

A jug with a bust-length portrait of a woman
Probably Montelupo
c. 1430–50

Height 17 cm, Width 14.5 cm, Diam. 13.6 cm



Condition

Consolidated cracks to the lower section of the body and some chips to the glaze.

A jug of tin-glazed earthenware with cobalt blue on a buff clay body. It has a bulbous pear-shaped body with a narrow, flaring neck and pronounced depressions either side of the spout. On the front of the jug is a bust-length portrait of a lady with loosely plaited hair who turns in profile to our left and is framed within a 'contour panel'. Around this cartouche is a background of dots with scrolling branches and bryony flowers. A large brush-drawn P or R under the handle identifies the workshop. Rapid parallel diagonal brushstrokes around the neck and either side of the handle cross motifs, also very rapid.

Discussion

The bulbous form of this charming and extraordinary rare little jug is characteristic of wares localisable by style or findspot to Montelupo workshops.¹ The workshop responsible for its production probably also painted a similarly decorated but much larger vessel now in the Bargello Museum, Florence, which bears the same identifying mark below its handles.²

Perhaps the single most striking feature of our jug and others of its type is the evolution of its figurative representations away from the bold, simple outlines found on its early three-colour counterparts and towards a new, more meticulous approach to the shading of facial features that demonstrate a search for greater naturalism. It is possible that one of the most celebrated albarelli of this type of decoration to have survived (now in the MIC, Faenza), incorporating bust-length portraits of a man and a woman in

¹ Cf. Berti 1997–2003, I (1997), p. 256 nos. 81–84, p. 257 nos. 85–86, and p. 260 nos. 92 and 94; Marini 2014, p. 79 no. 36.

² Cora 1973, pl. 180.

profile, was also created by the potter or workshop responsible for our jug. The sophisticated approach to the shading of the faces, the bold and spiky treatment of the clothing and the large, loose patterns describing the figures' hairstyles are characteristics shared by both vessels.³ Stylistically, it relates also to a dish in the British Museum, which incorporates a similar portrait of a woman with an equally elaborate hairstyle or headdress, and which has been likened to a drawing by Pisanello.⁴

The decorative repertoire of motifs and flourishes on this class of maiolica, typically painted in cobalt blue on the otherwise plain white surface of the tin glaze beneath, was created by Tuscan potters in direct imitation of imported wares from Spain. However, our jug is an early example of the use of what are called 'contour panels', which local potters introduced during the first half of the fifteenth century to help clarify and emphasize the dominant motifs of their compositions. Since these 'contour panels', or cartouches as they are also known, do not form part of the decorative repertoire of Valencian ceramics, they instead demonstrate the wider Mediterranean context with which the pottery-producing centres of the Arno valley were clearly in contact during this fruitful and creative period. Indeed, such contact clearly extended far beyond the borders of the Italian peninsula, since jugs of similar type to ours feature in northern European paintings from the 1420s onwards, most famously in those by the Netherlandish painter Robert Campin and his workshop. Campin's paintings show jugs that blend the swirling rosettes visible on the present example with the elegant strutting birds that so characterize the smallest of the double-handled jars in this catalogue and the large albarello in the previous entry, attesting to the concurrent and overlapping development of decorative idioms in Tuscan workshops during the second third of the fifteenth century.

Just inside the rim of the jug are traces of the potter's fingerprints, impressed into the clay while it was still wet. They are a serendipitous form of signature permanently fixed in place by the firing process.

³ Cora 1973, pl. 135a–b; Berti 1997–2003, III (1999), p. 240, figs. 16–18.

⁴ Thornton and Wilson 2009, p. 42 no. 20.