

A Passionate Love Affair With Renaissance Majolica

By RITA REIF

WHEN ARTHUR M. SACKLER, the New York research psychiatrist, entrepreneur and philanthropist, bought and exhibited his collection of majolica in the 1970's and 80's, he had more on his mind than brilliantly colored Renaissance ceramics.

"One of Dr. Sackler's ideas was to form a collection that would document the history of the potter's art," said Cyril Humphris, the London dealer who sold Sackler most of his majolica jugs and jars. "It was a very ambitious project, and he was on his way to accomplishing it."

Indeed, Sackler, who died in 1987 at the age of 73, had previously collected pre-Columbian, ancient Chinese and Middle Eastern ceramics. He continued buying European examples until shortly before his death.

Now the fate of the collection will be argued in a Mineola, L.I., courthouse on Nov. 25. Contrary to the expectations of many museum curators and art dealers, the executors of the Sackler estate voted this spring to send the majolica not to a museum but to auction. The collection has an important exhibition history: it was shown in 1982 at the National Gallery in Washington and in 1986-88 at the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco.

The decision to sell the majolica is being contested by Gillian T. Sackler, the collector's widow and one of five executors. (The others are Mr. Sackler's first wife, Elsa Sackler; two of his children, Carol Master and Arthur F. Sackler, and Michael Sonnenreich, a lawyer to the late collector.)

"Mrs. Sackler consistently opposed the break-up of the majolica and other collections," said Edward J. Ross, her lawyer. "It was Mr. Sackler's intention to place these collections on a 10-year loan with the National Gallery." Mr. Ross said he will present in court an affidavit from J. Carter Brown, the gallery's director emeritus, stating that he had discussions with Dr. Sackler one month before he died on these loans.

Three months ago, the 144-piece collection was delivered to Christie's in New York, to be sold next year. The two-part auction, in which it is estimated that the items will fetch a total of about \$3.5 million, is scheduled to begin on Jan. 13; the first session will offer 65 pieces, with the rest to be sold in October.

"This is the largest majolica collection and one of the most important to come on the market since the 1960's," said Jody Wilkie, a decorative-arts specialist at Christie's. In



Photographs by Christie's New York

Included in the Christie's sale are two 16th-century pieces: above, a large vase with a portrait of a Turkish sultan by Domenico da Venezia, and an allegorical plate by Francesco Xanto of Urbino that alludes to the 1527 sack of Rome.

Arthur Sackler's formidable ceramics collection may fetch \$3.5 million at auction.

documenting the pedigree of the pieces, the Christie's catalogue reveals that most of them were owned in the early 20th century by several distinguished collectors, including Lord Astor of Hever, the Earl of Rosebery of Mentmore, Sir Stephen L. Courtauld of London and Dr. Alfred Pringsheim of Munich.

Majolica, a term originally applied to the Spanish tin-glazed earthenware exported from Majorca to Italy in the late Middle Ages, has come to describe all such vividly painted vessels, especially those produced in Italy between the 15th and 18th centuries.

The earliest Sackler pieces are iridescent Spanish jars and dishes emblazoned with lustrous armorial motifs and oak leaves in the Hispano-Moresque style. The Renaissance works include gem-colored plates decorated with ravishing interpretations of legends and landscapes, and robust pharmacy jars and jugs bearing bold labeling. Covered cups and vases from the 18th century are fussily embellished with pastel renderings of ancient Greek and Roman deities.

The most impressive pictorial plate is shaped like a cardinal's hat with a wide brim and shallow crown. Painted about 1530 by Francesco Xanto, the allegorical scene alludes to the 1527 sacking of Rome by the Army of Charles V of Spain. The reigning Pope, Clement VII, is pictured as a worried-looking cherub holding a ball above his head, a symbol of the Medici family, of which Clement was a member. Estimated to sell for up to \$125,000, the highest presale estimate in the auction, the plate is a rarity, Mrs. Wilkie said, because it was painted by a master and depicts not mythology but current events.

Also memorable are several apothecary jars. The earliest, from 1470, is cylindrical and patterned with swirling Gothic leaves in blues, ochre and purple; it is expected to fetch about \$12,000. Another example, dated 1501, is larger and vigorously decorated with a female grotesque and a Moor encircled by wreaths and ribbons; it could bring up to \$50,000. Even more arresting is a spouted jug, the size of a soccer ball, depicting the bust of a Turkish sultan framed by a golden aura. One of a pair that was sold at auction in 1943 for \$240, the piece is expected to bring \$25,000; its mate will be auctioned in October.

As most majolica enthusiasts know, the historical and mythological scenes on plates are usually copied from paintings or prints. "But the question we puzzled over when describing a plate depicting the Rape of Helen," Mrs. Wilkie said, "was which print was the source." Two engravings and one drawing of this subject may have inspired different aspects of Nicola da Urbino's painting on one of Sackler's largest platters. The top presale estimate — \$60,000 — is low for

such a large work by a known artist. But the plate had been broken in a hundred pieces, Mrs. Wilkie explained, and was substantially repaired.

Although the finest examples of Renaissance majolica are relatively scarce today, collecting continues. Spurred by museum shows and the art boom of the 1980's, prices for exceptional pieces escalated sharply. Auction records were toppled twice in recent years, both times at London sales of dishes produced in Urbino. In 1988, a plate, possibly by Nicola da Urbino and decorated with a mythological scene depicting the rape of Proserpine, sold at Sotheby's for \$175,774. Last year, a 1544 plate showing Coriolanus being exiled from Rome was bought for \$316,030 at Christie's.

Such prices reflect the passionate interest majolica inspires. "Dr. Sackler was a great enthusiast and came to genuinely love the material," Mr. Humphris said. "One of the joys of collecting majolica is that its colors are as they were the day they were painted — something he definitely appreciated." □

