

A Neo-Renaissance Italian Majolica Dish

JESSIE McNAB

*Associate Curator, Department of European Sculpture and Decorative Arts,
The Metropolitan Museum of Art*

THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART has a small number of Italian majolicas attributed to Siena that are currently being reassessed. The most elaborate of them is a large dish, or broad, shallow bowl, with a border of grotesques enclosing a representation of Mary Magdalen (Figure 1). The dish came to the Museum in 1922 as a loan from V. Everit Macy, who gave it as part of a large gift of majolica in 1927 in memory of his wife, Edith Carpenter Macy. The provenance of the dish is not known.¹

The Magdalen dish was published as Sienese, early sixteenth century, in an article devoted to Mr. Macy's gift of majolica, which appeared in the Museum's *Bulletin* for June 1927.² At the time, this seemed an obvious attribution to make. The dish exhibits the organization of grotesques framing a saint found on other early-sixteenth-century Sienese pieces in well-known European collections,³ and its particular design is close to a Sienese plate in the Victoria and Albert Museum dated to about 1510. That plate has a wide, horizontal rim and deep well and is decorated with a border of grotesques and a half figure of the Magdalen (Figure 2). In coloring, the Metropolitan Museum's dish resembles that of a pharmacy jar, or "albarello," purchased by the Museum in 1923 from Langton Douglas (Figure 3). The albarello, decorated with grotesques in reserve on an orange ground, is dated 1515. Langton Douglas believed that it came from the famous hospital attached to the church of Santa Maria della Scala in Siena on a site opposite the Cathedral. A devoted student of Sienese history, Douglas later published an important article which cited documentary evidence to show that the official potter to the hospital in the early sixteenth century was one Maestro Benedetto.⁴ Benedetto's connection with the hospital was dramatically illustrated by a fragment of majolica

discovered by Douglas during an excavation of the hospital garden in the early part of the century. The fragment has a partial inscription that matches one on the underside of a dish in the Victoria and Albert Museum which reads "fata i siena da m^o Benedetto." The obverse of the dish is decorated with St. Jerome contemplating a skull, within a border of leaves on a tightly curling stem and the reverse has a lightly painted wreath of foliage.⁵ This dish, painted in light and dark blue and white, and the Museum's polychrome albarello, painted in blue, orange, yellow, red, turquoise green, and black, suggest a range of wares attributable to Maestro Benedetto; he was apparently both the owner of and an experienced painter in a majolica pottery.

Sienese potters were making tin-glazed wares in the fifteenth century, but the earliest polychrome pieces attributed to Siena are an albarello in the Musée de Cluny dated 1500⁶ and one in the Victoria and Albert Museum dated 1501.⁷ Both are decorated rather loosely with a few large motifs from the vocabulary of antique ornament: foliage, cornucopias, rosettes, and masks. Pinturicchio arrived in Siena in 1502 to execute frescoes and ceiling decorations in the space in the cathedral recently set aside for the reception of the library of Pope Pius II (Aeneas Sylvius Piccolomini, 1405–64). He introduced a large range of "grotesque" ornament,⁸ also derived from the antique but inhabited by fantastic figures such as chimeras, sphinxes, dolphins, trophies, birds, dragons, and serpents, often with human heads, from the ornament of Roman wall decoration from the early first century B.C. Although antique ornament was known from surviving architecture above ground, where it appeared in plastic form, painted grotesques on tinted plaster walls were found for the first time when rooms in villas and palaces dating from the late Republic and the



1. Dish, St. Mary Magdalen, ca. 1840–50 in the manner of Sienese majolica of about 1510–15. Majolica, Diam. 16¾ in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Gift of V. Everit Macy in memory of his wife, Edith Carpenter Macy, 1927, 27.97.37

principate of Augustus were entered underground, in the late fifteenth century, causing a sensation among artists and classicists alike. Pinturicchio used grotesques in the Piccolomini Library frescoes, and this influence must surely be seen in the designs of the floor tiles for an important room in the palazzo of Pandolfo Petrucci, the ruler of Siena.⁹ According to dates found on the tiles themselves, these were produced between 1509 and 1513. It is reasonable to suppose that these majolica floor tiles were made in a workshop capable of producing superior wares, probably that of Maestro Benedetto,¹⁰ from designs supplied, or at least approved, by Pinturicchio, who was in charge of the overall decorative scheme of both interiors.

Some early Sieneese majolica dishes show an influence coming directly from Piccolomini. This can be seen in the observance of Pinturicchio's idiosyncracies in drawing the human figure—the mythical figures, as on the "Narcissus" plate at the National Gallery, Washington, are rather squat and doll-like and the historical figures are heroically heightened but with tiny feet and a strange articulation of the legs, as seen on the St. James dish in the Victoria and Albert and the St. Bartholomew dish in the British Museum. Another dish in the British Museum, ensigned with the arms of Petrucci and decorated with Pan between two shepherds, within a border of grotesques, demonstrates a slightly different style of draftsmanship.¹¹ It also has bands of knot design based directly on those found in the library frescoes. One consistent small detail in particular, derived from the manner of delineating certain leaf ornaments in the library grotesques, is also seen on Sieneese majolicas. It is to be observed on the Museum's albarello below the mouths of the dolphins and to each side of the masks. Regardless of the differences in draftsmanship and levels of skill in execution, the character of early Sieneese majolicas (most of which have tin-glazed, decorated backs) is that of luxury wares for discriminating patrons, who required the work to be made in accordance with the very latest artistic developments.

The Metropolitan Museum's Magdalen dish offers a contrast to these pieces. The draftsmanship is stilted in the center and rather careless in the border, yet it has none of the confident freedom and exuberance of the Museum's albarello. A lively rhythm between borders and central pictorial composition is achieved in other Sieneese dishes through the placement of a lightly ornamented or totally unornamented space between them; also, the border designs relate asymmetrically to the

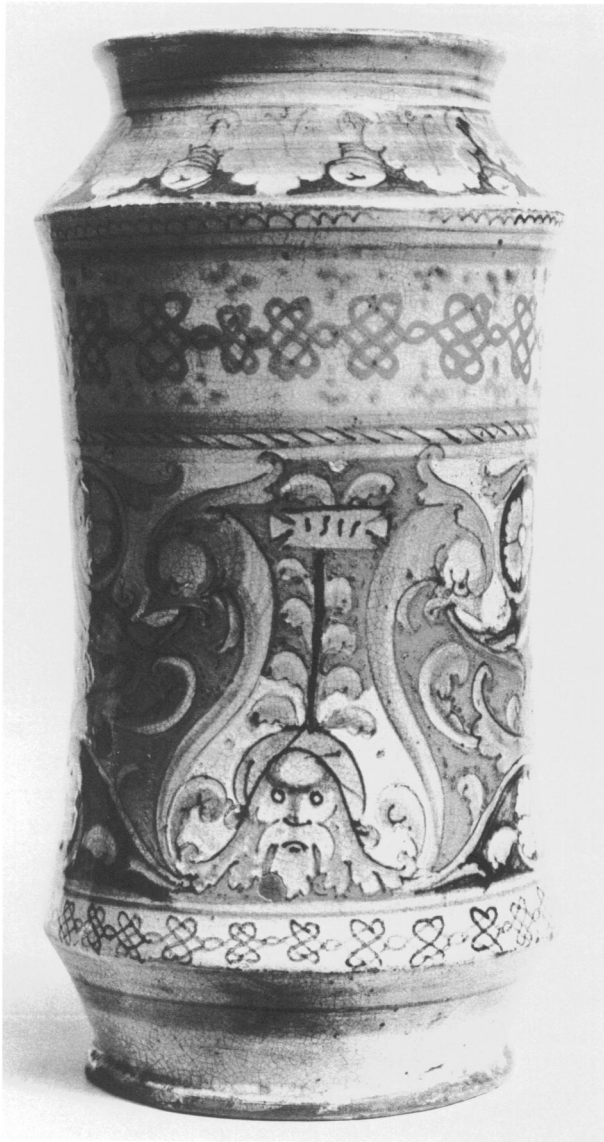


2. Plate, St. Mary Magdalen, Siena, ca. 1510. Majolica, Diam. 8 $\frac{7}{8}$ in. Courtesy the Trustees of the Victoria and Albert Museum (photo: Victoria and Albert Museum)

vertical axis of the pictorial scene, which gives a sense of continuous circular motion around the circumference. The Museum's dish has none of these aesthetic refinements: the concentric borders are close together, and the strong accent of the outer border lies directly on the vertical axis of the pictorial composition.

There are also differences in color. On the Metropolitan's dish there is a leaf green instead of the usual turquoise green, no black, and no use of white for highlights. The orange ground of the dish is slightly browner and less brilliant than that of the albarello, while the red of the albarello is more vermillion and lively and the yellow is a sharper lemon color than their equivalent tones on the dish. The reverse of the dish is entirely undecorated. The clay body of the albarello is of a brick red color, while that of the dish is a very pale cream.

The shape of the Museum's dish is not found among Siena pieces and appears to be a variant of those made in Caffaggiolo and Florence in the early sixteenth century



3. Albarello, dated 1515, Siena, from the workshop of Maestro Benedetto. Majolica, H. 10 in. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1923, 23.166

and in Montelupo from the sixteenth to the early seventeenth century (Figure 4).¹² The base, now almost imperceptibly concave,¹³ has been ground flat at the perimeter, so we must assume that it originally possessed a relatively broad foot rim (Figure 5). The dish warped considerably in its first firing; the underside is ridged (Figure 6).

The body received a white slip before the white tin glaze. The tin glaze, the "bianco," is exceedingly meager with many tiny round spots or flecks of the opacifying

agent occurring throughout. The bianco was painted in blue, orange, yellow, grass green, and finally red, in that order. The red, which appears crimson when seen with the surrounding colors, is more of a chestnut brown when seen in isolation. It is in fact the fine iron-rich clay, or "bole," that served for red.

After painting, the dish was given a covering of clear glaze back and front, the "coperta." The coperta reacted oddly with the red, which caused bubbles or spitting in the firing process, and this left tiny, circular areas on its surface bare of glaze. Deeper pitting in the bianco and down into the body, also caused by spitting during the final firing, can be seen in the flat of the dish. The large smudged area at the rim is also evidence of an accident in the kiln. Another dish or its support may have fallen against it, dragging the surface of the glaze and sticking to the dish, leaving a scar, which has been partly removed by grinding. Much of the rim edge has also been ground smooth down to the body. The obverse has no cracks in its glaze surface and appears relatively fresh. The underside is poorly finished.

The painted decoration is disappointing in execution as well as in design. The larger, outer border is divided into six segments by tall, narrow anthemion motifs (Figure 7). In each segment the decoration is symmetrical, but consistently drifts off center, to the right. The segments are occupied by torches flanked by cornucopias, surmounted alternately by masks and leaf buds. The scrolling ends of the cornucopias meet behind the torches, turn away in a hairpin bend, and finish in tight scrolls at the base of the anthemion motifs. Taken together, these establish a strong rhythm and indeed describe a hexagon around the plate. Within this is a narrow ring of blue on which is painted a circlet of round and rectangular beads in exaggerated perspective, which frames the main scene of the Magdalen. A very similar circlet of beads occurs as a bordering decoration on a Sienese plate in Washington.¹⁴

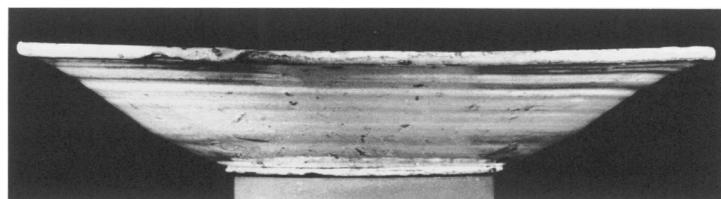
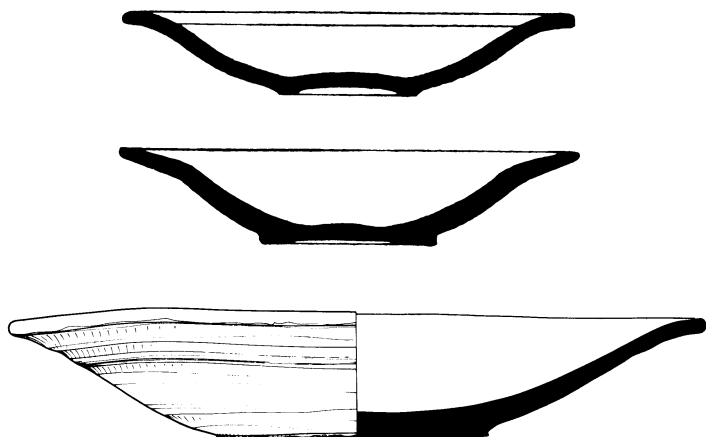
The saint is painted in blue monochrome, overpainted with yellow for the hair and with red for the cord knotted at her breast. She is backed by a cloud achieved by close, horizontally zigzagging brushstrokes in blue with washes of yellow and orange giving the scene a suggestion of sunset.

Below the image of the saint, to the left and right, low hills and mountains of boulders are perfunctorily indicated and placed disconcertingly in the foreground, and two trees—an orange tree and a sapling of some indeterminate species—sprout from the edges of the rocks

as though from invisible toeholds between crevices (Figure 8). The orange tree has its trunk, branches, and leaves outlined in blue and then painted in pale green, with touches of red for fruit; but the sapling is rendered entirely by the brush in blue monochrome. Both are totally out of scale with the part they play in the overall composition. Bushes painted in the same blue monochrome calligraphic technique as the sapling are on each side. Fernlike plants, also in blue, are suggested by radiating lines of dots springing from a curved base line. Squeezed into the space between these landscape elements is a town within a crenellated and turreted wall. Within the wall is a large building with a lantern prominently crowning the dome and tall, narrow towers of the type used for dwellings by the Italian nobility before the introduction of Renaissance palazzi.

In general, the Museum's Magdalen dish presents a largely blue monochrome scene within a polychrome double border; but it lacks the tension and unity found in other Sieneese pieces as it is relatively empty in composition, slack in arrangement, and awkward in details. In the hope that at least the question of where it was made might be settled, the piece was included among a group of majolicas tested by thermoluminescence in 1977. The test, conducted by Dr. Gary Cariveau at the Brookhaven National Laboratory, showed that the piece was "not old" and did not share the same elemental composition of clay as a drug jar with strap handle of a

4. Profile drawings of shapes found at Caffaggiolo, early 16th century (top); Montelupo, early 17th century (middle); and of the Museum's dish, drawn by William Shank, 1988 (bottom)



5. Base and underside of the Museum's dish



6. Underside of the dish

type Rackham called "indubitably Sieneese." The finding that it did not match up with a Sieneese example was not unexpected, but the conclusion that it was not old met with some skepticism. In 1987 new drillings from the dish were taken by Mrs. Doreen Stonham, who then tested them at the Oxford Laboratory for Archaeology and the History of Art in England.¹⁵ The dish was again found to be "young"; this time there was an additional comment that, although the clay was a very difficult one to analyze, in no event could the piece have been fired before the middle of the eighteenth century at the earliest. If the result of the thermoluminescence test is accepted, the date of manufacture can be narrowed to after 1750



7. Border on the dish

and before 1922, when we hear of it for the first time as a loan from Mr. Macy.

A comparison of the two figures of Mary Magdalen helps to find a point of distinction between them which does indicate a difference in time. In the plate in the Victoria and Albert Museum, the saint is presented as a young, beautiful woman enveloped by her hair but with the outline of a perfect feminine form clearly visible beneath, and with an explicit acknowledgment and demonstration of her nudity where her hair does not meet across her front. In a recent study of the iconography of Mary Magdalen in the legendary period of her life in the south of France that followed the Resurrection, Monika Ingenhoff-Dannhauser has shown that the beautiful nude Magdalen was a type of the saint that did not develop until the late fifteenth century. Interest in the nude, characteristic of the Italian Renaissance, was then

carried over into the iconography of Mary Magdalen, which had already received an accumulation of features properly belonging to St. Agnes (with ankle-length, all-concealing hair) and St. Mary the Egyptian (a sun-burned, naked, and emaciated penitent).¹⁶ The moment when Mary Magdalen is surrounded by angels refers to her life as a solitary for thirty years in the desolate country outside Beaune in Provence. Seven times a day, at the canonical hours, she was lifted up to heaven by angels who brought her heavenly food.¹⁷ She was normally shown looking heavenward. However, some pictures of the saint show her looking down at St. Zosima, a hermit who once witnessed her elevation and was considerably disturbed by the event. This is the explanation for the position of the head in the depictions of the saint on both majolica dishes. The type introduced in Italy at the end of the fifteenth century, which is found on the plate in



8. Center composition of the dish

the Victoria and Albert Museum, is understandably found on a dish made in Siena around 1510, a time when a leading artist with his assistants had been working on large schemes for the two most important powers in the city, the Church and the civil ruler, as well as other important private clients. The saint on the Museum's dish belongs to an earlier iconographic type, totally concealed and shrouded by her hair, which leaves only her face and hands in view. (Apparently kneeling, she is in fact a standing figure awkwardly cut off at mid-thigh.) Totally enveloped and concealed by her hair, she is neither

the naked, emaciated penitent of the Early Renaissance nor the long-haired, beautiful sinner of the later Renaissance, but a mere girl with a childlike face recalling a type current in the Middle Ages. This mixture of references is more consonant with a date in the mid-nineteenth century than in the early sixteenth century.

The central composition in the Museum's dish appears to be a conflation of landscape elements from known Sieneese majolicas. The trees,¹⁸ hills, and rocks (themselves derived in turn from contemporary Italian paintings and frescoes, very often from the landscape backgrounds in

the Pinturicchio frescoes) are themselves accurate depictions of common Italian arboreal and geological features. Here they are combined with a figure of the saint possibly obtained from a fifteenth-century woodcut or from an "approved" source of the Counter-Reformation and combined again with a view of a town within its walls, like those found in paintings.¹⁹

The dish thus becomes, most probably, a representative of a nineteenth-century production of neo-Renaissance majolica made by traditional techniques. The impulse for its creation might be the interest, awakening in Italy around the 1830s, in art of the Early Renaissance. The ceramic aspect of this revival has been very little studied, although silver and furniture created in the same spirit have been isolated by art historians for several decades since World War II. It is unlikely that the Museum's

dish is the only survivor of the workshop where it was devised and made, and there is every possibility that more majolicas made under the same impulse will eventually be identified.

The question as to where the Museum's Magdalen dish may have been made has not been settled through the analysis of the clay. The dish has a very pale body and possibly is a result of the mixture of clays, which by the nineteenth century had become a fairly widespread practice in potteries all over Europe. Because the procedures used in the manufacture of the dish are traditional majolica ones, it is reasonable to suppose that it was made in Italy. Parallel to the survival of traditional techniques is the fact that convincing large dishes were made in Deruta in the nineteenth century in the style of its own sixteenth-century productions.

NOTES

1. Mr. Macy offered the dish as a loan to the Museum in the summer of 1922, remarking in his letter that he had recently bought it from Jacques Seligmann and Co.

2. C. Louise Avery, "A Princely Gift of Renaissance Majolica" in *MMAB* 22 (1927) p. 163, ill.

3. Bernard Rackham, *Catalogue of Italian Maiolica* (London, 1940) I, nos. 374–376, 380; II, pls. 59, 60; Timothy Wilson, *Ceramic Art of the Italian Renaissance* (London, 1987) no. 136, p. 98, ill.; Jeanne Giacomotti, *Les majoliques des musées nationaux* (Paris, 1974) no. 408, p. 111.

4. R. Langton Douglas, "A Note on Maestro Benedetto," *Burlington Magazine* 71 (1939) pp. 89–90. This was a prestigious appointment; the wealthy Ospedale della Scala was the most famous public hospital in Italy, with a significant record of art patronage for the decoration of the hospital itself and branches throughout Tuscany and even farther afield. Such was the confidence placed in the hospital that it often served as a banking agent for the commune, which appointed its rector after 1404, asserting the secular origin of its institution, long a matter of contention between the commune and the canons of the cathedral.

5. Rackham, *Catalogue* I, no. 373, pl. 59, ill.; Wilson, *Ceramic Art*, no. 133, p. 89, ill.

6. Giacomotti, *Les majoliques*, no. 402, p. 110, ill.

7. Rackham, *Catalogue* I, no. 364, pl. 58, ill.

8. The contract for the decoration by Pinturicchio of the Piccolomini Library, dated 1502, expressly calls for the inclusion of grotesque ornament in the ceiling; in the event, however, there are also a notable number of vertically arranged grotesques presented as relief ornament on the pilasters, painted as trompe l'oeil architectural features between the pictorial frescoes on the library's walls.

9. A number of these have survived; see Rackham, *Catalogue* I, no. 386, pl. 62, ill.

10. Giacomotti, *Les majoliques*, p. 105, notes that Giovanni Andrea da Faenza, another Faentine potter, was also active at

the same time in Siena, although he has not been identified with any surviving Siena pieces.

11. Wilson, *Ceramic Art*, no. 134, col. ill.

12. It is not exactly shape 6 or 8 in Rackham, *Catalogue* I, no. 456; see also Guido Vannini, *La majolica di Montelupo*, pls. XIX, XX, XVIII. There are variations in the thickness of potting, curve of the inner and outer profiles, bases, and presence of foot rims. The Museum's dish appears originally to have had some kind of foot rim.

13. This was noticed by William Shank, the Museum's draftsman, in the course of making the profile drawing in Figure 4.

14. A similar circlet of beads is found on the Siena "Narcissus" plate of about 1510 in the National Gallery, Washington. See Deborah Shinn, *Sixteenth Century Majolica* (Washington, 1982) no. 6.

15. Mrs. Stonham also tested drillings from the Museum's albarelo and concluded that it was last fired between 380 and 590 years ago, a time span whose midpoint falls almost directly on the year 1515, which is the date inscribed on the piece.

16. Monika Ingenhoff-Dannhauser, *Maria Magdalena, Heilige und Sünderin der italienischen Renaissance* (Tübingen, 1984) pp. 4–12.

17. This is explicitly stated in the Golden Legend, a compilation of current legends published in 1235 by Jacobus de Voragine. See E. Willis, ed., *The Golden Legend or Lives of the Saints as Englished by William Caxton* IV (London, 1890) pp. 82–83.

18. The inclusion of two trees, one in monochrome and one colored, to each side of the central scene may have been suggested by those on the Pan dish in the British Museum. This dish has been publicly known since it was acquired for the British Museum from the Bernal collection in 1856.

19. For example, the town lying below a heavenly scene is almost a mirror image of that in a Coronation of the Virgin attributed to the Master of the St. Louis Madonna. See Miklos Boskovits, *Tuscan Paintings of the Early Renaissance* (New York, 1969) fig. 41.