



Fired with enthusiasm: The market for these Italian ceramics could experience something of a renaissance.

FASHIONS come and go. Just now, for instance, it seems to be the rage to criticise Princess Di, to buy pounds and to snigger at spies. It won't last, and this fashion-mania is no different in the art world.

If you find that hard to believe in the wake of the news that yet another mega-million Van Gogh is coming on to the market, you need look no further than the next paragraphs.

In the nineteenth century a good maiolica plate was four or five times the cost of a decent—and I mean decent—picture. Nowadays many people would be pushed to know what maiolica is.

Now is the time to learn, for an exhibition of the stuff opens at the British Museum in London on Thursday, and if the show succeeds like some other BM exhibitions (such as that on Japanese prints a few years ago), it could stimulate a revival of interest and nudge prices up a notch. More than a notch.

London boasts the best maiolica in the world, bar none, so it really is worth knowing about. It is an Italian ceramic tin-glazed earthenware, dating from about 1450-1600. There are two theories to account for its name. One is that the word is a corruption of Majorca, from where most Hispano-Moresque pottery was imported into Italy in the fifteenth century.

But, according to Timothy Wilson, assistant keeper in the department of medieval and later antiquities at the BM and organiser of next week's

The merry month of maiolica

ALTERNATIVE INVESTMENTS

show, it is more likely a corruption of Malica, a medieval word for the town British crooks know well: Malaga.

Either way the origins of maiolica are Spanish, but the plates and plaques and jars, as we know them today, are almost all Italian. For maiolica is the perfect Renaissance product: a splash of civilised colour after the drab ages.

It is also wonderfully sensual. The colours are intense—see last week's 'Observer Magazine'. For technical reasons blues and green predominate over yellow and red; the lustre that can be added by an extra firing with a metallic oxide gives these works a wet look that makes you long to touch them, to pick them up and rub the back of your hand over them. And, since a good deal of it was never intended to be used, these plates and plaques are often in excellent condition.

Also, since the technique of maiolica manufacture developed almost simultaneously with the development of printing, it has a scholarly depth to it that you don't always get in the decorative arts. Which means it repays study: even if the vivid colours don't immediately appeal to you, keep

looking; their allure *does* grow.

Printing was important because with it came the wider availability of prints: and before the age of the photograph these were the means by which most ordinary folk were given some idea of the great art in other, far-off cities.

Thus many maiolica plaques or plates are copies, or adaptations of familiar scenes—such as Michelangelo's designs for the Sistine Chapel, Dürer's great woodcuts, Perugino's religious masterpieces, or Pisanello's medals.

The plaques hold a particular fascination for me. They obviously have no other use than adornment and most, though not all, are religious. But they emphasise why maiolica could have a much wider appeal, why the mad fashion for it, which ran through much of the nineteenth century, could easily return.

There are figures everywhere in this branch of ceramics. They are crude in comparison to the finest painting yet that very crudity, in our post-abstract age, gives their charm a new life. The soldiers, the virgins, the satyrs and the wise men are all a little less forbidding than in 'heavy art,' and that may appeal to the modern taste too.

Not that maiolica is

cheap. Six figures for the best pieces are by no means unknown. And the best is rare—much rarer than in some other fields, so you need to be alert for when it becomes available.

But artists like Francesco Xanto Avelli can be found, since he was so prolific. He derived many of his designs from Raphael, so if you can't afford the real thing, or prefer to spend your cash buying shares in newly privatised firms, then a

Xanto might do instead.

Another tip for beginners is to concentrate on plaques and plates dating from 1500 or earlier. This material is available, much cheaper than later wares, and the academic side is much less well documented, leaving more to be found out. That is the really satisfying bit.

The BM exhibition is worth a visit, partly because it is so good of its kind, partly because it is an opportunity to see the full

range of its maiolica collection, which is not normally on show, and partly because, with the summer coming up, it is the kind of antique you can look out for, *and afford*, in Italy, if that's where you are heading.

You don't want to spend too much time away from the beach, but a little 'coup' in the antique markets wouldn't go amiss.

The greatest centre of maiolica manufacture was Urbino, home of some great dukes, and Raphael himself. It was once a fashionable spot. If maiolica catches on, it could easily be so again. Fashions do, after all, come and go.

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