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Census of Antique Works of Art
and Architecture Known in the Renaissance
Berlin-Brandenburgische Akademie der Wissenschaften
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

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This work aims at complementing the study of Timo Strauch from Humboldt-University of Berlin, who explored the theme »Death of Laocoon and his Sons« in maiolica dishes in an article published in issue no. 9 of this journal.¹

The famous sculptural group of the first century BC was discovered in excavations conducted in 1506 on the Colle Oppio in Rome and acquired by Pope Julius II for his Belvedere, which at that time was still under construction. The sculpture depicts the sacrifice of the Trojan priest Laocoon and his two sons, Antiphantes and Thymbraeus, reported in the »Aeneid« of Virgil. Immediately and throughout the sixteenth century the discovery of the sculptural group had a massive impact on artists and artisans active in all kinds of arts and trades. Strauch analyses fifteen maiolica objects reporting this subject in five different iconographic versions.

One maiolica plate – shown by Strauch in cat. 11² – of which the location remained unknown to the author, can now be identified in the large dish preserved in the Museum of Art of São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand (MASP) along with 241 other maiolica pieces originating from the collection of the antique dealer Alexandre Imbert. The dish was noticed by the German scholar in the archives of the Berlin Kunstgewerbemuseum, when examining a photo of the shelves of the so-called China Room, the maiolica collection of Andrew Fountaine at Narford Hall, Norfolk, shortly before it went on sale at Christie's London in 1884. According to information that Strauch obtained from Timothy Wilson (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford), the dish was acquired by the London art dealer Wareham.

The route of this piece, as well as the route of the entire Imbert Collection of Maiolica of MASP is still little explored due to scarcity of both reference material and scholars in the city of São Paulo.³

The news about Alexandre Imbert (Naples, Italy, 1865 – Buenos Aires, Argentina, 1943) are scarce. During his stay in Rome between the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries, the antique dealer Imbert gathered his collection of maiolica with remarkable care and connoisseurship. In 1909, after ordering a study of his medieval pieces from Pericle

Perali, a specialist in the field, Imbert published the results in his »Ceramiche orvietane dei secoli XIII e XIV«⁴ with a circulation of only two hundred copies, probably intended for his customers. In May 1911 Imbert presented to the public a collection of 525 pieces of maiolica in the exhibition entitled »Faïence Italiennes« in the Pavillon de Marsan of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs of Paris. The collection is documented by a catalogue published by André Dubrujeaud with a preface written by the conservator of the Louvre, Gaston Migeon, who described the collection as »scientifically very important for the quantity of pieces marked, signed or dated«.⁵ The large dish from Urbino is described under number 474 of the catalogue:

Plat creux; sujet: au centre, dans un médaillon rond, la mort de Laocoon; le reste du plat est orné de grotesques. Au revers cercles concentriques. Décor polychrome. Diam. 0,415. XVIe S. Collection R. Kann.⁶

Thus it becomes clear, that before Imbert the plate was owned by the famous French collector Rodolphe Kann. When and how it became part of Imbert's collection remains unclear. So far, our studies have also failed to identify the route taken by Imbert's collection after his death in 1943 until April 18, 1947, the day Sotheby's put a selected part of maiolica objects on sale in the great gallery of the renowned auction house.⁷ The Laocoon dish, however, did not figure among the lots of that sale. It is known that in 1951 a significant part of the Imbert Collection, then in possession of The Matthiesen Gallery in London,⁸ was under negotiation with the intention to find its place of permanent guard at the MASP. This time the rich documentation of the acquisition of Imbert's maiolica confirms the final entry of the Laocoon dish into the collection of MASP in 1952. The formal negotiation of the collection is recorded in the letters exchanged between Pietro Maria Bardi, director of the MASP,⁹ and the Matthiesen Gallery on March 27, 1951:

Dear Professor Bardi,

Herewith we are sending you list and photographs of the Majolica from the Imbert Collection.

As you know, the majority of pieces were at one time exhibited at the Musée des Arts-Décoratifs in Paris. The catalogue of that Exhibition was taken by M. Chateaubriand. No reference to that Exhibition is made in our list,

but the greater number of pieces still bear the label and number of the museum.

We are sending you two folders of photographs: The one containing photographs of the 15 pieces which are especially indicated in our list as being of great importance. The other folder containing photographs of over 50 pieces, taken at random, to show how very fine the standard of average in this collection is.

With kind regards
Yours sincerely,
K. Maison
Matthiesen Ltd.

Anna Carboncini, Bardi's assistant between 1975 and 1985, reports having heard frequently from him that he had lost the priority in the purchase of the pieces to an American museum, so that he could only buy the remaining objects. Nevertheless, the invoice sent by the Matthiesen Gallery to MASP on July 3, 1951, amounting to £ 12 000, cites a collection of 235 pieces of Italian maiolica of the fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as well as an oil painting by Francisco de Zurbaran (1598–1662) entitled »St Anthony of Padua«. The works were all loaded on the ship »Uruguay Star« and sent to the port of Santos in São Paulo. On August 6 the ship berthed in Santos, but the works were released only on December 11 that year, and it was only in January 1952 that the collection was finally recorded in the museum's inventory as Imbert Collection of Maiolica of MASP. In the documents Francisco Pignatari appears as its donor.¹⁰ Possibly to mark the acquisition of the collection, the Brazilian magazine »Habitat« published an article entitled »Majolica at the Museum« reporting the expansion of the museum collection of art objects through the acquisition of the Imbert Collection in Rome.¹¹

Only two and a half years later, between July 19 and 23, 1954, the collection was presented to the Brazilian public in the exhibition hall of the Library of the Foreign Ministry in Rio de Janeiro. The exhibition was preceded by a wide media dissemination through the publications of the »Diários Associados«, that printed headlines like »Presentation of new artistic gems of the Museum of Art of São Paulo«¹², »Representation of Culture in Europe in the field of ceramics«¹³ or »New donations to the museum of art«.¹⁴ The exhibition, which also showed bronze sculptures by Edgar Degas and paintings, was highlighted in the MASP

1 *The Death of Laocoon and his Sons, Maiolica, Urbino, around 1570–90, São Paulo, Museum of Art, inv. 108/M221*

Bulletin, launched in 1954, with the headlines »The ceramic« and »Italian faience«. ¹⁵ Up to this period only around 120 pieces were on show, but in 1959 a full check-off did occur, based on the list sent by the Matthiesen Gallery. Presently, much of the collection belonging to the museum has labels on the back or base, indicating its origin. According to the list sent by the Matthiesen Gallery, the description of our large dish was numbered and described as »M.221. Large flat rimmed bowl or dish richly decorated with ornamental in the French style, with a circular insert Laocoon group. French or Italian, 16th Century«. ¹⁶

Temporary maiolica exhibitions in the so-called »Display Window of the Forms« took place in the art gallery of the first headquarters of MASP in Sete

2 *Reverse of fig. 1*

de April Street and marked their history in São Paulo in the 1960s. Already in its second and final headquarters in Paulista Avenue, designed by Lina Bo Bardi¹⁷ and erected 1958–68, MASP performed other small exhibitions where maiolica objects were displayed. For several times the pieces were shown in the second basement floor, in the display window of the restaurant or in the library, between the years 1976 and 1980. A greater enrichment of documentation on maiolica took place by the end of the 1970s, calling the attention of Italian scholars and institutions. In the 1990s all the boxes which had remained untouched till then were finally opened by the initiative and guidance of Eunice Moraes Sophia, the collection coordinator of the museum. This allowed a further check

of the state of preservation of the pieces, the proposal for a more appropriate packaging and the preparation of several small exhibitions held in the display windows of the second basement floor, in the art gallery, and in the subway station next to the museum (Trianon-MASP).

In 1996 the exhibition »Italian Art Collections in Brazil, 1250–1950«¹⁸ gave the museum the opportunity to make its first catalogue raisonné of Italian art, curated by Luiz Marques, where the Imbert Collection of Maiolica was cited with emphasis through two of its pieces: the pitcher (inv. 33/M100), possibly Sieneese, sixteenth century, and the large dish (inv. 108/M221), representing the Death of Laocoon and his Sons, with 6.5 cm in height and 41.4 cm in diameter, from the studio of Fontana or Patanazzi, Urbino, dated around 1570–90. Two years later MASP published the catalogue, which mentioned the same pieces of the Imbert Collection in the volume dedicated to Italian art.¹⁹ In 2006 the exhibition »The Italian Art of MASP« inaugurated the Fiat House of Culture of Nova Lima in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. It showed part of the MASP collection of paintings, sculptures, archaeological objects, maiolica and rare books. The exhibition was curated by Eugenia Esmeraldo Gorini with the collaboration of Ivani Costa di Grazia for rare books and the present author for maiolica. The catalogue showed 16 illustrations of maiolica pieces, and the large Laocoon plate once again was highlighted in the publication.²⁰

The Imbert Collection has often given support to temporary exhibitions held in the museum, presenting artistic, plastic and sensorial manifestations to the public, as in the exhibition »Art and Myth in the MASP collection« of October 2007 curated by Roberto Magalhães.

The Art Museum of São Paulo, imbued with the task of contributing to current research on the »arte maiolicare«, feels privileged to share its collection with other institutions and scholars and is aware of the important ramifications in the research of this collection, yet little studied though located in one of the most important museums of art of Latin America.

NOTES

- 1 Timo Strauch: *Laokoon-Darstellungen in der ›maiolica istoriata‹*, in: *Pegasus. Berliner Beiträge zum Nachleben der Antike* 9 (2007), pp. 73–115. I would like to thank Timothy Wilson, who brought this article to my attention.
- 2 *Ibidem*, p. 93.
- 3 Supported by the English scholar Timothy Wilson, and motivated by the search for accurate assignments, the study on the Brazilian collection has sought to address the continuing changes in mastery of factories and the proximity between the centres of production, stressing that the life and the culture between the fourteenth and eighteenth centuries had many points in common in terms of exchange of craftsmen, techniques and possibilities of appropriation of knowledge. Another important point of the research is to discover the route of the collection before its incorporation into the museum, a fact that coincides with Strauch's studies. For those reasons, the year 2009 has been marked by expressive exchanges with foreign institutions and scholars, presenting important contributions to the documentation of the collection.
- 4 Alessandro Imbert: *Ceramiche orvietane dei secoli XIII e XIV: note su documenti*, Rome 1909.
- 5 *Faïence Italiennes de la Collection Al. Imbert*. Catalogue descriptif par André Dubrujeaud. Préface de Gaston Migeon, Paris 1911, p. 3.
- 6 *Ibidem*, p. 88.
- 7 Sotheby and Co.: *Catalogue of Turkish faïence, the property of Sir George Hill, K. C. B., Fine Italian Maiolica including the property of the late W. J. H. Whittall, Esq and a selected portion of the Celebrated Collection of Italian Maiolica, formed by the late A. Imbert, Esq comprising Important 15th Century, Faenza, Tuscany and Orvieto Wares 15th Century Hispano-Moresque bowl also fine Deruta, Siena, Caffaggiolo, Gubbio, Urbino and Venice Maiolica ...*, London 1947.
- 8 Directed by Francis Matthiesen and Karl Eric Maison, the Matthiesen Gallery was located at 142 New Bond Street in Mayfair, London.
- 9 Pietro Maria Bardi (La Spezia, Italy, 1900–São Paulo, Brazil, 1999), journalist, critic of art and architecture, merchant and director of the Art Museum of São Paulo. It was at the request of Assis Chateaubriand (Umbuzeiro, PB, Brazil, 1891–São Paulo, Brazil, 1968), owner of the *Diários Associados* (Associated Newspapers in Brazil), that Bardi made a commitment to conceive and direct a Brazilian museum.
- 10 Francisco Pignatari (Italy, 1916–São Paulo, Brazil, 1977), factory owner, known as Baby Pignatari.
- 11 *Habitat*, October–December 5 (1951), pp. 75–77.
- 12 *O Jornal*, July 20, 1954.
- 13 *O Jornal*, July 22, 1954 and *Diário de São Paulo*, July 23, 1954.
- 14 *Diário de São Paulo*, July 23, 1954 on »The facts through the Objective«.
- 15 *Boletim do MASP*, 1954, n. 5, pp. 6–7.
- 16 *Maiolica from the A. Imbert Collection (Rome)*, Matthiesen Ltd. 142 New Bond Street, London, W.I., p. 16.
- 17 Lina Bo Bardi (Rome, Italy, 1914–São Paulo, Brazil, 1992), architect.
- 18 Luiz Marques: *A arte italiana no Museu de Arte de São Paulo*, São Paulo 1996 (*Corpus da arte italiana em coleções Brasileiras* 1), pp. 72–74.
- 19 Luiz Marques: *Catálogo do Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand. Arte Italiana*, São Paulo 1998, pp. 207–210. In 2008, the catalogue was republished with a

new graphic design, but still using the same two objects to represent the Imbert collection.

- 20 *Arte Italiana do MASP na Casa FIAT de Cultura, São Paulo 2006*, p. 48. Meanwhile, some of the pieces have received more accurate assessments.

PHOTOGRAPHIC CREDITS

MASP, Museu de Arte de São Paulo Assis Chateaubriand, photo by Erick Santos de Jesus.