



How maiolica and majolica, one born in the Renaissance, the other a product of Victorian genius, became pottery showoffs.

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# WHAT A DIFFERENCE A "J" MAKES



MAIOLICA AND MAJOLICA—so similar and yet so different; it's no wonder that many confuse one with the other. Both are brilliantly colored glazed earthenware with sound-alike names. But it's easy to sort out the two if you remember that the J in majolica stands for junior. Developed in the 19th century, majolica is the giggly youngster. Its "wonderful, outrageous designs," says Melissa Berry of Christie's East auction house, "are purely Victorian."

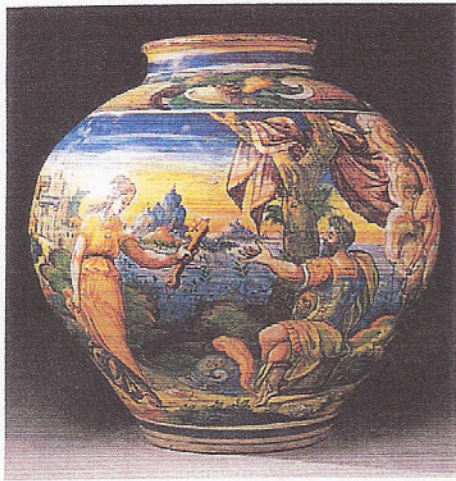
Maiolica (my-ALL-i-ka), by contrast, is the senior sophisticate, first created during the Italian Renaissance. Artistically, the two are very different. Pieces of Renaissance maiolica are smooth-surfaced and covered with elaborate painted scenes and designs. An example of Victorian majolica (ma-JALL-i-ka), however, appeals as a tactile, sculptural tour de force: The pieces were formed in molds, then richly ornamented with high-relief details that were also cast in plaster

of-paris molds. The putti that are elegantly painted on a 16th-century maiolica plate, for example, are likely to

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What distinguishes maiolica from majolica? About 300 years and thousands of dollars. Top: This Maiolica dish, circa 1540, fetched \$311,020 last year at Christie's. Left: An 1865 majolica stand worth about \$20,000

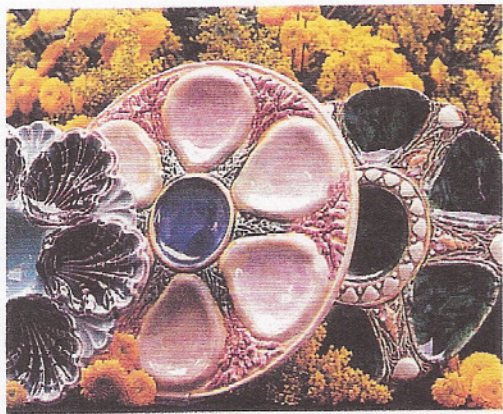




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explode into three-dimensional cavorting cuties on a Victorian jug.

Victorian majolica also races under its own colors. Think J again: The joyful palette is dominated by dazzling emerald, turquoise, and pink hues. Finally, a J word, jocular, definitely describes some of the most appealing majolica objects, including a cheese dish ornamented with scurrying mice and a teapot shaped like a monkey.

A cluster of influences set the climate for majolica's English birth. By the mid-19th century, with England's economy booming, an affluent middle class clamored for stylish home fashions. Drove of skilled



artisans from politically troubled Europe were lured by the many work opportunities in Britain's potteries. Also, about that time, some of England's leading scholars instigated huge acquisitions of 16th-century maiolica by public galleries, including the British Museum. Suddenly, glazed earthenware was hot. In no time, industrious Victorians invented their own version.

Actually, it was Herbert Minton who launched it. In 1848, he hired Leon Arnoux, a French chemist, as design director of the famous Minton ceramics works. Arnoux masterminded new low-firing tin- and lead-based concoctions, producing the jewel-like glazes that became the trademark of Minton—and eventually Victorian—majolica. The first designs took cues straight from Italian Renaissance maiolica and were awash with putti, grotesques, and brown and green tones. But as Arnoux coaxed artisans into devising their own designs, exuberant, nature-inspired creations appeared.

Top right: The most prized American majolica pattern, shell-and-seaweed, made by Griffen, Smith and Hill in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania, circa 1880s. Top left: A Maiolica jar, circa 1560, made in Venice. Above: Often mistaken for American, majolica oyster plates were made only in England and Europe. The blue plate is French; the pink, Continental; and the green, English.

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## MAJOLICA TRADEMARKS



1855

Artisan Hugues Protat's impressed monogram on Minton & Co. majolica



1861

Marks of former Minton potter George Jones (and Sons, after 1873)



1876

Artisan W.T. Copeland's mark on eagle vase for the Philadelphia Centennial



1879-1889

Marks of the pottery firm of Griffen, Smith and Hill of Phoenixville, Pennsylvania



1883-1912

Majolica mark of Villeroy & Boch, a German pottery firm



Left: Two majolica teapots by Minton. The original, right, was made in 1877; the other is a Minton reproduction made in 1995. Sculptural teapot details, below: Monkey and rooster. Bottom: A 1510 maiolica plate depicting a painter at work.



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**ART HISTORY ON A PLATE**

From the start, Italian maiolica had snob appeal. Popes, princes, and other movers and shakers of Renaissance Italy commissioned and collected it. It originated in the 1400s, after Italian potters noticed the wealthy snapping up Hispano-Moresque tin-enamel ware imported from Majorca, an island off the coast of Spain. Italian ceramists played on the island's name and created their own version of the pottery. By the 1500s, the sophisticated Italian ceramics were renowned throughout Europe.

With its vibrant green-blue-orange-yellow signature palette, this tin-glazed earthenware brought home on pot and plate all the latest developments of the vanguard Italian Renaissance art scene. "It really is old-master painting, but on ceramic instead of on canvas or a wall," says Jody Wilkie, head of ceramics at Christie's.

The artists who painted maiolica worked in a culture bubbling in ferment, one in which new artistic techniques were tried out and traded between painting studios and ceramic workshops. Grabbing ideas the way today's pop musicians sample and borrow riffs and lyrics from an older generation of Claptons and

McCartneys, they looked to those hipster painters Raphael and Michelangelo. One artist might lift a grouping from the Sistine Chapel for a plate; another might filch a corner of a Raphael fresco popularized in a print. Following the archeological discovery in Rome of Nero's infamous underground Golden House, with its walls adorned with grotesque motifs, and Raphael's subsequent adaptation of grotesques, the maiolica artists developed another flourish: They ornamented their wares with fantastic masks, putti, and arabesques, and made

The elegantly painted putti found on a maiolica plate are likely to explode into 3-D cavorting cuties on a majolica jug.

grotesques a maiolica hallmark. So hot was maiolica that it attracted its own inquiring-mind chronicler, Cipriano Piccolpasso, who in 1557 wrote a detailed text revealing secrets of the art.

Painting with brushes of goat hair and mouse whiskers, the artists needed a sure hand; once a figure was painted on the powdery tin glaze, it could not be corrected. Fine maiolica pieces were often signed, and some artists became famous, including one called Francesco Xanto Avelli and another named Nicola da Urbino.

*Istoriato*—narrative—maiolica was, and still is, most prized. Scenes such as the fall of Icarus and the Trojan Horse, taken from the *Aeneid*, were among tales from Greek and Roman literature used to decorate pottery surfaces. Artists skillfully worked the images onto earthenware, creating marvelous feats of perspective on the awkwardly curved, confined ceramic field.

Other types of decorations, including armorial motifs, contemporary scenes, and profiles of women—called *bella donna* (beautiful lady) designs—were also applied to an array of pieces, including flasks, vases, and wine coolers. Another entire category—everyday storage jars and wares—was also churned out by the



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 maiolica makers, who were clustered in towns such as Urbino and Deruta.

But the high-style narrative pieces were the trophies. Rich Italians considered them art forms and snatched them up as treats for themselves, for gifts, and for diplomatic presentations. King Philip II of Spain lucked into a huge maiolica set presented by a favor-currying aristocrat. Later, collectors with regal taste acquired maiolica pieces. Horace Walpole, the English writer, snagged a pair of fabulous urns in the 1700s; in the 1800s, A.W.N. Pugin, architect of the House of Lords, collected maiolica. So did 20th-century princes of banking and commerce, including J.P. Morgan and J. Paul Getty. They all saw maiolica's attraction: Unlike old-master canvases and frescos, which are faded by centuries of grime, candle smoke, and sun, maiolica is the "principal branch of Renaissance art that has preserved all the vividness of its original coloring," notes art historian Timothy Wilson.

**FOR GREENHOUSE AND GROANING BOARD**

In the well-to-do Victorian home, majolica wares were fabulous show pieces that were

also intended for use. Most belonged in the dining room or conservatory. To present food ceremoniously, there were game-pie dishes topped with sculptural foxes, grouse, and pigeons and giant cheese bells shaped like beehives. Ornamentation hinted playfully at use: Spoons for serving strawberries, for instance, resemble strawberry leaves.

In Victorian conservatories filled with exotic plants, the gem-toned majolica glazes made a colorful splash. And garden seats in offbeat shapes—a monkey holding aloft a ceramic pillow, for example—had a whimsy perfect for the hothouse jungle settings.

Some of the most remarkable garden furnishings were exhibition pieces made for the Victorian era's famous international expositions. Minton debuted majolica at the 1851 London Great Exposition, and from then on, these expositions were vehicles for popularizing it, notes Marilyn Karmason in her book, *Majolica*.

The most complex design ever made was the 370-piece, 36-foot-high fountain crowned with figures of St. George and the

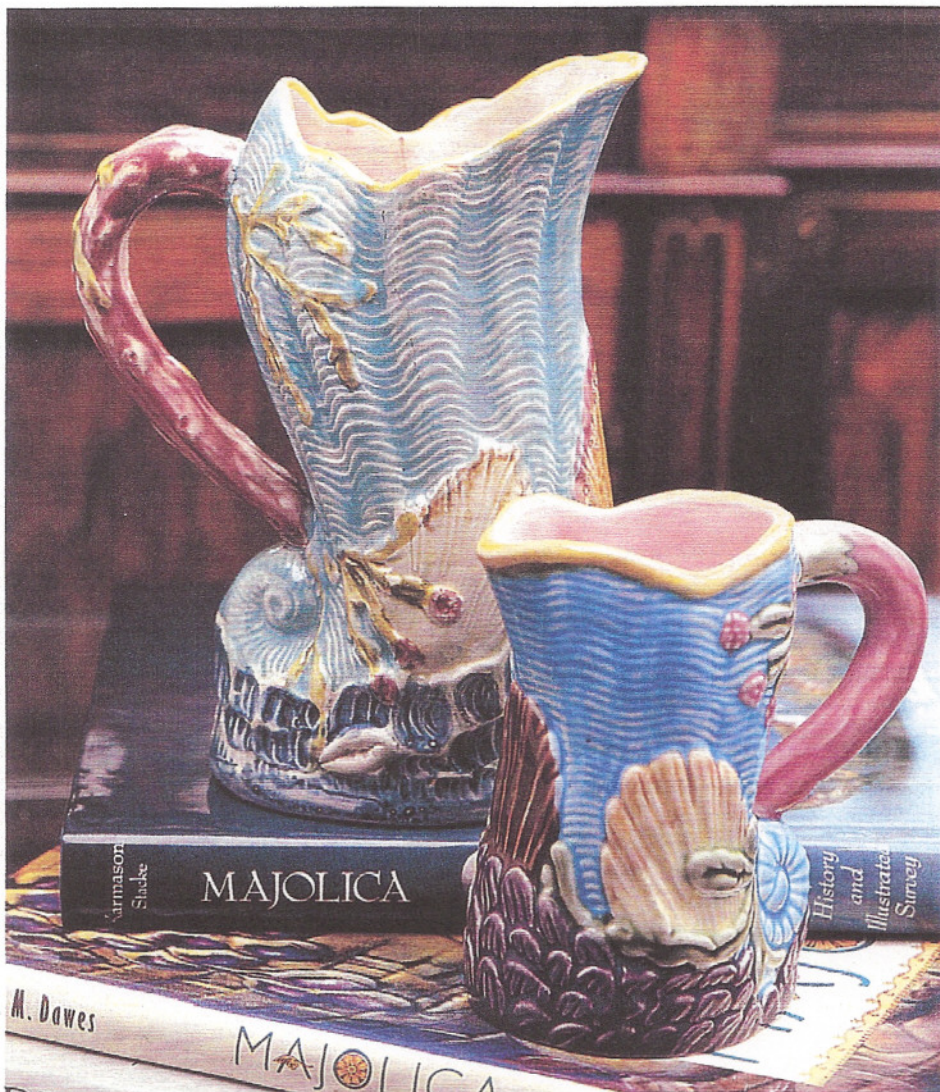


Dragon that Minton created for the London Exhibition of 1862. There was also Minton's pair of majolica elephants, each more than 6 feet tall, that wowed the 1889 Paris Exhibition and that today are mascots in the London shop of Thomas Goode, the company that snapped up the pottery pachyderms at the fair over a century ago.

With majolica all the rage, others launched production of the colorful ceramics. George Jones, a Minton worker, opened his own firm, and his high-relief designs are now coveted.

In 1860, Wedgwood issued its majolica ware. Soon firms large and small throughout Britain, and then Europe, were producing some form of majolica. In France, it was known as *barbotine*, in Sweden as *flintporcelain*. American companies like Griffen, Smith and Hill, originator of the shells-and-seaweed pattern, joined in the majolica madness after

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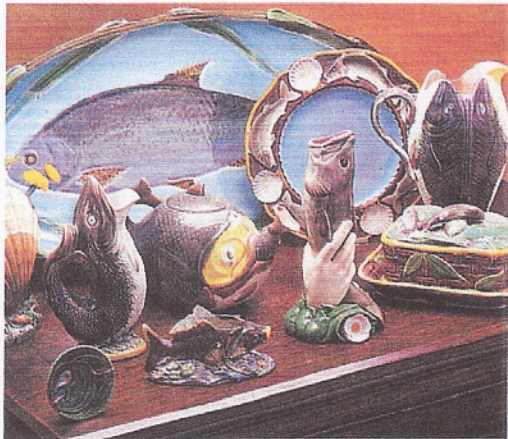
Left: Majolica knockoffs are easy to spot. The original, far left, is highly detailed and pale compared to the fake. The original is worth about \$800, the repro, about \$20. Top: Funky monkey Minton teapot, 1874, goes under the hammer May 31 at Christie's. Estimate? \$4,000 to \$6,000. Above: French grasshopper vase, circa 1890, by Massier.

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a huge exhibit of Minton wares was put on display at the 1876 Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia.

British pieces are often stamped with makers', potters', and British registry marks, a practice that helps collectors authenticate and date pieces. American makers also used marks. Pieces by Griffen, Smith and Hill bear the firm's monogram or the word *Etruscan*.

When pieces are unmarked, and many are, look for stylistic clues, says author Karmason. Hot pink, orange, and sandy beige, for instance, are colors identified with



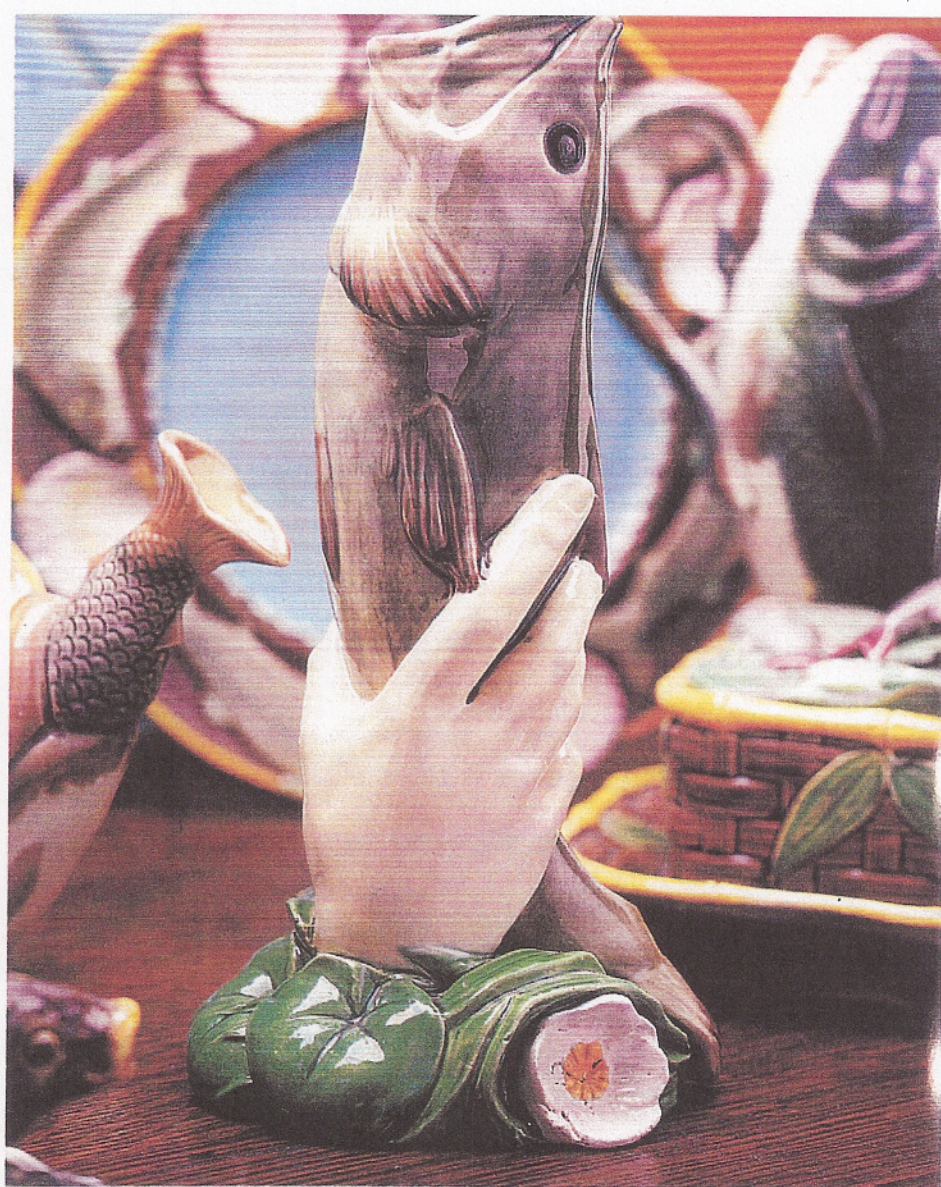
French wares. And American pieces tend to be simpler in detail and less intensely colored than English.

### OF FASHION AND FAKERY

Currently, majolica and maiolica are both sizzling collector markets. Out of favor for decades, majolica has come a long way since 1950, when author Frances Lichten dismissed it in *Decorative Art of Victoria's Era* as "gaudy and horrible" with a "tasteless effect."

Over the last 10 years, prices of English majolica are up 200 to 300 percent, and American wares have risen 50 percent, according to Michael Strawser, who runs two annual all-majolica auctions. At a Christie's Kensington sale in London two years ago, a life-sized majolica peacock, a rarity by Minton designer Paul Comolera, went for £95,000 (about \$152,000), an auction record.

Collectors go after highly detailed, well-modeled designs, especially those by Minton, George Jones, and Griffen, Hill and Smith, says Strawser. A witty teapot or other unusual serving piece can command a five-figure price tag. But it is still



Majolica is for seafood lovers. Above and left: Hand vase with fish by Minton & Co., circa 1869. This collection was amassed by Marilyn B. Karmason, author of *Majolica*. Below: Bunny dessert dish by Minton was made in 1870 and is worth about \$3,000 to \$5,000.

possible to find good-quality examples, including single plates and small serving pieces, for under \$1,000.

Fashionableness fuels fakery. The ocean of recent copies from Indonesia, China, Thailand, Japan, and Italy poses a challenge for collectors.

But phonies are easy to spot, says Karmason. "The scale is off, the detail is lacking or oversimplified, the colors are all too sweet." One giveaway: the garish Pepto-Bismol pink that fakers use. Also, majolica copies usually feel much lighter than the substantial Victorian originals.

As for Renaissance maiolica, always elite, it draws serious money these days. A circa-1540 signed *istoriato* charger that's signed

grabbed £199,500 (about \$311,020) last July at a Christie's London sale. At recent American auctions, unsigned but good Renaissance pieces have been selling for the price of a Lexus SUV. More affordable are some of the handsome storage jars, as well as later 18th-century Italian pieces.

Keep in mind that Italy's artisans never stopped making maiolica. "It's a tradition that continues," says Christie's Jody Wilkie. If you go to Deruta to buy coffee cups today, you will find descendants of earlier maiolica. "It's the same Italian clay, the same glaze recipe; they're not fakes," Wilkie explains.

Unless they are passed off as antiques. How to tell? Antique maiolica, says Wilkie, has "a warm look" and finer painting. ■

For more information, see the Reader's Resource on page 226.