



The
Magic
of
Majolica



Text by **Barbara Crozier** • Photography courtesy of www.Alexandersportraits.com

Is it the legend of the oyster or the luster of the pottery? Whether you think it is the crazy quilt of gleaming colors and fanciful shapes of the earthenware or the myths about the mollusks it cradles, it is difficult to deny the current superstar status of the Victorian oyster plate.

Edgy designers, culinary gurus, and serious collectors alike find the whimsical forms, vibrant colors, and gleaming glazes of Victorian majolica tempting. But pair that temptation with the myth and mystery of the oyster, and what was merely tempting becomes irresistible. Today majolica oyster plates fill dining rooms and kitchen cupboards to overflowing. Oyster plates line the aisles of fine antiques shows around the globe and grace the pages of decorating and design periodicals issue after issue.

Victorian majolica first exploded on the scene as part of the man-made wonders of the Industrial Age unveiled at the Crystal Palace Exhibition in London, 1851. At London's Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations Herbert Minton, noted entrepreneur and artist, and his chief chemist Leon Arnoux introduced the tin glazed, earthenware pottery to over six million visitors in a single exhibition season. Overnight majolica became the darling of a growing middle-class of Victorian ladies whose opulent dinner tables were dramatic displays of prosperity.

A proper plate for every occasion and for every course was the

rule of thumb for the well-appointed Victorian table. A proper plate for the humble oyster was no exception. Oyster plates came in multiple forms. There were deep-well plates for oysters on the half shell with ice. There were different deep-well plates for oysters on the half without ice. There were even plates with more shallow wells for previously shucked oysters. These plates for "shuckers" were never subjected to the damaging effects of the rough oyster shells and subsequently are some of the most sought after by collectors today.

Every form of the oyster plate came with various numbers of wells or coves. Victorians set their fancy feasts with double-wells plates and three-well plates with central wells for condiments. They served on four-well versions, five, six and even seven-well plates. But the pinnacle of Victorian majolica madness and oyster mania was the elaborate Victorian presentation pyramid like the one pictured on the opposite page.

However, by the end of the 19th century Victorian fussiness and ostentation were nothing more than yesterday's pretentiousness.

opposite This magnificent presentation pyramid, a Herbert Minton design holds an impressive 27 oysters. It was exhibited by Washburne Antiques of Solebury, PA at the Theta Charity Antique show in Houston last November.

above The pastel pink and vibrant turquoise of these glistening oyster plates are two of the most desirable and sought after colors. The plates, circa 1870, were part of the Stoke-on-Trent majolica manufacture that flourished throughout the later part of the 19th century.



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Pictured is an eclectic group of majolica favorites including a traditional six-well oyster plate.

Maligned in the context of the streamlined sensibilities of the early 20th century, the vulgar poor man's porcelain was relegated to grandmother's attic. The prize of the privileged throughout the second half of the 19th century, Victorian majolica oyster plates spent the first half of the 20th century discarded in disgust and disgrace.

What a change a century can make. What is found common and revolting today in the span of a few short years can become rare and revered, and valuable and costly. Those reversals of favor are the heart of what eventually makes an antique, any antique, desirable. The current infatuation with Victorian majolica oyster plates exemplifies the effects of those undulating shifts of taste over time.

Need proof? Spend a few minutes in an antique shop. Walk an aisle or two at your favorite show. Follow the sounds of the oohs and aahs. They might just lead you to those long-lost oyster plates you played with in Granny's attic. ^{TH&L}

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