

AMERICAN

CRAFT

AUG/SEPT '03



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cover: MARA SUPERIOR—Italia, detail, 2002, teapot, porcelain with underglazes, gold-leaf wood base by Roy Superior 19 by 16 by 8 inches. Photo/John Polak. See page 40, including the reverse view of piece.

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Italia, 2002, porcelain, underglazes, 19 by 16 by 8 inches, with gold-leaf wood base by Roy Superior. See reverse of teapot on Cover 1. OPPOSITE PAGE: *Room with a View*, 2002, porcelain, underglazes, 14 by 15 inches.

BY JO LAURIA • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN POLAK

Using porcelain much as others use diaries and photo albums to record memorable experiences, Mara Superior has created *Souvenirs d'Italia*, a group of platters and vessels that recall a six-week visit that she and her husband, the artist Roy Superior, made to Italy in 1999. The Tuscan landscape, country villas, Palladian and neoclassical buildings, Venetian canals, Roman ruins, iconic images by the great Renaissance painters and Italy's legendary culinary delights became the inspiration for domestic pieces meant to convey the "qualities of Italy that engage the senses and capture the romantic ideal."

The vignettes Superior paints on porcelain are imaginary depictions of her mental geography of people, places, animals and the natural world. They do not represent what she actually sees, nor do her line drawings delineate real space. She achieves her signature narrative style by appropriating formats and attitudes from other art, high and low, past and present, creating a complex chemistry. An admirer and collector of Early American embroidered samplers, she marvels at their elaborate designs of central figures surrounded by moral verses and bordered by floral and figural ornamentation. Pennsylvania German folk art, usually anonymous, especially *Fraktur* paintings, has also been an influence.

Her paintings share with folk art several stylistic qualities: naïve illusionism—the deliberate indifference to perspective as scenes unfold on the same plane—emphasis on strong shapes and line, the symmetrical

designs and decorative patterns, the whimsical compositions, the use of text and, most appealingly for the artist, the "playful humor and direct fearless approach, which equal raw expression." But as the product of art school training, Superior cannot be defined as a folk artist, nor does she consider herself one. And like the ancient Greek and Roman "history" painters of amphorae, Superior employs the vessel format to carry cultural myths and portrayals of quotidian life, and to connote comfort and domesticity. She acknowledges and assimilates these various influences for a personal iconography.

Superior earned an undergraduate degree in painting at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, and also studied printmaking and textile design. She was introduced to clay in a six-week workshop in Northampton, Massachusetts, and went on to the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, for a master's degree in ceramics. It was the 1970s, when coarse stoneware clays were prominent, but Superior felt no kinship with this material, or with the potter's wheel. Making a "noble brown jug" in the tradition of the celebrated English potter Bernard Leach was an unappealing prospect. The beauty of hand-painted ceramics, particularly English Staffordshire, Italian majolica and Chinese export porcelains, was a different matter and she sought to emulate the highly decorated surface and the quality of these refined products.

When her hands touched porcelain, she knew she had found the "three-dimensional magic paper" on which to draw and paint her narratives. She

MARA SUPERIOR'S *ITALIA* SERIES

A visual diary—the artist's way of channeling through clay the wonder and splendor of Italy





Birth of Venus (After Botticelli), 2002, porcelain, underglazes, 10 by 14 inches. OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: *Angelo Da Vendemmia*, 2002, porcelain, underglazes, 11 by 21 by 10 inches. BOTTOM: *Chianti*, 2002, porcelain, underglazes, 16 inches diameter

also found an understated palette and subtle tonal range: she applies natural oxides—cobalt for blue, chrome for green, copper for red—and select underglaze stains directly to the bisque body to achieve an elegant line and pure color. A final application of clear glaze and high firing in a reduction atmosphere impart translucency and a warm blush to the pieces.

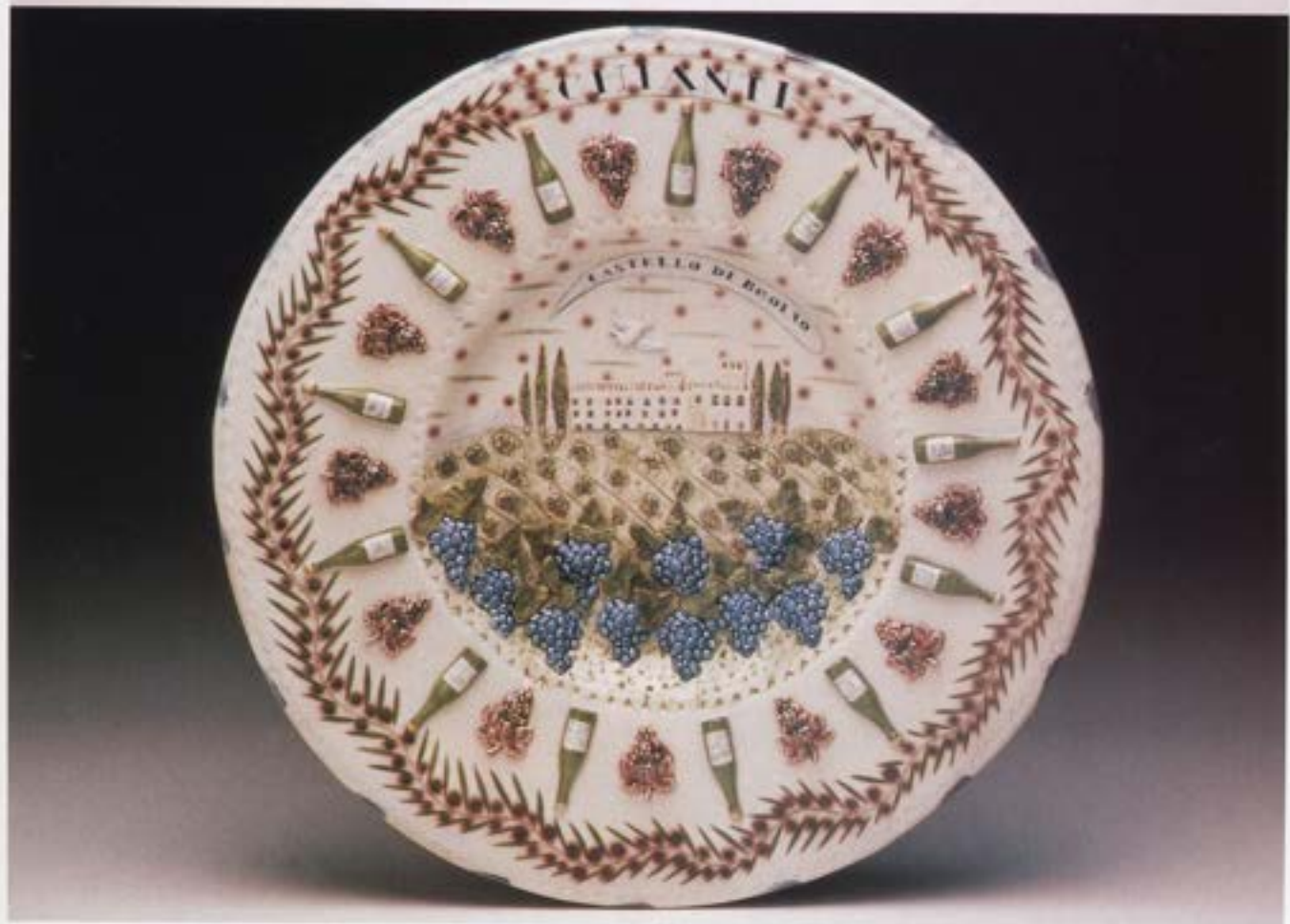
Twenty-nine of Superior's *Souvenirs d'Italia* series were recently shown at the Fuller Museum of Art, Brockton, Massachusetts (April 12–June 15). In the teapot *Italia*, 2002, she uses a wedding cake format with layered tiers as a dimensional, shaped canvas. Six charming scenes are painted on the teapot's flattened panels. On one side are the Tuscan farmhouse in which the Superiors stayed, the Leaning Tower of Pisa and, in the top tier, a map of Italy flanked by two small serving platters, references to the pottery centers of Deruta and Faenza. On the verso is the hill-top cathedral of Orvieto with its gleaming gold-leaf facade rising toward the top panel and framing a Madonna and Child with heavenly halos. The teapot is crowned by a miniature model of Filippo Brunelleschi's famous dome for the cathedral in Florence, and all cartouches are encircled by laurel leaves, cypress trees, sprigs of grapes and attending angels. The presentation is completed by a handsome gilded wood base made by Roy Superior. The teapot is an ebullient tribute to the sights, impressions and, of course, the art that springs from the fertile Italian soil.

Other works in this series—*Pecora Italiana* (*Italian Sheep*) and *Bella Toscana* (*Beautiful Tuscany*), both 2002—demonstrate Superior's deft-

ness at elevating the mundane to the level of elegiac visual poetry. The story illustrated on *Pecora Italiana*, a large vase, represents a "magical moment" that the artist felt compelled to record—an encounter with a flock of sheep grazing on a Tuscan hillside. The scene portrayed on *Bella Toscana*, a platter, celebrates the juicy stuff of life, in this instance an exuberant feast served *al fresco* in the landscape. A festooned table laden with multiple courses arranged on decorated plates, surrounded by bread, cheese and wine, makes one's taste buds stand at attention and one's mind acknowledge the Italian reverence for the culinary encounter. Overhead, a fluttering bird announces "ABBONDANZA" in a word balloon, captioning the abundance of detail, embellishment and spectacle—the sheer visual pleasure afforded the viewer.

Affirming her artistic commitment, Mara Superior says, "Porcelain is an elegant material that I handle in an earthy, somewhat casual manner. There is integrity in the materials and in the ancient firing method—use. It transports me back in time. The clay is a metaphor for all the porcelains throughout history that came before it. I am committed to continue to work with porcelain. For me there is no other choice. We argue. Sometimes we win. Sometimes it is unforgiving." ■

Jo Lauria is an independent curator and a specialist in modern and contemporary decorative arts.



The American Craft Council is a national, nonprofit educational organization founded in 1943 by Aileen Osborn Webb. The Council's mission is to promote understanding and appreciation of contemporary American craft. Programs include the award-winning bimonthly magazine *AMERICAN CRAFT*, annual juried craft shows presenting artists and their work in Atlanta, Baltimore, Charlotte, San Francisco, Sarasota and St. Paul, a specialized library and archive, educational grants, seminars and the annual Aileen Osborn Webb Awards honoring excellence in craft. Membership is open to all.

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Wholesale	Aug. 6	1 pm–6 pm
	Aug. 7	10 am–3 pm
Public	Aug. 8–9	10 am–6 pm
	Aug. 10	10 am–5 pm

Sarasota, FL

Dec. 5–7

Charlotte, NC

Dec. 12–14

SHOWS 2004

Baltimore-Winter, MD

Wholesale	Feb. 24–26
Public	Feb. 27–29

Atlanta, GA

Mar. 20–21

St. Paul, MN

Apr. 16–18

Baltimore-Summer, MD

Wholesale	July 7–8
Public	July 9–10

San Francisco, CA

Wholesale	Aug. 4–5
Public	Aug. 6–8

Charlotte, NC

Dec. 10–12

Deadlines

Annual slide submission	Sept. 5
late submission	Sept. 12
final submission	Sept. 19

American Craft Council

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Aileen Osborn Webb Awards Presentation
Oct. 17, 3 pm, Room 301-304
Awards Exhibition, Oct. 16–19