



Review Article

Anthony Ray, *Spanish Pottery 1248–1898 with a catalogue of the collection in the Victoria and Albert Museum*, V&A Publications, 2000. 276 × 219 mm, xiii and 418 pp., 61 numbered figs, 1 map, 1 page of diagrams, and 96 out-of-text colour pls. ISBN 1 85177 291 X. Price: £125 hardback.

Complete catalogues unrelated to temporary exhibitions may seem a threatened genre in a climate of populism, although it is a means of access to scholarship, which — it is a pleasure to state at the outset — is in this case incomparable. The V&A and the Swiss and Spanish sponsors are to be congratulated on producing a well designed volume, a worthy match to the research apparently initiated in 1982 and brought to a conclusion in 1998. This book is more substantial than the details listed at the head of this review suggest. As the numbering of the plates refer to an entire page, it actually consists of 528 pages. The colour photographs on these plates amount to about 280. Each of the 1,029 numbered entries (which may cover more than one similar item) is illustrated by one or more black and white photographs on the same or facing-open page of good quality, heavy, glossy paper. The numbered figures are of pieces in other collections. As the text is set two columns to a page apparently in 9 point, about 1200 words can be printed on a page (cf. about the same as on the slightly bigger page of this journal). The book is divided into five main sections. Medieval pottery, 17th- and 18th-century pottery, and tiles get about 100 pages each, including about 220, 140 and 420 catalogued items respectively, whereas about 60 pages (165 items) are devoted to 16th- and 45 pages (140 items) to 19th-century pottery. The pottery sections are each prefaced by an historical survey and a general account, and the entries are grouped topographically with lustreware treated separately.

As the title indicates, Ray set out to write both a history of six and a half centuries of Spanish pottery and a catalogue of the V&A's collection, covering 'the tin-glazed wares in all their diversity, lead-glazed and unglazed wares', Alcora porcelain (because the factory also made fine faience and creamware), and a few recent imitations. As there are significant gaps in the museum's holdings, unrepresented centres are discussed and objects from other collections are illustrated. Because the products of many documented potteries have not been identified, the general accounts are often more historical than material. This appears to be Ray's *forte* rather than connoisseurship or the art history of other media. But to what extent does the known history reflect the story of the industry as a whole or the vagaries of local research? What impact did, for example, 17th-century Italian migrants make on production at Zaragoza? In practice the book is mainly about tableware and painted tiles attributed to the better-known places; and the in-text figures only resolve in part the V&A's gaps.

Pride of place in the medieval section is rightly given to lustreware, with its apparent start at Murcia in the 12th century outlined in the preface, its fame established in the

13th at Malaga on finely potted forms, and its spread in the 14th century from Andalucia to Valencia, where in the following century new 'Christian' motifs were incorporated into the decorative repertoire in a cheaper, more coppery lustre on more simply potted forms. With the notable exceptions of the remarkable ship bowl (No. 21) and an outstanding drug jar (No. 122), the Museum is only able to illustrate the lustreware story before the 15th century from its important collection of fragments. Some storage jars and one unglazed painted pot represent what were presumably the commoner wares used in the last Islamic kingdom. Some purple-and-green and blue-only decorated tin-glazed wares round off the picture for the Christian east. In cultural terms, Ray contrasts a Christian world eating and drinking before the middle of the 13th century from treen and metal, with an Islamic one employing a range of decorated ceramic household vessels. Painted pottery — made principally by Moorish potters — spread to tables with urban civilisation (as it did elsewhere in western Mediterranean Christendom) to peak in Spain in the 15th century, when Valencian lustreware was exported and prized by elite and bourgeois alike throughout the Mediterranean and in north-west Europe. New World bullion brought metal tableware back into favour, shown by the decline in armorial services in the first quarter of the 16th century and by the imitation of metal forms. The other traditional blow to the ceramic industry was the ethnic cleansing of the Moors in 1609, whose impact is less easy to measure.

Political and economic circumstances are, as Ray points out in discussing Talavera's decline, often excuses to cover a particular industry's inability to respond to change. In this instance, Valencia did not rise to the challenge of Italian prestige and good quality table wares, inspired by Spanish models but developed in the Renaissance taste with an extended palette. However, an Italian potter, Niculoso Francisco, set up in Seville at the end of the 15th century. He may have invented figured wall-painting spread over many tiles, adopted the local low relief or *arista* (once known as *cuenca*) tiles which can still be seen gracing many a stairwell in Liguria, and made the plain and 'popular' Sevillian wares found in the New World. (Oddly, the last, together with contemporary *cuerda seca* items, are placed in the medieval section.) In the middle of the 16th century, the new tradition of wall painting in Seville was boosted by Ligurian immigrants and by a son of Guido Andries who had taken the art of tin-glazing to Antwerp. At the same time another Fleming, Jan Floris, attracted royal patronage for this work in the Castilian heartland.

In this period glazed tiles began to be used by a wider public to such an extent that they now characterise Spanish ceramic production as much as lustreware. They were employed in an extraordinary variety of situations, on floors, wainscots, and ceilings, and as street name and funerary plaques, and were applied to stair risers, altars, tombs and so on. Because tiles depend on building cycles and are thus a less predictable source of income than tableware, some potters made both and an integrated overall history, especially of the upper end of the industry, as this study

inevitably is, would make sense. A notable exception is Valencia, where in the 18th century the city specialised in tiles, and Manises in pots. Most post-medieval Spanish pottery does not apparently match the quality of the better tiles and certainly not the pottery of other west European countries. Its story is reduced to a few well-known place names. Other centres are assumed to have made poorer versions. Some gross geographical variation is allowed, with Valencia continuing lustre production for its own region and with the Mediterranean coastlands more open to Italian influence. The last is seen simply in terms of a polychrome palette and figured subjects, very indirect reflections compared with, for example, the obvious but distinct Low Country derivations of Montelupo. Talavera de la Reina on the river Tagus emerges in the mid-16th century as the maker of esteemed white wares; by 1600 it was considered pre-eminent in Spain, enjoyed royal patronage, and became synonymous with a type of pottery in Seville and apparently with tin glaze in Aragon (as the qualifier Pisa had been and continued to be in some areas). It is assumed that its characteristic product is the brightly coloured ware in blue, orange and manganese, featuring busts which are, if anything, distant and folksy versions of the Italian progenitors claimed by Ray. They and, in particular, the full-length figures have more in common with 17th-century Montelupo cavalier dishes than with the Renaissance maiolica of Deruta and Castel Durante. Another category may have been influenced by Chinese porcelain via Portuguese faience, although the V&A example is not dissimilar to the contemporary Ligurian *calligrafico naturalistica* style, which might account for the contribution of some of the Italian immigrants.

Only the quality of landscape scenes painted predominantly in green, yellow and brown, some with coats of arms datable between 1696 and 1723, are worthy of the recorded elite patronage. Ray links these, of which the V&A has some fine specimens, to Ligurian potters. Thereafter Talavera declines and its place is taken by Alcora near the east coast, between Valencia and Barcelona. The foundation of this large factory by an aristocrat and government minister in 1727 is a marked departure from the previous craft workshops clustered in small towns or suburbs. Decorators from Moustiers and a modeller from Marseilles were brought in to teach the more refined rococo styles to local workmen in the factory's academy. By 1743 three million pieces had been produced. The figurines, plaques with moulded frames which were hung like pictures, and the chocolate cups and stands catered for an elite clientele. By 1790 other Frenchmen successfully replicated creamware ('Bristol ware'), but efforts to produce porcelain resulted only in soft paste. In the following century, china and transfer-printing were introduced by entrepreneurial capitalists who imported English, French and German potters. They are represented in the V&A by William Pickman's factory, which started production in Seville in 1841. Presumably this industrial ware satisfied the middle-class market. Humbler folk bought the cheaper, popular wares at fairs to adorn their walls and dressers; examples were also acquired by British travellers and the V&A, keen on the exotic and oriental. One illustrated by Ray (Fig. 60) probably would have been classed 'peasant pottery' by Honey. These older potting traditions survived long enough to overlap with the middle-class revivalist and nationalistic movement of the 1880s, which led to rather mechanical-looking copies of lustreware.

Inevitably Ray's tome is dependent on the available evidence. Whereas for the Middle Ages he can draw on pots inserted into church fabric, excavations, scientific analyses indicating the provenance of the clay, and on a century of

international scholarship, thereafter he has to rely on relatively few datable coats of arms, dated items, representations in paintings, and on the researches of mostly local and often opinionated enthusiasts. With the establishment of potteries in Mexico towards the end of the 16th century, colonial archaeology ceases to provide a remedy for the paucity of post-medieval work undertaken or published in Spain. The excavation of the Tribunal of the Inquisition (in progress in 1995) may provide a picture of what really was used and probably made at Seville between 1480 and 1780. At the moment we cannot tell whether the lustreware and *berettino* (blue on blue) from Triana was experimental, like similar oddities found at Montelupo, or marketed, just as we cannot yet assess the outcome of the many documented attempts to innovate. The great merit of this volume is that it provides a reliable guide through the recent bibliographical maze (and more is to be found in the footnotes than appears in the selection at the end). But Ray does more than provide a balanced synthesis. He has applied critical acumen to the hoary chestnuts which have gained their own momentum, rewriting, for instance, the Alcora story, checking original documents, and frequently putting straight the record. *Inter alia* he has made me rethink the extent to which the Boils, the lords of Manises, had a more active role than I have credited. He is clear and sensible about terminology and, for example, the impossibility of distinguishing the two Valencian centres of Manises and Paterna. His research is both detailed as well as broad-brush. One catalogue entry (No. 363) tells an English ship captain's story; another (No. 1016) records early star bullfighters. There are too data on the number of potteries, kiln firings and employees and on technology transfer, of interest to those concerned with these wider issues outside Spain. Most importantly he has handled pottery in reserve collections and talked to those active in the field, abroad as well as in Spain. I doubt there is any work of this calibre and scope on Spanish pottery of the last millennium.

The historical prologues are, however, curiously old-fashioned in the certainty of their judgements and in their focus on narrative history and dynastic fortunes. As Ray himself notes at one point, potters proceed with their business despite bad rulers and policies, persecution, war, decline and stagnation. Both population increase and decrease are invoked as negative and seemingly autonomous factors. History is about change; and many new approaches to its study have been introduced in the last half-century. I cannot believe that a new generation of Spanish historians has not questioned the old picture and produced more nuanced and pertinent economic, social and cultural accounts than the three English history text books cited in the bibliography (two published in the early 1960s and one in 1991). Archaeologists will be disappointed that only some typical open forms have been drawn and that base and rim diameters of the fragments are rarely given. The sixteen pages of scaled drawings in Alfonso Pleguezuelo's catalogue of the Carranza collection show that art historians can do a proper job; and now that an Italian prehistorian has devised a computer-linked profile-drawing machine to automate the task there will be no excuse in future on grounds of cost (but should drawing not be built into the budget, as photography is?). It is a pity too that the coloured photographs of closed forms duplicate the same views as the monochrome ones, instead of providing a view of an unillustrated side (and why not shoot the whole circumference?); and that the pagination of articles is not given in the Bibliography. The analytical index is an essential complement to the full contents page, but I could not track down Albisola. Nor could I locate El Viso on the map. Other niggles: analyses have shown that the Caliphal wares were

not coated with a white slip but with a tin glaze; is No. 43 really unglazed?; the 'label' on the drug jars Nos. 181-2 resembles more a merchant's mark than an indication of contents.

I wonder too if the whole enterprise of catalogue publication on this scale has had its day and whether or not this is a swansong of the genre. Few national museums have 'representative' collections of materials from outside their own country; and, even if they cover the chronological span of the known geographical centres, they are unlikely to be more than reflections of past collecting taste or opportunism. Thus a collection of this kind may not be a suitable framework on which to hang a complete history of a particular craft or industry, which in the Spanish case is impossible

given the patchy state of knowledge. Catalogues of this size and quality become definitive because it is too daunting to devote the time to cover the same ground again. Synthesis should perhaps be separated from catalogue and be updated regularly; and the latter be a rolling collaborative project, accessible via the web where objects could be viewed from any angle. In this scheme exhaustive monographs could be limited to well-defined topics. These musings on changing the approach and medium do not detract from my admiration of Ray's fine achievement.

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