

An ovoid maiolica dish for use during childbirth
Italy, Urbino, workshop of Guido Durantino (also known as Fontana, active c. 1520-1576)
c. 1550



17.2 x 21.5 x 2.9 cm; blue, yellow, green, black, purple, orange, and white glazed earthenware. One section of the rim broken and repaired in two places, some minor chip losses to the rim, otherwise in excellent condition with no abrasion to the glazes.

Provenance

Private collection, Italy

A shallow maiolica ovoid dish depicting an interior scene with a child in swaddling clothes being presented to a group of ladies in waiting by an elderly midwife. An ornate cot stands in the centre of the room and a sky at dusk is visible through a wrought iron window grill set into the brick wall behind. On the verso an angel stands against a vivid golden sky encircled by clouds, supporting a delicate metalwork cross in her left hand.

In Renaissance Italy, momentous life events were celebrated with the giving of gifts and special objects, and the material culture associated with childbirth was particularly rich and sophisticated. The demographic tensions inherent in a society bound by dynastic success while being simultaneously afflicted by recurring bouts of plague epidemics resulted in a ritual of childbirth that was intended to affirm, comfort and encourage. As the production of maiolica flourished in Italy during the sixteenth century, ceramic wares painted with birth-related images became integral parts of the material culture necessary to this ritual. Our dish is a rare example of the type of gift that would have been offered to a new or expecting mother and used during the delivery to feed her restorative foods. Its expense and refinement also meant that it would have been carefully kept and displayed afterwards, and perhaps even handed down to encourage the continuation of the family line. The image of the angel on the underside of the dish was particularly associated with the birth of male children, which suggests that it was either given to a couple hopeful for a son, or soon after the birth as a proud and enduring symbol of the family's good fortunes.

The unusual ovoid format, and its moulded, scalloped edge, make this example a particularly rare survival among the corpus of extant vessels associated with childbirth. We know from early records and descriptions, and particularly that of Cipriano Piccolpasso, who wrote and illustrated an extensive treatise on maiolica production in the late 1550s, that childbirth vessels were often made in sets of five or even nine separate components, known collectively as a *servizio da impagliata*. In his treatise *Li tre libri dell'arte del vasaio* (now held at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London) Piccolpasso illustrates one such set, made of five vessels that interlock together when not in use (fig. 1).

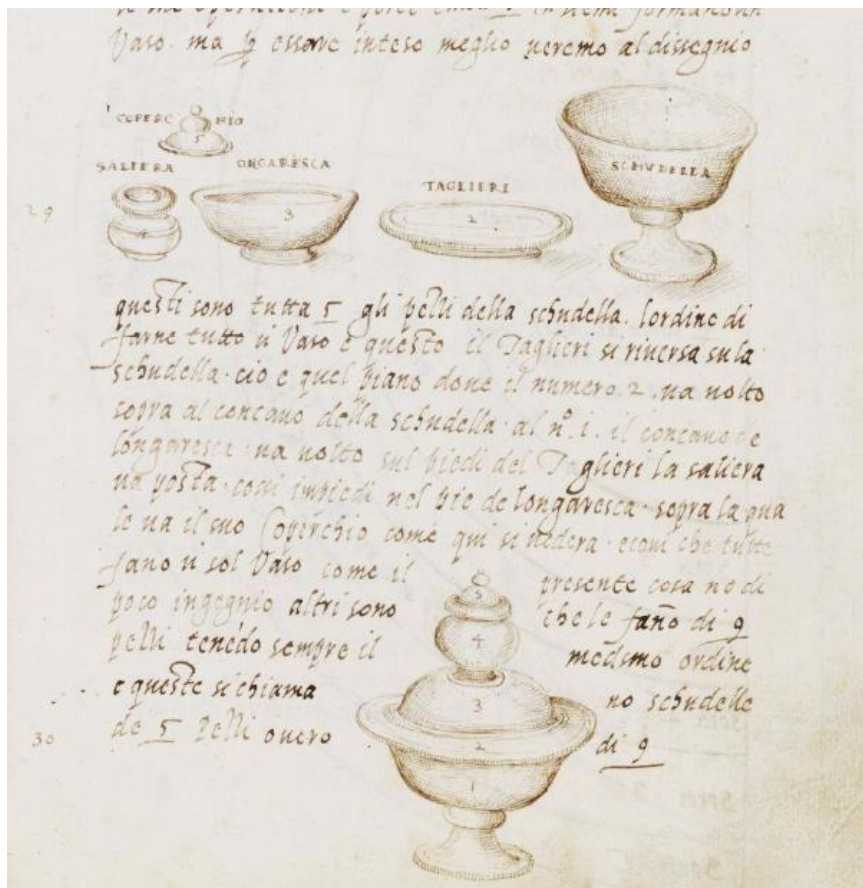


Fig. 1
Cipriano Piccolpasso
Li tre libri dell'arte del vasaio, fol. 11r, detail
c. 1557
London, Victoria and
Albert Museum,
MSL/1861/7446

While no complete services have survived intact, a small number of individual vessels have come down to us, and are almost exclusively circular in format, rather than oval like the present dish. It is more likely therefore, that our example was produced and offered as a stand-alone gift to the new mother, instead of forming part of a more extensive set. Another oval dish formerly in the de Somzée collection incorporates an identical scalloped edge, and may have been produced as a pendant pair to our dish, but is at any rate surely the work of the same potters.



The dextrous, assured brushwork, with its lively and frenetic energy, the warm palette of orange and yellow, and the manner in which details of dress and the swirling clouds around the figure of the angel are put in place, are all characteristic features of the maiolica produced in a Marchigian workshop headed by the potter Guido di Nicolò Schippe, or Guido Durantino. Originally from Castel Durante, Durantino and his family ran one of the largest maiolica workshops in Urbino for at least half a century, employing many of the best painters in the city, and were especially known for their *istoriato* wares; vessels painted with figurative scenes taken from mythology and other historical or biblical sources. ‘Guido di Nicolò Schippe’ is first recorded in 1516, when he witnessed a document for his uncle Simone who ran a leather business in Urbino. In 1519 he married an Urbino girl, and over the following years appears regularly in Urbino documents; he was clearly a successful businessman, becoming *priore* of an Urbino confraternity in the 1540s. In 1523 he and a consortium of Urbino potters took on a contract to supply five thousand paving tiles for Duke Francesco Mario of Urbino. In 1535 he had become prominent enough to win the contract for a large maiolica service for Anne de Montmorency (fig. 2 below). By 1553 (and most likely well before this date) he had adopted the surname *Fontana*, by which he and his workshop are better known today.¹

¹ For the most recent in-depth analysis on the Fontana workshop see T. Wilson, *Maiolica: Italian Renaissance Ceramics in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York, 2016, see especially nos. 63, 67 and 68.



Fig. 2

Fontana workshop

Broad-rimmed bowl with the sacrifice of the Greeks at Aulis and the omen of the serpent devouring nine birds, interpreted by the priest Calchas; arms of Anne de Montmorency
1535

25.6 cm diameter; tin-glazed earthenware

Washington, National Gallery of Art, inv. 1942.9.346

Further reading

J. M. Musacchio, *The Art and Ritual of Childbirth in Renaissance Italy*, Yale, 1999

M. Ajmar-Wollheim and F. Dennis, eds., *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, Exh. Cat., London, 2006

M. Corry, D. Howard, and M. Laven eds, *Madonnas and Miracles: The Holy Home in Renaissance Italy*, Exh. Cat., Cambridge, Fitzwilliam Museum, 2017, p. 32