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‘Majolica Mania’ Review: Exuberant Earthenware There’s nothing staid about this show of Victorian ceramics at the Walters Collection in Baltimore Barrymore Laurence Scherer



Installation view of ‘Majolica Mania’ PHOTO: THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

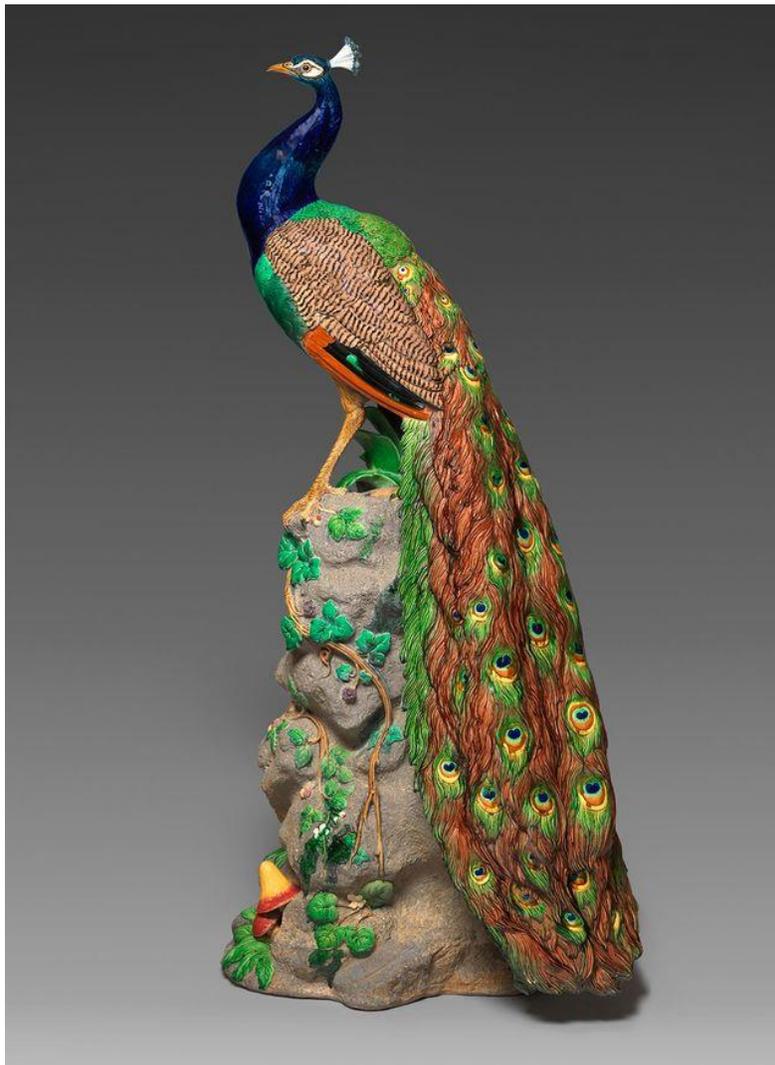
Exuberance is not a word often applied to the Victorian Age. But at the Walters Art Museum’s historic Hackerman House, the exhibition “Majolica Mania” reveals an area of 19th-century decorative arts in which exuberance ran wild.

This joyous show, on view through Aug. 7, was jointly organized by Bard Graduate Center, New York, and the Walters under the curatorship of Susan Weber, noted founder and guiding spirit of the BGC, and Jo Briggs, the Walters’s curator of 18th- and 19th-century art. Both scholars hope that the exhibition and its encyclopedic, lavishly produced three-volume catalog will help restore majolica to its rightful position in the history of decorative arts.

Majolica (with a hard “j”) was the term used in Victorian England for intricately modeled earthenware ceramics embellished with colorful lead glazes accentuating shape and ornamentation.

Initially created to exemplify the best British industrial design, majolica wares were produced in vast numbers as dining, gardening and purely decorative accessories at prices suited to castles as well as cottages. Popular in Britain and America during the second half of the 19th century, majolica fell precipitously from grace in the 20th.

The word “majolica” derives from *maiolica*, colorful mid-15th-century Italian tin-glazed pottery with polychrome decoration. Victorian majolica was developed by Léon Arnoux, a French designer and ceramic chemist engaged by the celebrated British firm of Minton & Co., and it was unveiled at London’s Great Exhibition in 1851. With its multiplicity of bold shapes and sizes in dazzling colors, Minton’s majolica earthenware triumphed as a beautiful and far less costly alternative to porcelain. Rival makers such as Wedgwood joined the commercial frenzy, and like other British decorative ideas, majolica production was also adopted by American firms.



Paul Comolera’s figure of a peacock (1876)PHOTO: THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

Hackerman House, recently restored to its mid-Victorian grandeur, provides a harmonious backdrop for this show. Thematic installations of rare and wonderful examples of majolica are arranged

throughout the mansion, including Minton's elaborate two-tier, seven-foot-high jardinière (c. 1855) embellished with Renaissance-style painted motifs, sculptural female heads, satyr masks, festoons and putti.

Elsewhere, a dining table is set with an eye-catching assortment of fanciful majolica serving vessels. Renaissance and Baroque motifs often inspire their vigorously molded shapes and decoration. From tea sets, ice-cream sets, oyster plates, sardine boxes, soup tureens, game-pie dishes, wine and water coolers and other gustatory pieces to elaborate vases, fountains and figures of exotic fauna, majolica design reflects the embodiment of High Victorian eclecticism, drawing inspiration from a wealth of subjects—history, mythology, botany, zoology and popular culture among them.



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For example, a superb 1875 punch bowl by the British firm George Jones & Sons offers not only the promise of steaming, spiritous refreshment, but a visual pun to boot: Wreathed in relief-molded holly branches, the capacious bowl rests on a recumbent figure of Mr. Punch, whose beaky profile,

long familiar from traditional Punch-and-Judy puppet shows, had been made even more familiar as the symbol of “Punch,” the weekly humor magazine first published in 1841.

A scientific sensibility governs Worcester Royal Porcelain’s “Shell and Lizard” (designed c. 1868), a sculptural vessel evoking a Renaissance nautilus cup (which would have been fashioned from an actual nautilus shell). Here, a defiant lizard clammers over the shell-shaped cup, which is supported by a stem modeled as a piece of branching wood or coral emerging from a foot formed as a mound of leaves populated by snails. The open-mouthed lizard evokes the fearsome dragons of Japanese art, which influenced Aesthetic Movement design in such pieces as Worcester’s Japanese tea kettle, with its slender arching dragon handle relieving the severe cube shape of the vessel itself (designed 1872).



Monogrammed fountain (1861-62), by Minton & Co. PHOTO: THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM

George Jones & Sons’ “Calla Lily” pedestal and jardinière (c. 1880) fairly trumpets its intention to stand in a household conservatory, its assertive blossoms rising out of long green leaves climbing the

pedestal shaft. Elsewhere, two lithe mermaids form the handles of Wedgwood's "Mermaid Clock Vase" (c. 1871), imparting happy sensuality to timekeeping.

Minton's "Prometheus Vase" takes neo-baroque sensuality over to the dark side. The vase is basically a covered urn with upright ring handles. The solid turquoise coloring of the urn body emphasizes the careful modeling of the tormented figure who lends the piece its name. Its finial is modeled as the nude Titan, Prometheus. Punished by Jupiter (or Zeus), king of the gods, for bringing fire to mankind, Prometheus is chained in agony as Jupiter's eagle makes its daily meal of his liver. The vase handles serve as anchors for two pairs of muscular Greco-Roman soldiers bound by ropes and chains.

With trans-Atlantic marketing opportunities fostered by successive international trade exhibitions, European and American majolica manufacturers enjoyed a heyday from the 1850s through the 1880s. But by the 1890s changing tastes led to a slump in demand. During the early 20th century, majolica became one of the many fatalities of modernist criticism that consigned Victoriana to the cultural dung heap.

Moreover, the lead glazes that gave majolica its dazzling colors caused widespread illness among pottery workers—as those glazes were declared illegal, majolica production virtually ceased. Hence, this otherwise cheerful exhibition includes a somber note: a majolica memorial by the contemporary ceramic artist Walter McConnell in the form of a Buddhist-style stupa made of ceramic figures and vessels. But even the intended significance of this ghostly white, somewhat kitschy hillock cannot undermine the decorative flights of fancy that make this show so engaging and so memorable.