Snakes, Snails, and Creatures with Tails

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Every French schoolchild knows the story of the indomitable potter whose poverty and determination impelled him to stoke his kiln with tables and floorboards from his house. Although dedicated to clay, art’s humblest medium, Bernard Palissy emerges (largely through his own writings) as a vivid Renaissance personality. The bizarre rustic ware is virtually synonymous with his name; it teems with the slippery and sinuous animal life of grottoes. Made by the architec
t ete en oeuvre de terre to the Constable of France and the queen mother Catherine de’ Medici, it became a fashion in the homes of the wealthy and a domestic expression of that peculiar fascination which grottoes held for the mind of Renaissance man. While still coveted for its rarity, rustic ware remains only one manifestation of Palissy’s work as an artist-potter.

The Museum has acquired an exceptionally large collection of Palissy ware through the Berwind gift. Thirty-five additions expand our holdings into one of the major groups of its kind, embracing virtually every type of pottery thought to have been made by Master Bernard. A survey of this well-rounded gift thus offers the means of inquiring into the potter’s position relative to the art of his time.

Bernard Palissy was born about 1510 into a family too poor to educate him; he nevertheless completed an apprenticeship in glass painting and learned the elements of land surveying and portrait painting. As an itinerant worker he traveled throughout France, Flanders, and the region of the Rhine. Then, a young man of per-

haps thirty, he settled down in Saintes, about sixty miles from Bordeaux. It was there that he acquired the status of a legend through his extreme exertions in mastering the art of making decorative pottery.¹

Soon after establishing himself at Saintes, he was shown “an earthen cup, turned and en-
amelled with so much beauty, that from that time I entered into controversy with my own thoughts. . . . I began to think that if I should discover how to make enamels, I could make earthen vessels and other things very prettily, because God had gifted me with some knowledge of drawing; and thereafter, regardless of the fact that I had no knowledge of clays, I began to seek for the enamels, as a man gropes in the dark.” This passage is translated from the chapter “Art de terre” in Palissy’s Discours admirables (Paris, 1580), a recounting in dialogue form of his experiences in potting and his scientific views.

The precise nature of the cup that changed Palissy’s life is not known. There is a tradition that it was the whiteness of his elusive model that set Master Bernard off on a quest for émail blanc. Palissy’s only testimony on the subject is, “I sought only after white enamel, because I had heard it said that white enamel was the basis of

¹ A sketch of Palissy as a humanist, author, and unshakable Protestant appears in an article, “Portrait of a Potter,” by John Goldsmith Phillips in the Museum’s Bulletin of May 1947. The article also describes a terracotta bust presumed to be a portrait of Palissy (Figure 1), given to the Museum in 1941 by George Blumenthal.
all others.” This has inclined many to believe that his inspiration came from the newly developed white earthenware then being made at Saint-Porchaire, only nine miles distant from Saintes. In actuality, the wares now associated with Palissy’s name do not include any wheel-thrown pieces to reflect the mysterious “turned cup,” nor are any predominantly white. It is, instead, chiefly as a colorist in glazes that Palissy takes his place in the history of ceramic art.

His concern with color is evident in the rampant display of strong, rich shades in his wares, with blue, green, and purplish brown predominating. The blue is variable, but generally deep; the greens range from grayish and bluish to emerald. In addition there are touches of agate gray, with creamy white reserved for scattered elements of relief. The undersides appear even more brilliant, being unbroken by ornament. There the prevailing colors are strong blue and aubergine in blurry streaks or patterns suggesting tortoiseshell, agate, or occasionally pebbles of amethyst and lapis lazuli as they might appear on the floor of a swiftly running brook. The mottled colors are outlined by streaks of mossy green, or by irregular veinings of the whitish background showing through.

It must be remembered that at the outset Palissy knew nothing about clays, kilns, or the behavior of colors during firing. In the Discours admirables he gives a sketch of the problems he faced: “At last I found means to make several vessels of different enamels intermixed in the manner of jasper. That sustained me for several years; but, while making a living from these things, I sought always to make further progress, thus incurring expenses and disbursements—as you know that I am doing still. When I had discovered how to make my rustic pieces, I was in greater trouble and vexation than before: for having made a certain number of rustic basins and having fired them, my enamels turned out some beautiful and well fused, others ill fused; others were scorched, because they were composed of different materials that were fusible at different temperatures—the green of the lizards was overfired before the color of the serpents was even melted; and the color of the serpents, lobsters, tortoises, and crabs was melted before the white had attained any beauty.” It was only after fifteen years of such struggling that Palissy presumed to call himself a potter!

We may suppose that Palissy’s apprenticeship as a painter of window glass had taught him something about the ingredients of a diversified palette. In his “Art de terre” he tells that his “enamels” were made of tin, lead, iron, steel, antimony, saffre (oxide of cobalt), copper, sand, salicort (ashes made from the lees of wine), litharge, and stone of Perigord (probably a source of manganese). Most of these are traditional materials in the potter’s craft, used both before and since Palissy’s day. With them one could make a lead glaze tinted variously white, brown, yellow, blue, or purple. The wares of the contemporary German Hafner, or makers of stove tiles and other common pottery, offer the closest technical analogy. Their white was achieved by applying a colorless glaze over white-burning

1. Detail of a painted terracotta bust, presumed to be a portrait of Bernard Palissy. French, late xvi century. Height 26½ inches. Gift of George Blumenthal, 41.100.240
clay, or by painting in areas of opaque tin glaze. In both of these wares white was used sparingly for accenting the more important elements of the reliefs, much as it was used on gold by the makers of Renaissance enamel jewels.

Most Palissy products are dishes and platters, round and oval, almost always raised on a low spreading foot in the manner of a tazza, so that they stand clear of the supporting surface by an inch or more. Since they are molded in relief, they appear ill suited to hold food, except for the jasperized dishes, which have shallow receptacles, possibly for sweetmeats. In the main they are ornamental pieces, although the repertory includes such useful objects as ewers, salts, candlesticks, sconces, wall fountains, and basins.

In addition to the continued production of this lead-glazed pottery in France after Palissy’s death, variants in tin-glazed pottery were made in England and Holland during the seventeenth century. One such is the Lambeth platter, dated 1664, with the subject La Fécondité, given to the Museum in 1941 by Mrs. Frances P. Garvan. In the nineteenth century, Palissy ware ranked among the most sought-after of ceramics. As a result the market became flooded with forgeries, chiefly of French and English manufacture. Spurious copies of the rustic wares in particular are believed to outnumber the genuine pieces.

There are no signed examples to attest to the hand of the master. Attributed to Palissy with the strongest historical support are the fragmentary lizards, caryatid figures, and other architectural fragments now in the Louvre, in the Musée Carnavalet, and in the Musée Céramique de Sèvres. These represent the remains of a grotto which the master was summoned to Paris during the 1560s to erect in the Tuileries gardens. Even with regard to these the credit is divided, for the royal account books for the project list three

Palissy's: Bernard, and two others, Nicholas and Mathurin, whose identification is obscure. A sharp demarcation cannot be made as to authorship, with the result that the criterion of quality alone has induced collectors and others to ascribe the finest pieces to Palissy.

No detailed chronology of Palissy's work has been established, nor is it known whether he ever discontinued any one branch of his production. For certain models the relative age can be gauged on the basis of the patterns and their sources, the clarity of the modeling, the nature and density of the paste, and the quality of color in the glaze. Palissy's own remarks in the "Art de terre" provide a starting point for setting up a relative chronology. He describes his first successful creations as "vaissaux de divers esmaux entremeslez en maniere de iaspe" (i.e., jasperized). They therefore constitute our starting point. Four round and oval dishes in the Berwind gift represent the type. Their centers are deeply concave and coated with mingled glazes. Some of the oval examples have borders additionally ornamented with four depressions similarly tinted. It may well be that these marbled and mottled glazes are an original discovery of Palissy's, as credited to him by Serge Grandjean in his recent monograph Bernard Palissy et son école (Collection Edouard de Rothschild) (Paris, 1952). In that case the jasperized ware of Saintes represents an important technical achievement, duplicating the development of multicolored lead glazes in China during the T'ang period.

In contrast to the novelty of the mottled glazes, apparently Palissy's own invention, the decorative scheme of the jasperized vessels shows somewhat less originality. Consider the motif of the endless cord that commonly loops about the four or more varicolored hollows in the borders (Figure 2). The type is pictured clearly among the cryptic symbols illustrated in one of the woodcuts (Figure 4) accompanying Francesco Colonna's allegorical romance, Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, published in 1499. That our potter was familiar with the French edition is clear from a reference to "the dream of Poliphilus" in his Recepie véritable, a book published in La Rochelle in 1563. In the Recepie véritable Palissy discusses his ideas for such varied projects as a "delectable garden," the first French essay devoted wholly to a garden project. And we might even find the genesis of Palissy's jasperized ware in this description from the text of the allegory: "As full of couleurs as a Christall glass, repercusst and beaten against with the rays of the sun." One can readily imagine the potter's mind turning from this to thoughts of the "earthen cup, turned and enamelled."

The reliefs between the hollows of the borders of this type of ware are drawn from the general vocabulary of Renaissance design. Mainly, these

are cornucopias, stylized rosettes, and oval cartouches such as appear ubiquitously in ornament prints of the time. It is possible to be more specific about the sources of Palissy’s figural elements. For instance, the little heads that fill the spandrel spaces in Figure 2 alternate in displaying feathered wings and chitinous wings. The idea occurs in an engraved design for the border of a plate (Figure 3) by J. T. de Bry after Marten de Vos of Antwerp.

Half a dozen shallow bowls make up the second type of Palissy ware in the Berwind collection: their designs are suggestive of goldsmiths’ work. In color they are closely allied to jasperized ware and should probably be regarded as a subdivision of that category. Three examples follow the general lines of the terres jaspées in having mottled centers, though with the difference that the borders are characterized by openwork affording an interplay of positive and neg-

5. Lead-glazed earthenware dish, manner of Bernard Palissy. French, second half of the xvi century. Diameter 11\(\frac{3}{4}\) inches. 53.225.46
ative elements in the design. When viewed against a contrasting background, the effect is comparable to that of scrolls and arabesques of white silver applied as overlays upon silver-gilt, as in nautilus cups, automata, and the like, by south German goldsmiths. The dish in Figure 5 is notable for its reticular center, resembling an intricate stencil.

The two remaining examples of the group are in contrast to the ajouré quality of the others. One is a scalloped round dish, quite solid, with a radial pattern of gadroons (Figure 6). Concentric zones of purplish brown and ivory attract the eye inward toward the abruptly concave center, where it is held pleasantly captive while sweeping from one to another of the mingled green, blue, and aubergine glazes. Last in the group is a bowl with relief ornament of six grinning masks, male and female, peering at the observer from a welter of green and blue leafage. Each mask wears a spreading headdress of leaves and a bib-like festoon of drapery caught up in a knot at the ear. Here again the conception is not without its counterparts in the embossed work of German sixteenth century goldsmiths: for instance, designs for metalwork by Bernhard Zan of Nuremberg, active in the 1580s.

A number of pieces in the Berwind collection illustrate the most extravagant type of Palissy’s products, the rustiques figulines—rustic pottery swarming with realistically modeled snakes, snails, frogs, and other creatures. The oval dish or bassin is the most representative shape, and the complexity of decoration is directly proportional to the size of the vessel. The simplest among ours is a composition of grape and oak leaves and other leafy twigs, some bearing fruit or nuts, all interspersed with white shells (Figure 9). Three larger vessels have their centers modeled as islands, each supporting a snake or lizard (Cover and Figure 8). Surrounding each island is a pebbled stream with swimming fishes in high relief. The borders of the dishes are treated as sloping banks, some simulating fossil-studded rocks of rough texture. On these the denizens of grottoes—frogs, crayfish, salamanders, and mollusks—alternate with ferns and leaves.

In the Recepte véritable and the Discours admirable, Palissy describes his exploration of hills and fields, with careful attention to all that existed underfoot—as becomes a land surveyor. He speaks of his intense curiosity about the shells trapped in the rocks on mountaintops and emerges as one of the first to realize the nature and significance of fossils. Therefore it is not surprising that as he mastered the art of potting he should seek his motifs in the realm of nature. Creatures of the earth and water held endless fascination for him. Practice in making the fishes, shells, reptiles, and plants for his pottery prepared him for his larger projects, the architectural grottoes of his middle years.

We have referred earlier to Master Bernard’s familiarity with the Hypnerotomachia Poliphili. Perhaps the following passage, here taken from an Elizabethan translation, was one that fired his imagination. It describes the entrance to an underground bath, carved out of the living rock, which the hero of the poem visited in his travels in the dreamworld: “The paued ground vnder the water being of a diuers emblemature of hard stone, checkered where you might see marueilous graphics through the diuersitie of the colours . . . diuers fishes in the sides . . . and in the bottom by a museacall cutting expressed, which did so imitate nature as if they had beeene swimming

7. Silver basin, by Wenzel Jamnitzer (1508-1585), German. xvi century. Cathedral Treasury, Ragusa, Sicily. (Figure 101 from “Der Stil ‘Rustique’” by Ernst Kris in Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen in Wien, n. s. I[1926] p. 157)

8. Lead-glazed earthenware dish, manner of Bernard Palissy. French, second half of the xvi century. Length 20 3/4 inches. 53.225.52
... The black stone of the walls was ingrauen with a leafework, as if it had beene an illaqueated composition of leaues and flowers, and the little shelles of cytheriaces, so beautifull to the eye, as was possible to be deuised."

So true to life are the animal and vegetable forms of Palissy's rustic compositions that scientists have been able to identify them with pre-

cision. This is not surprising, since most were cast from actual creatures and plants, ostensibly after having been arranged into a suitable composition upon a model vessel. From this model complicated plaster molds were made, and from these in turn the pottery version received its shape.

In the sixteenth century naturalistic animals were not entirely unknown in art. One has only to recall the bronze serpents and frogs modeled by Andrea Riccio (1470-1532) or the bronze turkey hen of about 1567 by Giovanni da Bologna, now in the Bargello, and made, incidentally, for installation in the grotto of the Villa Castello, Florence. Another sculptural analogy is the bronze lunette, the Nymph of Fontainebleau, by Benvenuto Cellini (about 1500-1571),


designed for the principal entrance of the palace. In the center is a trophy head of a stag thrusting forward in the standard taxidermist's manner from a composition otherwise in medium relief.

Whereas such examples are sculptural entities, Palissy's rustiques figulines remain domestic pottery upon which flora and fauna have been assembled in groupings so closely approximating nature that they verge upon being ecological
studies. A related but more diversified expression exists among German sixteenth century goldsmiths, whose works employ casual arrangements of three-dimensional animals and plants on objects otherwise highly sophisticated in design. Outstanding among these masters is Wenzel Jamnitzer of Nuremberg, who fashioned lizards, fish, snakes, crayfish, and foliage to be attached at random within the cavetto or upon the border of his circular basins. One such is in the treasury of the cathedral of Ragusa, Sicily (Figure 7). The same manifestation is to be observed in the Breslau silver-gilt nautilus cup by Casper Bendel (1575-1599) and in the superb Augsburg automaton, Diana and the Stag, by Joachim Friess (died 1620), both in the Museum’s collection. All these are allied to engraved designs for silver cups by Albrecht Dürer (1471-1528) and to numerous other ornament engravings, especially those of Cornelis Floris II (1514-1575).

Thus it is apparent that from Florence to Padua, from Nuremberg to Fontainebleau, and beyond to Antwerp, the spell of literal adoption from nature was in the air even before the lifetime of Master Bernard. The individuality of Palissy’s rustic creations lies in the humbleness of his medium and in his apparently haphazard disposition of his motifs vivants. This practice stands sharply in contrast to the Italianate tend-
ency of his contemporaries, a tendency toward contrived, symmetrical patterns as in the design for a silver cup, dated 1551, by Mathis Zündt of Nuremberg (Cover).

The fourth and last division of Palissy wares in the Berwind collection consists mainly of pieces in which the borders, unlike the preceding examples, are distinctly subordinate to the pictorial interest of the centers. The typical shape is a shallow tazza, the interior of which is molded in relief with figures in landscapes, framed by a steeply rising border of static repeats such as gadroons or stiff floral stalks.

Among figural examples in this collection five are modeled with religious subjects, extremely rare in Palissy’s work. While it is not known precisely when the production of such wares began, one may help to fix the group in time. The Creation of Eve (Figure 10), a glazed relief in green, blue, and aubergine, with touches of yellow, is virtually a mirror image of a print attributed to a contemporary of Palissy’s, Jean Cousin the Younger (Figure 11). The dish bears a cryptic mark, resembling a monogram, on the trunk of the apple tree, which is not in the print.

The Sacrifice of Isaac, another in this group, serves to remind us of the endlessly varied interpretations of the subject that had been made since the beginning of the Renaissance. The other religious subjects are Christ and Two Disciples, Christ Washing the Feet of His Disciples, and the Decapitation of St. John the Baptist, of the seventeenth century or later.

An assortment of vessels with mythological and allegorical reliefs completes the survey. Offering particular insight into Palissy’s sources is a dish (Figure 14) with rosette-studded border, the center occupied by a nymph who reclines among cattail plants and leans upon an overturned yellow jar from which water gushes copiously, while two dogs approach cautiously from the left. The subject is unmistakable: it is the Nymph of Fontainebleau as depicted in the fresco painted by Rosso in the 1550s for the great gallery of Francis I at the palace of Fontainebleau. The scene is an illustration of the allegory of the discovery of a clear spring (represented as a nymph) by a royal hunting dog; at this spot the royal residence was built. Since Palissy was nearby in Paris during the 1560s, it is not un-

likely that the original painting was well known to him. Rosso’s fresco, moreover, was copied by René Boyvin (Figure 13) and issued as an engraving, which Palissy also might have seen.

Just as Boyvin chose to “improve” the composition by causing the rushes to lean in the breeze, so also has the artist-potter improvised by adding a dragonfly. This, then, is the significance of our nymph: that the school of Fontainebleau was an important source of figural themes and compositions for these wares.

One of the most engaging vessels in this group is a deep egg-shaped cup within which are posed Ceres and Bacchus, embracing (Figure 12). The subject is not traditional, and is perhaps even unknown, in classical sculpture. In the sixteenth century, however, the two figures were symbolic of Summer and Autumn, respectively, and they were so used in the decorations of the ballroom at Fontainebleau, painted between 1551 and 1556 under the direction of Primaticcio. The interior walls of the cup are glazed in rich blue


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and modeled, appropriately, with grapevines and wheat in relief.

One piece deserves special attention, for its figural relief has known counterparts in metal. This is an oval dish with a flat border called, after its primary subject, Pomona or La Belle Jardinière (Figure 15). The bare-bosomed figure, clad in a long blue gown and loose green mantle, sits majestically beneath a tree, with gardening tools scattered at her feet. Her hair is dressed with flowers, her outstretched right hand clasps a bunch of fruit, and her left arm embraces a bouquet of lilies. In the background is a formal garden with two female gardeners and a plowman, undoubtedly Vertumnus. The sharp perspective of the enclosing walls converges upon a château.

The picture in toto may be composite; the figure of Pomona, however, is not without sixteenth century counterparts. First evidence in the search for her antecedents is at the Louvre, where there may be found two matching basins, one in pewter, the other in Palissy ware. The glazed pottery basin is apparently a direct cast from the pewter basin. In the cavetto are five medallions, the central one captioned Temperantia, giving the basins their name. In the pewter version, at the lower left corner of the dais upon which the central figure sits, are the initials F B, for the pewterer François Briot (about 1550-after 1616); his portrait medallion, inscribed with his name, appears on the reverse of the basin.

Surrounding the Temperantia roundel are oval cartouches representing the Four Elements, and those of Aqua and Terra are especially related to the pose of our Pomona. It is quickly evident that Aqua (Figure 16) comes close to being her mirror image. The frontality of the shoulders, the outward turn of the head, the slight crooking of the lowered arm, and the sharp flexing of the nearer leg—all are present in both figures. The chief modifications are that Aqua’s elevated arm is straighter and almost horizontal, and her bubbling fountain has been transmuted into a rosetted round cushion for Pomona. Next, a glance at Terra shows her outstretched arm to be in exactly the position of Pomona’s, even to the manner of clasping the foliage in the hand. The suggestion that the same source of design was used by Briot and the potter is almost inescapable. What was that source? Possibly the Palissy Pomona basin was again a direct cast from some pewter original; possibly an engraving was adapted by the designers of both the Temperantia and Pomona basins. At any rate, Pomona, Aqua, and Terra find a least common denominator in the mannered nudes of Fontainebleau, among which Primatticcio’s Diana in the Gallery of Henry II is not to be overlooked.

The Temperantia basins at the Louvre help us to understand better the last of our Palissy items, a delicate little ewer (Figure 18). Each basin was designed to serve as the stand for a similar ewer, featuring medallions of Faith, Hope, and Charity. Several such ewers in pewter are known; our piece is a pottery version of one formerly in the Nordböhmisches-Gewerbe Museum in Reichenberg (Figure 17), which has


been widely published. The Berwind ewer, together with its matching basin at the Louvre, offers a prime example of the direct duplication of pewter by Palissy ware.

The painstaking studies made by Tuetey and Demiani in the last quarter of the nineteenth century have firmly established that the pewter originals were made by François Briot during the 1580s, most likely between 1585 and 1590. By that time, Palissy was an aged man who probably had given up active potting. In any event, he spent the last two or three years of that decade in the Bastille, a victim of religious persecution, and there he died. Therefore it is generally conceded that these castings from pewter must be credited to Palissy's atelier and followers rather than to his own hand.

Long regarded by his neighbors as fool or knave, Palissy lived to see his efforts extolled in the purple prose of Pierre Sanxay, who wrote the following panegyric as a dedication to the potter's Recette véritable: "The before-named trifling works, namely, the Straits of Gibraltar, the monuments of Greece, the Pyramids, and the
Coliseum, required thousands of makers, but the best of them was not equal to a basin made by you, Palissy, alone. . . . The ancients counted seven wonders in the world; had they seen yours, it would have ranked before the first."

In addition to the Palissy ware discussed in this article, several groups of decorative objects, mainly of sixteenth and seventeenth century origin, also came to the Museum through the Berwind gift. These include twenty-one examples of majolica (notably two Urbino cisterns of 1550-1560); twenty-five vessels of Venetian and other glass, with molded and enamel decoration; and eight lead-glazed pottery statuettes and groups produced by the school of Avon, a type which collectors only a generation ago would have credited to Palissy.

17. Pewter ewer, by François Briot. About 1585-1590. Formerly in the Nordböhmisches-Gewerbe Museum, Reichenberg. (Plate VI from François Briot, Caspar Enderlein und das Edelzinn by Hans Demiani)