

Italian maiolica in the Wernher Collection

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1 Two pharmacy jars, with unidentified shields of arms (Arnone of Sicily?), probably Deruta, c. 1480. Maiolica, hts 33 cm.

The jars have decoration in horizontal bands of ornament and are inscribed with contents names, 'SIROPPPO ROSATO' and 'SIROPPPO DE BISANTIIS'

2 Deep bowl, supported by three lions; the interior with a seated woman holding a purse, flanked by an eagle and a lily (symbols of the Holy Roman Empire and of France) within an interlaced panel, Emilia-Romagna, probably Ferrara, c. 1450-90. Incised slip ware, diam 30.5 cm



All twenty-seven pieces of Italian Renaissance pottery acquired by Sir Julius Wernher, in the main with an eye to display in the Red Room at Bath House,¹ are still in the Wernher Collection. They are mostly of stellar quality, making them, despite their small number, among the touchstones of the collection. They now constitute the finest group of maiolica in Great Britain outside the great, long-established museums, and one of the best illustrations anywhere of the Victorian enthusiasm for collecting maiolica.²

By the 1890s, when Julius Werner entered the market as a serious force, maiolica had been a collecting passion widespread in England and France for nearly half a century.³ There had been a good deal of 'Raphael ware', as *istoriato* maiolica was often known, in England in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but the competitive 'boom' took off around 1850. In 1856 J.C. Robinson wrote of a twentyfold price increase: 'it is no exaggeration to say that the average value of specimens of Majolica has, within the last five years, literally risen in the proportion of shillings to pounds sterling'.⁴ By 1862, England was so rich in maiolica – both specialist collections and as components of wider art accumulations – that Robinson was able to show at



3 Dish on a high foot, a dog attacking a rabbit; the underside with ribbon and interlace patterns, Siena, c. 1500-20. Maiolica, diam 20.3 cm. Part of the rim is broken away and restored between 7 and 9 o'clock



4 Circular container with lid, Faenza, c. 1525-40. Maiolica, diam 22.8 cm. The lid is painted with blue-ground grotesques and two roundels; these contain figures of a nun with a heart and a young woman with arrows and the inscription 'p[er] amore', representing Sacred and Profane Love. The interior is decorated with fruit and flowers

the Special Exhibition of Works of Art at South Kensington, entirely from British private collections, one of the most astonishing displays of key pieces ever assembled.⁵ In the 1880s and 1890s German collectors, such as Alfred Pringsheim,⁶ began to play a greater role in the international market, but it was not until around 1900 that Americans, above all J. Pierpont Morgan and other clients of Duveen's, became forces in buying and gave a new twist to the spiral in maiolica prices. The most visible competition in England for the finest pieces of maiolica at the time Wernher began to form his collection⁷ was George Salting, who focused the vast wealth he derived from Australian interests on buying works of art, which he did with legendary sharpness and perspicacity.⁸



5 Bowl with a saint (possibly St Philip or St Andrew), workshop of Maestro Giorgio Andreoli, Gubbio, 1520, probably by the Painter of the Judgement of Paris. Lustrated maiolica, diam 20.3 cm. This thinly-potted bowl has lustrated rings on the reverse. With three others probably from the same series (one in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford; one in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; and one, ex-Uzielli and Passavant-Gontard collections, in a private collection in Paris), it is among the most delicate works of Gubbio lustreware in existence

It was never Wernher's intention to form a large collection – the Beit collection, for instance, became much more extensive than his.⁹ In 1900 Wernher wrote from Bath House to Wilhelm Bode in Berlin: 'I would like to have a big Urbino basin and Xanto plate and do not hope for more because space is limited and I can only display a few pieces'.¹⁰ This suggests a concern to be representative, as well as with the display qualities of the pieces. Indeed the twenty-seven pieces do cover most of the prime production centres of fine maiolica in the sixteenth century. Wernher's Urbino *istoriato* includes two wonderfully lyrical plates¹¹ with Ovidian subjects painted in Urbino in 1524 by Nicola da Urbino, the most influential early master of Urbino *istoriato*, to be a gift to that most demanding of collectors, Isabella d'Este, from her daughter (Fig. 8); and also a characteristic virtuoso plate painted in 1531, soon after he had arrived in Urbino, by the great eccentric of Urbino maiolica-

painting, Francesco Xanto Avelli (Fig. 9). There is a brilliant concentrated group of dishes from the workshop of the most celebrated producer of lustreware in Italy, Maestro Giorgio Andreoli of Gubbio (Figs. 5, 6, 7). There are delicious characteristic examples of the sixteenth-century maiolica of Siena (Fig. 3) and Faenza (Fig. 4), and imposing pieces from Deuta (Figs. 10-11)¹² and Castelli (Figs. 12-13).¹³ Rarest of all is one of the most spectacular examples in existence of Ferrarese slipware (Fig. 2).¹⁴ That there is nothing made in Venice or at Cafaggiolo is perhaps just the chance of market opportunity.

More significant as a pointer to Wernher's refined but not progressive taste is the lack of anything before about 1470. The pharmacy jars (Fig. 1), together with a spouted jar of about the same date, are the earliest Italian maiolica he acquired. From the late 1880s, Bode, Emile Molinier of the Louvre, and the English artist-collector-dealers Henry Wallis and Charles

6 Plate with an unidentified shield of arms (Renio of Venice?), workshop of Maestro Giorgio Andreoli, Gubbio, probably 1526. Lustred maiolica, diam 25.4 cm

The border has foliate scrollwork with putto heads, masks, tablets and arms; on the reverse are lustred scrolls and the workshop mark 'M° G°'. A tablet in the border has the date 'a di 17 de ginero 1525' (17 January 1525, i.e. probably January 1526 by modern calendar)

7 Shallow bowl, Neptune in his chariot, workshop of Maestro Giorgio Andreoli, Gubbio, 1526. Lustred maiolica, diam 25.4 cm

On the reverse are lustred scrolls, the date 1526, and the mark 'M° G°'. The scene, from the *Aeneid*, is based on the print by Marcantonio Raimondi after Raphael known as the *Quos ego*, or the reversed copy of it by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia; the 'paddlewheel' motif in the foreground is taken from one of the engravings after Raphael's *Galatea*

Fairfax Murray promoted a fashion for collecting wares from the middle of the fifteenth century and earlier; a particular focus was the relief blue Tuscan jars christened by Wallis 'oak-leaf jars'.¹⁵ Wernher's maiolica, unlike the Beit collection, shows no trace of this rising taste; it contains nothing that would have been out of place in a typical English or French collection fifty years earlier.

Despite the richness of material in England, Wernher was far from confining himself to the London market. His maiolica came from some of the great Continental collections – Gatterburg-Morosini (Venice),¹⁶ Spitzer, Seillières,¹⁷ and Gavet (Paris),¹⁸ Miller von Aichholz (Vienna),¹⁹ and Zschille (Dresden).²⁰ He bought piece by piece, rather than *en bloc*, and was willing to pay top prices to get what he felt fitted. The Gubbio lustred plate (Fig. 6), for example, was one of the most expensive pieces of maiolica in the sale of the huge collections of the collector-dealer Frédéric Spitzer in Paris in 1893 (*la plus grande vente du siècle*, as the sale catalogue claimed),²¹ although the highest maiolica prices of all were paid by Salting.

The prominence of lustreware in Wernher's collection – perhaps understandable in a man for whom precious metal was so important, but Gubbio lustre was also a traditional mainstay of nineteenth-century maiolica collecting – emerges clearly from the Bath House inventory made by the dealer Charles Davis after Wernher's death. In the modern market, the most desirable pieces in the collection would be the two plates with the arms of Isabella d'Este (Fig. 8). In 1913 these were given a relatively modest valuation, at £400 each; whereas the Gubbio lustre pieces (Figs. 5, 6, and 7) were valued at £1750, £1800, and £1600 respectively.²² It





8 Two plates, with the arms and imprese of Isabella d'Este, by Nicola da Urbino, Urbino, 1524. Maiolica, diam 27 cm
The scenes of Apollo and Marsyas and Meleager and Atalanta are based on woodcuts from the illustrated Italian paraphrase of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* first published in Venice in 1497. It is likely that these two plates formed part of the set commissioned as a gift to Isabella from her daughter Eleanor, Duchess of Urbino, in the autumn of 1524, as a *cosa da villa*, intended for use at her villa of Porto

is an indication of the value put on lustrated maiolica in Wernher's lifetime, and the relative decline of all maiolica in the market during the twentieth century, that these three pieces of maiolica, put together, were thought to be worth more than the Altdorfer (£4,500).²³ Ninety years after his death, the Altdorfer would surely be worth at least a hundred times the value of any one of these maiolica plates. With Sir Julius Wernher, as with most of the Rothschilds,²⁴ maiolica and other medieval and renaissance works of art were at the heart of the business of collecting, not decorative supplements to painting, and it is indeed fortunate that this part of his collection has remained intact to show his artistic judgement at its most reliable.²⁵

¹ The Faenza container (Fig. 4) was inventoried in 1913 at Luton Hoo, but the rest of the maiolica was at Bath House.

² The Wernher Collection also contains three pieces of Hispano-Moresque and four pieces of Palissy-type pottery, including a large oval *rustique* dish with snakes and sea-creatures; but they are of minor interest compared to the Italian pottery. In this, Wernher is in contrast to Alfred Beit, who owned magnificent Hispano-Moresque alongside his maiolica.

³ For maiolica collecting in England and elsewhere, see A.V.B. Norman, *Wallace Collection: Catalogue of Ceramics*, vol. 1, London, 1974, pp. 19–31; T. Wilson, 'A short history of maiolica collecting', *Italian Maiolica of the Renaissance*, Milan, 1996, pp. xii–xiii.

⁴ J.C. Robinson, *Catalogue of the Soulages Collection*, London, 1856, p. iv.

⁵ Idem (ed.), *Catalogue of the Special Exhibition of Works of Art of the Mediaeval, Renaissance, and more recent periods on loan at the South Kensington Museum*, June 1862, exh. cat., London, 1863, nos. 5151–301.

⁶ See T. Wilson in O. von Falke, *Le maioliche italiane della collezione Pringsheim/Die Majolikasammlung Alfred Pringsheim/Italian Maiolica of the Pringsheim Collection*, 2nd ed., Ferrara, 1994, vol. iii, pp. 79–95.

⁷ Documenting the growth of Wernher's collecting is impeded by the fact that the notebook recording two hundred and thirty non-painting purchases in the 1890s, seen and used by Stevenson, has not been available.

⁸ On Salting's death, his maiolica formed part of his bequest to the Victoria and Albert Museum; on Salting as a collector, see S. Coppel, 'George Salting (1835–1909)', in A. Griffiths (ed.), *Landmarks in Print Collecting*, London, 1996, pp. 189–203.

⁹ A. van de Put and B. Rackham, *Catalogue of the Collection of Pottery and Porcelain in the possession of Mr. Otto Beit*, London, 1916, is regrettably weak on provenances and does not distinguish purchases made by Alfred Beit from those made by his brother Otto after Alfred's death in 1906. I owe to Michael Stevenson the reference to a letter from Robert Langton Douglas to Bode (Berlin, SMPK, Zentralarchiv, Bode Correspondence), of 20 March 1905, in which he claims to have sold Beit 'one of the finest collections of Urbino and Pesaro ware that has ever been offered for sale'.

¹⁰ Wernher to Bode, 9 June 1900 (Berlin, SMPK, Zentralarchiv, Bode Correspondence). I am indebted to Michael Stevenson for the transcription and translation. It may be deduced that the signed plate by Xanto (Fig. 9) was probably acquired after this date. The collection now contains two large Urbino basins – a deep trilobed one with the *Judgement of Paris*; and a shallow one, the reverse moulded with pairs of swans, the front painted with grotesques and a scene of *Perseus and Andromeda*.

¹¹ See J.V.G. Mallet, *Splendours of the Gonzaga*, exh. cat., Victoria and Albert Museum, 1981–82, nos. 133, 134; M. Palvarini Gobio Casali, *La ceramica a Mantova*, Ferrara, 1987, pp. 180–88, 211–12.

¹² The form and technical characteristics of this dish suggest an attribution to Deruta. However, Professor Giulio Busti of the Museo Regionale in Deruta notes that there is no parallel to the border motif among the thousands of fragments excavated at Deruta.

¹³ For another example of an abandoned sketch on Castelli jars of this so-called 'Orsini-Colonna' type, see Wilson, op. cit. in n. 3 above, no. 194.

¹⁴ This bowl and examples in the Musée du Louvre and the Musée Jacquemart-André in Paris are among the most elaborate and ambitious early examples of this type of incised slipware; see V. Ferrari, *La ceramica grafitata ferrarese*, Ferrara, 1960, figs. 187–88; R. Magnani, *La ceramica ferrarese tra Medioevo e Rinascimento*, Ferrara, 1981–82, vol. ii, p. 69, plate LXII.

¹⁵ See essays on Wallis and Fairfax Murray by T. Wilson and P. Tucker respectively in *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. xiv (forthcoming, 2002).

¹⁶ Wernher's plates from Isabella d'Este's set were probably two of the seven pieces of the set sold at the Gatterburg-Morosini sale in Venice, 15 May 1814 and days following, lots 173–75.

¹⁷ See n. 22 below.

¹⁸ The Ferrarese slipware bowl in Fig. 2 was lot 366 at the Émile Gavet sale, Paris (Petit), 31 May–9 June 1897.

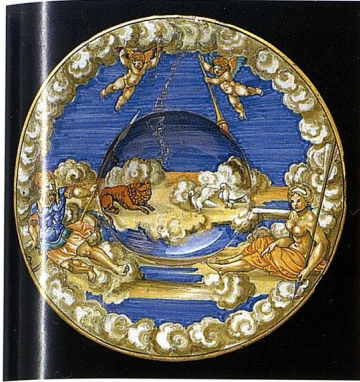
¹⁹ The relief-moulded Deruta dish in Fig. 10 was lot 117 at the Eugen Miller von Aichholz sale, Paris (Petit), 18–22 May 1900.

²⁰ The lustrated bowl in Fig. 5 was from the collections of James de Rothschild and Richard Zschille, and sold at the Zschille sale, Christie's, 1–2 June 1899, lot 89, bought by the London dealer Harding for 300 guineas. The Sieneese dish in Fig. 3 was also from the Zschille sale, lot 18, bought by Harding for 120 guineas.

²¹ The plate was lot 1200 at the Spitzer sale, Paris, 17 April–16 June 1893 (bought by Stettiner for 25,050 francs). See E. Molinier, *La collection Spitzer*, vol. iv, Paris, 1892, no. 162; G. Ballardini, *Corpus della maiolica italiana*, vol. 1, Rome, 1933, no. 145, figs. 173, 312.

²² A fourth piece of Gubbio-type lustreware, with the high 1913 value of £1,800, is reproduced by T. Wilson, *Western Decorative Arts*, vol. 1 (*Systematic Catalogue of the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC*), Washington and Cambridge, 1993, p. 213; it is dated 1538 and is probably by Xanto with a collaborator, though unsigned. It had been in the Debruge-Duménil and Soltykoff collections, and fetched 500 guineas (to 'Frankenheim?', according to the marked copy in Christie's archives) at the (anonymous) Baron S. Illiers sale at Christie's, 13 July 1888, lot 182.

²³ The highest value on a renaissance enamel in 1913, by



9 Plate with Mars and Venus by Francesco Xanto Avelli of Rovigo, Urbino, 1531. Maiolica, diam 25.4 cm

The plate is inscribed on the reverse, '1531. Stānos i pace Vene.../ bella & Marte.: Spere. frā: xā o Ave: Rovigiese pī: i Urbino. [Beautiful Venus and Mars are at peace. Hope. Francesco Xanto Avelli of Rovigo painted it in Urbino]. The poetic inscription is characteristic of Xanto, but this particular tag 'Hope' – perhaps an expression of hope for peace in Italy, giving allegorical significance to the subject – is unusual. In Xanto's characteristic manner, the figures are assembled from Raphael-workshop engravings



10 Large dish with a prophet; on the border *trompe l'oeil* ornament, Deruta or possibly Siena, c. 1500-20. Maiolica, diam 40.4 cm

The prophet recalls figures by Pinturicchio

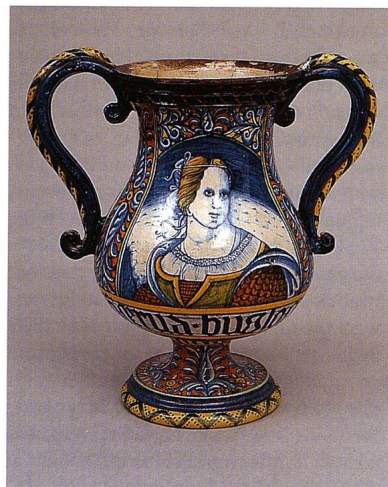
comparison, was £1,500. The highest-valued item in Bath House was the Titian portrait now in the Ashmolean (£10,000).

²⁹ Ferdinand Rothschild's New Smoking Room at Waddesdon Manor (also red-walled), the contents of which were bequeathed to the British Museum, was completed in 1896, at exactly the time Wernher was planning the Rev. Room at Bath House. However, such *Kunstkammer* rooms had parallels on the Continent and I am unaware of evidence that Waddesdon provided a specific model for Wernher. For Rothschild's New Smoking Room, see D. Thornton, 'From Waddesdon to the British Museum', *Journal of the History of Collections*, vol. xii, no. 2 (2001), p. 195.

³⁰ I am much indebted to Michael Stevenson for generously making available the results of his research into the Randlords' art collections, in his PhD thesis, which will be the basis for his book, *Art and Aspirations: The Randlords of South Africa and the Collections* (forthcoming, 2002). I would also like to thank Julius Bryant, Giulio Busti, John Mallet, Tori Reeve, Jeremy Rex-Parkes, Diana Scarisbrick and Dora Thornton for information.



11 Large dish moulded in relief; in the central emplacement for a ewer, a profile of a girl, Deruta, c. 1525-40. Lustred maiolica, diam 38.1 cm
On the reverse are blue and lustre rings



12, 13 Pharmacy jar with female figure and contents inscriptions 'conserva buglossata', workshop of Orazio Pompei, Castelli, c. 1540-60. Maiolica, ht 33 cm

The rough sketch on the back of a woman in profile is a rare example of such trial sketches (perhaps abandoned plans for the display side) on maiolica of this type; it constitutes rare evidence of underdrawing on maiolica