

Majolica production in 16th and early 17th century Antwerp: a commercial hit

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Introduction

Sixteenth and early 17th century majolica production in Antwerp is an interesting example of cultural exchange involving an innovative type of consumer goods. Their successful interaction with the local market and their position within the local social network not only prove the success of the artisans but also illustrate a specific economic process.

Although an overall model explaining the social, cultural and economic mechanisms involved, is not available, this paper is an attempt to discuss the subject from various different points of view. Throughout this paper attention will be paid to four parameters, i.e. production, consumption, technology and social aspects. These parameters may illustrate the shift in focus, which occurs throughout the 16th and at the beginning of the 17th century, in Antwerp majolica production. This paper does not pretend to give answers concerning the mechanisms involved. It merely brings together pieces of information that may provide possible clues and lead to a better understanding of the subject.

From an archaeological point of view, two types of consumer goods come into focus. In addition to majolica a second industry with an Italian background pops up in Antwerp in the 16th century, i.e. glass production 'à la façon de Venise'. The mechanisms involved seem to be different from those of majolica production. In this paper, these two industries are compared from time to time.

The origins of majolica production in Antwerp

The first recorded presence of a majolica potter in Antwerp is in 1508. It concerns a man called Guido di Savino, an immigrant potter

from Castel Durante in Central Italy (Dumortier 1988, 23). This Italian town had a flourishing majolica industry, especially at the beginning of the 16th century (Wilson 1999, 6 and 8). The reason for Guido di Savino's departure from Castel Durante is not known. Was it merely economic or did he have specific social or personal reasons for leaving his hometown? And what about his destination? At the beginning of the 16th century Antwerp was only at the dawn of its golden age but many Italians immigrated to the city on the river Scheldt and very soon dominated the city's commerce (Subacchi 2002). It is difficult to assess the attraction of the economic metropolis in the making to an artisan living in Central Italy. What guarantee did he have of being successful? Local conditions were probably unknown to him. Therefore it seems that the emigration of Guido di Savino to Antwerp should probably be seen as the undertaking of an individual in search of a better (or even brighter) future rather than as a carefully premeditated step. Unfortunately we have no archaeological information concerning Guido Andries' workshop 'Den Salm', situated in Kammenstraat. He probably copied the infrastructure with which he was familiar from his hometown. One of his main concerns was probably where to get the necessary basic materials. White firing clay, for instance, is not available in the Antwerp region and had to be imported. Apart from the white slip used to decorate redware, the only craftsmen who used white firing clay were those producing pipe clay figurines and plaquettes. The use of white clay for the large-scale production of everyday ceramics only starts around the middle of the 16th century. Guido Andries must have had the necessary contacts to solve this problem.

The pottery, available on the Antwerp market at the beginning of the 16th century, was no competition for the exclusive polychrome majolica tiles and vessels. The only comparable ceramics is the local slip-decorated redware. Compared to the attractively decorated tin-glazed products these local creations were of rather poor quality. The majolica potters probably did not even intend to compete with these. They found themselves a more exclusive 'niche' in the market. Their customers belonged to another social class, wealthy enough to buy objects in more precious materials. In the first half of the 16th century the Antwerp majolica production was clearly intended for a public made up of nobility and clergymen with a high social status. The known creations of that period appear in an exclusive social setting. Examples are the tiles for the abbey of Herkenrode (B), the tiles for Rameyen castle in Gestel (B), the tiles in the chapel of The Vyne in Hampshire (GB), and the tiles in the castle of La-Fère-en-Tardenois (F). The consumption market aimed at was clearly much wider geographically than simply Antwerp and surroundings.

One might wonder why Guido Andries' production remained focused on unique pieces, often made to order. Wouldn't he have been able to make more money by producing a less sophisticated mass product? Apparently he preferred to continue production of high quality, luxury ceramics, a question of keeping up a certain image.

From the start Guido di Savino, now known as Guido Andries, settled into Antwerp social life, both in his private life and in his professional contacts. He married a local woman who gave birth to a numerous offspring, of whom 5 sons followed in their father's footsteps one way or another. As an artisan he associated with local potters and tradesmen who were responsible for the distribution of the majolica. When glass production started in Antwerp, Italian craftsmen from Venice were brought to Antwerp. During the 16th and until well into the 17th century Italians played a crucial role, both in the glass trade and in the production process. Glass technology was complicated and recipes were a closely guarded secret. The manufacturers protected the market with privileges, and were granted a monopoly on the production of 'façon de Venise' glass and buying and selling genuine Italian glass. If we look at the majolica industry, a quite

different picture emerges. Guido Andries probably used local craftsmen in his workshop and local potters very soon copied the technology and started a workshop of their own. The majolica potters had no special privileges.

The second generation: expansion in and outside of Antwerp

Although many local artisans were already involved in the majolica industry, the second generation remains dominated by Italians, i.e. the sons of Guido Andries. The sons follow in the footsteps of the father. Some stay in Antwerp and start a workshop of their own; others emigrate and are responsible for spreading majolica technology to the Northern Netherlands and to the British Isles. By about 1550 majolica potters had started production in Utrecht. In the 3rd quarter of the 16th century a majolica potter of local origin emigrated to Haarlem, near Amsterdam. One special artisan should be mentioned in particular, Jan Floris, the brother of Cornelis Floris, who emigrated to Spain. He was one of many Flemish artists brought in by the Spanish king to embellish his palaces. After Niculoso Francisco, who died in 1529, he was probably the only potter painting majolica tiles in the Italian technique on the Iberian Peninsula (Pleguezuelo 2002, 123).

The sons of Guido Andries also followed in their father's footsteps socially and were accepted by local Antwerp society. Majolica potters and painters were members of the guild of St Luke, as were most artists and artisans. François Frans – also of Italian origin – had succeeded Guido Andries as head of the 'Den Salm' workshop and had remarried his widow. The fact that he was elected dean of the guild of St Luke in 1564 illustrates how successfully the family was accepted locally. The members of the Andries family not only succeeded in protecting their own commercial interests but the majolica market continued to expand. The number of local majolica potters also increased.

The intensity of the (professional) contacts of the Antwerp majolica potters with Italy is not known. On the one hand, very little Italian ceramics were in use in Antwerp. At least, 16th-century cesspits and other archaeological contexts of household waste only seldom contain

vessels of Italian origin. On the other hand, there are not many Antwerp majolica vessels that were clearly influenced by contemporary Italian examples. A pedestal beaker and fragments of a cup, found in the Steen, are among the few exceptions (Veeckman/Dumortier 1999, cat. nr. 48–49). Compared with its Italian counterparts 'alla porcelana' or 'a frutti' decoration appears much later on Antwerp majolica. Simple geometric or stylised floral designs are predominant on the vessels produced in Antwerp.

Some Antwerp products are present in archaeological assemblages from France and are clear proof of some contact with this region (Ravoire 2002, 356–359). On the other hand, no connection with 16th (and 17th) century majolica or faience production whatsoever is found in centres such as Nevers and later Noyon (Rosen 2002).

The production of this period (the 3rd quarter of the 16th century) is best known from the excavations of Lucas Andries' kiln situated in his house 'De Goudbloem' at Steenhouwersvest (Dumortier/Veeckman 1994). Production at this site should probably be dated between 1556 and 1562 or 1572 at the latest. If we compare the kiln, the way of modelling the vessels and the firing aids used in the kiln, a clear resemblance can be noted with the technique of producing majolica as described by Cipriano Piccolpasso in his treatise from around 1556 (Lightbown/Caiger-Smith 1980). This implies that the Antwerp majolica potters held on strongly to their traditions. However, the vessels and tiles produced have clearly shifted towards a less luxurious and more popular style, intended for a wider public. Majolica has become a mass product, a mass product for a limited class that could afford it. It could be described using the German term 'gesunkenes Kulturgut'.

The third generation: local potters take the lead

Towards the end of the 16th century the production of majolica is concentrated in the hands of local craftsman and artisans. In total we know over 80 names of majolica potters who have exercised their profession in 16th and early 17th century Antwerp (Dumortier 1999, 107). The workshops are now concen-

trated in the southern part of the town, in particular in Schoytestraat, Bogaardenstraat and Sint Janstraat (present day Aalmoezeniersstraat). We know the most about the majolica production of this period, thanks to several archaeological contexts yielding production wasters and the recent discovery of a kiln site. For the first time another type of high quality decorated ceramics appears on the Antwerp market, i.e. slip decorated redware from the Werra and Weser region in Germany. However, these ceramics, only imported in small quantities, were probably never a real threat to the majolica potters.

The technology used remains very traditional. The remains of the kiln, excavated in 2001 in Aalmoezeniersstraat (Oost/Veeckman 2002, 60–61) are very similar to the older kiln investigated in Steenhouwersvest which belonged to Lucas Andries (Dumortier/Veeckman 1994). From historical sources we know that the Aalmoezeniersstraat kiln belonged to Hans Boudewyns, who lived on the spot from 1595 until 1617 (Dumortier 1992, 110). The kiln, as well as the production wasters, can therefore be accurately dated.

Production also remained very traditional typologically speaking. Although a quantification of the material is not yet available, it seems that the Aalmoezeniersstraat ensemble is very similar to the Schoytestraat wasters, the vast majority of the production consisting of plates, a smaller percentage of albarelli, some porringers and a few jars. A considerable portion of the total production also consisted of tiles. The Aalmoezeniersstraat material seems to be a little more diverse, containing several uncommon (and even some unidentified) pottery types such as salt cellars and a type of low albarello. These deviating types do not occur in Antwerp consumption contexts and could therefore possibly be regarded as experimental.

The vessel types, as well as the decoration is very close (or even identical) to what is usually referred to as typical Northern Netherlands majolica. From the Schoytestraat material we were already able to prove the presence of Chinese designs in Antwerp in an early 17th century context. The Aalmoezeniersstraat finds confirm the Schoytestraat information. Types of decoration, usually identified as being of North Holland origin appear on the excavated material. Besides being a potter Hans Boudewyns also was a tradesman (pers. comm. C. Dumortier). I

think we may conclude that even until well into the 17th century Antwerp still played a major role in both the production and the distribution of majolica. The traditional view of Holland's supremacy on the majolica market in the Low Countries in the 17th century should therefore be adjusted. The almost proverbial date of 1585 – the fall of Antwerp, responsible for the shift of the economic centre towards the North – doesn't seem to fit the facts. It should be noted that the same goes for the production of glass. The most elaborate and exclusive Antwerp glass production dates from the end of the 16th and the first quarter of the 17th century. There remains one more item of proof of the originality of late Antwerp majolica production. Excavations on the site of the 17th century Carmelite monastery yielded a small but interesting ensemble of majolica vessels decorated

in blue on white, bearing designs influenced by Chinese porcelain. At first sight, one might doubt the Antwerp origin of the pieces. But no comparable pieces have been found elsewhere, which is an argument for the identification of Antwerp as the place of origin. The excavation context dates to the second quarter of the 17th century at the earliest, at which time the development of faience production in the Northern Netherlands is well underway. And finally, we must not forget the influence of Chinese porcelain imports on the European market. From the 17th century onwards the majolica potters were faced with this new high quality product. They probably had to adjust their production to a new consumption market. Majolica and faience became a more common type of goods aimed at a less wealthy class of customer.

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