

In Studio with Laura Silvagni

Together with her family, Laura is a specialist in the field of majolica. In addition, she lives and works in Italy's most famous ceramics city, Faenza. She immediately agreed to let our readers in on some of the secrets of majolica.

Evelyne Schoenmann

Laura, your studio, *La Vecchia Faenza*, is very spacious and it is fascinating. You said that it is a family business. Would you tell us some more about its history please?

My husband, Gino Suzzi, opened the business, *La Vecchia Faenza*, in 1967 and immediately devoted himself to the production and sale of hand painted majolica after the traditional Faenza technique. I started my training in the same year. Ten

merged the two studios but kept two shops, which by then both had a good reputation in our field. Since 2014, our daughter Elisa has been working with us and would like to take the business over, which in 2017 will be celebrating its 50th anniversary!

What precisely is majolica and how did it develop?

Majolica is a ceramic technique in which terracotta is tin glazed, painted and

many of these majolica objects can still be admired in museums. The glossy glaze and the brilliance of the colours remain unchanged over centuries.

Could you describe the “traditional Faenza style”?

There are more than one traditional Faenza style! Ceramics have always been made in Faenza ... Every period has its own colours and decorative motifs that



years later, that is in 1977, I decided to go my own way professionally and opened my workshop store, “Laura Silvagni”. For forty years, we worked separately. My husband mainly produced ceramics in the classic styles of decoration from Faenza in the Renaissance, the 18th and the early 20th centuries, whereas I specialised on the 19th century, what is known as the Raffaellesco style, which is very elaborate and painterly. In 2004, when my husband retired, I took over *La Vecchia Faenza*,

fired at high temperature. In other countries, this kind of ceramics is often called faïence or fayence, a name which is derived from the city of Faenza. For centuries it was one of the largest centres for the production of ceramics in Europe. Majolica flourished in the Renaissance and reached a very high production quality. The pots were no longer exclusively functional, true works of art were created, entirely made and painted by hand, and they were often very large. Although they are very old,

were particularly in vogue. The special motifs from the Renaissance were called the “penna di pavone” (peacock feather) and “palmetta persiana” (Persian palm) inspired by the oriental textiles that were finding their way to Italy via the Silk Road at that time. The predominant colours were cobalt blue and orange. In the 18th century, which once again brought forth a burst of production, the majolica was painted in the famous “garofano” (carnation) style and represented oriental

gardens. However, the style of decoration that I have devoted myself to all my life is called "Raffaellesco", for which elaborate compositions of garlands, winged dragons and acanthus leaves are typical, forming the frame for proper landscape painting and bucolic scenes.

Do you work on all kinds of forms or are there special formats reserved for majolica?

You can glaze and paint any form as long as the clay you are using is suitable. I prefer painting classic ornamental items: vases, ornamental plates, centrepieces for the table. The potters in Faenza are very skilled on the wheel, and they draw a lot of their inspiration from the past, too. Both professions, potter and decorator, are continuing the legacy of hundreds of years of experience.

We are curious and would like to learn the technique of making majolica from A to Z.

hours pass. First, a lot of water must evaporate, the glaze coating has to become "dusty" again. To prepare the piece for decoration, I use the old "spolvero" technique (perforation). I paint the decor on tissue paper and then prick through the outline of my design with a fine needle. I place the paper on the glazed pot and dust it with charcoal, which penetrates the holes and leaves a very fine outline that I can trace with my brush. The decoration is done exclusively with a brush. The colours are made of mineral or metallic oxides diluted with water. A lot of colours change during the firing. Faenza blue, for instance, is a glossy cobalt blue but before the firing it looks purple. The colours are transparent. You cannot use light colours over dark, which is why the empty areas are filled in with the blue background colour typical of the Raffaellesco style with a brush. With the large plates, which I particularly enjoy decorating, just painting in the background in blue takes several

very slow. You need about twelve hours to reach this temperature and about the same to cool down again. The second firing makes the glaze, the colours and the sprayed coating fuse to a single coating with a brilliant gloss that lasts for ever.

Can you tell us about the Notte del Bisò (mulled wine night) on 5 January and its importance in the production of a special drinking bowl for the event?

On 5 January, "bisò" is served in the main square of Faenza. This is a spicy mulled wine in a special vessel called the "gotto", a round, wide low cup that you hold in both hands to warm them. If you buy a gotto, you can fill it with bisò as often as you want! Every year, a different classic motif from Faenza is selected for this bowl. We make these special vessels in our workshop together with others, and they have been collected by the local inhabitants for over thirty years!



First of all, the potter makes the form on the wheel or in press moulds, which are often very old. After the clay has dried, it is fired to approximately 1,000°C, and this is then terracotta. After that, I prepare the blank for the glaze by removing all the imperfections from the piece. The clay we use is very suitable for the glaze because it is highly absorbent. So the piece is dipped in the majolica (the glaze is called "majolica"). Before you can start decorating, several

days! You need a very steady hand and a lot of experience because corrections are very hard to do, sometimes they are completely impossible. The glazed and decorated piece is very delicate before firing. The decor is a layer only a few millimetres thick, clinging to the terracotta, but it can evaporate. After the object has been painted, it is sprayed with a transparent glaze. This glassy coating gives the majolica an even richer sheen. The firing is at around 940°C and it is

LAURA SILVAGNI
C.so Garibaldi 12/A
48018 Faenza (RA), Italy
www.lavecchiafaenza.it/en/

Evelyne Schoenmann's next interview is with **Robert Lawarre III (USA)**.
Evelyne Schoenmann is a ceramist. She lives and works in Basel, Switzerland and Liguria, Italy.
www.schoenmann-ceramics.ch