

THE USE OF SYMBOLIC IMAGERY
THROUGH THE DECORATIVE
QUALITIES OF
MAJOLICA

PROBLEM IN LIEU OF THESIS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Folk artist's work often depends on archetypal images taken from everyday life. These images may include hands, snakes, eyes, hearts and religious symbols. In the same way their use of color is uninhibited. This way of working has clearly affected my work in ceramics. Evidence of this was seen in my use of color and choice of imagery.

While searching for a way to apply this bright color to my ceramic pieces I discovered the Renaissance technique of Majolica. This technique offered the possibilities of bright color and a loose and spontaneous decoration. The beauty of Majolica is the implied looseness of its glaze application and the richness of its coloration. This is what I needed to further my current direction. This past year I have used a more spontaneous and loose decoration and integrated it more closely with my chosen imagery.

For the purpose of this study I intended to use Majolica to allow me both more flexibility in the physical act of decorating my ceramic work, as well as the opportunity for the expansion of my selection of symbols.

During this investigation the following questions were addressed:

1. Was the color range attainable with Majolica relevant to my work?
2. Was my chosen imagery complemented by the special properties of Majolica.
3. Did the textural possibilities of Majolica benefit my work?

For this study I made a large series of at least twenty-four pieces using red earthenware and an assortment of low fire glazes. The pieces varied from flat utilitarian forms to three-dimensional sculpture.

I experimented with Majolica to gain an understanding of its possibilities as well as its limitations. Throughout this research a journal was kept containing detailed information concerning color combinations, formula mixtures and application techniques.

A final series of six pieces present my findings. All of the pieces produced for this project were evaluated in regard to the aforementioned questions.

For centuries folk artists have shared common elements in their approach to art. Two of these shared elements were present in my work. They were the use of archetypical images and symbols that were depicted in a spontaneous manner and the use of vibrant color. The ceramic technique of Majolica was by nature conducive to this kind of work. For this reason an in-depth study of this glazing and decorating technique was proposed. I hoped that this study

would complement and enhance my own ceramic work and lead me into the future.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF RELATED INFORMATION

Most symbols do not have just one definite meaning but are open to various interpretations. They can be read in contradictory terms. (Cirlot, pp. xxix-lv) The fish symbol, for example, may be female (Venus) or male (Christ). The fish image was appropriate in a special way to the early Christian community. (Cirlot, p. 107) Even the Hindu legend of the birth of the sage Vyasa is from a fish-born virgin. (Cirlot, p. 108) The fish became a primitive Christian symbol, principally on the basis of the anagram drawn from the name for fish: Ixhthys. Then it came to be taken as a symbol of profound life, of the spiritual world that lies under the world of appearances, the fish representing the "life-force surging up." (Cirlot, p. 107)

In India, snake cults or cults of the spirit of the snake, are connected with the symbolism of the waters of the sea. (Campbell, p. 136) Snakes are the guardians of the spring of life and of immortality. (Campbell, p. 137) The ability of the serpent to slough its skin and to renew its youth has earned it the world wide reputation as the master of the mystery of rebirth. (Cirlot, p. 287)

The apple has been symbolic since the time of Adam and Eve and the temptation in the Garden of Eden. It signifies totality and is symbolic of earthly desires, or the

indulgence in such desires. (Cirlot, p. 14) The warning "not to eat the forbidden apple came from the mouth of the supreme being as a warning against the exaltation of materialistic desire." (Cirlot, p. 37)

In Egyptian hieroglyphics, the open hand signifies any specifically human task as well as magnetic force. (Campbell, p.14) This idea is also characteristic of pre-Columbian America and a very similar belief lies behind the widespread use of the hand as an amulet in Islamic cultures. (Cirlot, p. 137) Gloves, since they are work on the hand, share symbolic meaning with them. (Cirlot, p. 119)

Color symbolism is one of the most universal of all types of symbolism, and has been consciously used in the liturgy, in heraldry, alchemy, art and literature. It is usually derived from one of the following sources: (1) "the inherent characteristic of each color, perceived intuitively as objective fact;" (2) "the relationship between a color and the planetary symbol traditionally linked with it;" or (3) "the relationship which elementary, primitive logic perceives." (Cirlot, p. 52)

Symbolically yellow has long been associated with the light of the sun and with illumination. Green is associated with vegetation and the fertility of the fields as well as its being dominate in Christian art because of its value as a bridge between the two color groups, according to Jolan de Jacobi in her study of Jungian psychology. Purple, which

was the color of the imperial Romans as well as the Cardinal's color, provides a synthesis comparable with representing power, spirituality and sublimation. (Cirlot, p. 30)

According to Jung the conception of black and white as diametrically opposed symbols of the positive and the negative is very common. In traditional symbolism it helps to explain the ceaseless alternations of life/death, light/darkness, appearance/disappearance which make possible the continued existence of phenomena. In medieval Christian art, black stands for penitence, white for purity and red for charity and love. (Cirlot, p. 59)

Red is associated with blood, wounds, death-throes, sublimation and is the color of pulsing blood, of fire and the "surging and tearing of emotions." (Cirlot, p. 60) It is associated with passion, sentiment and the life-giving principle. (Cirlot, p. 59) According to Zimmer, the mother-goddess of India is represented as red in color because she is associated with the principle of creation and red is the color of activity. Prehistoric man would stain with blood any object which he wished to bring to life. (Cirlot, p. 55)

CHAPTER III

REVIEW OF WORK

My investigation into the history of symbols, specifically the symbols that I use in my work; the fish, snake, apple and hand, as well as the information that I gained concerning the meaning of color, gave me fresh material to use in the creation of twenty-four new pieces. The following is a description of six of these pieces that I feel reflect my findings.

I enhanced the symbol of the fish by using it as the form outline of Ichthys (See slide A). This form allowed me to use the entire surface for the decorating process. One of the unique attributes of this Majolica glaze is the viscosity of the formula. This formula was poured over the platter and then a wide range of colored stains were brushed over this mixture. The various colors were used to delineate the scales and fins of the fish image. The stain mixture was brushed on in a spontaneous manner. The waxy quality of the glaze's finish gave the color a subdued value and subtle intensity.

I incorporated the image of Carmen Miranda into the historical symbology. The size of the Carmen Miranda platter (See slide B) gave me the needed area to paint her image and to compose a headdress made from yellow baskets filled with green vegetation. This also included a cluster

of purple grapes. The use of detailed bead shapes as a costume and for the bracelets provided me with the widest range of selected color combinations. The background area was an ideal place to use a textured, thickened slip. The painterly qualities produced allowed the red earthenware to be visible through the loose brushstrokes of the slip. The use of Carmen Miranda as a symbol seemed to me a natural thing to do as I consider her image the embodiment of life and color.

I have also attempted to put the form of the red chili pepper to symbolic use by incorporating it into the decoration of the platter. The use of the platter was to me an obvious choice when considering its use as a utilitarian object to be used usually when a large group of people are gathered for a celebration. It is usually used for the main course of a meal, receiving the center of attention and a perfect depository for the chili pepper with its red color, a universal symbol for life.

For Four Virtues (See slide C) the colors of golden yellow, teal, light green, purple and a shade of sombre violet were used for the underglaze decoration. A sharp-edged patterning was used when applying the intense opaque color. Four Virtues was then edged in black and three red chili peppers were attached to the outer rim. The undecorated portion was given the same amount of area as the colored underglaze. This allowed the natural color of the

clay to complement and enrich the color selection of the underglaze.

Initially the tureen form seemed to be a desirable choice to use with the Majolica technique of glazing. I felt that folk artists from various ethnic cultures have used this form throughout the ages. However, I found that the characteristics of this particular base glaze made the smooth, even-coating of the glaze upon the bulbous surface of Garden of Eden (See slide D) impossible. Due to the glazes' viscous nature, it would dry and stop flowing before the undulating surface of Garden of Eden was thoroughly coated. When the formula was thinned, large areas of the piece were left unglazed (See slide E) whereas in the areas where a thickened glaze was used, it would be irregular in its consistency (See slide F).

My attempt to follow the raised decoration that was imprinted on Garden of Eden proved to be difficult. The imprinted, raised and recessed areas had to be mimicked perfectly in order for the decoration to be successful. Due to the viscosity of the Majolica base glaze, the delineation of the design was completely obliterated in some areas (See slide G). Also, the colored stain formula, being transparent in nature, separated and left areas devoid of any colored decoration (See slide H). Therefore, further experimentation is required for the use of Majolica glaze on this particular form.

I incorporated the symbol of the serpent, or snake, in two ways. On Circle of Life (See slide I) it was used three-dimensionally twining around the base and as a two-dimensional decorative motif on the surface of the dish. The colored stain formula was applied directly on the earthenware for the snake imagery. This allowed the natural color of the clay to show through the translucent qualities of the mixture. When a more opaque color was required, an under-glaze was used. The two-dimensional image of the snake coiled on the surface of the dish allowed me to use a spontaneous brush stroke in the application of the slip to the background area. Colored underglazes were then applied for decoration over the slip.

Eve (See slide J) presented some of the same problems as Garden of Eden. The undulant shape of the gloves constricted the flow of the Majolica glaze leaving areas of the sculpture not glazed (See Slide K). The problem was in the three-dimensionality of the gloves and not in the imagery of the hands themselves. Unglazed areas were also apparent at the bottom edge of the base (See slide L). The black stain mixture separated during the firing process. This left tearing and broken areas both in the black design painted on the surface of the base (See slide M) and in the overall texture of the glove (See slide N). This textural occurrence might be interpreted as worn areas in the glove. The textural activity of the glaze on the apple, however, was successful.

CHAPTER IV

SUMMARY

This study investigated the symbolism that often appears in my work. It also investigated the use of Majolica glaze to enhance this symbolism. After researching the symbolism of color in general, and of the fish or serpent, and the apple and the hand specifically, I conducted a group of experiments. From these experiments I hoped to answer three questions that explored the adaptability of Majolica to my work.

The first question asked how the color range attainable with Majolica would compliment my work. After many variations of color combinations and formulas, I found that this method of glazing was compatible with an unlimited choice of colored stains. It allowed the color of the stain to be appreciated for its own value, creating a uniform finish, without distortion. The viscous nature of Majolica and its ability to enhance a colored-stain surface make it a superior technique for use in my work.

The second question asked how the imagery used in my work would be complemented by the special properties of Majolica. I found the fish imagery of Ichthys to be

particularly compatible in that the colored-stain mixture could be applied over the Majolica basic formula with the assurance that it would not flow out of its designated boundaries. I also found that the special properties of Majolica were the perfect catalyst to bring Carmen Miranda's image to life. I was able to utilize this glazing process to its fullest advantage. In contrast, I found the bulbous tureen form of Garden of Eden and the three-dimensionality of Eve to be unsuccessful.

The third and final question asked if the textural qualities of Majolica would benefit my work. I found this glazing technique allowed me the use of a spontaneous brush-stroke, whether laying on the colored decoration, applying slip, or in the application of an opaque, intense color. Even in the example of Eve, the textural quality resulting from the color separation of the black stain was beneficial to the overall affect.

I found during the course of this research that the various formulae and glazing techniques that are possible with Majolica were well suited to both the form and imagery of my work.

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