

Minton & Co.

Peacock

60 $^{1}/_{2}$ x 17 1/2 x 27 1/2 inches. (154 x 70 x 44 cm)

Signed on top of base P. COMOLÉRA

Impressed mark MINTONS, date symbol for 1876 (triangle within a circle), and model registration no 2045

The culminating achievement of Victorian majolica pottery, Minton & Co.'s Peacock was produced in the years when the Stoke-on-Trent manufactory was at its creative and commercial zenith.

The peacock model was designed in 1875 by the French animalier sculptor, Paul Comoléra, whose name is moulded on the rockwork base. Born in Paris, Comoléra was a pupil of François Rude (1784–1855). He exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1847, before joining Minton in 1873. Comoléra created his models from direct observation. His studio was 'occupied by animals, birds, fish and reptiles, which were brought to be modelled'.1 The Minton Peacock was no exception. Comoléra kept a live peacock in his studio during the conception of the work so that he could better understand and capture the nuance and majesty of his subject.

Only a small number of Peacocks – either 9 or 12 – were made. Six examples are in museums in England, Australia and the U.S. (Walters Art Museum, Baltimore). Majolica was typically cast and fired on a smaller scale due to the difficulties in the structural, casting and firing processes. The realisation of such an ambitious, imposing and intricate subject is a testament to the vision, technical skill and ingenuity of British 19th century ceramic artisans.

Minton chose The Great Exhibition, opened by Queen Victoria in 1851 at the Crystal Palace, as the occasion to launch its new majolica ware. The techniques Minton pioneered enabled it to achieve groundbreaking scale and vibrancy of color. The works were well received, earning Minton the Council Medal, the highest award for ceramics. An international trend began with competition between makers for technical and artistic excellence, which lasted for over half a century. Spurred on by the efforts of Herbert Minton (1793–1858), his visionary nephew Colin Minton Campbell (1827–1885) and ceramic chemist, modeller and artistic director Léon Arnoux (1816–1902), the atelier achieved technical and artistic brilliance.

At almost five feet tall, the Minton Peacock was fired in a single piece. The work in its entirety was produced at the Minton manufactory, then under the direction of Colin Minton Campbell. By nature of its size, complex form and myriad glazes, its production required the highest level of skill from all involved, not only Comoléra, but the team of mould-makers, potters and kiln attendants. In the catalogues of Minton & Co., the Peacock was listed for a price of 35 guineas or as a pair for 90 guineas.

Standing proudly, its multi-coloured tail falling to its left, the Peacock was Comoléra's most ambitious work, exhibiting naturalistic detail and anatomical accuracy. While drawing on historical precedents such as Johann Joachim Kändler's 1730's model of a Peacock for Augustus the Strong's menagerie in the Japanese Palace in Dresden,2 it also exhibits the influence of the newly established Aesthetic Movement, the most famous example of which is James McNeill Whistler's contemporaneous Peacock Room, painted for the London dining room of Frederick Leyland, a shipping magnate.3

Under Arnoux's artistic direction, the Minton factory harnessed the power of its manufacturing expertise to engage with the Aesthetic movement, whose ethos of 'art for art's sake' masked the ugliness and materialism of the Industrial Age. Wealthy Victorians would have responded to the bold colours of majolica. A symbol of beauty, rebirth and power, the life-sized peacock would have been the ultimate home accessory, finding its place in a grand conservatory.

The largest and most successful animal and bird models were used to showcase the artistry and craftmanship of the company. Minton & Co. included them as exhibition showpieces at International Exhibitions in London and Paris. The Minton Peacock was shown at the Paris Universal Exhibition in 1878 and possibly at the Paris Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia in 1876.

When Melbourne hosted an International Exhibition in 1880, Minton & Co. sent out ceramics and tiles, including a peacock, as part of their exhibit in the British Court in the Exhibition Building, built in the Carlton Gardens. The ship that Minton & Co. hired was the ill-fated Loch Ard, which sank in June 1878, on the final leg of its journey to Melbourne. After being salvaged intact and sold twice at auction, the Loch Ard peacock was acquired by the Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum and Village, Warrnambool, in

Victoria, Australia. Its survival affirmed the peacock's ancient status as a symbol of immortality and eternal life.

Apart from an archival photograph of an unfired example, there are no surviving production records for any of Minton's peacock models. Documents in the Minton Archive indicate nine peacocks were designed by Comoléra, such as the present example which was executed in 1876, his final year with Minton & Co. Other historians believe that twelve were fired at the Minton factory.

Recently, Comoléra's Peacock was featured in the 2021-22 exhibition Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States 1850–1915, Bard Graduate Center Gallery, Walters Art Museum and The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery. Further majolica exhibitions include the 2014 Sculpture Victorious: Art in an Age of Invention, 1837–1901 Yale Center for British Art; Tate Britain, London; and Colour Revolution: Victorian Art, Fashion & Design Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.

Majolica and Minton & Co.

Majolica, – the term used for a new type of earthenware coated with boldly coloured lead glaes – was developed at Minton in the late 1840s by the French designer, ceramic chemist and modeller Léon Arnoux (1816–1902), under the close watch of Herbert Minton (1793–1858), factory director and son of the founder. An explosion of colour and bold pattern characterised the decorative arts in the Victorian era and the factory capitalised on the appeal of Arnoux's opulent ceramic glazes. A wide range of models were developed, inspired by or derived from three historical sources: Italian tin-glazed earthenware or maiolica, the wares of the potter Bernard Palissy (1509–1590) and the ceramics of the Della Robbia family. To build Minton's majolica repertoire, Arnoux engaged French and European artists, sculptors and designers, among them Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse (1824–1887), Pierre-Émile Jeannest (1813–1857), Émile-Aubert Lessore (1805–1876) and later, Paul Comoléra (1818–1897) and Christian Hénk (1822–1905). The natural world was a source of inspiration. Arnoux commissioned from these artists sculptural models of exotic and domestic birds and animals which were to be reproduced in small numbers, signed, and where possible executed life-size. Some creatures were incorporated in models for furnishing, such as garden seats, while others were intended as free-standing sculptures.

Minton & Co. was founded in 1793 by Thomas Minton (1765–1836). By the middle of the 19th century, the factory was at the forefront of ceramic design and one of England's most pioneering and successful producers. Combining art and industry, the factory pushed the boundaries of ceramic technology and introduced bold and innovative new designs. Nowhere was this more apparent than in its development of the bright majolica glazes, unveiled at the Great Exhibition of 1851 at Crystal Palace, London. The Art Journal in 1856 reported: "The Minton majolica is one of the most successful revivals of modern pottery…there is both in the materials and manufacture of the models, in their manipulation and in their decoration, a very marked and acknowledged superiority."

1. See Susan Weber et al., Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in the England and the United States 1850-1915, exhibition catalogue, New Haven and London, 2020, Vol. 1, p. 66.

2. An example of Kändler's peacock, which stands at 45 in. (114.3 cm) tall is in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, Bequest of Edward M. Pflueger and Gift of Kiyi Powers Pflueger, accession no. 2006.923.

3. Freer Gallery, Washington D.C. For a discussion of the peacock model and the Minton factory's engagement with the Aesthetic Movement see the essay by Jo Briggs, 'Molding Meaning: Majolica in a Transatlantic Context, from Cole to Haynes, from Ruskin to Eastlake, in Weber et al., op. cit., Vol. 1, pp. 145-147.

4. See Susan Weber et al., op. cit., Vol. 1, p. 2.

The present Minton majolica peacock is one of nine, possibly twelve, that were made, six of which are in museums:

Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool (acquired 1891), acc. no. WAG 3985

The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, Stoke-on-Trent, (acquired in Masterpieces of Minton, Selected Items from the Minton Museum, Bonhams, London, 23 July 2002, lot 179), previously in the Minton Museum Collection

Shuttleworth Collection and Gardens, Biggleswade (acq. in the 19th c.)

Powerhouse Collection, Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences, Sydney, (acquired Sotheby's, London, 14 February 1984, lot 233)

Flagstaff Hill Maritime Museum and Village, Warrnambool, Australia, museum no. 2763 (known as the Loch Ard Peacock, acquired from the Ridley-Lee family, Australia, 9 September 1975)

The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore, accession no. 48.293, Gift of Deborah and Philip English, 2024 (Private coll. until 2010; sold, Christie's, London, 3 September 2010, lot 179)

An example from the collection of Linda Horn was on loan to The Metropolitan Museum, New York (2019).

Literature:

Comparative Literature

S. Weber, C. Arbuthnott, J. Briggs, E. Hughes, E. Martin, L Microulis (dir.), Majolica Mania: Transatlantic Pottery in England and the United States 1850-1915, 3 vols., New Haven et Londres, 2020

J. Jones, Minton: The First Two Hundred Years of Design and Production

P. Atterbury et M. Batkin, The Dictionary of Minton, Woodbridge, 1990

M. G. Karmason et J. B. Stacke, Majolica: A Complete History and Illustrated Survey, New York, 1989