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Marvelous majolica

by *Genevieve Wheeler Brown*

A life-sized cobalt and emerald peacock perched on rocks covered with cascading brambles and fungi, a Stilton cheese stand in the form of a thatched beehive, and a vase modeled as a nest with a wren feeding on insects—these are among the many fantastical works of ceramic art awaiting visitors in a dynamic exhibition of majolica titled “Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States, 1850–1915,” co-produced by the Bard Graduate Center and the Walters Art Museum.¹

Touted as “the most comprehensive survey of majolica ever assembled,” the exhibition at Bard is an encyclopedic exploration of vibrantly colored, creatively unrestrained, and highly sculptural lead-glazed earthenware. “Majolica Mania” touches upon majolica’s early manufacturers in England, its eclectic design sources, and its effects on the development of nineteenth-century American ceramics as well as the environmental impact of its signature glaze.

Based loosely on the tin-glazed *maiolica* earthenware from sixteenth-century Italy, majolica has been attracting enthusiasts worldwide since its introduction by Minton & Co. at the groundbreaking Great Exhibition in 1851 at London’s Crystal Palace, attended by more than six million visitors. The pottery on display caused an immediate sensation. It was extravagantly glazed in jewel tones, produced in a variety of innovative forms, and unlike anything the Victorian public had ever seen.

As British technical innovation met a large, available workforce in the nineteenth century, majolica was mass-produced at a relatively low cost and sold at a variety of price points. Embraced both by royalty (most notably Queen Victoria and Prince Albert) and a growing middle class in Britain and the United States with ample disposable income, majolica became a global commercial success.

Drawing from public and private collections including the Royal Collection, the Victoria & Albert Museum, and the Philadelphia Museum of Art, “Majolica Mania” fills the Bard Graduate Center’s intimate townhouse with more than three hundred and fifty pieces of majolica, illustrating its prolific production on both sides of the Atlantic, beginning with preeminent British makers such as Minton, Wedgwood, and George Jones.

Not unlike those Victorian visitors to the Crystal Palace, we are entranced by early British majolica masterpieces, including *Fern and Foxglove Garden Pot and Stand* (1866) by Minton & Co., with its highly naturalistic stems, leaves, tendrils, and fronds bending and reaching in a symphony of saturated green glazes. This representation of organic matter would have appealed to the Victorian popular interest in modern science and botany.

The exhibition continues in the upper galleries with the often overlooked American chapter of the majolica narrative. Introduced by English potters who immigrated to the United States throughout the nineteenth century, the phenomenon of American majolica is exemplified by the work of Griffen, Smith & Co., a factory in Phoenixville, Pennsylvania. Often imitative of English majolica, as seen in a delightfully curious *Shell Ware Moustache Cup* (ca. 1879–90) with its pink moustache “guard” featuring a half moon-shaped opening to allow the passage of tea or coffee, American majolica was adapted for the U.S. market in surprising ways. The *Base Ball Jug* (ca. 1879–90), for instance, was modeled after a British form but depicts boys playing the quintessential American game.

Beyond its beauty, technical virtuosity, and cleverness, why is majolica relevant nearly 175 years after its initial production in England? Describing the process of developing an exhibition devoted to majolica, Susan Weber, the founder and director of the Bard Graduate Center and the co-organizer of “Majolica Mania,” explains that the exercise teased out “a host of inherent contradictions” and was therefore “a rewarding subject of inquiry.” While it is an undeniable celebration of decorative art, “Majolica Mania” is also an investigation of majolica’s darker side, of the uncomfortable truths behind its appealing glossy façade. Although majolica was coveted by nineteenth-century collectors for its brilliant sheen, its glazes were in fact 40–60 percent lead. This was a lethally high dose of exposure for its makers, in particular the predominantly female pottery painters, or “paintresses,” as these women and girls were known. Acknowledging this toxic paradox, “Majolica Mania” includes a ceramic memorial, a towering assemblage of cast porcelain by the contemporary American artist Walter McConnell titled *A Requiem in White*. Commissioned by the Bard Graduate Center and the Walters Art Museum in 2020, this stupa-shaped sculpture honors the many workers in the majolica industry who became sick or died as a result of working with its hazardous materials.

Reforms and legislation beginning around 1890 limited the use of lead in majolica’s glaze. These new laws protecting workers, together with changing public tastes, contributed to the rapid decline of majolica production and its precipitous fall from collecting favor. As quickly as majolica, a triumph of art applied to industry, ascended in the 1850s, so it was left behind at the turn of the new century.

Complementing the exhibition are both virtual and printed resources including the engaging online exhibition and the sumptuous three-volume exhibition catalogue worthy of majolica’s opulent legacy. Entering the online component of “Majolica Mania” on the Bard Graduate Center’s website, we have the opportunity to delve into the latest interactive museum technology with twelve three-dimensional majolica models or “virtual recreations” of objects featured in the exhibition.

Created by the Conservation Center at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts using photogrammetry, these models allow us to view and manipulate the ceramics with clarity and accessibility as never before.

The exhibition catalogue, “the first comprehensive study of the most important ceramic innovation of the nineteenth century,” is a graphic work of art in itself. Lavishly presented with over a thousand pages of new illustrations, archival reproductions, and essays by preeminent scholars, it encapsulates the unique beauty of majolica and the fervent interest this decorative art continues to inspire.

¹. “Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States, 1850–1915” opened at the Bard Graduate Center, New York on September 24, 2021, and remains on view through January 2, 2022. It will then travel to the Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, where it opens on February 26 and will remain on view through July 21, 2022.

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