

RENAISSANCE MAJOLICA

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HISTORY:

Early medieval pottery in Europe and the Middle East was mainly brown or tan earthenware clay with a limited range of slip decoration (off-white and black) covered with transparent lead glazes – clear, yellow, or green. It was, even by the standards of its day, mostly unrefined and inexpensive stuff.

In the 10th c. or so, porcelain was first imported into the Middle East. Unlike local pottery, it was smooth and white, and had vividly colored decoration or elegant blue-on-white designs. It was also very, very costly. Local potters sought to produce similar effects but porcelain (or indeed, any white clay) was unknown outside China, which kept its production a secret for centuries. In the absence of white porcelain, Arab and Persian potters covered their local tan earthenware with a smooth lead glaze made opaque white by adding tin, then decorated on top of that with colored versions of the same glaze.

The technique followed the expansion of Islam westward to Spain, where the island of Majorca gave it its name in English, majolica (sometimes spelled maiolica). Persian and Spanish majolica also made use of copper metallic effects called luster. When the method spread to Italy in the 13th century it gained even greater popularity, and Italian workshops produced huge quantities for export all over Europe. They were unable to reproduce the Spanish luster effects, but added to the basic color palette over time, and eventually brought classically-inspired Renaissance painting styles to the process.

The technique of majolica is one of the few crafts for which we have a detailed period account, as most workshop processes were considered guild secrets, or else beneath the notice of the literate classes. Majolica held enough status, however, to be of interest to the upper classes, and in the 16th century, Cipriano Piccolpasso published a detailed description of the process, *The Three Books of the Potter's Art*. Piccolpasso was not a potter himself, nor was he writing for practitioners, but spent a great deal of time in observation and wrote a fairly accurate account for interested gentlefolk. The 1932 translation into English suffers slightly from the translator's lack of knowledge, but the most recent two-volume version, in facsimile with a new English translation by Alan Caiger-Smith, is more accurate and helps make Piccolpasso's work a more accessible primary source. There are also many modern texts on the use of this technique.

FORMS:

Foodware pottery was the primary use for majolica, but in the high Renaissance, elaborately painted presentation platters and vases were made purely for display, given as ostentatious gifts and as commemorative objects. Majolica sculpture also proliferated, with the Della Robbia family gaining prominence as its finest practitioners. Initially used as an easy substitute for white marble, its prestige as a sculptural material eventually rivaled that of marble or bronze, as the finest platter-paintings held pride of place alongside panel paintings in oil. Only after the Renaissance did all ceramics become firmly demoted to a lowly trade as distinct from 'fine art', as did woodcarving, glassworking, goldsmithing, and other prestige crafts of the Renaissance.

There are not many examples of drinking vessels surviving in majolica, though there are a few. More prevalent are canteens and flasks, pitchers, and storage jars. The most well-known container form is the albarello, (with or without handles) used for storage of herbs and other pharmaceuticals as well as wine.

Bowls primarily take the form of porringers (small bowls with handles), and are usually decorated in a 'folk' style. Larger serving bowls are less common, but more likely to be fancy. This is likely a matter of 'what survives', however, and not reflective of what was actually made. Fancy stuff gets preserved, and goes to museums; folksy stuff gets used, broken and goes to landfills.

Plates are the most common surviving majolica objects, and range from humble loosely-decorated folk pottery to the most elaborate designs, often based on engravings by the superstar artists of the day. Often, designs include a circular band of ornament, either floral or geometric or a combination, surrounding a center design of heraldry, mythical/biblical scenes, or portraiture.

Other objects executed in majolica include vases and urns, candleholders, architectural wall carvings, altarpieces, portrait busts, and free-standing statuary. Tile for walls and floors was also in common use.

MATERIALS:

Majolica starts with a terra cotta clay body. Terra cotta is a very non-specific term, as it merely means 'cooked earth' or fired clay, and in period, the only clay used in Europe (until the Germans discovered stoneware) produced low-temperature porous ceramics, a.k.a. earthenware, ranging in color from tan to orange or brown, maturing at a wide range of low firing temperatures. Any commercially available non-white clay labeled as earthenware or terra cotta will likely be a good starting point. I prefer the L&R brand #5 brown 'stoneware', but fired only to #1. You can also dig local clay from the ground, and test it to determine its best firing temperature. Clay can be formed by hand or on a wheel, or pressed in a mold – all are period methods.

As in period, I find that the technique works best if the clay is pre-fired in a low-temperature preliminary 'bisque' firing before glazing. ¹⁰10-⁸ is sufficient. After bisque firing, wipe with a damp sponge before glazing. Glaze can be applied by brushing or dipping. Smooth out any thick drips with a fingernail. The majolica technique relies on the viscosity of the base glaze to keep the overglaze decoration from running or blending, but this means that if it's lumpy now, it'll still be lumpy later!

Many period examples have the bare tan clay exposed at the foot and rim. Fancy pieces had the foot ring left bare so the glaze wouldn't stick to the kiln, but humble pieces were stacked vertically, foot-to-foot and rim-to-rim to maximize kiln space, so the rims were also left bare to keep the pots from sticking to each other. If your clay is not a suitable shade of tan, you can paint the exposed spots with a tan clay slip or an iron oxide wash before bisque firing, to get the proper effect. (You'll even see brown edges on the cheap white clay knockoffs at discount stores: Chinese copies of European adaptations of Arab versions of Chinese originals...)

GLAZE:

The period base glaze was (like all earthenware glazes in period) was made of lead, turned white and opaque by the addition of tin. Modern substitutes for lead are fussier and less pretty, but safer. Tin is not especially toxic, but it is currently very expensive, so many modern recipes replace some or all of it with zirconium, which is similar enough for most people. Appropriate glaze can be purchased, but can get quite expensive if you plan to do much majolica! Making glaze from scratch is not difficult, and many recipes are available. I like Linda Blossom's modern recipe, which works well at ¹. (But remember, the firing temperature of the glaze must match the temperature of the clay!)

Turquoise green came from copper, brown-black from iron, and tan from ochre – all easy to mine and refine, even in period. Blue came from cobalt – tougher to produce, but a little goes a long way. In the Renaissance, these colors were augmented by antimony yellow, chrome green, and manganese purple. Pinks were developed around 1600, but true reds were never attained until long after the Renaissance, and their place in heraldic emblazon was conventionally filled by a deep ochre tan. In general, a wide color palette is only found in later Renaissance majolica, but limited color palettes and blue-on-white monochrome work never fell out of use.

The colored overglazes can be mixed from scratch as well, using the same base glaze with suitable colorants in place of the tin or zirconium, but since much less is required, it is not unreasonable to buy pre-made glazes for this. Mayco's 'Stroke'n'Coat' product line is a good choice. There are many colors available, but remember, most of them weren't used in period! Have images of period work close at hand when you choose your overglaze colors!

METHODS:

Designs can be drawn on paper, and the outlines pricked with a roulette or a big needle. The design can then be transferred by putting powdered charcoal or graphite in a cloth bag and tapping it along the lines, leaving a gray dotted line on the white glaze. (The carbon will burn away during firing.) Or, you can simply begin by painting your design freehand. Do not try to use a pencil directly; it will scratch the glaze surface.

For freehand work, start painting your design using the lightest colors. As in watercolor painting, there is no 'white paint' to make anything lighter - the white 'paper' (glaze) showing through is what makes colors look pale. If you put a stroke in the wrong place at first, don't worry; it'll only be a faint mark, anyway. To keep colors pale, use mostly water with just a little overglaze. When your design is laid out lightly, you can start darkening the areas that need it, by using more glaze on the brush. (Use tan to 'darken' the yellow areas.) Pale flesh tones are usually just white with a bit of tan (or blue) for shading, not usually an attempt at pinkish-beige realism, though dark skin tones are done in realistic browns. All colors are generally used 'straight', not mixed together and blended before application. Deep shadows are often done by laying a thin layer of blue on the darkest side of a shape. Calligraphic inscriptions are often done with dark blue or black, using a small flat brush. Outlining typically occurs after the color is done, usually in dark blue or black. Even if the colored glaze application is a bit loose, don't worry; the outlining really sharpens up the design!

After the overglaze is complete, fire the piece to the maturation temperature required by the glaze and clay. Firing services can be hired at Krueger Pottery Supply, Lamplight Studio, and at many 'paint-a-pot' businesses. Krueger's is also the best supplier in the St. Louis area for the materials mentioned.

Majolica, like all earthenware, is porous and should never be put in a dishwasher or soaked for long periods in the sink. Prolonged immersion causes water to be soaked up through the unprotected clay foot into the rest of the piece, causing expansion of the clay and eventual crazing the glaze. Just wash it by hand to keep it looking good forever.

Linda Blossom's majolica recipe:

17 EPK kaolin
23 silica
23 frit 3124
23 nepheline syenite
14 whiting
16 zircopax

Period examples for design ideas:



ALBARELLOS:

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|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. 14 th c Italian | 2. 16 th c. Italian | 3. 15 th c. Italian |
| 4. 16 th c. Italian | 5. 16 th c. Italian | 6. 15 th c. Italian |

BOWLS:

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| 7. 13 th c. Italian | 8. 15 th c. Spanish (blue with copper luster) |
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PLATES:

1. 15th c. Spanish
2. 16th c. Spanish (both blue w/ copper luster)
3. 15th c. Spanish (blue w/ copper luster)
4. 14th c. Italian
5. 14th c. Italian
6. 16th c. Italian



PLATES:

1.-6. All 16th c. Italian historical and mythical subjects, #1, 3, 5 with heraldry (Note the use of tan for both heraldic gules and Or in #1.)



PLATES:

1.-2. 16th c Italian portrait plates (Note typical shade of manganese purple on #2)

TILES:

3. 14th c. Italian, 4. Decent Victorian repro of 16th c. Italian 5. 16th c. Italian