



A ROMAN TALE

**An Italian maiolica *istoriato* crespina or low comport
attributed to Pesaro, probably mid-16th century**

Mark: none.

Size: 28.6 cms. (11.25 ins.) in diameter, 7cms. (2.75 ins.) in height

Condition: losses to the front, including area of painting to centre, which is slightly raised; chips to rim, including one larger, more recent one, laying bare the earthenware body; extensive bubbling to surface, perhaps during manufacture; section of base missing with another large chip.

The scene depicted was a popular one during the Renaissance and represents an episode in the mythological history of Rome. After an earthquake in 362BC a deep pit which could not be filled appeared in the Forum. Seers declared that the Gods demanded the sacrifice of the citizens' most precious possession, but what was it? A young soldier, Marcus Curtius, declared that arms and the courage of the Romans were their most precious possessions and, fully armed and on horseback, he proceeded to leap into the chasm, which then closed over.

Found on prints, paintings, bas reliefs and medals, the scene also occurs on maiolica. Perhaps the closest design to this Pesaro example is a plate in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, which is attributed to nearby Urbino and dated c.1535 (Acc.No. 95.372). Although a more sophisticated production, it features Roman soldiers with similar helmets and the round towers surmounted by cupolas. Other Urbino examples feature similar buildings, including the distinctive 'spires', surmounted by balls or spheres, and the blue mountainous, rocky background.

In his chapter on ‘The Making of Maiolica’ in Eliza P. Sani’s **Italian Renaissance Majolica** (London, V & A Publishing, 2012) Reino Liefkes describes it as ‘more sophisticated than any ceramics made in Europe’. The body was earthenware [seen to advantage on the chip to the rim here], covered with an opaque white tin glaze. Painters had only a limited range of colours available, namely blue, green, brown, purple, orange, yellow and white and a transparent lead glaze could be applied if required. Another commentator (DJS? Dominic Simpson) notes that the ‘stability and permanence of maiolica’s colours gives us a window...directly onto the vibrant colours and designs of the Renaissance’. Although in occasional use on the dining table, where they benefited from the absence of much metal cutlery, it is probable that most of the elaborate wares were used for display. Figural subjects, as in the *istoriato* or narrative style seen here, can be found from the early 16th century and were developed at Urbino and Castel Durante in the 1520s and 1530s. Painters from these centres are known to have moved as far as Antwerp and Lyons, but could also be found closer to home in places such as Pesaro, where Sforza di Marcantonio, from Urbino, could be found at least as early as 1548.

Jim Sewell, August 2020

Author’s note: a leading expert on Italian majolica contacted me after this paper was circulated to members, suggesting that this comport was more likely to be a 19th century production so the jury is out!

Sources: Wikipedia (for Marcus Curtius)

Timothy Wilson **Maiolica** (2nd ed., Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, 2003)

Elisa P. Sani **Italian Renaissance Majolica** (London, V& A Publishing, 2012), including plates 128 and 129 for a Faenza dish c.1525 in the Museum featuring Marcus Curtius’s leap.

Christie’s London sale catalogue **Italian Ceramic Art 1400-1900**, (no.7568. 22 April 2008), for the article by DJS on maiolica and lot 17 for a Pesaro dish

J.V.G. Mallet **Xanto: Pottery-Painter, Poet, Man of the Italian Renaissance** (London, Wallace Collection, 2007) [exhibition catalogue]

