

Drug Jars

History

Ceramic vessels designed to contain medicine have been in use since at least the 12th century. They originated in Persia and then spread to the near east, western Europe and a small part of China.

The most common early form was the albarello : a cylindrical pottery vessel waisted in the middle, with a flange at the top opening, closed with a lid or, more frequently, a parchment cover.

Other forms of pharmaceutical vessels are commonly called drug jars, except those with a spout which are termed syrup jars.



Drug Jar



Syrup Jar



Albarello

What was inside the jars?

Unlike modern treatments made from chemicals, the medicines (until the 19th century) were made of plants and sometimes of animals or insect-derived materials. The contents were indicated in cartouches.

Look out for the jars below:



syrup of violets



stag's grease



and, as strange as it sounds, earthworm oil!

How were drug jars made?

The drug jars displayed in the museum are tin-glazed ceramics. When making such jars, potters would apply a coat of glaze by plunging the fired jar into a suspension of water, tin oxide and other components. The pottery absorbs the water leaving the rest of the materials on the surface. The potter could then paint further decoration, before finally firing again at high temperature.

Tin oxide was a popular glaze for two main reasons: it provided a good foundation for further painting and its white colour made other pigments appear brighter.



rose flavoured honey

Outstanding items in the collection

The museum has in its collection four jars made in the 18th century for the Ospedale Maggiore della Carita, in Novara (each with an OMCN label in the case). They form part of a group of 31 known objects made for this hospital scattered around the world (mostly in Italy, with some items in Germany and England).



The jars are unsigned but the style of decoration suggests they were made in the workshop of Giorgio Rossetti in Turin. Because of their good condition, these jars are thought to have been used only decoratively. The abbreviated name of the hospital can be seen on the jar, as can its emblem, the figure of Charity with children.



There are three jars made for the Carthusian religious order in the late 17th and early 18th centuries (each with a CART label in the case). This order was founded in France in the 11th century and subsequently spread into Italy.

Two of these jars are similar and were made the same year: 1702. They are side by side so that you can see both the C.A.R.T. emblem used by the Carthusians and the illustration of a legend concerning Saint Martin, Bishop of Tours (371-397 A.D.) on the other side.

Before becoming a bishop or even a Christian, Saint Martin was a soldier in the Roman army. Legend has it that one winter day, he gave half his cloak to a beggar. Why only half? Because half of the uniform belonged to the soldier, and the other to the Roman army. Saint Martin is therefore known to be generous, and also honest.



The collection also illustrates the fashion for blue and white designs: between the late 17th and the early 18th centuries, many ceramics in Europe were decorated in this way. Look at the right hand case, on shelves 3 and 4.

A catalogue of the Drug Jars is available in the Museum shop.

