

Italian Pottery Pleasers From the 14th Century

By Sarah Booth Conroy

For more than a decade, the National Gallery of Art's decorative arts have been hidden from view. While painting and sculpture from the gallery's rich collections fill the building, nothing has been seen of those charming objects—furniture, silver, tableware—made to be used as well as admired.

Now the National Gallery has opened, in the East Building, a small exhibition of Maiolica (majolica) as the first promise of more decorative arts galleries to come (next February in the West Building). The show serves to relieve the eye from too much art for art's sake.

Maiolica is a type of earthenware similar to French *faience* and English and Dutch *delftware*. The ceramic is glazed with a tin compound, fired and then decorated with polychrome glazes and fired again. Metallic glazes needed a third firing. The technique has been remarkably successful in preserving the bright colors, primarily gold, greens and blues. The designs and the techniques are derived from Islam by way of Spain (hence the term Maiolica, a corruption of Majorca).

Though the pottery began to be made in the 14th century, the high period was in the mid-16th century.

Potteries were located in Florence, Faenza, Gubbio, Deruta, Castel Durante, Urbino, Venice and Padua.

The objects are rather simple dishes, plates, jars (often for pharmaceuticals) and jugs. The decorations are pictures, usually copied from easel paintings of the period.

Sometimes the designs are grotesque as in the plate (circa 1532) from Urbino showing a mythological scene of Neptune with a ram's head assaulting Theophane; the male bust with hideous parrot- and elephant-headed sea monsters on a dish (circa 1535) from Castel Durante; and the beheaded babies (circa 1520) also from Castel Durante.

Some scenes are religious, as the circa 1525 plaque from Urbino, showing the Adoration of the Magi. A few are abstract, revealing their Eastern origin, such as the Faenza jar (circa 1470), the earliest piece in the show.

None approaches the mastery of Islamic ceramics, but the objects are interesting for the reflection they give of Italian taste of the times.

The 75 pieces, from the Arthur M. Sackler, Peter A.B. Widener and Joseph Widener Collections, were chosen by guest curator Deborah Shinn from the gallery's Widener gift of 16th-century Italian Maiolica augmented by a loan from Sackler.