

PALISSY WARE

REALISTIC DEPICTIONS IN FANTASTIC SETTINGS

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Pitcher attributed to Joseph Landais. Unsigned, c.1850-1870. Landais, who, in 1822, married Charles-Jean Avisseau's sister, Anne-Françoise, claimed, in 1846, that he and not Avisseau had rediscovered Palissy's secrets.

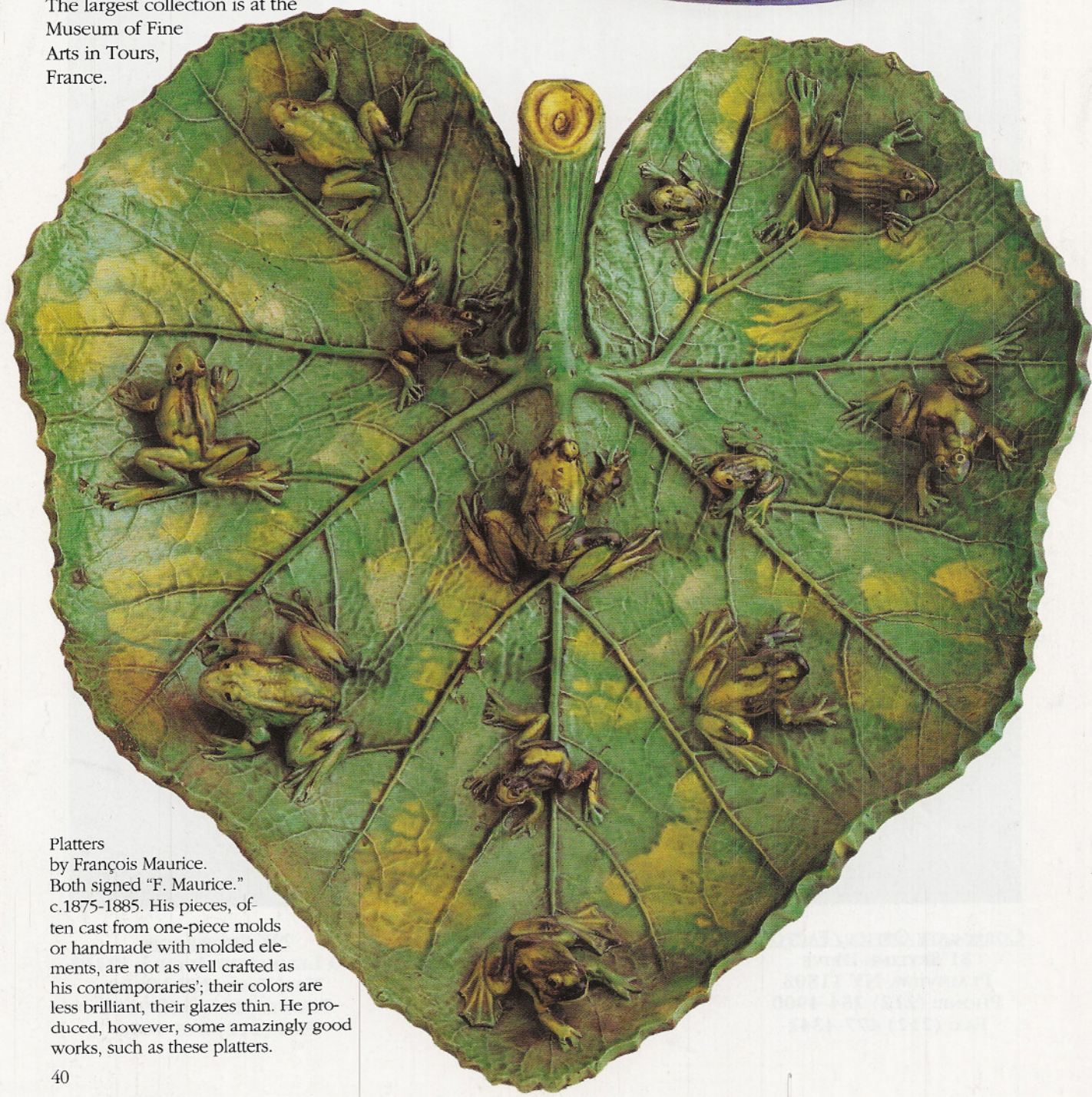
Platter by Charles-Jean Avisseau. Signed "Avisseau" with monogram, dated 1850. Avisseau, who used designs by Palissy as models, was constantly hampered by technical problems, including inconsistent oven temperatures, and could not guarantee the success of each of his works. His pieces often took from two months to two years to complete. He was a poor businessman and died in poverty in 1861.

To any serious student of ceramics, the name Bernard Palissy conjures visions of realistically colored fish, coiled vipers and slinking lizards in naturalistic settings. This sixteenth-century Renaissance man of France enjoyed both the patronage and protection of the royal family, particularly the queen mother, Catherine de Medici. His achievements as a ceramist were so remarkable that many others attempted to imitate his works. For two centuries, they had only limited success, for it was not until 1843, around 250 years after Palissy's death in 1590, that middle-aged French ceramist, Charles-Jean Avisseau from Tours, would rediscover the lost secrets of Palissy and thereby energize a revivalist movement that would last fifty years.

The Palissy revival period (1843-1900) would not only engage many skilled artisans and ceramic factories in France, but would spread to other countries as well, including England and Portugal. The leading French ceramists of the movement, namely Avisseau, Joseph Landais and Georges Pull were al-



ready well known. They exhibited works at nearly all of the great industrial exhibitions of the time and often won gold, silver and bronze medals. For example, Avisseau's exhibition of works at the Great Exhibition of London in 1851 markedly enhanced his reputation throughout Europe and pioneered the way for other artists. It is not surprising, therefore, that many of these artists' works appear in the collections of the world's great museums, including the Louvre and the Decorative Arts Museum in Paris, the National Ceramics Museum in Sèvres and the Victoria and Albert Museum and the British Museum in London. The largest collection is at the Museum of Fine Arts in Tours, France.



Platters
by François Maurice.
Both signed "F. Maurice."
c.1875-1885. His pieces, often cast from one-piece molds or handmade with molded elements, are not as well crafted as his contemporaries'; their colors are less brilliant, their glazes thin. He produced, however, some amazingly good works, such as these platters.



Platter
attributed
to Léon Brard.
Unsigned, dated

1891. Brard's unique treatment of rustic ware constituted

an important departure from Avisseau and Landais, who had sought to recreate the style of Palissy. Brard applied his knowledge of still-life marine painting to his ceramics, and his creatures are arranged in stylized compositions reflecting the artist's hand, not nature's.

Artisan to kings, writer, savant, philosopher, lecturer, naturalist, religionist, scientist and discoverer, Bernard Palissy is believed to have been born around 1509 or 1510. The exact date is unknown, and his birthplace, too, is uncertain but is often mentioned as the small hamlet of La Chapelle-Biron, France, in the diocese of Agen, approximately eighty miles southeast of Bordeaux.

Palissy's parents and early years are likewise obscure. His father was probably an artisan because Palissy was able to draw and paint, and such skills were often passed from father to son. Palissy's talents enabled him to learn the art of stained-glass window painting as well as geometry, in order to convert small images to larger ones and vice versa, and glass-making, which proved useful in his future.

In his late teens, perhaps around 1528, Palissy left La Chapelle-Biron to travel around France. Because Palissy appears to have had no other means of support, we must presume that he earned his living as a painter. He

probably moved from one town to another, seeking employment along the way, and remaining in each town until he ran out of work or earned enough money to continue his journeys.

It is likely that during his years of travel Palissy refined his talents, especially in geometry. He learned to measure large areas precisely, much as a land surveyor does, and in later years this skill would enable him not only to support his family (though only meagerly), but ultimately to plan a large home and garden sites and to prepare maps. Given the subjects of his writings, it is also likely that Palissy pursued interests in naturalism, alchemy, geothermy and underground springs and wells.

Sometime between 1535 and 1539, Palissy settled in Saintes, a small town in southwestern France about sixty-five miles north of Bordeaux. There he married and raised his family. It is thought he supported himself as a stained-glass artist, portrait painter and land surveyor. Around 1540, an event

occurred that would change Palissy's life. Years later, in *L'Art de Terre* he wrote . . . *There was shown to me an earthen cup, turned and enameled with so much beauty . . .*

There are several accounts of what Palissy may have seen. It was probably an enameled earthenware cup of Italian origin, perhaps by Luca della Robbia, possibly from Faenza, or from an Italian maker working in France, that bred his passion for making similar objects. During the next fifteen years, Bernard Palissy's family experienced the brink of starvation and ridicule.

From around 1545 and continuing for about ten years, Palissy's pieces such as spice dishes were simplistic in design, with jewel-like enamel glazes. Palissy's own account of the period suggests that little or no work of merit could have been produced in the

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early years.

Palissy's greatest period began around 1555 with his rustic ware. One can imagine the young Palissy wandering the fields among the forests and streams of Saintonge making sketches of the animal life that would become the studies for his later works. To render each piece as realistically as possible, Palissy turned to moulding his subjects: snakes, lizards, frogs, shells, fish, insects, leaves and ferns. Palissy worked in high relief, often hollowing out the backs of his pieces. Examples of works made after 1555 would provide the impetus for nineteenth-century followers.

His works were like no others in France and attracted such wealthy and powerful patrons as Antoine Sire de Pons; Comte de Marennes, and his wife, Anne de Partenay; Baron de Jarnac; the governor of Rochelle; Seigneur de Burie and Comte de Rochefoucault.

A renewed interest in the work of Bernard Palissy in the mid-nineteenth century was not surprising. Palissy's ceramics appealed to advocates of the Renaissance and Rococo Revival styles, both popular in France in the middle years of the nineteenth century. His rustic ware which drew on the natural world, a key component of the Rococo, had a freedom and flourish in keeping with the bravura of the Rococo Revival. But his intellectual exploration of many of the natural sciences, clearly seen in his accurate depiction of the creatures on his ceramics, as well as his interest in history, politics and religion was more in keeping with the Renaissance ideal. Palissy was a true Renaissance man and expressed his views and philosophy in his writings, which were republished in France, after a gap of nearly seventy years, in 1844. This volume brought Palissy to public attention just at the time when French ceramic artists were attempting to discover the secrets of France's greatest potter.

The most important figure in the nineteenth-century revivalist movement of the art of Bernard Palissy and founder of the School of Tours was Charles-Jean Avisseau. His determination and skill led to the discovery of Palissy's lost secrets for glazing and enameling, which created a new en-



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thusiasm for ceramic rustic ware that endured for almost fifty years. His work influenced scores of ceramists across France and well beyond its borders.

Among Avisseau's most gifted pupils was Léon Brard, who moved to Tours after meeting Charles-Jean and later founded a school of ceramics. Avisseau's brother-in-law, Joseph Landais, worked with him for a short time and later became an important ceramist himself. Avisseau's work became his passion, and all of his family participated in one fashion or another. Two of his three children, Edouard and Caroline, trained in the workshop and continued the work of their father. The Avisseau tradition extended even to his grandson, Edouard-Leon Deschamps-Avisseau, who produced ceramics until his death in 1910.

The Industrial Revolution in the mid-nineteenth century ushered in great prosperity and achievement throughout Europe and elsewhere. The arts reached their greatest heights in France and made the French the tastemakers of the world. French culture peaked in this period and became fertile ground for new ideas and artistic expression. Thus it is understandable that France embraced the works of innovative artists such as Charles-Jean Avisseau, with his breakthrough discoveries, immense talent and perseverance. Although Avisseau's success began relatively late in life and lasted only eighteen years, his achievements inspired two succeeding generations of ceramists and created an unsurpassed legacy for the world.

There was a resurgence of interest in Palissy during the mid-1980s, after the excavation of the Louvre uncovered Palissy's Parisian workshop together with thousands of fragments of his works. These are now under academic investigation and have already been the subject of scholarly articles. In recognition of the great ceramist, the new Richelieu wing of the Louvre includes the Bernard Palissy room, filled with works attributed to the famous potter or his workshop. □

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