

FIGURE A



FIGURE A. A LARGE MAIOLICA FLOOR TILE FROM A PAVEMENT IN THE NUNNERY OF SAN PAOLO, PARMA. THE MESSAGE IN THE YOUNG MAN'S HAT READS, "TO BE GIVEN INTO THE HAND OF ZOVANO."



# A HISTORY OF ITALIAN TILES - PART IV

THE RINASCIMENTO (PART II)

## PROVIDING AN ATMOSPHERE OF BEAUTY

BY GARRETH CRUIKSHANK

I turned and walked into the night. Despite the lateness of the hour, I wasn't tired. My mind buzzed with thoughts and questions concerning Bodkin and his research. I headed towards the city, which sprawled before me, thrashing and pulsing like an insect in the final stage of metamorphosis. Soon it would break free from its chrysalis and we would behold its final Olympic form.

Approaching St. Mary's Cathedral I paused to observe the progress in construction of the two new stone spires. I sat on a bench in the equally new piazza and stared up at the spotlit façade, my mind still racing. Reading Vasari's *LIVES* one is constantly struck, not so much by the influence of rich or religious patrons, as by the part played by pictures, statues and beautiful buildings in the everyday life of ordinary people. It is arguable whether this was characteristic of the Rinascimento, or of Italy, or is simply uncharacteristic of most other places. And so Bodkin ended the third journal of his investigation of Italian ceramic tiles and its culture. Perhaps he had sat, as I was sitting now, and contemplated the imposing magnificence of San Petronio in Bologna or St. Peter's in Rome. Had he watched the goings-on in Rome in 1929 with a sense that, once again, major historic forces were coming to bear on the shape and texture of the eternal city? Would the changes be for the better or worse, or both?

Bodkin's fourth journal opens with the following, somewhat provocative observation, "It is impossible to be interested in the outburst of artistic energy we call the Italian Rinascimento without being interested in its painted pottery. As painting, maiolica is the principal branch of Rinascimento art which has consistently preserved all the vividness of its original colouring; as an index of taste, it offers an incomparable corpus of both religious and non-religious subject matter; and as a form of ceramics, this so-called 'minor art' comes perhaps closer to the 'major arts' than at any other point in the long history of world ceramics."

In a microcosm of the broader cultural history of the period, the maiolica of Rinascimento Italy absorbed into the Italian tradition elements from the Islamic world via Spain and from the rediscovered culture of ancient Rome, and developed them into something entirely new. By 1500 a further overwhelming influence was brought to bear - the new technologies of printing, woodcut and engraving. The outcome was the phenomenon of ceramics treated as a form of pure painting, and the creation by 1510 of a fully realised narrative style. Nevertheless it is important that we recognise maiolica's place in the overall scheme of things, for it was unquestionably a 'middle-brow' art form. Classical subject-matter is abundant, but it is an unintellectual classicism, derived from paraphrases of Ovid and collections of stories from Roman history. Echoes of the great painters are everywhere, but maiolica painters rarely show any profound understanding of contemporary art. Commonly their inspiration is work of an earlier generation, mediated through the popularising format of engravings. For this very reason maiolica gives unique insight into what the Rinascimento meant to Italians outside the discriminating world of the avant-garde, the cognocenti and the scholar. As such it should be viewed as one of the most characteristic art forms of the Rinascimento.

But I seem to have got ahead of myself with the story, so let me retrace my steps. I keep using the term 'maiolica' without explaining what it is. This is very remiss of me. 'Maiolica' is the name first applied by the Italians themselves to the lustre painted (don't worry, I'll explain that one also) Spanish wares which were imported from Malaga initially, and later from Valencia. The term is thought to be a corruption of 'Majorca', the island which served as an entrepot for these Hispano-Moresque ceramics. 'Maiolica' referred solely to lustreware, both Spanish and Italian, but eventually came to signify all Italian earthenware covered with a tin-glaze.

Italy had little need of ceramic tiles before the Renaissance, for the great expanses of wall in churches and secular buildings were reserved for mosaic or fresco, while floors were paved with the naturally abundant stone or marble, laid either in slabs or cut into intricate patterns (e.g. the floor of the Duomo in Siena or the Baptistery of San Giovanni in Florence). But it was customary to add some ceramic decoration to the Romanesque churches by cementing coloured pottery bowls - 'bacini' - often of Near Eastern origin, into the brickwork of their towers and outer walls, as can be seen at Pomposa Abbey.

Some of the most important commissions received by the workshops of Faenza in the late 15th century were for commemorative discs, that could likewise be inserted into the walls of an important building honouring the founder or a benefactor. The discs often bore a coat of arms or an illustration of some religious subject. Some had only the pictorial theme, such as the medallions made in the della Robbia workshop in 1450-56 for the ceiling of the study of Piero de' Medici. This far more ambitious approach, developed by Luca della Robbia and his family, wedded the arts of pottery and monumental sculpture, however these architectural embellishments remain an isolated phenomenon in the history of Italian tin-glazed earthenware.

The sound of people on roller-blades whizzing past brought me back to the present. I stood and continued on my way. As I walked away from the cathedral I stared down at the stone flagging. The thing was, you understand, there was no native precedent for the massed use of painted maiolica tiles as a continuous floor decoration. The practice, which grew common as the maiolica-makers perfected their craft during the 15th century, seems to have been suggested to the Italians once again through their contacts with Spain. Blue and white floor tiles, such as those depicted in the *De Sphaera* manuscript, c.1450-60 (see Part III) were made in

quantity at the same factories in Valencia as the famous lustre-painted Hispano-Moresque wares, and like them, exported to Italy. Alfonso V of Aragon is known to have ordered great consignments for the buildings he erected in his Kingdom of Naples between 1446-58. The Spanish Pope, Alexander VI (Borgia) ordered Valencian tiles to decorate his private suite of apartments in the Vatican Palace.

The earliest existing Italian maiolica pavement is at Naples, in a chapel added to the Church of San Giovanni a'Carbonara. It is presumed that the floor was laid in 1432. On long hexagonal tiles surrounding square tiles are painted profile heads, heraldic devices, animals and foliage evidently inspired by the Valencian imports. The shapes are Spanish, but not the colours. Their style suggests a common origin with the pottery of Tuscany. There are several tile pavements of the late 15th century which are still in situ in Neapolitan churches.

The panel of square and hexagonal floor-tiles from the Mazzatosta Chapel in the Church of Santa Maria della Verita in Viterbo, c.1470 depicts writhing parti-coloured Gothic leaves, popular also with contemporary vase painters. Other tiles in the Viterbo pavement are painted with profile heads of young men and women. But the finest portraits are to be found on the large square tiles from a pavement laid in the nunnery of San Paolo at Parma between 1471-82, with some later additions in 1507. One of these shows a handsome youth fashionably dressed, carrying in his hat a note addressed "to be given into the hand of Zovano". Others bear portraits with amatory inscriptions and mythological subjects, such as the Judgement of Paris and Pyramus and Thisbe.

The self-esteem of the ruling Italian nobles found a suitable form of expression in the allusive devices and mottoes emblazoned on floor-tiles. A set of six such tiles from the apartments of Isabella d'Este in the Castello Vecchio in Mantua is painted with the arms of her husband, the Marquis Gianfrancosco II Gonzaga, plus five of the more intimate devices of which the family was so fond. Another set of small octagonal and square tiles bear Isabella's name and the more stoical mottoes which she adopted about the time of her husband's death in 1519.

FIGURE B



FIGURE B. EARLY 16TH CENTURY MAIOLICA FLOOR TILES MADE FOR ISABELLA D'ESTE'S PALACE IN MANTUA.

Tiles of 15th century are for the most part distinguished by their bold designs, free from over-refined detail, and their somewhat sombre colouring dominated by a cool dark blue. About the end of the century greater elaboration of design becomes apparent. This development of maiolica tiles and pottery can be attributed to the exploration of drawing, colour (i.e. glaze technology), and subject-matter on the white glaze base: above all, maiolica was a painter's medium.

The greatest compendium of early Rinascimento ornament is the beautiful pavement made by workmen from Faenza under the direction of Petrus Andrea for the Chapel of San Sebastian in the church of San Petronio in Bologna, made in 1487. There are more than 1000 unique tiles in this pavement. Each tile has a central device surrounded by an elaborate border. The pavement also

FIGURE C



FIGURE C. ONE OF THE 1,000+ TILES FROM THE FLOOR OF THE VASELLI CHAPEL IN THE CHURCH OF SAN PETRONIO, BOLOGNA.

reveals a new reliance on the motifs derived from classical antiquity - many of them taken from architecture, like the bead-and-reel, and the egg-and-dart patterns, just as similar antiquarian interests had characterised the work of major Rinascimento painters like Mantegna and Melozzo da Forli a few years earlier. A cornucopia of other motifs appear in the centre of each hexagonal tile: trophies, birds, animals, coats of arms, masks, musical instruments, weapons, sacred emblems, portraits, fabulous beasts and weird fantasies. In these tiles can be seen two of the main features of Rinascimento ceramics - painting on flat surfaces with the illusion of relief achieved by clever use of tone, and the dependence of pottery-painting on themes from the 'fine arts'. The kind of painting that was being done on the flat tiles of San Petronio were soon to appear on the curved surfaces of all kinds of pottery.

FIGURE D



FIGURE D. 'GROTESQUE' DESIGN INCORPORATING URNS, DOLPHINS, CORNUCOPIAS, ETC. FROM A PAVEMENT INSTALLED IN THE PALACE OF PANDOLFO PETRUCCI, SIENA. PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN.

The fully developed Rinascimento style first appeared on tile pavements made for local buildings in Siena. Individual tiles bear dates from 1500 and 1509. Bodkin notes that he had seen a fragment of a pavement from the Palazzo Pandolfo Petrucci, ruler of Siena (1452-1512) in the Victoria and Albert Museum, prior to his trip to Italy. The floor had once graced the same room in the palace as the frescoes of Signorelli and Pinturicchio.





FIGURE E

FIGURE E. EARLY 16TH CENTURY MAIOLICA FLOOR TILES ORIGINALLY FOR THE CHAPEL OF BARTOLOMEO LOMBARDINI IN THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO, FORLÌ.

On grounds of black, orange or pale yellow are painted rich and minutely detailed grotesque designs of sphinxes, dolphins, cornucopias, candelabra and trophies; some of the tiles have shields with the arms of the Petrucci and Piccolomini families, while others depict figures in landscape settings.

Another very important pavement which Bodkin saw on display in the Victoria and Albert Museum reveals the fully matured Rinascimento style at its highest pitch of refinement. This was the pavement ordered by Bartolomeo Lombardini (d.1512) for his chapel in the Church of San Francesco in Forlì (ironically enough), but to judge from dated tiles of 1513 and 1523, not completed till well after his death.

The church was subsequently demolished and the pavement relaid in a villa at Pieve a'Quinto. (There is an entry in his journal where Bodkin relates two unsuccessful attempts to locate the villa and view the remnants of the pavement in situ. However the reasons for his failure are vague and strangely unconvincing). The format of the pavement is one of irregular polygons surrounding octagonal tiles, all painted in polychrome colours on varying backgrounds. The octagonal tiles show portraits, landscapes, animals, trophies, monsters and the like on pale orange or yellow; noteworthy among the portraits are those of the maiolica-painter Petrus (Andrea?) by himself, of Ugolino di Francesco Urbevetano the organist, and of Melozzoda Forlì, the great

painter. On the surrounding tiles the ornament has a predominantly arabesque character. For these the "pouncing" method of drawing was probably used, but the octagons are each individual works of art of such breathtaking delicacy that their position on the floor must have deprived them of the close scrutiny they so signally deserve, besides exposing them to the depredations of wear. In fact, the whole Italian practice of paving floors with maiolica tiles was a constant source of incredulity to Bodkin (and many others besides, I am sure), raising serious questions on practical grounds, since the soft tin-glaze was easily scratched. Many of the pavements still in situ have been worn down to the bare clay.

A famous passage by Francisco Eximenez of Gerona, written in the late 15th century, gives us a clue to the reason for maiolica's popularity.

"The communal industry of Paterna and Caceres [near Valencia] is the making of fine jars...charges, plates, bowls and tiles, and like desirable objects. But the beauty of the golden ware of Manises excels them all, painted in a masterly manner, which with good reason has made all the world its admirer, so that the Pope himself and the Cardinals and Princes of the world all covet it, and are amazed that anything so excellent and noble could be made from common clay."

In little more than 100 years, Italian tin-glaze wares had evolved from an unpretentious craft to an applied art that was coveted by the "Princes of the world."

FIGURE F



FIGURE F. MAIOLICA FLOOR TILE MADE BETWEEN 1503 AND 1513, DEPICTING THE ARMS OF POPE JULIUS II.

By the late 15th century the finest work in ceramics was being equated in artistic merit to the work of the jeweller and silversmith, even by the likes of Lorenzo de' Medici, no less. People expected to be astonished by the jeweller; that they could be astonished by painted ceramics was indeed notable. It would not have been extraordinary in the Far or Middle East, but in Europe it was, for Christian patrons were accustomed to regard clay as a base material whose very nature denied its nobility unless it were used on a monumental scale in architecture or sculpture, a-la-Luca della Robbia. The colours of tin-glaze ceramics undoubtedly helped raise its esteem, for good colours were still rare and mysterious and associated with secret skills. It was no accident that the first pottery to be highly regarded in Europe was painted tin-glaze. Consequently, maiolica craftsmen were able to undertake increasingly ambitious and expensive projects and develop their technical resources.

Information on the maiolica techniques used in the 16th century is substantial, thanks to a treatise by Cipriano Piccolpasso of Castel Durante, entitled THREE BOOKS OF THE POTTER'S ART. Written c.1557, it is an incomparable source for Rinascimento ceramic technology, containing drawings of maiolica manufacture, as well as detailed descriptions of techniques, and glaze and pigment recipes. One must remember however that this document represents only what one amateur potter was able to learn about the technology of his time and region. Piccolpasso's description for fine maiolica, transcribed by Bodkin in his fourth journal, is as follows: the clay is dug mainly from river beds and purified. Vessels are made on a wheel or by use of a plaster mould; they are given a first firing to a temperature of 1000°C approximately. The kilns in Piccolpasso's drawing are wood-fired up-draft kilns built of brick, with the fuel under the kiln floor. The ware is then dipped in a tin-opacified lead-glaze, the main ingredients of which are potash (made by burning the lees out of wine barrels), sand, oxides of lead and tin, the mixture being ground and mixed with water; the tin-oxide remains suspended in the glaze and has the effect of turning it white.

When the tin-glaze is dry the resulting powdery surface is painted on. The best brushes, which have to be very



soft, are made from the hairs of goats and the mane of asses, with mouse whiskers sometimes added.

At this point, Bodkin, who had during his travels visited potteries in Deruta and Faenza, makes the observation that the painting of maiolica requires an extremely sure and steady hand, because once the wet pigment from the artist's brush touches the chalky surface of the dry tin-glaze, or BIANCO, it is instantly absorbed. There is no opportunity therefore to correct an error or implement a change of mind in this demanding medium.

In range and subtlety of colours, Rinascimento ISTORIATO (which he defines below) has rarely been equalled. The main pigments used were blue from cobalt, green from copper, yellow from antimony, orange from antimony and iron, and purple and brown from manganese. The colour that gave the most difficulty was red: a red derived from an iron-rich clay called 'Armenian bole' (first discovered by Turkish potters and much favoured in Iznik ceramics). This pigment was sparingly used even by the factories which mastered it - mainly those in Faenza and Tuscany.

After painting, according to Piccolpasso, the ware was dipped in or sprinkled with a clear glaze, then stacked in the kiln. After the second firing at about 950°C the wares would be removed in their finished state.

A few centres, the most important being Deruta and Gubbio, used the additional process of metallic lustres, a technique learned from Islamic and Hispano-Moresque pottery. Compounds containing silver or copper were painted on the twice-fired pottery, which was then refired in a smaller kiln at a lower temperature. Towards the end of this firing the fuel was changed to brushwood, which filled the kiln with smoke; carbon monoxide combined with the oxygen in the metal oxides, causing a thin layer of pure metal to be formed on the surface; when cleaned this produced a much admired iridescent effect. Lustre was always a specialist skill, only practiced in a few workshops.

Without realising it, I had walked the length of Macquarie Street, reaching the Quay. I glanced at my watch - 12:15am. The Basement was close by. It was one of the best jazz venues in the world, so I headed there. I could do

with a drink. I entered and sat in the back bar where it was less crowded, sipping my scotch and thinking about 16th century Italian maiolica. Even I could see the absurdity of the situation.

From about 1500 maiolica design came increasingly to reflect the influence of ancient Rome. Elements of Roman architecture and sculptural ornament had been used by artists throughout the 15th century, but a fashion for fantastic painted ornament in the classical manner caught the imagination of artists and artisans, cognocenti and the general public alike, after the discovery around 1480 of the painted rooms of the 'Golden House', the vast palace in the centre of Rome built for the Emperor Nero prior to his death in 68 B.C. The style of painting in the Golden House came to be called 'grotesque'. These 'grotto-paintings' were eagerly copied by artists, such as Raphael, and disseminated by sketchbooks and ornament prints, and the word came to be applied to decoration incorporating bizarre monsters and fantasies, more or less echoing those motifs of classical origin.

The development of a rich palette of glaze colours combined with the technical control of these colours and increasing drawing skill in maiolica workshops at the beginning of the 16th century permitted the evolution of a new kind of 'art pottery,' in which the whole surface was treated like a canvas for painting. By about 1515, Istoriato pottery (maiolica decorated with stories, allegories and historical scenes) was being made in Emilia-Romagna, the Marches, Umbria and Tuscany. It was at this point in its development that Italian maiolica, for the first time, aspired to the condition of 'fine art'. While Istoriato became at this time a fully fledged branch of Rinascimento painting, it was not, however, a branch where the painters in general had time, training or incentive for original invention. They turned for inspiration, as a consequence, to the most easily available graphic sources. Piccolpasso's drawings of maiolica painters at work shows drawings or prints pinned up on the walls.

Following the invention of printing in Germany, woodcut and engraving developed rapidly in the second half of the 15th century. The works of Martin Schongauer and Albrecht Durer were much admired in Italy. Durer especially was widely copied by Italian engravers. Not surprisingly, many Istoriato painters

in the first quarter of the 16th century employed versions of engravings by the two German artists.

It was not until about 1520, when the influence of Raphael had become all pervasive in Italian art that Italian engravings became the main source material for Istoriato maiolica. In the decade prior to his untimely death Raphael and the engraver Marcantonio Raimondi worked closely in the production of numerous engravings based on the great artist's drawings and those of his pupils. Such was their success that the "Raphael style" came to be the dominant factor in Italian engraving.

Another source of composition were illustrated books, the most popular being the set of woodcuts from the Italian prose paraphrase of the METAMORPHOSES by Ovid. Illustrated editions of Roman historians were similarly scoured for ideas.

Every Rinascimento artist, in whatever medium, knew, without needing a model, what a Madonna & Child or a Diana & Actaeon, should look like. Decorative patterns of the types illustrated by Piccolpasso, and the 'grotesques' characteristic of Urbino maiolica of the late 16th century are, similarly, part of the shared language. However much, or little, maiolica painters adapted or added to their iconographic models, and however sophisticated or primitive the models themselves, the coloured ceramic object which resulted was a new work of art, a product of the technical and stylistic traditions of a particular workshop. A 'close copy' of a Marcantonio print on a Faenza plate of 1525 is a very different thing from one made in Urbino in 1550.

The door of the back bar swung open as I rose to get another drink. *The syncopated beat of the jazz fusion band burst in like an excited reveller.*

The formula for Istoriato painting which developed in Urbino and Castel Durante in the 1520s and 1530s was a successful and fashionable one. Between 1525-1575 these two towns became the heartland of Istoriato, with the latter the more productive town, and the former the dominant artistic centre. The painter known as 'Nicola da Urbino' was the Raphael of Istoriato maiolica painting. By the 1530s a generation of painters who had grown up under his influence and that of the



other great maiolica painter, Xanto, were fully trained and in command of the Istoriato techniques. A number of them left Urbino to take their skills to other markets, and with them the 'Urbino style' to a series of other centres including: Gubbio, Perugia, Pesaro, Rimini, and the Veneto.

An earlier generation of emigrant Italian potters were among those artists who carried the Rinascimento style all over Europe, and where they settled they brought revolutionary changes. Francisco Niculoso, an Italian living and working in the potters quarter of Triana in Seville found that in Spain, the tile makers were allowed a far greater share in architectural decoration than in his native country and seized his opportunity to work on a monumental scale.

Like many of his countrymen, he probably had his apprenticeship at Faenza, where large wall plaques painted with religious and mythical subjects became familiar to him. However in Spain he created tile pictures painted continuously over a number of square tiles, a technique which seems to have been his own invention. This method became a favourite art form in Spain, spreading to Portugal and the Netherlands, and was eventually introduced back into Italy, for it is possible to see a Spanish influence in a series of 16th century tile pictures in the district around Genoa.

By the mid 16th century the estimation of ceramics and their makers had risen greatly, and as Bodkin observed, "pottery in all its forms was adopted not merely as part of the usual furniture of life but also, in partnership with paintings, sculpture, silversmith work, and embroidery, as a means of providing an atmosphere of beauty for the wealthy Italian arriviste."

From this period begins the long history of derived designs which dominated fine European ceramics until the early 20th century. At first it was necessary; later it became a habit. Almost everyone, potters and public alike, assumed that any decoration worth having must be derived from some work which was already admired, usually with its roots in classical antiquity. This had many ill-effects, but it was not entirely negative, for it introduced a wider range of figurative and decorative designs than ceramics might otherwise have known, and it aroused the interest of a large public,

much of which might otherwise not have reacted at all. Without such interest, many technical developments of porcelain, enamels and stoneware might never have come about and

ceramics might have been relegated to the position of a humble craft, technically almost static; hardly touched by the ideas or needs of the rest of society.

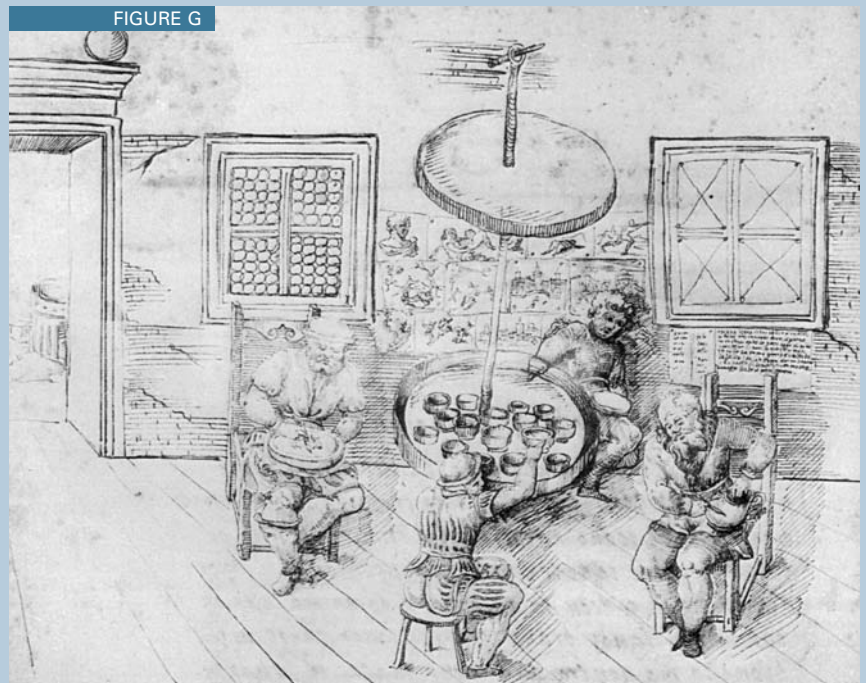


FIGURE G. MAIOLICA PAINTERS IN A WORKSHOP; FROM THE PICCOLPASSO MANUSCRIPT.

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