The Lehman Collection of Italian Maiolica

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The discovery that the spirit of an age survives not only in the works of architects, painters, and sculptors but in all the small objects that graced man’s everyday life is a subtle joy for the art collector. This joy is shared by the Museum visitor when, in the collection generously lent by Robert Lehman, he sees the splendid examples of renaissance furniture, bronzes, jewels, and Italian maiolica that provide a living background for the renaissance paintings assembled on the walls.

The Italian maiolica displayed here is part of an outstanding collection of painted wares of unique beauty and importance. The technique of this tin-glazed pottery was learned by the Italians as early as the fourteenth century from the wares imported from Near Eastern countries and from Islamic Spain, and they found it congenial to their native talent for pictorial expression. With the Renaissance all the possibilities of the new technique were exploited, and the productions of the maiolica centers at Faenza, Deruta, Caffaggiolo, Castel Durante, Gubbio, and Urbino truly represent the climax of this art.

Mr. Lehman’s collection consists mainly of the finest of early sixteenth-century pictorial pottery, thus admirably supplementing the Museum’s own collection, which is rich in all kinds of Italian maiolica except for this particular one. A few fifteenth-century pieces make a welcome introduction. They are a jar decorated with a typical pattern of blue oak leaves and two superb armorial jugs, all three made by potters from Florence or Faenza between 1450 and 1470. One of the jugs displays the lily of Florence, the other the arms of the Rucellai family. The heavy wreath of swirling dark blue and purple foliage of the first and the yellow and blue parsley ground of the second could hardly be nobler examples of the severe style—a blend of Gothic, oriental, and renaissance elements—characteristic of the blue wares turned out in Italy in the second half of the fifteenth century. But the powerful turn of their shapes, the stylized yet poised children that hold the wreaths, bear the unmistakable mark of the early Florentine Renaissance.

About 1500 a subtle change in feeling took place. The Renaissance had reached all the pottery shops, even in the most remote provincial centers. The same revolution in taste that had filled all the palaces and churches of Italy with stories told in frescoes and panel paintings brought about a substantial change in the decoration of the wares. Pictorial subjects now covered the surface of a plate like that of a wooden panel.
or a wall. The stylized patterns of fifteenth-century pottery, still so largely Gothic in spirit, gave way to a decoration rich in images and colors and providing the illusion of perspective. With the painted image, whether freely invented or adapted from an engraving or the woodcuts of a book, the individuality of the painter emerged and conferred unique and distinctive value to the fragile services that filled the sideboards of new and appreciative patrons.

In the wares made in the first years of the sixteenth century in the little Umbrian town of Deruta, early Florentine prints were frequently adapted for the new figure subjects. Often the prints themselves are not known to have survived, but their vigorous design is preserved in these dishes. One of them is a large, deep-centered dish of a type we commonly associate with Deruta, possibly slightly earlier than 1500, with a representation of Hercules and Antaeus. The figures, forcefully drawn in blue and surrounded by details in yellow, orange, and green, are evidently derived from Pollaiuolo’s famous composition, as it was known to the craftsman, not from the painting but from an engraving made from it. A similar source must be assumed for another Deruta dish, with Hercules fighting the giants, a design clearly inspired by one of the many prints that copied Pollaiuolo’s well-known engraving of the Battle of the Naked Men. The surface of the dish is enriched with pale yellow and reddish luster.

The bold and somewhat violent style of these designs is contrasted with the quiet and subtly balanced treatment of a slightly later Deruta dish, on which a group of nymphs bathing in a fountain is painted in blue with shadings of the same color and yellow luster pigment. The frightened movements of the nymphs suggest some unseen cause of excitement. This is, indeed, most amusingly discovered on a Deruta plate, now in the Cluny Museum in Paris, with the same composition but with the addition, to the left, of the figure of Acteon, who has been turned into a stag at the command of Diana. Obviously the same graphic source, woodcut or engraving, was used for both dishes, but in the Lehman example with a peculiar indifference to subject matter. This remarkable feeling for purely aesthetic values is characteristic of the anonymous artist, whose delicate yet firm hand can be recognized in the design of several other Deruta dishes as well as the tiles of a pavement dated 1524 formerly in the church of Saint Francis in Perugia.

Among the most distinguished pieces in the Lehman collection is a group of plates that can
Bowl with the coat of arms of Pope Julius II della Rovere surrounded by putti and satyrs. Above is Saint Veronica’s veil, and below are the arms of the Manzoli of Bologna. Made by Giovanni Maria. Castel Durante, 1508

be identified as the work of the finest masters of pictorial maiolica: Giovanni Maria and Nicola Pellipario, both of Castel Durante. Giovanni Maria, a painter who seems to have created entirely original designs, is here represented by a truly impressive piece, the famous Della Rovere bowl with the arms of Pope Julius II della Rovere and those of the Manzoli family of Bologna. Bernard Rackham has suggested that the donor of the piece may have been Melchiorre di Giorgio Manzoli, who was appointed senator by Julius II in 1508 and was twice the Pope’s special envoy. On the back is an inscription stating that it was made at Castel Durante on September 12, 1508, by a “Zoan maria vro.” Some thirty years ago, when the piece was still in the William Randolph Hearst collection, this inscription was Rackham’s clue in his reconstruction of Giovanni Maria’s style.

Apart from its documentary interest the Della Rovere bowl deserves particular attention for its unusual decorative quality. The papal arms are
in the center, set against a deep orange carpet between two putti who support the swag from which it hangs. Under the bronze-like fruit baskets are two other putti, crowned with oak and laurel and sitting on dolphins, and between them the Manzoli arms. Above is Veronica’s veil with the face of Christ. All the contours and details are drawn in dark blue and painted in a light cream color, delicately shaded in gray-green, with touches of thick orange, light yellow, and very light, transparent olive green, while the background is filled in with a peculiar, very dark blue-black. The beautiful and logical simplicity with which this decoration is conceived, almost like a work of architecture, reveals Giovanni Maria as an artist of imagination and draftsmanship far superior to those of his fellow craftsmen. In his earlier years he must have seen “the most beautiful palace of Italy” being built at Urbino and transforming the little town of the Montefelttri into one of the most miraculous expressions of the Renaissance. The simple and noble purity of art that Piero della Francesca and Melozzo da Forli, Laurana and Francesco di Giorgio, and a crowd of Tuscan decorators had then brought to Urbino echoed like a message from valley to valley in the still dormant Marches. At Castel Durante near by, Giovanni Maria in his own way tried to express this ideal of beauty in the new designs of his pottery.

Comparison with the Della Rovere bowl, as well as with other known works by Giovanni Maria, for the most part in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, allows us to attribute to this artist at least two other pieces in the Lehman collection. Zestful drawing and playful imagination give them a very peculiar charm. One is a small, flat roundel with a satirical Triumph of Love, perhaps inspired by the burlesque feasts and carnivals that were the common entertainments of those days. Two captives of blind Cupid, a warrior in full armor and a fair lady, their hands tied behind their backs, stand on a chariot escorted by winged putti and followed by a dwarf jester and a satyr stumbling among the weeds. In the foreground a few small earthy creatures, a serpent, a snail, a turtle, a duckling, reveal a naturalistic vein most unusual in Italian maiolica.

The other piece that can be attributed to Giovanni Maria is a deep-welled dish with a formal blue border of rosettes and cornucopias and a white band, surrounding a small Cupid about to shoot an arrow, who is drawn on a toy cart by two winged brothers. In both dishes the colors are the same as those used in the Della Rovere bowl except for a somewhat brighter green and a plain, brilliant white, very effectively used.

Contemporary with the Della Rovere bowl is a plate whose decoration is an interesting example of the influence of the ornamental designs of North Italian engravers upon ceramic painters, who, not unlike the wood or stone carvers of their time, made large use of them. The surface of the plate is entirely covered with a design consisting of an ornate structure in the form of a candelabrum surrounded by fantastic creatures, trophies, and putti playing musical instruments. On the weedy ground on which the candelabrum seems to stand a piping satyr faces a woman with a baby in her lap. The figures, drawn with considerable skill and minuteness of detail, are painted in a creamy pigment, carefully modeled with touches of yellow, ocher, and green against a deep, bright blue background.

This design is a curious combination of Dürer’s print of 1505 of a satyr and a nymph and one of the well-known engravings of ornament panels.

Roundel with a farcical Triumph of Love, by Giovanni Maria. Castel Durante, about 1500 or 1510
signed by the Mantuan Zoan Andrea. Since the other ornamental details that fill out the surface of the plate are in the style of Zoan Andrea, there is good reason to consider him the author of the whole design. Like other North Italian engravers he often copied prints by Dürer. As to the actual painting of the plate, it is difficult to tell whether it was done by Giovanni Maria or by some other painter of Castel Durante whose initials may possibly be the letters IR inscribed on a tablet near the satyr.

Quite different from these works are the wares painted by Nicola Pellipario, the exquisite ceramic artist who has been recognized as the master of pictorial maiolica. No less than five pieces by his hand have found their way into the Lehman collection: two dishes with purely decorative designs, painted about 1515 to 1525, and three plates with mythological subjects from the famous service made in 1519 or 1520 for the Marchioness of Mantua, Isabella d'Este Gonzaga. The plates from the Este-Gonzaga service, of
which some twenty pieces are still in existence, most of them in European collections, are charming examples of Nicola’s style in its happiest expression. They represent the Contest of Apollo and Pan, the Fall of Phaeton, and the Triumph of Silenus and bear the quartered coat of arms of Este Gonzaga and various devices of Isabella, such as the burning torch (a symbol of her recent widowhood), a bunch of lottery tickets, a few bars of music, or her motto, nec spe nec metu (neither by hope nor by fear). These complicated symbols can still be seen in Isabella’s apartments in the Ducal Palace at Mantua.

As usual in Nicola’s work the designs are inspired by printed sources. The first two stories are borrowed from two woodcuts in the Italian edition of Ovid’s Metamorphoses published in Venice by Lucantonio Giunta in 1407. The Triumph of Silenus is found to be adapted from one of the most attractive engravings by Agostino Veneziano, probably made about 1516. Although Nicola thus frankly took his designs from others, the manner in which he adapted them to maiolica surfaces shows the range of his gifts as a draftsman and painter. His noble figures are gracefully drawn and freely rearranged.
Dish with the Triumph of Silenus, from a service belonging to Isabella d’Este Gonzaga. Made by Nicola Pel- lipario (about 1480–1542), after the engraving illustrated on the opposite page. Castel Durante, 1519 or 1520

Usually, as in the Contest of Apollo and Pan, they are in a broad, open landscape of faintly idyllic mood, where rolling hills and meadows and far-away misty mountains disappear in the distance under an intensely blue sky aglow with the last rays of the sunset. The general blue undertone used for the painting is washed with light greens and yellows of marvelous transparency, which give to the whole a delicate, smooth brilliancy.

The supple vitality of line and the lightness of the colors, so softly and delicately fused, that distinguish Nicola’s pictorial compositions are also evident on the dishes with purely decorative designs. One of these is decorated with the profile of a helmeted woman and a scroll inscribed CARENDINA. The other has a grotesque figure surrounded by two griffins, trophies, and cornucopias painted in creamy white with soft brown shadings and delicate white lights on a
brilliant blue ground. There is a serenity and balance in the early work of Nicola that makes us realize that he was a fellow countryman and contemporary of Raphael.

By 1520 the practice of copying or adapting prints, especially those of North Italian engravers or Marcantonio Raimondi, had become usual not only with the painters of Castel Durante and Faenza but also in the pottery shop that worked for the Medici family at Caffaggiolo, near Florence. An example of the rare maiolica produced in this shop is a deep dish with a border of trophies, grotesques, and putti surrounding the scene of Aeneas received by Dido at Carthage. The subject is copied from an engraving by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia (1516) after Marcantonio’s famous border illustrations of the Aeneid, but the airy sky where light clouds travel, the blue buildings, the bright draperies, yellow, ocher, green, or light purple, compose a delightful picture that is far more brilliant and decorative than the original print.

About the same time there came into fashion the use of red and gold luster pigments, which were added to the already decorated plates, thus giving further splendor to the painted wares. Most of the early lustered pieces came from the pottery shop that Giorgio Andreoli had established about 1518 in Gubbio. Whether these wares were designed by Maestro Giorgio himself or, as was more often the case, had been previously painted at Castel Durante or Urbino, such was the importance of his shop that a special decree exempted him from all taxes “in view of the reputation and extraordinary profit that the export of his vessels brought to the Town, the Lord and the Commons” of Gubbio. More than fifty pieces in the Lehman collection appear to have come from this busy kiln. Ten of them are signed and dated by Maestro Giorgio, nine merely record the year they were made.

Among the finest of the pieces both painted
LEFT: Dish decorated with the Contest of Apollo and Pan, from the Este-Gonzaga service. Made by Nicola Pellipario, 1519 or 1520. RIGHT: Dish showing Aeneas and his companions at the tomb of Polydorus, with the coat of arms of the Pucci family. By Francesco Xanto (active 1530–1542). Urbino, 1532
and lustered by Maestro Giorgio is an early group of works in which purely decorative designs as well as pictorial subjects seem to have been inspired by the style of pottery painting at Castel Durante and at Faenza. A sure sense of decorative effect is displayed on three deep-welled dishes of 1519, with trophies, books, and inscriptions surrounding the head of a warrior or a lady in the center, richly lustered with glittering gold and ruby pigments. Two beautiful plates, signed and dated 1525, are examples of the rare pictorial work of Maestro Giorgio. With their cool green and blue tones they come close
to examples made at Faenza. Their subjects, Hercules fighting the Centaur Nessus and the story of the Prodigal Son, are accurate copies of two prints by Giovanni Antonio da Brescia, one probably reproducing an antique sculptured group, the other a copy in reverse of a well-known composition by Dürrer.

Most of the dishes lustered at Gubbio in the following years were first painted in the increasingly active potteries of Castel Durante, Faenza, and Urbino. Of unusual interest is a dish with a pastoral scene, possibly from Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, set in a charming landscape, painted by Guido Durantino, the son of Nicola Pellipario. His delicate but somewhat naïve style is recognizable also on a dish with Saint Margaret and the dragon, lustered by Maestro Giorgio in 1527.

The pictorial wares made at Urbino, where Nicola Pellipario moved about 1525, are richly represented in Mr. Lehman’s collection. Among the finest specimens are five lustered dishes, signed and dated by Francesco Xanto Avelli da Rovigo, the learned and prolific pupil of Nicola, whose easy flowing manner has come to characterize for us so much of the blue and yellow maiolica of Urbino. A dish from a service with the arms of the Pucci family of Florence showing Aeneas and his companions at the tomb of Polydorus (1532), another representing the Echinades turned into islands (1532), and a third with Alpheus pursuing Arethusa (1534) are among the best examples of this painter’s well-rounded, mature style of draftsmanship and his exuberant use of warm colors, often washed one into another—deep oranges and yellows against strong greens and blues—and sometimes enhanced by touches of bright red.

Contemporary with the Xanto dishes but painted by anonymous artists are two plates, one representing the three angels appearing to Abraham and the other Leda and the swan, both painted in cooler tones—green, gray, and black; a dish with the arms of the Strozzi family, showing Vulcan forging an arrow for Cupid; and a pair of candlesticks with the Montmorency arms. Finally, a large Urbino plate, made about
1540 or 1550 in the shop of Maestro Guido Fontana in Urbino, represents a scene from the siege of Rome in front of Castel Sant’ Angelo in the fateful year of 1527, an event that impressed the imagination not only of contemporaries but also of following generations.

In the potteries at Faenza the influence of Urbino’s pictorial style of decoration was felt until the middle of the century. But the painters here insisted on a range of cooler colors, especially the traditional blue, and created a number of free and witty motives of decoration, such as heads of bearded old men, heads of women, or large Gothic lettering to indicate the content of the wares. Fine examples of this kind, several bottles and drug vases made at Faenza, are to be found in the Lehman collection. A small but interesting accouchement bowl of about 1540 is easily identified as the work of Baldassarre Manara, an artist strongly impressed by the Urbino style. The inside of the bowl and its flat cover are embellished with mythological stories minutely painted: Aeneas and Anchises, Pyramus and Thisbe, Hercules and the Nemean lion. On the borders are several inscriptions, including one around the rim of the bowl addressed to the lady for whom it was made: “God with his hands created you so fair that now to mortal eyes more precious you appear than any oriental stone.” Such a poetic compliment readily evokes for us the courteous civilization of which maiolica is still so enjoyable an expression.

Bowl and cover painted by Baldassarre Manara with scenes from mythological stories. On the outside of the cover shown above is the tragic end of Pyramus and Thisbe. Faenza, about 1540