

COLLECTION CONNECTION

The Fontana Maiolica Workshop

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The Taft Museum of Art's small but choice collection of Italian Renaissance maiolica, or tin-glazed earthenware, includes an important ewer from the Fontana workshop, a renowned pottery in Urbino in central Italy. Guido (active about 1520–65), the son of a pelt dealer, established the pottery, which was highly successful and raised the social status of his family. Guido's first will, dated 1570 and signed "Master Guido, son of Nicola, called Fontana" reveals that he adopted the surname Fontana.

Ewer with the Birth of Adonis (fig. 1), of about 1545–50, is painted with scenes borrowed from an illustrated book, *Ovid's Metamorphoses*, published in Venice in 1493. These images portray the tragic birth of Adonis, who was born to Myrrha and Myrrha's own father, Cinyras, a son and priest of Apollo. Under the ewer's spout, a woman in blue holds a baby that has emerged from a cleft in a tree, which merges above with the upper torso of a woman. Observing nearby is Lucina, goddess of childbirth, who is nude and carries a wand. On the ewer's back appears the aftermath of the story: the gods transforming the remorseful Myrrha into a myrrh tree.

The form of this ewer, which was copied from a contemporary print, set a new trend in maiolica: its mouth represents a gaping lion and its



Fig. 1. Urbino, Fontana Workshop, *Ewer with the Birth of Adonis*, 1545–50, tin-glazed earthenware. Taft Museum of Art

handle the beast's foot and paw. The creative Fontana workshop led the market with such innovative forms.

On view in *Marvels of Maiolica: Italian Renaissance Ceramics from the Corcoran Gallery of Art Collection* is another vessel produced by the Fontana Workshop, *Pilgrim Flask with Myrrha and Adonis* (fig. 2) of about 1570–80, which illustrates the same myth and again drew inspiration from *Ovid's Metamorphoses*. On one side of the flask, a landscape view features a young semi-nude woman seated with an older bearded man, probably representing Myrrha's incestuous relationship with her father. On the other side we see the death of the beautiful young man Adonis, who was slain by a boar while hunting with his beloved Aphrodite, the goddess of love.



Fig. 2. Urbino, Fontana Workshop, *Pilgrim Flask with Myrrha and Adonis*, 1570–80, tin-glazed earthenware. William A. Clark Collection, Corcoran Gallery of Art

The shape of the Corcoran flask originated with functional objects: dried hollow gourds suspended by cords and used to carry water. That explains certain odd features of the ceramic piece: nonfunctional holes in the base and loops at the sides. Applied molded decorations—grotesque masks and volutes—evinced the Fontana workshop's flair for new techniques.

The Taft's 14 pieces of maiolica once belonged to the collection of Baron Adolphe de Rothschild in Paris, which was sold in 1900, ultimately being split among the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Musée du Louvre, Paris; and the Tafts. The Corcoran's collection of 800 examples was donated in 1925 by former Montana senator William A. Clark and provides many more fascinating comparisons with the Taft holdings.