Tomato Tomah-to, Disegno Design: Italian Ceramics in Cultural Perspective

Design, as an area of scholarly inquiry, is one of many that the study of material culture brings together in new and unique ways. And graphic design, as a specific discipline with a relatively recent history (its very name first coined by William Addison Dwiggins in 1922), often receives short-shrift in the grand narrative otherwise known as Art History. So, if graphic design is the art of combining text, pictures, and ideas, then graphic design-like activities have a history that reaches far back in time – from the caves of Lascaux to the Roman Column of Trajan to medieval illuminated manuscripts and so on. Thus, the intent of this paper is to look back into the past and examine some of the types and popularity of these graphic design-like activities, such as 16th century Italian istoriato (literally, “story painted”) lead-glazed earthenware.

Design, of course, was everything in the Renaissance. Indeed, the physical act of drawing, or disegno in Italian, assumed particular prominence in 16th century Italy – due in large part to the fact that up until the late 15th century, the expense and limited availability of drawing surfaces (what we so casually refer to as “paper” today) meant that not a lot of artists made preparatory sketches. Most artists either drew on parchment (made from the skin of calves, sheep, or goats) or vellum – also made from the skin of young animals, which was therefore very expensive. Since the cost of materials mattered, artists, in turn, made the most of their drawings – in other words, drawings that were typically extremely detailed and meticulously executed. But with the advent of the 16th century also came the introduction of less expensive “paper” made from fibrous
pulp, and artists could literally better afford to experiment more, thereby drawing with increased freedom and fluidity of line.

But perhaps even more important was the realization that the importance of drawing went *beyond* its mechanical or technical possibilities because *disegno* also means “design”, and already as of the 16th century, “design” was discussed as the foundation of art, with drawing as the fundamental element of design. Typically, we tend to talk about Raphael as a great *painter* but he was also a “great” designer: he designed a number and variety of stucco interior decorations for the papal apartments in the Vatican in addition to designing tapestries, such as the large-scale cycle hanging inside the Sistine Chapel depicting the life of Christ.

Speaking of painting, by the 16th century there was a persistent demand for brightly painted and imported *maiolica* wares – tin-glazed earthenware – which generated serious interest in the process among Italian ceramicists, such that, eventually, not only were there several centers of Italian-produced lusterware, soon-to-be called *maiolica*, but also Italian potters soon created a new ornamental language, which was unique to the Italians because by 1500 the influence of ornament and subject matter from ancient Rome was *huge*, as were new “technologies” such as printing (Johannes Gutenberg is credited with having invented the printing press around 1450), woodcuts, and engravings. Potters could now use or transcribe scenes from engravings as the source for their paintings on pottery, and by 1510, a fully narrative style was born, which is particularly significant because in terms of some of the art objects produced during the Renaissance, *istoriato* pottery *had no precedent* in ancient Greece or Rome. We know this, in part, because Giorgio Vasari, chronicler of the lives of artists of the Renaissance, commented upon
how “the Romans were not aware of this type of painting on pottery. The vessels from those days that have been found filled with the ashes of their dead are covered with figures incised and washed-in with one color …, but never with the brilliance of glaze … nor variety of painting … which has been seen” in the Renaissance.

Between 1525 and 1575, the “happening” centers of istoriato maiolica were Urbino and the nearby town of Castel Durante. Although quantitatively, Castel Durante may have been the more productive town, most of the best istoriato painters seemed to have worked in Urbino. There is, therefore, a noticeable homogeneity within the “Urbino style”.

Sixteenth-century istoriato pottery was an up-market product – not as expensive as silver or Chinese porcelain – but one definitely seen as an art form. As painting, maiolica has preserved its original and vivid color; as an index of taste, it offers a large body of non-religious subject matter; but also as a form of ceramics – often considered a “minor art” based on divisions established in the writings of Leon Battista Alberti in the fifteenth century, who focused on the importance of the intellectual skills of the artist rather than on his or her manual skills – maiolica came closer to the “major” arts like painting and sculpture more than at any other time in the history of world ceramics.

The finest istoriato pieces were collectors items and for actual use only very rarely: (1) Broad-rimmed bowl with the arms of Isabella d’Este, c 1525. Part of a set painted by Nicola da Urbino and after nearly 500 years, very few scratches or chips, which would have been inevitable, had they been used with any regularity at Isabella’s table. This is not to say, of course, that maiolica pieces weren’t used; it’s just that it wasn’t long before maiolica sets were being specially designed by major artists and
commissioned by or presented to some of the most powerful men in Europe at the time. Some *maiolica* painters even began to think of themselves as being on the same level as artists like Raphael or Michelangelo and subsequently signed and dated their works.

Case in point: Nicola da Urbino, considered by many to be the “Raphael” of *maiolica* painting. His early work, which dates around 1520 and is the earliest identified with *istoriato* from the Urbino region, brought grace and lyricism to the figural style. Nicola, more than anyone else, created a “classic” style of High Renaissance *maiolica*. Here, the arms and motto (*NEC SPE NEC METU* – “neither hope nor fear”) are Isabella’s, a major art collector of her time, and wife of Francesco Gonzaga, duke of Mantua, whose own *impresa* or emblem of a gold bar being dipped into flames can also be seen on the plate.

Twenty-one pieces survive, all painted by Nicola, and all, except two biblical subjects, are mythological scenes: *(L)* = story is about Apollo killing the monster Python; *(TOP)* = cupid kindling Apollo’s love for Daphne; *(R)* = Daphne being rescued from the unwelcome amorous advances of Apollo by being turned into a laurel tree; *(BOTTOM)* = figure based on ancient statue of river god. The inspiration comes from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* – a poem of 250 myths and considered the most comprehensive, creative mythological work from antiquity. Completed in the year 8 C.E. and very popular in his own time. Indeed, Ovidian graffiti even found on walls in Pompeii!

These stories read like chivalric tales and provide a *popular* face of Renaissance Humanism. Part of what made Nicola’s work so graphically successful was how he arranged his figures in a landscape and filled the otherwise awkward spaces of *maiolica* plates: *(2)* *Dish, c. 1525 (41.6 cm ~ 16 ¼”)*
Painted for the Calini family, whose arms are in the middle supported by putti, which is then surrounded by white on white or bianco sobre bianco with a very faint palm or anthemion motif. On the rim, LEFT to RIGHT is Apollo playing the lyre; Timolus; Pan playing pipes; Pan defeated; Midas; Timolus again; and Apollo playing Renaissance string instrument, lira de braccio. Reflects the story of a music competition between Apollo and Pan. The judge was the mountain god, Timolus, who awarded the prize to Apollo. King Midas was given the ears of a jackass for disagreeing. Again, the source is Ovid.

While not painted by Nicola, (3a) the Cafaggiolo plate, c1510 depicts a maiolica painter at work on a dish with two aristocratic patrons watching. The painter is dressed as well as the patrons and is therefore a reflection of the status of the painter! In the early 16th century a workshop had been set-up in the castle of Cafaggiolo under the patronage of a younger branch of the Medici family. Here, the couple depicted has just been betrothed so the function of the plate is commemorative. The painter, known as “Master Jacopo,” was influenced by Florentine visual culture, especially the paintings of Botticelli: (3b) Primavera, 1482.

Like Nicola da Urbino, Francesco Xanto Avelli was also from Urbino. Indeed, the “allover” painting on plate becomes a recognizable “style” of Urbino painters. “Xanto” as the latter was more common called, signed and dated his work, wrote poetry (poets had high status in the Renaissance, higher than visual artists, especially in the early Renaissance), invented his own moral and political allegories, and ultimately described himself as a painter – (4a) Plate, 1531 (about 26 cm ~ 12 1/4”) – sometimes adding
informative notes on the backside, which now help us get an idea of what he read and what his interests were.

Xanto also seems to have thought of himself as a man of culture. Was well-read in Italian poetry and had a knowledge of classical literature from antiquity. He even illustrated one of his own poems on a low-footed dish. On other pieces, he illustrated contemporary political events or came up with elaborate moral allegories. Signed his works more regularly than any other maiolica painter before (or since). And like Nicola da Urbino, his figure-style is also grounded in the Marcantonio-school of engravings:


Re (4a), Aeneas is carrying his father, Anchises, with his son Ascanius. It’s a story about the end of the Trojan War and the journey from Troy (his father was the cousin of King Priam of Troy) to Italy where Aeneas became the ancestor of the Romans as recounted in Virgil’s Aeneid. (Aeneas is also a character in Homer’s Iliad.) Hanging from the tree, is a shield of arms depicting Hercules and the lion. This plate comprises part of a set possibly made for a wealthy family from Ferrara.

(4c) Broad-rimmed bowl, 1533 (about 25.7 cm ~ 10.12”) Depicted on this broad-rimmed bowl is a story from a Greek legend, although the figures are from different engravings. Greek priest – Amphiaraus – tries to avoid taking part in attack on Thebes, foresees his own death, so he hides, but his wife – Eriphyle – was bribed with a pretty necklace and betrays his hiding place to a soldier, Polynices.

It is unclear how many workshops in the Urbino district were producing istoriato in the middle of the 16th century and many of these works are not marked and dated. Still, as already mentioned, the homogeneity of the “Urbino style” is quite recognizable:
(5) Plate from Urbino, 1542, with Hercules carrying the “pillars of Hercules”.

Beneath a prelate’s black hat is a shield of arms with an oak tree. Although the arms remain unidentified, the painter is called the “Painter of the della Rovere dishes” as there are four other similar pieces with these arms, and since the oak leaf/acorn was a symbol of the della Rovere family – the family name of two Renaissance popes, Sixtus IV and Julius II – hence, the interpretation, albeit a dubious one.

(6a) Dish, perhaps Urbino, c1545 is about the conversion of Saul to Paul. A very ambitious composition. Echoes Michelangelo’s painting of the same subject in the Cappella Paolina in the Vatican: (6b) 1542-5. Stylistically reminiscent of Nicola da Urbino, although some pieces in this style may have been made by artists from the Urbino district working in Venice.

From around 1500 maiolica design began to increasingly reflect the influence of ancient Rome, and elements of Roman architectural and sculptural ornament had been used throughout the fifteenth century but a fashion for fantastic painted ornament in the classical manner developed – (7a) Pharmacy Jar, 1519 – after the accidental discovery in the late fifteenth century of the painted rooms of Emperor Nero’s “The Golden House” – the palace built before he died in 68 C.E. – and the style was subsequently called “grotesque” after the word “grotto,” as in a type of cave or underground chamber, like the bedrooms, bathrooms, studies, living rooms, et cetera that were found underground in Rome – underground because after the death of Nero, the palace and its ground were filled with dirt and built over. These “grotto paintings” were eagerly copied and diffused via sketchbooks and prints of ornament, and so the word came to be used loosely for describing decoration incorporating bizarre monsters and fantasies.
The Pharmacy Jar, from a workshop in Castel Durante, has two pairs of “monsters” flanking a garland containing a shield of arms. Once again the use of printware or prints is very important – gave potters access to high culture mediated through prints (as will continue to be the case with the advent and design of porcelain products in Europe). Also, it’s about the dilution of the High Renaissance style or the popularization of Renaissance Humanism.

And then there’s the “Bella Donne”. Like istoriato painting, another type of painting subject:  (7b) Dish, Deruta, 1513. Subject inspired by Petrarch’s poems about his great unrequited love, Laura, and then elaborated upon by other poets, like Boccaccio (who published his On Famous Women in 1361), which was itself inspired by Petrarch’s collection of lives of famous men. (Petrarch, along with the author Dante, is considered one of the fathers of the Renaissance.) Petrarch fell in love with a “Laura,” although whom exactly she was remains uncertain. She may have been an idealized or pseudonymous character. There’s little definitive information about Laura other than she was lovely to look at, fair-haired, and with a modest dignified bearing. As dishes, they’re “stock” plates: likeness not so much sought after as were generalized, abstract qualities, like virtue. Very much tied to class and female beauty. Also, generally presumed to be gifts from men to their girlfriends.

Meanwhile, and elsewhere, c.1600 Japan and China were exporting large quantities of simple ceramic ware to Southeast Asia, but then there had already been vast and widespread trade in porcelain occurring in Ming times (late 14th-mid 17th century), with porcelain probably first being brought to the Moslem countries of the Middle East along the Silk Road, and the bulk of the trade conveyed by sea to the Persian Gulf. Soon
there was a steady flow of both Asian goods and European products into and out of European markets.

(8) Charger plate, Arita, Japan, 1670-1720 (h-p, Imari ware, 14 ¼” dia.)

“VOC” – the monogram of the Dutch East India Company (“Verenigde Oost Indische Compagnie”) – appeared on all sorts of goods belonging to the company and was a mark of both identification and pride. Dishes like this were for the company’s use and could have been found in its settlements in Asia, on board ships, and in its offices in the Netherlands, and fragments of dishes have been excavated at Deshima, the site of the VOC trading post in Nagasaki, Japan, the port from where the company shipped most of its Japanese wares to Holland.

Here, two phoenixes, a flowering camellia, and pomegranates swirl in the middle around the VOC monogram, and on the rim, bamboo plants alternate with peonies as primary motifs. The source for this style of compartmentalized border decoration on Japanese export ware was Kraakporselein – what the Dutch called Chinese blue and white ware, i.e., porcelain from a carrack or trading ship. The word soon became a Dutch synonym for Chinese porcelain and how it continues to be known today.

(9) Bottle, Arita, Japan, 1670-1700 (10” hi.) This kind of bottle, known today as an apothecary bottle, is a porcelain vessel used for medicine or wine. Its shape, although of Japanese production, is based on that of seventeenth-century European glass bottles. Many of these bottles exported to Europe have initials on them, which may refer either to their contents or to their original owners. In this case, it has been suggested that the writing is not shorthand for “water” but rather the initials of a high-ranking Dutch East India Company official based in Asia, Willem ten Rhijne, a surgeon who worked in
Deshima, the VOC trading settlement in Japan, between 1674 and 1676. (The blue-and-white palette, developed in the fourteenth century initially, was probably for the Middle Eastern market.)

(10a.) Charger, Jingdezheng, China, 1700 (13 ¼” h.) The images of musicians that decorate this charger were copied directly from a French print (a.k.a. “The Music Party”) – (10b.) Nicolas Bonnart, *Symphonie du Tympanum*, Paris, France – engraved around 1700 and based on a painting or drawing by his brother, Robert. The print illustrates a short poem comparing the inferior pleasure of music to the superior pleasure of love. Starting in the late seventeenth century, merchants took European prints to China to be reproduced on export porcelain – Jingdezhen being a major center of the Chinese porcelain industry. French fashion prints as seen here were especially popular at the turn of the century, and many depicting aristocratic men and women engaged in genteel pastimes such as playing music or relaxing outdoors were copied onto porcelain.

(11a.) Soup plate, Jingdezheng, China, 1733 (9” dia.) Scenes of London and Canton, two of the most important China Trade cities of the 1700s, decorate the rim. The cities represent the beginning and end of the long voyage from Europe to China. (11b.) det. This view of the river Thames with London Bridge, the dome of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and spires of the city’s many churches was probably based on a panoramic print, while the image of Canton is probably one of the earliest known depictions of the city on porcelain. Its format and painting style suggest that it was probably based on a Chinese hand-scroll.

An example of yet another kind of cultural interaction is this (12a.) teapot from Arita, Japan, 1700-1725, which represents the interaction between three cultures:
Japanese, Chinese, and Dutch in that it was made in Japan; for export to the Netherlands; imitates Chinese blue and white porcelain; and is decorated with scenes of China copied from illustrations in a Dutch book. This side depicts the Dutch ambassador, Joan van Hoorn, being welcomed into the city of Beijing, and on the (12b.) other side is a temple on a rock bridge. Together, the scenes are illustrations from a book published in Amsterdam in 1670 and in London the following year under the title Atlas Chinensis …

Also of interest is the unusually large size of this teapot at 7 1/4” high. It might have been to hold hot water to fill smaller teapots or may have even been used at larger gatherings in a public coffeehouse back in Holland. (Typically, teapots were small, in part because tea in Europe was so expensive.) And speaking of tea, I would like to conclude by offering an example in support of the thesis that the importation of an object of material culture can imply the importation of other aspects of culture – and in this case, all done graphically.

(13.) Teapot (about 5” h.) The taste for tea drinking was another “fashion of Eastern origin.” This porcelain teapot, made in Jingdezhen, China about 1740, depicts a scene of a Chinese man sipping a cup of tea. The image, however, may not have originated in China and is therefore very possibly European; it is based on similar decoration found on Meissen (German) porcelain of the 1720s and 30s. This type of decoration was known as chinoiserie, a European interpretation of designs found on Chinese porcelain and lacquer. Thus, by the time this teapot was made in China, European versions of Chinese designs were being sent to China to be reproduced on porcelain exported back to Europe.
There may have been another reason behind the production of Chinese export porcelain with Meissen-style *chinoiserie* decoration (which, of course, became immensely popular in Europe among those who could afford it when it first appeared): it may have been a way to encourage tea drinking, which was now also becoming increasingly popular in Europe in the 1730s and 40s, and tea, of course, was just another cog in the European wheel of trade with China.