatic or whimsical modeling. Nineteenth-century majolica design featured naturalistic scenes, folk themes, exotic motifs, and wild combinations of elements.

Also introduced at the Great Universal Exhibition were hyper-naturalistic pieces inspired by the work of the master French Renaissance ceramist Bernard Palissy (c. 1510–1590). This line, introduced by the firm of Charles-Jean Avisseau and Joseph Landais of Tours, featured exquisite modeling of natural specimens. Avisseau and Landais worked for years to rediscover Palissy's methods for producing riotous scenes of fish, reptiles, bugs, and greenery in ceramics. Their work—known as Palissy ware—caused an instant sensation, tapping into the Victorian interest in the natural world and delight in man's ability to render nature in artistic forms.

Majolica was the perfect ceramic for its time. Its rich colors and eclectic mix of styles appealed to the nineteenth-century audience, which reveled in demonstrations of technical skill and elaborate design. For Victorians, decorative art was meant to delight and entertain. Through majolica they could express their good taste, interest in the natural world, and even their sense of humor.

Throughout the nineteenth century, majolica producers in Great Britain, Europe, and the United States produced items of varying cost and quality. Some firms hired talented artists, designers, and painters to create highly detailed ceramic works. Others produced majolica on a mass scale, sacrificing aesthetic considerations to meet the demand for low-cost goods.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the public's enthusiasm for majolica was spent. The market dropped off so quickly that firms halted their majolica production seemingly overnight. Twentieth-century viewers considered the work an overwrought relic of Victorian design. Only in the late twentieth century did interest in these wares revive, leading to the development of a strong market for antique majolica. The wit and whimsy of these pieces still delight audiences today just as they did at the Great Universal Exhibition more than a century and a half ago.

Photography is not permitted.

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