



The “*rustiques figulines*” (rustic wares) of Bernard Palissy and his imitators

Bernard Palissy, who was born in Agen around 1510 and died in Paris in 1589 or 1590 was a mythical ceramist, as well as a writer and scholar uncovering nature’s secrets. His extraordinary career, some areas of which remain shrouded in mystery, was full of drama.

After an apprenticeship as a glass-painter, Palissy moved to Saintes, where he married and converted to Protestantism. Around 1539, after having seen "a cup of turned and enamelled clay of such beauty that I began to dispute from then on with my own thoughts", he switched his attention to ceramics, focusing his research in particular on glazes and enamels in an attempt to recreate Italian maiolica. His relentless quest, especially the desire to perfect a white glaze, reputedly led to him burning wood from his own house: "Lacking wood, I was forced to burn the palings maintaining the boundaries of my garden, and once these had been burnt, I was obliged to burn the tables and flooring of the house". In parallel with his research, and in order to support his large family, he worked as a land surveyor, which allowed him to observe the fauna that inspired the designs for his ceramics.

From 1555 onwards, his platters and dishes were decorated with cast forms in relief, with these "*rustiques figulines*" (rustic wares) then being covered with shiny glazes. As well as ornamental tableware, he also built a grotto for the Château of Écouen and for the Tuileries Palace. In his work *The Admirable Discourses*, he devoted one chapter to "On the Art of the Earth", in which he describes his experiences.

Though protected for many years by his close ties with those in power, he was ultimately imprisoned in the Bastille for his religious beliefs and ended his days there.

Added to the gallery of "great men of the French nation" in the 19th century, the passionate and misunderstood artist Bernard Palissy then returned to the spotlight. During a period when art was

taking a fresh look at the great periods of its history and when the development of the natural sciences and chemistry was prompting a return to nature, several French ceramists concentrated in the Schools of Tours and Paris contributed to the Palissy revival, revisiting the works of their famous predecessor.

In Tours, **Jean-Charles Avisseau** (1795-1861) discovered a real vocation as a ceramist on seeing some examples of Palissy's work. He modelled reptiles, animals or molluscs, often from nature and with the aid of live specimens, seeking to impart to this fauna the impression of intense and teeming life.

In Paris, in addition to Victor Barbizet (active between 1850 and 1890), no examples of whose work is held at the Musée Ariana, **Georges Pull** (1810-1889) and his son **Jules** were also passionate about Palissy. They made large moulded dishes featuring amphibians and other snakes, plants and shells in extremely light creamware, which they coated with bright and colourful glazes. Bernard Palissy's influence also extended beyond France, as in the case of **Manuel Cipriano Gomes**, who adopted the name **Mafra**.

Though the Musée Ariana sadly does not possess any works by Bernard Palissy, the institution does, however, have a rich collection of pieces testifying to the revival of this style in the 19th century. **Gustave Revilliod**, the founder of the Musée Ariana, was no doubt drawn to these astonishing pieces during visits to exhibitions or workshops, since he acquired around ten items representative of this movement. He also commissioned a figurine from Jules Pull depicting the famous ceramist at work and reprinted by Fick editions in Geneva in "*L'Art de la terre*" by Palissy.

If it gets too hot this summer, dip into the delightful freshness of these rustic wares by Palissy's followers!

1. & 2. Platters, workshop of Georges Pull, Vaugirard (Paris, France), c. 1880
moulded creamware, marbled ground, coloured glazes
Gustave Revilliod bequest, 1890 – Inv. AR 7903 & 7905

3. Bernard Palissy at work, Jules Pull, Vaugirard (Paris, France), 1884
moulded creamware, coloured glazes
Gustave Revilliod bequest, 1890 – Inv. AR 7901

4. Group, factory of Charles-Jean Avisseau, Tours (France), mid-19th century
creamware, coloured glazes
Gustave Revilliod bequest, 1890 – Inv. AR 6274

5. Platter, factory of Manuel Cipriano Gomes, known as Mafra, Caldas da Rainha (Portugal), c. 1880
modelled and moulded earthenware, coloured glazes
Gustave Revilliod bequest, 1890 – Inv. AR 7915