

**A large two-handled bowl decorated with a lobated leaf
Umbria, Orvieto
c. 1420**



11.7 cm (height) x 36.5 cm (diameter including handles); Tin-glazed earthenware with copper green and manganese brown decoration on a pinkish buff clay, with a broad, flanged rim and a flat foot-ring. Two undulating strap handles applied below the rim on either side of the body. A clear lead glaze coats the exterior. Reassembled from multiple fragments with some in-painting and small infilled sections. Thermoluminescence analysis undertaken by Oxford Authentication in October 2021 confirms a date of firing between 530 and 800 years ago. Report by Helen Mason, 1st November 2021.

Provenance

Cheffins, Cambridge, 25th May 2016, lot 95;
Private collection, UK

The discovery of large quantities of richly-decorated vessels and fragments during excavations in Orvieto in the early twentieth century caused something of a fever amongst maiolica collectors. It was a moment of great discovery for pioneering museum curators of the age, such as Wilhelm von Bode and his protégé Wilhelm Valentiner, who moved quickly to acquire Orvieto pottery. Such was the frenzy with which it was bought up by private and public collections alike, and the concurrently poor regulation of the many excavations being undertaken, that there exists scant documentary or physical criteria for any precise reconstruction of the chronology or development of Orvieto ware. Nevertheless, various aspects of form, design and decoration of this grand, two-handled serving bowl are so analogous to

those used on early vessels now preserved in the Museo dell'Opera del Duomo in Orvieto – which number amongst the very few fully documented objects to have been excavated in the town – that it can almost certainly be classified as a product of that centre. Its huge green and purple leaf spray almost entirely covers the vessel's interior surface against a finely cross-hatched ground encircled just below the rim by a running chain motif in manganese green and is among the most fully realised examples of large-leaf design in the entire surviving corpus of Orvieto 'archaic maiolica' pottery. It represents the last great flowering of this beguiling family of wares, the production of which waned dramatically in the years after 1400 concurrent with the downturn of the town's fortunes following a century of financial turbulence and intermittent bouts of Plague.¹ The rich use of tin in its decoration – an eye-wateringly expensive material imported to Italy from abroad – help points to a date of manufacture in the fifteenth century, when its availability for Italian potters had widened and its comparative cost reduced. A late date is further supported by its design, which very likely draws on the influence of contemporary textiles. Such a link would have been newly possible for Orvietan potters of the early fifteenth century given the burgeoning popularity of broad leaf-patterned cut velvets being produced in a number of the larger Italian centres, including Florence and Venice, at exactly this date.² The use of large-leaf motifs in Orvieto is well precedented, and can be found on a small handful of contemporary vessels including examples in the Museo Internazionale delle Ceramiche in Faenza³ and the Kunstgewerbemuseum in Berlin⁴, though on neither of these examples do their scale reach that deployed on our vessel.⁵ Other features of its design, such as the characteristic use of a chain motif in green around the rim, and the moulded undulations to its handles, were highly popular amongst Orvietan potters, the latter feature especially marked on fifteenth-century wares.

¹ For an overview of Orvieto's changing fortunes during the period see Alberto Satolli ed., *La ceramica orvietana del medioevo*, Exh. Cat., Milan, 1983.

² Cf. a similar lobed-leaf design on a Venetian velvet of the 1420s in the Victoria and Albert Museum, for which see Lisa Monnas, *Renaissance Velvets*, London, 2012, no. 4, pp. 60-61. Another parallel is in the Schnütgen Museum, Cologne, produced in Venice in the first quarter of the 15th century, for which see Gudrun Sporbeck, *Museum Schnütgen: Die Liturgischen Gewänder 11. bis 19. Jahrhundert*, Cologne, 2001, no. 62, pp. 238-9.

³ Satolli 1983, no. 76, p. 76.

⁴ Lucio Riccetti ed., *1909 tra collezionismo e tutela. John Pierpont Morgan, Alexandre Imbert e la ceramica medievale orvietana*, Exh. Ca., Perugia, Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, 2010, no. 6.11.12, p. 426.

⁵ Cf. also a smaller two-handled bowl with a lobated leaf design illustrated in Gian Carlo Bojani et. al., *Ceramiche medioevali dell'Umbria: Assisi, Orvieto, Todi*, Exh. Cat., Spoleto, 1981, p. 150; another of this type, thought to be of early 14th-century date, is in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, inv. C.101-1991.