

Room 17 English

Hispano-Moorish ceramics

Medieval Europe did not overlook ceramic art, as the museum's collections testify, in particular its pavement tiles. But these works were intended for everyday, routine use and, until the end of the 14th century, no ceremonial ceramics were produced. Precious dishware, in particular, was made exclusively by goldsmiths.

Influences and techniques

It was via two Islamic states, one in decline – the Nasrid Kingdom of Granada – and the other on the ascent – the Ottoman Empire – that the production of fine ceramic dishware, imitating Persian and Turkmenian works, was to emerge on the continent. While Iznik ceramics, not at their height until the 16th century, had to withstand competition from Chinese porcelain and focused on blue and white decors, Hispanic ceramics used a much broader palette of colours from the outset, introducing two fundamental technical innovations in particular.

Faïence

The first, destined for the great success it still enjoys today, was the use of a tin glaze, entirely coating items with a white layer, called faïence after the Italian town of Faenza, which specialised in this type of production at the end of the 15th century.

Metallic lustre

The second was a feature of Spanish production: after a first firing, the application of glaze and a décor of cobalt blue, copper green and manganese brown followed by a second firing, the potter applied a gold, silver or copper metallic lustre, before firing the items a third time, using a technique that was first developed in Persia in the 9th century.

Production and market

Local production

On the Iberian peninsula at the end of the 14th century, production moved from its original location in Malaga, in the Kingdom of Granada, to two towns, named Manisès and Paterna, near Valencia. Although they were in Christian territory, the potters, who may have come from Andalusia, were Muslims. This is revealed not only by the decorative repertory that they used but also by the Arabic inscriptions found on some pieces (for example, this bowl housed in the museum, A. Cl. 9318).

The European market

Market-related factors, however, probably also explain this relocation of production. Indeed, whilst the success of Spanish metallic lustre faïence appears to have been very

limited outside the Nasrid Kingdom in the 14th century, there was nonetheless a high demand throughout Western Europe in the 15th century. Signs of this include the presence of Hispano-Moorish ceramics in the paintings of Hugo Van der Goes, Enguerrand Quarton or Filippino Lippi (fig. 1). Italy especially was extremely fond of these works, which



Valencia region and balad balansiya in the Middle Ages



(fig. 1) Filippino Lippi, *Virgin from the Annunciation*, 1483-1484. San Gimignano, Museo Civico. On the left: general view. Above: detail



A. Cl. 9318



B. Cl. 1978



E. Cl. 2119

was imported in massive quantities. It appears that Majorcan merchants played a crucial role in this trade, which explains not only the attribution of these ceramics to the town of Ynca, near Majorca, in the 19th century, but, above all, the name given by Italian documents to this type of work from the 15th century: *maiolica*, or “majolica” in English. And it was Tuscan craftsmen's imitation of the work produced in the Spanish Levant that gave rise to the faïence industry in Italy, followed by the rest of Europe.

Decorative repertory

Geometric decor

Throughout the 15th century, the ceramic artists of Manisès and Paterna were to extend and transform their decorative repertory. Early pieces, which it is actually difficult to attribute to the Levant rather than Malaga with any certainty, have an essentially geometric décor on the front, sometimes embellished with inverted trees of life or the formula “al afiya”, these two designs initially having an apotropaic value (warding off evil), here used systematically and repeatedly as a decorative motif. As examples of this very early work, the museum houses three large bowls with

9th century

First lustred ceramics in Mesopotamia

End of the 12th century

First faïence ceramics in the West

1238

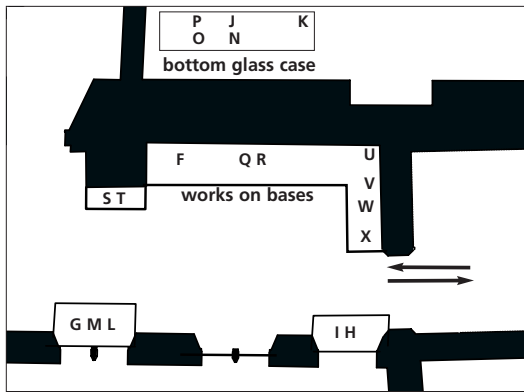
Valencia conquered by James I of Aragon

End of 14th century

Start of the production of lustred faïence in the Spanish Levant

1492

Nasrid Kingdom of Granada conquered by Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon



suspension rings (B. Cl. 1978 - see the illustration over, C. Cl. 2343 and D. Cl. 2420) and two spice or ointment jars, the shape of which was thereafter known as *albarello* in Italy. These were used in pharmacies from the 17th century onwards, hence the name of “apothecaries’ jar” commonly given to these pieces (E. Cl. 2119 and F. Cl. 2120).

Heraldic motifs

The reverse, however, rapidly came to be decorated with large figures, which appear to have derived from heraldic motifs, eagles, fleurs de lys, lions, or, as in the case of plate G. Cl. 2456, an unidentified rodent. But, from the first quarter of the 15th century, these motifs moved to the obverse. Their presence indicates that these plates were intended for a Western European clientele. However, initially these coats of arms appear to have had a purely decorative function. The two oldest plates of this type (H. Cl. 2776 and I. Cl. 2775) depict, in one instance, a crest with an eagle, coats of arms far more common in Imperial lands than in the Hispanic world, and, in the second, a white fleur de lys, which can be linked with the arms of Florence, although, again, this was an extremely common motif. Without indicating a specific commission, these coats of arms clearly indicate that what we see here are plates intended for export. What’s more, these two plates are important since they are the only examples in the museum’s collections of an intermediate production phase, still retaining the blue and gold décor with arabesque and other “al afiya” motifs of early works, but already blending this with elements that were to become characteristic features of the following decades, such as coats of arms or grass seed decors on the reverse.

Coats of arms

From the middle of the 15th century onwards, however, less generic coats of arms began to appear, which can be linked to Italian families, generally Tuscan, such as the arms of Montefiori on dish J. Cl. 2777 or those of the Medicis on dish K. Cl. 2139, “in gold with six neatly arranged balls, five in gules (red) and the top one in azure, containing three

golden fleurs de lys”. This coat of arms has belonged to the family since 1465, when Louis XI authorised Peter I to add three fleurs de lys to his shield, but the plate itself belongs to a much later period, the first quarter of the 16th century. As for the décor, it was embellished with increasingly complex figures: “leaf-feather” motifs (L. Cl. 1687 and M. 2305), described as “bryony-style” after the perennial plant (N. Cl. 13503 a and b), oranges (O. Cl. 2240), ivy leaves in blue or gold or simply in gold (P. Cl. 7647). With its azure heraldic disk with six stars and three golden hedgehogs, this dish is probably one of the finest examples of high-quality lustre in the museum’s collection, achieving a very pure yellow-gold colour through a careful blend of copper and silver.

Hollow vessels

The second half of the 15th century saw the development, alongside dishes hollowed out to varying degrees with flanges that could be more or less pronounced, of hollow vessels, some interesting examples of which can be found in the museum. Alongside a few large drinking vessels, including one with a bryony motif and the monogram “IHS”, which stands for *Ihesus* or Jesus (Q. Cl. 13503 a), the most important is probably the large winged vase bearing unidentified arms with a standing lion (R. Cl. 7647). The counterpart of this vase, housed in the British Museum, bears the coat of arms of Peter Medici and appears to date from immediately after 1465. The fact that these two vases appear to belong to the same commission is an indication of the very marked ceremonial value of these works. Characters or animals rarely cover the entire piece. However, the museum owns two very high-quality examples: two dishes, one depicting two wading birds facing each other (S. Cl. 3220), and the second an upright lion (T. Cl. 9613). In both cases, the potter made precise use of contrasts between mineral pigments and lustre effects to separate contours and body volumes, the latter also merging elegantly with the background decor.

End of production

From the second third of the 16th century onwards, production in the Spanish Levant became increasingly standardised and its quality deteriorated. Gradually, the colourful palette was reduced to straightforward metallic lustre effects, increasingly coppery and at the expense of mineral pigments. However a few pieces demonstrate the survival of some interesting work (U. Cl. 9596 or V. Cl. 9624), sometimes with original shapes (cups W. Cl. 2622 and Cl. 2623, salt cellars X. Cl. 10891 and 10892).

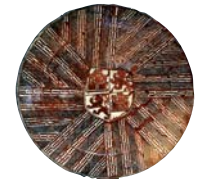
Xavier Dectot, *curator*



I. Cl. 2775



J. Cl. 2777



M. Cl. 2305



O. Cl. 2240



P. Cl. 1686



Q. Cl. 13503a



R. Cl. 7647



S. Cl. 3220

9 th century First lustred ceramics in Mesopotamia	End of the 12 th century First faience ceramics in the West	1238 Valencia conquered by James I of Aragon	End of 14 th century Start of the production of lustred faience in the Spanish Levant	1492 Nasrid Kingdom of Granada conquered by Isabella of Castile and Ferdinand of Aragon
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