LUSTERWARE OF SPAIN

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The Museum’s collection of ceramics has been greatly enriched recently by the purchase of nearly a hundred examples of Spanish lusterware of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The majority of the pieces are Valencian and were made in the fifteenth century, giving a very thorough picture of the stylistic development of majolica in Spain in its early phases, which had such wide-spread effects throughout Europe. The collection was purchased for The Cloisters from the William Randolph Hearst Foundation with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

Spanish lusterware derives from the glazed pottery of the Islamic East, where the luster technique had been evolved as early as the eighth century. By the tenth century there is evidence that the Moors in Spain had begun to copy Eastern pottery, and by the middle of the thirteenth century Malaga in Andalucia had become famous both in Spain and abroad as a center of gold-lustered ware. “Obra de Malicha,” as it was called, was already exported in the fourteenth century, as shown by an import record of Sandwich, England, for 1303. When the center of the industry shifted to Valencia at the beginning of the fifteenth century, the old term “obra de Malicha” was still used to designate the gold-lustered pottery made at Manises, Paterna, and neighboring towns outside the city of Valencia.

Of Valencian pottery before 1420 there is no example in the present collection, though the lack is supplied by a fine bowl in the Hispanic Society of America (E643) with Moslem designs imitating the work of Malaga and by a superb deep dish (brasero) with a horseman and dragon in the Metropolitan Museum. The earliest pieces from the Hearst collection date from the third and fourth decades of the fifteenth century, when Moorish designs of trees of life, palmettes, and Kufic inscriptions were the vogue. One of the earliest dishes, painted in pale copper luster, bears a pattern of stylized palmettes, the shield of the royal house of Sicily, and on the reverse a boldly drawn bull. Another similar example in Madrid displays the arms of Philip the Good of Burgundy and, together with the Cloisters dish, shows that before 1430 Valencian ware was of such importance that it was commissioned by the ruling houses of distant countries. A large group of pieces dating from the twenties and thirties of the century are decorated with Moorish designs in blue and luster. The luster reflects a variety of metallic tones from bright gold yellow to hues of purple and red, giving great richness to the vessels and a continual variety in the play of light. One of the richest examples is a large serving platter or display dish painted with a six-pointed star and a series of trees of life on the obverse, and with the figure of a bull on the reverse. A deep dish of this type numbers among the large group of pieces extant bearing the arms of Despuig of Catalonia in the center. The greatest rarity in the collection is the immense seven-and-a-half-quart pitcher, made about 1440. It is decorated in blue and brownish hues.

Dish with dragon and inscription, about 1440. This lusterware is now on exhibition at The Cloisters.
luster with bands of zigzags, fleurs-de-lis, mock-Arabic, and geometric patterns. The simulated Arabic inscription on the body shows pure delight in the design for its decorative value, as it is written upside down.

There is no simple date order for the appearance of the various styles of decoration in the Manises workshops, as many types were current at any given date. Before the basically Moslem designs were out of fashion in the thirties and forties of the fifteenth century, other patterns, such as vine leaves, bryony, marguerites, and mixtures of these with acacia sprigs, had appeared on the scene. A notable example of this style overlap is the platter in the present collection painted with a design of blue and luster vine leaves, which bears the arms of Queen Blanche of Navarre in the center impaled with those of her husband, Juan of Aragon, and is possibly as early as 1427. This vine-leaf decoration persisted into the latter part of the century, as shown by the great vase of this pattern made for Lorenzo de’ Medici after 1465, in the Godman collection.

Other patterns had come into fashion, to last but a few years. Among these are the dishes divided into segments decorated with rows of spur-like ornament, of which there are two examples in this collection. Another rich, but short-lived pattern has a background of acacia leaves and blue flowers on which are imposed a series of crowns. Many dishes of this type bear royal escutcheons, but the present example, a fine deep dish, bears the monogram IM at the bottom, which could as well be the initials of a couple as the letters of the sacred monogram Jesus Maria. A third series of dishes is painted with stylized marguerites in golden luster, across which spring dragons and other animals in dark cobalt blue. Two of these, dating from the 1440’s, are inscribed in blue around their rims with Gabriel’s salutation to the Virgin, AVE MA/RIA GRATIA/PLENA.

By the middle of the fifteenth century Spanish pottery had found its way to the tables of most of the countries of Europe. Examples are to be seen in paintings by Hans Multscher, Stephan Lochner, Ghirlandaio, Hugo van der Goes and a multitude of others. A fine pair of manuscript pages painted in Bruges by the Master of Mary of Burgundy shows a series of majolica dishes in niches, and among them are a star-decorated plate of the 1420’s and a vine-decorated albarelo. Existing examples of Spanish lusterware bear the arms of many noble patrons: the kings of France and Sicily, the dukes of Gelders and Burgundy, and the wealthy patrician families of Italy. Among the Italian customers for Spanish lusterware, the pattern of interlaced bryony stems and flowers was outstandingly popular. Examples in the present collection bear the arms
A variety of forms of lusterware in the Cloisters collection from the middle of the XV century. From left to right, an albarelo decorated with bryony, a vine-leaf dish with the arms of the Gentili of Florence, a bowl, a small bowl (scudella), a footed bowl, a dish with an unidentifiable Italian coat of arms, a deep dish with the arms of the delle Agli of Florence, and an albarelo with vine-leaf decoration. The deep dish is 19 inches in diameter and the small bowl 7 inches.
of the famous Florentine families of delle Agli, Tedali, Ridolfi, Gentili, and what is perhaps intended for Medici; Angarani of Vicenza; and Sanchez of Naples and Sicily. The Morelli of Florence are well represented by numerous surviving dishes painted with patterns of vine leaves in concentric circles of golden luster, two of which are in the present collection. One is a typical large serving dish, while the other is a delicate plate.

Two symbols of ownership are of special interest. One is the arms of the Buyl family painted on a dish divided into compartments by raised ribs, dating from the second half of the fifteenth century. The Buys were the lords of Manises, where the major portion of Valencian pottery was produced, and their history is interwoven with that of the industry. Each year the family received a tenth of the production of the Manises kilns, which they undertook to sell themselves or through agents. The correspondence has been preserved concerning one large order for pottery placed by Queen Maria of Castile with Pedro Buyl in 1454. Though the order fails to give the number of pieces or the prices, it is interesting as it assumes that Pedro Buyl knew how much Valencian ware, called “obra de Melica” in the contract, the queen would need, and it is one of the few documents that names the uses of the vessels. The dinner ware was all to be of a single pattern and to include plates for washing the hands; large platters for serving and for the meat; plates for eating; bowls (escudillas); bowls for drinking broth; jars for water, completely gilded; vases for flowers, with two gilded handles; a half-dozen mortars; small bowls and other items; and bowls for dry soups. The order was placed with Pedro Buyl at Manises, “the fountainhead of this industry,” in November and delivered the following March.

The other interesting mark of ownership is the device used by the Kings of Aragon in Sicily. On a plate painted with a pattern of dots and stalks, sometimes called musical notes and usually dated in the latter part of the fifteenth century, there appears in the center the siti perillos, a flaming brazier, which probably stands for Ferrante I of Naples, who employed the device from 1458 to 1496. The device also appears on numerous lustered tiles that Alfonso V of Aragon (d. 1458) ordered from Valencia for his palace in Naples.

The Gothic vine-and-leaf patterns of Spanish luster maintained a continual popularity and were widely imitated outside of Spain, especially by the Italians at Florence and Deruta and by the Flemings. Dishes with large-scale representational decoration are extremely rare among Spanish works, but there is in the present collection a dish with a figure subject painted com-
Most with dating derived was killing a monstrous dragon in a setting of large leaves, under one of which a small deer watches. There was a second dish, probably from the same series, in the Mante collection, Marseilles, which showed a horseman with a sword beset by an immense lion.

Most of the forms of the Spanish vessels were derived from Islamic prototypes. The albarello, or drug jar, is a derivative of covered Arab jars dating as early as the twelfth century, but those in Spain, and later those of Italy, were made without lids. They were closed by tying a piece of parchment over the top, as contemporary illustrations show. Some of the shallow, footed bowls are also replicas of Eastern forms, but many of the Spanish pottery types from the earliest times imitated shapes in metal rather than pottery. These include the deep dishes, or braseros, with straight sides, which were extremely popular throughout the fifteenth century and even into the sixteenth. After 1450 the potters tried more and more with their glazed dishes to rival the growing competition of metalwork that was hurting their market. They began to mold bands and compartments on the dishes in imitation of metalwork, and at the end of the century the practice of impressing the borders of dishes with a series of molded gadroons became the most prevalent fashion. In some instances large animals and birds spreading across the surfaces of the plates were impressed on the unfired clay and then lustered. Examples of the compartmented dishes include those of the Buyl family and that with the siti perillos. Some of these are further enriched with a series of raised nobs on their surfaces in patterns. This type of ornament made the use of the dish virtually impossible and bears out the evidence of contemporary illustrations that the larger dishes were mostly for display on large racks near the dinner table. A varied series of dishes shows the possibilities of gadrooning, and among them are examples made for the royal house of Sicily, the counts of Villahermosa, and the Breton family. One bears the inscription SURGE DOMINI several times repeated, standing for the prayer Exsurge Domini ad liberandum nos. Of those with impressed animals two show large heraldic eagles, one a bull, and a fourth a lion. All of these latter are painted with the musical note or dot-and-stalk pattern in monochrome luster.

One of the outstanding later pieces in the collection is a covered bowl fifteen inches in diameter and sixteen inches high. This was made in Aragon rather than Valencia, and is painted with stylized plants within rectangles and a pattern of leaves. Interspersed in the luster decoration are four crosses in black, a color rarely met with in lusterware, and in the bottom the in-
Two views of a deep dish (brasero) made at Manises, just outside of Valencia, between 1420 and 1430. The coat of arms probably stands for a member of the Despuig family of Catalonia. Width, 19 inches; depth, 4 inches.
Large pitcher painted in blue and brown luster, made in Valencia about 1430. Height, 18¾ inches.
scription IHS. Because of the crosses and motto this type of bowl has been called a baptismal font, but there seems to be no conclusive evidence for this usage. The crosses probably indicate that the bowls were made for a Christian family, as do the inscriptions IHS and AVE MARIA, and not even necessarily for a religious institution. There are three bryony plates and a bowl in the present group with IHS inscribed in the center in place of a coat-of-arms.

Though the lusterware of Spain finally succumbed to competition from Italy and the North, and to the increased use of tableware of precious metals for serving platters and display purposes, its importance remained fairly constant throughout the fifteenth century. The major reason for its retention of popularity, even in Italy, where very fine competitive majolica was made, was the shimmering quality of the luster glazes with their continual variations. The secrets of the glazing are still not fully understood, though the formulas for the metallic oxides of the glazes are known from documents. The mystery is the actual method of firing. We know that the vessels were first dipped in vats of white tin glaze and then fired. On this basic glaze the designs were painted in color with brushes and drawn with quills, the color range being limited to cobalt blue and the luster colors from gold through the browns to purplish red. The iridescence of the luster was probably a result of timing and smoking in the second kiln firing. The kiln was a double chamber, the lower section for fuel and the upper for stacking the pottery to be fired. The heat and smoke rose through the upper chamber and escaped through small holes at the top, and, depending on the fuel, must have exposed the vessels to a great deal of smoke. The surfaces may afterwards have received special treatment or merely have been polished bright. From the early fifteenth century well into the sixteenth many vessels show a high degree of success in obtaining a fine iridescent glaze. The quality dropped off after the mid-sixteenth century and the secrets of the firing were largely lost after the deportation of the Moors in 1609. Though documents show that Moors and Spaniards worked together in the production of Valencian pottery, the Moors always seem to have been dominant. This is also evident from the persistence of Islamic elements in the designs and from the lack of comprehension of certain common inscriptions, though there is little evidence in the way of signatures to guide one to any definite conclusions.

Spanish lusterware, often called Hispano-
Moresque, not only fused the Arab East with Gothic Spain in its designs but also linked Spain with northern Europe and the East through trade. The pottery found a ready market from Germany to Sicily and was exported in quantity to Egypt because the usual Eastern sources of lusterware had been disrupted by wars. German barons, renaissance princes, and Egyptian potentates dined off similar Valencian dishes. The Venetians and Burgundians favored it so much that they allowed Valencian pottery special import privileges. It is amusing to think that Alfonso V of Aragon, who died planning a crusade against the infidels, walked daily in his palace on lustered tiles made by Moorish hands, and that lifelong enemies like René d’Anjou and Alfonso V ate off similar dishes from the kilns of Valencia while plotting campaigns against one another. All of these circumstances can be explained only by the facts that in both northern and southern Europe Spanish lusterware was readily available in large quantities and that all and sundry were pleased by its lustered designs and high standards of quality.

*Serving dish and plate with luster vine-leaf decoration and the coat of arms of the Morelli family of Florence. Made in Valencia about 1465. The diameters measure 17 ¾ inches and 11 inches.*