

Glorious Excess

Dr. Susan
Weber
on
Victorian
Majolica

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Paul Comoléra (1818–1897), designer; Minton & Co., manufacturer. Peacock, shape no. 2045, designed ca. 1873; this example made 1876. Earthenware with majolica glazes. 59 7/8 x 27 1/2 x 17 1/4 in. (152 x 70 x 43.8 cm). Molded on top of base: P. COMOLÉRA; impressed marks: MINTON, 2045, year cipher for 1876, and other ciphers. The English Collection. Photograph: Bruce White.

The first time I visited the majolica collection of one of the largest lenders to our forthcoming exhibition, I remember feeling a bit bewildered by the concentration of material in front of me—shelves upon shelves of teapots and game pie dishes, jugs and ornamental figures, garden seats and jardinières—many in the form of molded animals or embellished with exuberant historicist decoration. I recall thinking, where does one begin to understand this glorious excess? The combination of vibrant colors and sheer diversity of objects was reminiscent of a Victorian interior in its density of display, and yet it complemented this sleek Manhattan apartment in a wholly contemporary manner. It was the first of many paradoxes that engagement with majolica would present—and this was just the beginning of an Alice “Through the Looking-Glass” type of

visual journey that has culminated in the exhibition and catalogue *Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States, 1850–1915*.

Majolica, one of the most significant innovations in nineteenth-century ceramics, was introduced to the public by the renowned English firm Minton & Co. at the Great Exhibition of 1851. The eccentric designs and



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flamboyant polychrome lead-based glazes of this new ware captured the attention of consumers on both sides of the Atlantic. From the time of its debut, however, majolica posed a host of inherent contradictions, and thus proved to be a rewarding subject of inquiry. Although at first largely inspired by Renaissance ceramics, the ware represented a

technological advance in the British ceramic industry and was therefore seen as modern and new. Frequently designed and decorated by known sculptors and painters, it was also mass-produced in mechanized factories. Considered a triumph of art and industry upon its introduction, by the early twentieth century, after its popularity had waned, it was criticized for its so-called vulgar application of ornament and would be essentially ignored for the next seventy years. And perhaps the most sobering contradiction that we explore in the exhibition is that the great appeal of majolica—its exuberant whimsy and rich colorful glazes—came at significant human cost. In most potteries, the ware was painted by women and girls. The occupational dangers of working in close proximity with lead-based glazes were well known throughout the period, but workplace safety reforms would not be enacted until the late 1890s. Potters and painters routinely became ill, and many lost their lives while making majolica—we

■ Photo: Bruce White



Griffen, Smith & Co. "Shell" ware, ca. 1879–90. Earthenware with majolica glazes, various dimensions. Various marks. Private collection, some ex. coll. Dr. Howard Silby. Photograph: Bruce White.

honor these individuals in the exhibition with a stupas-shaped memorial, commissioned from the contemporary ceramic artist Walter McConnell.

In the course of our research, we have expanded the majolica narrative beyond what has typically been a connoisseurial overview of the productions of a few principal makers. The recovered histories of more than a dozen English manufacturers range from those of Thomas Forester, the "Potter King of Longton," who used modern marketing techniques to sell inexpensive ceramics to millions, to Eliza Wardle, a potter's widow who, in the 1870s and 1880s, grew Wardle & Co., the firm founded by her husband, into one of the most successful in Staffordshire. Our scholarship sheds new light on the output and business practices of these important but

mostly undocumented makers. An assessment of the contributions made by immigrant English potters who settled in the towns of East Liverpool, Ohio, and Trenton, New Jersey, the acknowledged centers of ceramic production in the United States during the second half of the nineteenth century, have also been fundamental to broadening the scope of this project. With their practical experience and technical skills—their knowledge of clays, glaze chemistry, and mold-making—these potters were to become the critical foundation of the American ceramic trade. We celebrate their collective majolica endeavors alongside the grander productions of the elite English firms—illustrating both continuity and ingenuity across the industry, as well as how this popular ware reached all levels of Victorian society, from the British royal family to the American farmer's wife.

Beyond the many compelling stories of designers, makers, retailers, and collectors, the majolica objects, in all of their fanciful eccentricity, have provided a window into nineteenth-century culture and society; and it is in exploring this realm that the cheese stands, trinket trays, spoon warmers, and mustache cups become most meaningful. As an embodiment of the era's ever-expanding consumer culture; of its middle-class social angst; of its popular preoccupations, such as botany, zoology, and science; as well as its satirical commentaries on other issues of the day, majolica's significance transcends the inevitable cycles of taste that precipitated its ultimate decline.

As we near the end of proofreading the three-volume, one-thousand-page exhibition catalogue, it is my sincere hope that *Majolica Mania* will spark a much-needed reconsideration of this important document of nineteenth-century culture.