

Basin with a fantastical beast
Italy, Florentine district, probably Montelupo
c. 1420 - 1440



38.4 cm diameter; 6.4 cm deep; tin-glazed earthenware painted with green, blue, and manganese brown on a buff-coloured body, reverse unglazed. A shallow-sided basin with two horizontal loop handles applied under the rim. In its broad central well the figure of a human-headed dog stands in profile amongst slender, uprooted plants whose branches terminate alternately in berries and leaves. Encircling the animal on the near-vertical sides of the basin is a design of blue palmettes strung on a thin manganese vine.

Provenance

Frizzi Baccione Collection, Florence;
 Private collection, Lastra a Signa, Florence

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Marini, Marino, *Passione e Collezione: Maioliche e ceramiche toscane dal XIV al XVIII secolo, exh. cat., Florence*, pp. 66–67 no. 28

This is a rare and important survival of fifteenth-century polychromatic maiolica. It is one of a small group of vessels and other fragments found at sites across Tuscany that Cora first classified as ‘*famiglia tricolore*’ to describe their characteristic three-colour palette of manganese purple, copper green and cobalt blue (fig. 1 – 2).¹ For many years the only known example of three-colour maiolica has been a large dish with an undulating rim depicting two lovers in the Musée des Antiquités in Rouen, but recent excavations and stratified finds in Montelupo, Bacchereto and San Salvatore a Viano near Florence have greatly added to the material and have helped to confirm Cora’s dating of the *tricolore* group to the first third of the fifteenth century (fig. 2).² It also seems likely that all the examples of this type of ware to have survived were made either in a single workshop or by a group of potters working in close and sustained contact with each other. Consistent aspects of their design are the inclusion of elegant

¹ Cora, Galeazzo, *Storia della maiolica di Firenze e del contado: Secoli XIV e XV*, Florence, 1973, I, p. 71; for a more recent reappraisal of this group of wares see Ravanelli Guidotti 2012, pp. 21–24.

² Cora 1973, I, p. 71, II, fig. 42. For recent scholarship on excavated material see Bettini 1992, p. 53.

circular garlands that serve to frame the imagery within, blue berries encircled by smaller manganese dots, and uprooted plants that appear to float against the background (fig. 3).³

Based on excavated fragments and recent research by Marino Marini, the workshop or workshops responsible for them are likely to have been located in the neighbouring villages of Montelupo and Bacchereto, both highly developed pottery-making centres that fed demand from nearby Florence.⁴ A closely comparable dish to ours in the British Museum, which is one of a number of Tuscan wares dug up in Florence, certainly supports the notion that outlying workshops specializing in three-colour maiolica found patronage amongst the city's merchants and inhabitants.⁵



Fig. 1
Tricolore jug
Italy, Florentine district
c. 1420 – 40
Private Collection

So-called 'archaic maiolica' often depicts fantastical figures drawn from medieval bestiaries and Romanesque sculpture, and our basin attests to the refinement that such creatures underwent in *tricolore* maiolica production, the beast's elegant profile here wittily embellished with the attributes of a collar and hat. Similar beasts can be found on other examples of three-colour maiolica, including a fragmentary jug, one other bowl of comparable type, and several sherds found in Montelupo and Bacchereto.⁶ Also common to three-colour maiolica in particular is the rather charming use of uprooted plant motifs, which represent a very different conception of foliate decoration to the type more commonly found on the more-or-less contemporary *zaffera* wares from Tuscany and Lazio. The significance and meaning of the unusual motif of two bones lying on the ground below the figure on our bowl, their centres encircled by what appear to be rings, is far less easy to identify. The motif appears on several excavated fragments found in Montelupo wells and kiln wastes, as well as more prominently around the rim of the famous Rouen dish depicting two lovers.⁷ In his authoritative 1997–2003 study on Montelupo pottery, Fausto Berti described the motifs as 'dovetails', or a perspectively warped jewelled ring, and proposed that it may have been used as a workshop emblem, an interpretation

³ Berti 1997–2003, I (1997), p. 156; for a number of parallel vegetal motifs on other three-colour material see Cora 1973, pls. 41b and c, 42, 44a.

⁴ Cora 1973, II, pls. 41c, 43, 44a; Bettini 1992, pp. 52–55 nos. 95–105.

⁵ Thornton and Wilson 2009, p. 43 no. 21.

⁶ For the jug see Conti et al. 1991, p. 87; for the bowl, now in an English private collection, see Marini 2014, pp. 66–67 no. 28; for the sherds see Cora 1973, pls. 41c, 43.

⁷ Cf. a fragment of a plate in the Museo Archeologico e della Ceramica in Montelupo illustrated in Berti 1997–2003, I (1997), p. 235, fig. 37, and another illustrated in Cora 1973, pl. 41c.

that seems plausible but not conclusive without further documentary evidence or excavated material.⁸ A number of fragments reproduced in Berti's study, now in the Museo Archeologico e della Ceramica in Montelupo, were found in 1994 during excavations in a kiln under a house on the Piazza dei Gelsi. Such is their comparability to our dish that it in all likelihood originates from the same workshop.

The size and profile of this basin perhaps indicate that it was intended for use as a hand-washing basin for cleansing the fingers between the courses of a meal. It would be brought to the table and filled with water scented with the addition of rose petals or herbs, poured from a jug. Sets of vessels consisting of a jug and basin together are referred to in contemporary inventories as '*bacini con mesciroba*' and often formed part of a sophisticated social ceremony for the diners. They also mark the beginning of a move towards more and more elaborate dining services – often made of many different vessels – that would come to define some of the finest maiolica production of the following century.

Like ours, a number of dishes produced or excavated in different pottery-making centres incorporate applied strap handles under the rim and, in some rare cases, a dish of this scale might have had as many as four, which may well have served as suspension loops.⁹ But since such handles are not consistently positioned relative to the painted decoration on those that have survived, it is doubtful they were strictly intended to enable hanging, and it is perhaps worth considering whether they might instead relate to the storage and strapping together in some manner of multiple vessels.



Fig. 2
Tricolore plate
Italy, Florentine district
c. 1420 – 40
Rouen Ceramics Museum



Fig. 3
Tricolore basin
Italy, Florentine district
c. 1420 – 40
British Museum

⁸ Berti 1997–2003, I (1997), p. 157. It may also be possible that this enigmatic motif functioned as an armorial device or personal impresa (or perhaps even a rebus?).

⁹ Bettini 1992, pp. 53, 54, and nos. 95–97; Thornton and Wilson 2009, p. 43. For a four-handled bowl cf. Cora 1973, pl. 15.