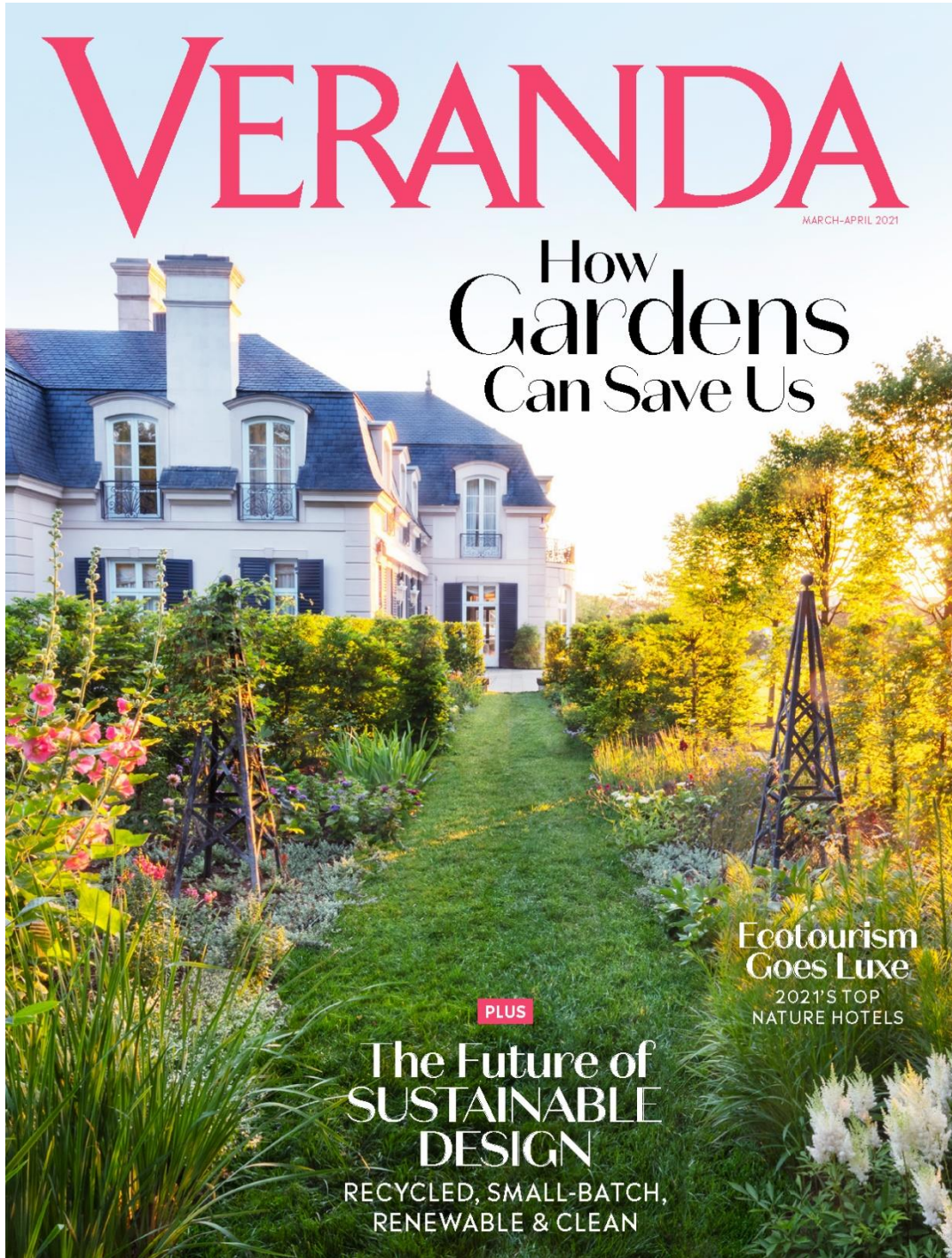


VERANDA



Cult Following

# Wild, Wonderful MAJOLICA



Like a fantastical ride down a Victorian rabbit hole, a look at the **highly expressive glazed earthenware**—and why it's resonating now more than ever

### HOT DISH

Oysters—plentiful, cheap, and widely consumed in 19th-century England—met their match in majolica. Both enjoyed a refreshingly democratic market feasted on up and down the social strata. Ceramic artists saw kaleidoscopic possibilities and began molding brightly colored wells—and the dishes themselves—as fast as they could make them.

**Oyster plates:** Antiques from Trilogy, Gilded Age Antiques, Linda Horn, Madelena, MajolicaDream, Weston Table, and Bard Graduate Center's "Majolica Mania" exhibition; prices vary. For websites, see Sourcebook, page 102.

BRUCE WHITE '65, COURTESY OF BARD GRADUATE CENTER.

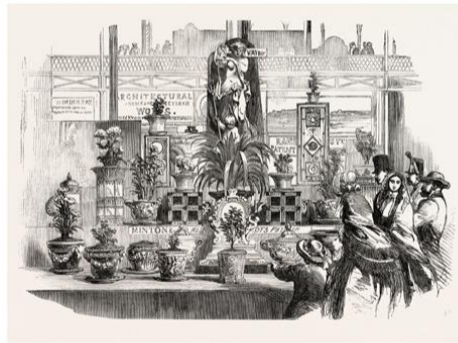
PRODUCED BY Dayle Wood

WRITTEN BY Meg Lukens Noonan



IN FROCK COATS and hoop skirts, eager throngs packed London's Crystal Palace, a cavernous glass-and-iron hall, to view the wonders of industry and design on display at the Great Exhibition of 1851. Among the marvels at that first-ever world's fair (folding pianos, expanding hearses, and giant steam-powered hammers) were several pieces of colorful pottery produced by Minton & Co., one of England's leading ceramics manufacturers. Herbert Minton's vivid lead-based glazes and inventive three-dimensional designs stood in dazzling contrast to the drab houseware widely used in middle-class homes at the time. That it was also affordable made the luminous earthenware soon to be known as *majolica* (in a nod to the refined tin-glazed *maiolica* of the Italian Renaissance) all the more appealing.

Spurred by that successful debut, Minton and competing English factories, including George Jones and Wedgwood, as well as makers in Europe and, eventually, America, filled their kilns with it. Notable artists were brought in to mold fanciful, flamboyant pieces that reflected the diverse interests of the day: zoology, botany, ornithology, gastronomy, and Asian art, among them. Function unabashedly followed form. Lifelike storks stalked



LEFT: Herbert Minton's smashing debut of majolica at the Great Exhibition of 1851 took London, and eventually much of western Europe, by storm.

bulrush umbrella stands, chubby putti cavorted with leaping dolphins in seashell-shaped compote dishes, monkeys embraced coconut teapots fitted with bamboo-shaped spouts. Banquet tables came alive with dishes molded to purpose: welled plates for oysters, linear "boxes" for sardines, basket cradles for asparagus, and bells for pungent cheeses. Game pies

arrived in covered tureens cheekily ornamented with molded hares and pheasants. All-too-real-looking lizards, snakes, and eels slithered across massive trompe l'oeil ornamental platters.

Majolica madness had a nearly 50-year run (with residents of cramped, urban spaces in particular relishing the flourish). But overproduction paled its appeal, and those lead-based glazes that created such astonishing turquoises, pinks, and ochres proved poisonous to those who painted with them; laws limiting the use of the toxic materials effectively put an end to production around the turn of the century. At the same time, modernist tastes were taking over, and majolica, in all its wacky excess, was increasingly viewed with suspicion or outright disdain. Museums deaccessioned it; consumers turned their backs on it.

MAIN IMAGE, COURTESY OF LINDA HORN; BLUE ROOM, SIMON LIPTON; ILLUSTRATION, ARTOTOLOGY; ALWAYS STOCK PHOTO; PEACOCK, BRUCE WHITE; COURTESY OF BARD GRADUATE CENTER.



Majolica dealer and author Linda Horn's collection includes 25 George Jones cheese bells.



A beautifully varied display of majolica plates and bowls in the dining room of collectors Frank de Biasi and Gene Meyer



Minton & Co.'s five-foot peacock (ca. 1876) will be on display in Bard Graduate Center's "Majolica Mania" exhibit in the fall.

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### THE FINE PRINTS



*A mini guide to makers' marks for shopping highly collectible majolica*



#### GRIFEN, SMITH AND HILL

Known for their seaweed and shell pattern and leafy begonia plates, the fine Pennsylvania pottery leans less pricey than European antiques.

#### MINTON

##### MINTON & CO.

Work by majolica's imaginative pioneer tends to be fantastical and opulent, commanding in presence, and considered museum quality.



##### CHOISY-LE-ROI

The French pottery outfit built its majolica legacy on witty trompe l'oeil pieces, helping steer a tradition of garden produce as table art.



##### GEORGE JONES

Pieces by the Minton alum are among the most desirable and expensive, including his prized sardine boxes and game pie dishes.

#### WEDGWOOD

##### WEDGWOOD

The famed English makers drew upon their own vase archives to interpret the glazed art into more classical, monochromatic pottery.



ABOVE: Philip Mitchell and Mark Narsansky's emerald collection "is for everyday," says Mitchell. "The tureens and pitchers especially are frequent serving pieces."

RIGHT: Aquarium flower pot designed by Christopher Dresser for Wedgwood, circa 1871, and Minton & Co. game pie dish from 1876 from Bard Graduate Center's "Majolica Mania" exhibition

"It was considered too bright, too loud, too lowbrow," said Dr. Susan Weber, founder and director of Bard Graduate Center in New York City, which later this year will join Baltimore's Walters Art Museum in mounting "Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States, 1850-1915," the most comprehensive exhibition of 19th-century innovation of ceramics yet. "But it has humor and whimsy, and it shows great virtuosity. I absolutely love it—the bigger, the better."

Among the most exquisite pieces in the exhibition is a life-size peacock designed in 1878 by sculptor



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—DR. SUSAN WEBER, FOUNDER & DIRECTOR OF BARD GRADUATE CENTER

Paul Comoléra for Minton. That peacock is "the top rung," according to Wanda Matthes, an avid collector and owner of Antiques from Trilogy, a majolica dealer in Dallas. She is also co-president with her husband, Duane, of the Majolica International Society. "It's absolutely fabulous. The last one that came to market sold for more than \$100,000."

Meanwhile, smaller, unmarked items or widely produced pieces, such as Wedgwood's green leaf dessert plates, can sell for less than \$100 and are a good entry point, Matthes said. "Even the common pieces are quite beautiful."

Majolica's polarizing nature endures—it's part of the thrill. Where some see garish, others see magic, setting off on decades-long hunts for the novel, the wild, the exceptional. Serious collectors seek out identifying factory marks to signify authentic 19th-century craftsmanship (see page 49) and look for superior artistry and signature patterns. (Copies generally have sloppy paint jobs, unglazed bottoms, and a lack of molded detail.)

From cauliflower bowls to cockatoo jugs, Matthes said she's seen increased interest in the Victorian art over the past year, in part among young people moving away from minimalism. She also attributes some of the fresh enthusiasm to the pandemic and a deep need for whimsy and joy—even if it's in the form of a majolica pitcher shaped like a singing frog. "I've seen a big change. People are stuck at home and dreaming," she says. "They want to make their homes happier places to be." ♦

## HAPPY HUNTING

Five shopping hot spots for collectors, including a mad-for-majolica spring auction

### FINE MAJOLICA FOR THE CONNOISSEUR

At the May 29 auction in Wolcottville, Indiana, look for rare pieces from all over the world, including a 30-year assemblage that features work by Minton and George Jones. [strawsetrauctions.com](http://strawsetrauctions.com)

### ANTIQUES FROM TRILOGY

A wonderland abounds in Wanda Matthes's Dallas shop. Asparagus plates, pineapple pitchers, and shell compotes make delightful displays out of riches from land and sea. [emajolica.com](http://emajolica.com)

### LINDA HORN

The Upper East Side shop owner and author of *Inspiration: My Love Affair with Majolica* has a soft spot for the showstoppers, from Minton monkey teapots to a medallion-studded neoclassical cachepot. [lindahorn.com](http://lindahorn.com)

### NICOLAUS BOSTON MAJOLICA

A premiere expert on 19th-century pottery, the London-based dealer is a go-to for serious collectors seeking rarities (i.e. statuesque garden figures, rare woodland tureens). 011-020-7629-7034

### GILDED AGE ANTIQUES

The Banner Elk, North Carolina, boutique carries an enviable, interesting mix of English, French, and even Swedish dishes and objects by a Who's Who of legacy makers. [gildedageantiques.com](http://gildedageantiques.com)

EMERALD COLLECTION, ANNIE SCHLECHTER POT & DISH, BRUCE WHITE, COURTESY OF BARD GRADUATE CENTER.