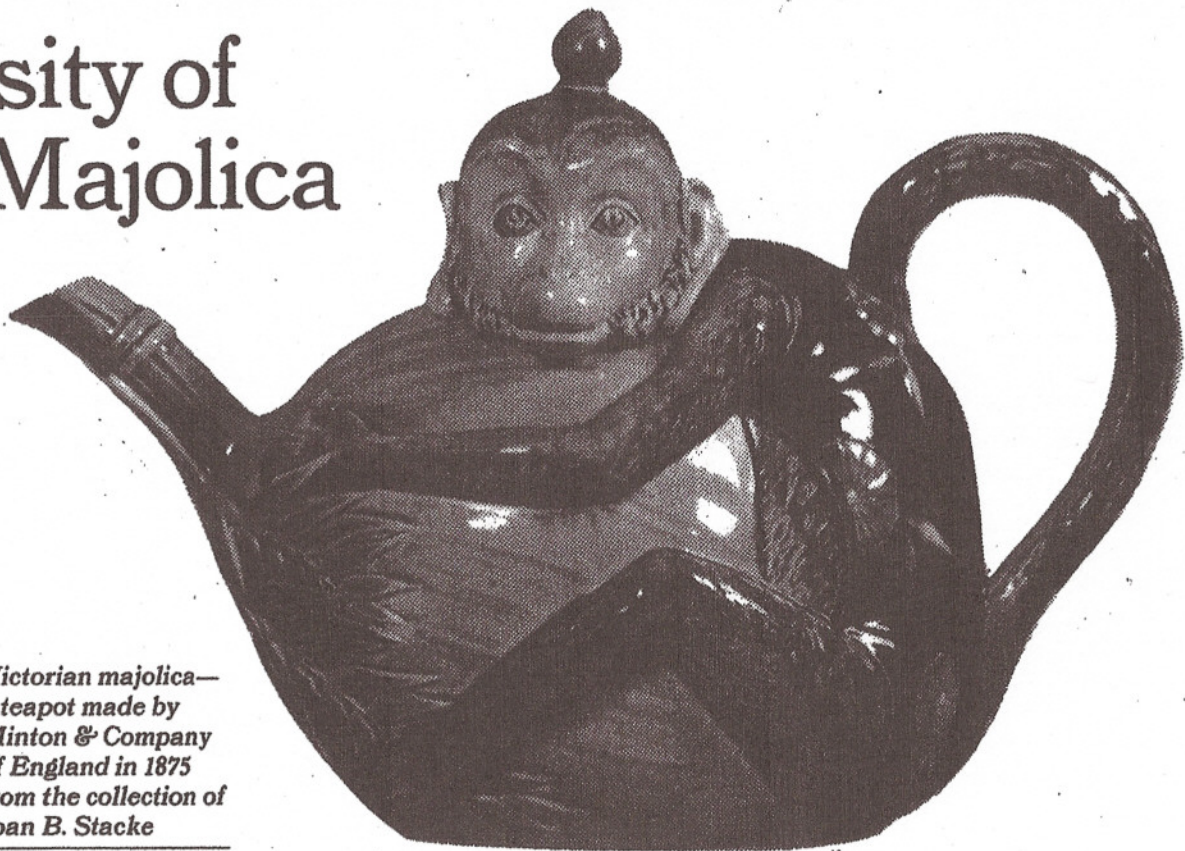


ANTIQUES

The Diversity of Victorian Majolica

*Victorian majolica—
a teapot made by
Minton & Company
of England in 1875
from the collection of
Joan B. Stacke*



Jill Graham

LIFE-SIZE EARTHENWARE storks, fish-patterned platters, leaf-embellished turquoise — all in the brilliantly colored majolica glazes popularized in the Renaissance and revived in the Victorian period — have been pursued increasingly over the last decade by collectors, dealers and museum curators.

Two New York collectors of 19th-century majolica, Marilyn G. Karmason and Joan B. Stacke, began in 1976, shortly after they met and became friends, to amass comprehensive holdings. Each now owns about 1,500 pieces, and their collections — almost identical, due in part to the abundance of material available until now — are of mostly British and American majolica, but include Portuguese and French pieces as well. Dr. Karmason, a psychiatrist, and Ms. Stacke, who manages a doctors' office in Manhattan, said in a recent interview that their husbands, who are physicians, do

Vessels glow with metallic glazes.

not collect majolica but support their interest with enthusiasm.

Most of the visible surfaces in each of their apartments display jewel-colored pitchers, punch bowls, butter dishes, vases, jugs, umbrella stands, oyster plates, cheese stands and napkin holders. Platters and vessels, glowing with metallic glazes in numerous color combinations and in scores of shapes, are arranged neatly, two or three deep, on table tops, shelves and floors, impressive documents of the rich diversity of objects produced a century ago. Represented are works made in England by Minton & Company, Josiah Wedgwood & Sons and George Jones & Sons and in the United States by Griffen, Smith & Hill, the Wannopee Pottery Company and George Morley & Company.

Although most 19th-century English and American majolica is stamped or impressed with a maker's name, Dr. Karmason recalled that she and Ms.

Stacke became increasingly frustrated in their collecting because of the lack of information in print. Antiques dealers shared what they knew, but the collectors were frequently unable to find out when, how and in what numbers objects were made. In the early 1980's they decided to write a book to fill in the gaps.

Dr. Karmason produced an outline in 1981, and put it aside, she said, until she and Ms. Stacke could devote adequate attention to the project. In 1984 they returned to the research and writing, and last year they completed "Majolica: The Complete History and Illustrated Survey," to be published in December by Abrams (\$75). The publisher describes the book as the first to cover the subject in depth.

The collectors explain that the word "majolica" is pronounced in two different ways by collectors of Victorian examples. When referring to 19th-century earthenware, they suggest, one pronounces the "j" in the normal American fashion; when speaking of Renaissance material, one sounds the "j" as if it were an "i."

Throughout the 1980's, museum exhibitions of Victorian majolica spurred collecting, which sent prices spiraling upward. The most notable presentation to date was the 1982 show "English Majolica" at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, the first such presentation in this country. The exhibition document-

ed the diverse influences that shaped Victorian majolica, including the interest a century ago in natural forms, technological innovation, the Japanese esthetic and historical references from ancient Egypt onward.

Dr. Karmason and Ms. Stacke loaned to that show 17 of the 70 objects presented. Their selections included pie dishes ornamented with rabbits, quail, woodcocks and hunting dogs; tortoise-shell-patterned wares; basketlike dishes for serving everything from salt to strawberries, and an urn embellished with lilies, birds and dragonflies.

Another exhibition, "Majolica," on view now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art through Oct. 1, focuses entirely on Italian metallic-glazed pottery. Renaissance works dominate, but 19th-century examples are also shown.

Over the 13 years that Dr. Karmason and Ms. Stacke have collected, they said, prices have increased 4 to 10 times for some examples. They bought pieces for as little as the \$2 paid for a small pitcher, or as much as the five-figure sums paid for several monumental pieces.

Prices soared at auction beginning in December 1982, two months after the Cooper-Hewitt exhibition closed. An outsize 1867 Minton vase, more than four feet tall, with the lid surmounted by the chained figure of Prometheus and an eagle hovering above, was sold at Sotheby's in New

York for \$35,200 — still the record at auction for an individual item of Victorian majolica.

High prices were paid at London sales for other examples of outsize majolica. In 1985, Sotheby's auctioned a pair of 1865 Minton blackamoor figures, almost six feet tall, for \$57,552. A year later Phillips sold a five-foot life-size 1873 Minton peacock for \$35,112.

In 1988 another such Minton peacock was auctioned in London by Christie's for \$30,624. Though lower than the sum paid at Phillips, this price, according to Rachel Russell, one of Christie's ceramics specialists, was higher than the house estimate. Ms. Russell pointed out that the glaze had deteriorated on the base of the figure, and added that interest in Victorian majolica may be on the wane. In London, she said, the material is less popular now than it was five years ago.

Dr. Karmason and Ms. Stacke disagreed. In their view, the revival is just beginning. They said they found increased awareness of majolica in their travels and experienced an enthusiastic response in April at the first meeting of the International Majolica Collectors' Association, in Fort Wayne, Ind. Recently founded by Michael Strawser of Wolcottville, Ind., an auctioneer and realtor who collects majolica, the organization already has a membership of about 100 collectors from 16 states and from France. □