

Malta's



Illustration: Vanessa Woods

Majolica

A fabulous national collection of ceramics from the 16th-19th centuries will form the basis of a new Valletta museum, the Maiolica Vaults. Text: Lara Strickland

Among the many beautiful objects to be found in Malta's national collection is a 500-strong collection of maiolica: tin-glazed earthenware fired at temperatures ranging between 550 and 1150 degrees centigrade. It was once mistakenly believed that the term 'maiolica' was derived from the island of Majorca, also known as Majorica or Majolica, which was a transit point for shipments of ceramic ware from Valencia, in Spain, to Italy. Yet the technique was taken to Spain from the Middle East, where it originated, and from there it found its way to Italy where, in the 16th century, it reached its peak.

Today, most of Malta's maiolica is displayed at the National Museum of Fine Arts in Valletta. Many pieces decorate the presidential palaces, while others remain in storage. At the end of this year, the entire collection will be gathered under one roof in a new museum, the Maiolica Vaults, in the basement of the Auberge de Castille. The project is coordinated by the Office of the Prime Minister.

For the first time, this collection is undergoing serious study. It had been thought that the greater part came from Caltagirone, a small hilltop town in eastern Sicily, which has for many centuries been famous for the production of ceramics. Research has since revealed that, although Caltagirone was a prolific supplier, other Sicilian towns - including Trapani, Sciacca, Palermo, and Messina - also played an important part in the manufacture and supply of ceramics for Malta. Other pieces in the national collection can, on stylistic grounds, be attributed to Venetian manufacturers. In several cases, the hand of the *maestro* can be clearly detected.

A vast number of maiolica pieces appears to have been commissioned by the Knights of the Order of St. John, for use in the pharmacies of the Santo Spirito Hospital in Rabat, and in the Holy Infirmary - now the Mediterranean Conference Centre - at the lower end

of Valletta. Large, two-handled amphorae bear the arms of the Grandmasters De Vilhena and Perellos, while smaller vases are decorated with the arms of the Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt. The earliest drug jars in the collection can be dated to the mid-16th century, although these are exceptions. The vast majority date to the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries, and are typical mainly of Venetian and Caltagironesi production, with circular panels incorporating portraits, coats-of-arms, landscapes, or simple floral, vegetal, and peacock feather motifs.

The shapes of these jars differ according to their intended use. By far the most popular shape is that of the *albarelllo*, or dry drug jar. Its slender, cylindrical and slightly waisted shape was taken from the Near East, and became popular in pharmacies in Italy only in the 15th century. Being waisted, it was easy to take hold of when lined up with others along a shelf, and its slightly everted rim allowed a parchment or similar cover to be put on and tied down. One theory is that the floral decoration painted on the outside gave an indication as to the drug inside, but this is debatable.

Other shapes include the wet or spouted drug jar, which was used to hold syrups, honey, and oils; the globular *bombe*, which were used for roots and plants; and *boccie*, which are large Venetian ovoid jars with long necks, thought to have been used for water or wine. Flowerpots with painted and applied decoration, and the famous owl jars, or *civette* as they were commonly referred to, fall under the heading of domestic maiolica, and were probably not used in the Order's pharmacies at all.

Malta's maiolica collection is rich in variety and depth, and may be favourably compared with other collections at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and the Sicilian museums of Caltagirone, Palermo, Trapani, and Messina. HF

