

Shining a light on old Drug Jars

by John Sandon

Fifteen years ago I was still new to eBay and searched in all the wrong places, and this is why I came across by accident a lamp base that was put up for sale by a seller in Hawaii. I knew at once that it was early, and at \$150 US dollars it was reasonably priced. I took the chance that it would arrive safely in the post and that I would be able to remove the unsightly lamp fittings, so I clicked the buy button.



The lamp from Hawaii



Christian Rub in *The Spectacle Maker* (1934) and as Disney's Geppetto (IMDb.com)

The listing gave an interesting provenance. The seller had bought the lamp many years earlier from the estate of a Hollywood character actor who appeared in more than 100 films, though I must admit that at the time I couldn't put a face to his name.

Christian Rub (1886-1956) had a distinct middle-European accent due to his Austrian heritage, and with half spectacles perched on his nose he usually played the janitor or the innkeeper or a shopkeeper. His best known role was as a cartoon of himself, for he was the voice of Geppetto in the 1940 film *Pinocchio* and Walt Disney intentionally modelled his character on the much loved bit-part actor.



The lamp arrived safely and the first thing I did was to strip Christian Rub's lamp of its own character, for off came the lamp fittings and I chucked them away (they had even posted me the Hawaiian lightbulb). The base was exciting, though a bit chipped around the neck rim and it had been drilled with a big round hole in the middle of the base to accommodate the electric flex. The pot is an albarello, a pharmacy jar made in Italy at the very end of the fifteenth century. It was probably made in Pesaro, or possibly Venice, around 1490-1510. It is decorated in a manner known as *alla porcellana* as it imitates the very costly Chinese porcelain recently imported into Italy. Painted in dark blue, spiralling foliage and flowerheads surround a strap label inscribed in gothic script 'eo nenufario'. This translates as water lily, an uncommon name on early drug pots.

So while the lamp may not have looked out of place in the quaint hotels and inns in which Rub starred as an actor, it originally starred in Renaissance Italy, on a shelf in a pharmacy from the time of Leonardo da Vinci.

My successful purchase inspired me to search online for other Majolica lamp bases, and I came across many true horrors from Victorian times. But then I was drawn to an estate sale at Doyles auction galleries in New York in the spring of 2007. On offer was furnishings from the estate of a Washington socialite. In the catalogue photograph, a pair of lamps looked remarkably familiar, and happily my absentee bid was successful. While waiting an eternity for the shipping process, I enquired after the provenance of the lot of table lamps I had bought.



The lamps shown in the Doyle catalogue



Extra photographs sent to me from Doyle

Known as 'Doda', Dorothy deWolf (1930-2006) was a doyenne of Washington society. Born in Poland, Princess Dorota Drucka Lubecka was the daughter of Prince Francis Xavier Lubecki and Countess Hegwige Oppersdorff. In 1944 the family fled when their ancestral home in Poland was occupied by the Nazis and they became "displaced" persons until Doda was old enough to travel to America in 1952. She began working as an au pair in Wisconsin, sending money home to help her family. She later worked for Elizabeth Arden, managing its Flagship store on Connecticut Avenue in Washington DC. Doda's striking elegance, impeccable grace and unfailing calm under pressure won her the admiration of the company's founder, Elizabeth Arden, who included the young Princess Doda as a beneficiary in her own will.

In 1960 Doda married Francis Colt deWolf Jr. - known as Colt - who was a descendant of Chris Colt, whose brother Sam invented the Colt 45 revolver. Colt and Doda became a well-known couple on the Washington Social scene, known for their constant hospitality and infectious vitality. Their Washington townhouse was filled with antiques inherited from the deWolf and Colt families, for everything Doda's own family owned was lost in Europe. In the 1890s Francis's father Bradford deWolf had been a significant purchaser at the Italian sales of the contents of the Borghese Palace, and these items passed directly to his son, and then to Doda. The drug jars were likely converted by a Washington 'Decorator', with shades carefully chosen by Doda to add elegance to her home.



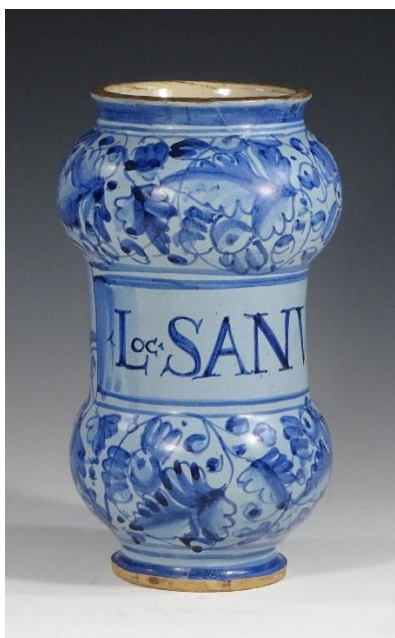
I stripped off the lamp fittings quite easily and thankfully there were no drill holes. I had before me two early Albarelli made in Venice around 1520-1550 and again they are decorated *alla porcellana* with scrolling foliage and flowerheads. The reserved strap labels are inscribed in gothic script 'cassia. trata' and 'Uto cometipse'. In spite of countless searches through Rudolf Drey's index, I have not been able to translate either of these cures. After their many travels, these two jars remain in remarkably good condition. No longer lamps, they appear as they would have done when, once upon a time they probably furnished the Borghese Palace.



Then I got a surprise. In the same lot in the Doyles auction was another drug jar that had also been turned into a lamp, but the fittings had previously broken away taking a chunk of the neck with them. The handle of the jar is missing from long ago, but the neck clearly broke recently, when the estate was being cleared for the auction, and the broken piece must have been tossed away with the lamp parts. But I got it for nothing—it came free in the same lot with the albarelli. How wonderful. It must have been a splendid lamp in the deWolf's Washington home. Now the poor thing has found a new, sympathetic home in Kent. It was made in Urbino, or possibly Deruta, around 1630-40 and is painted with *grotesques*. They are curiously debased compared to the great grotesque decoration favoured in Urbino seventy or so years earlier, but the cartoon quality has charm if nothing else. An inscribed drug label 'SYo Di.AGRO.Di CeDro' translates as syrup from unripe lemon, and this is written above the badge of a monastic pharmacy.



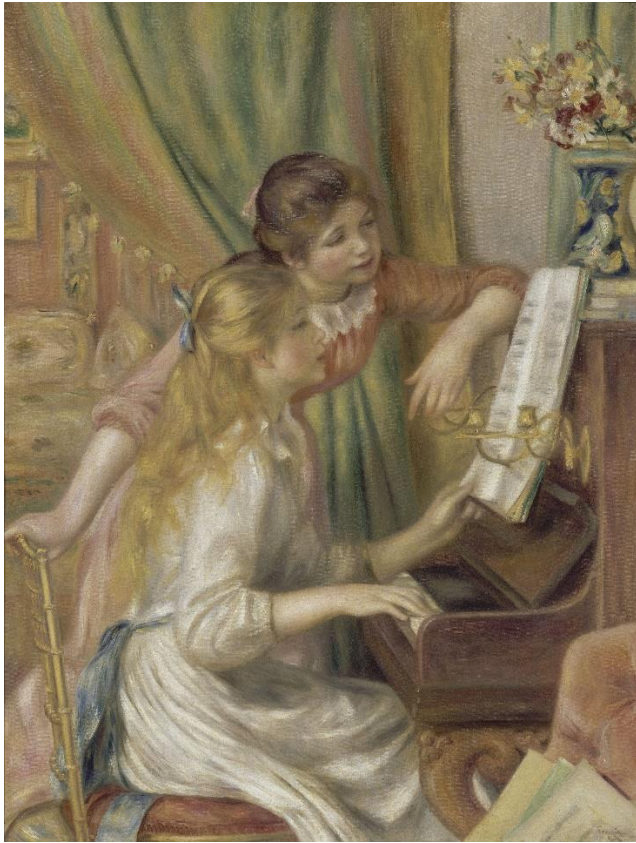
Over the years I have bought other jars with repaired holes in them, evidence that at some time they served as bases for lighting. Then last year during lockdown I spotted on The Saleroom aggregator site a lot that was in an auction with Clarke & Simpson in Suffolk. A splendid set of metal lamp fittings masked quite a nice albarello and I knew that I needed to take a further gamble. I bought the lot back in the autumn when 'click and collect' was allowed, so Kris and I drove to collect our latest lamp.



The fittings came away, but not quite as well as I would have liked, as the footrim of the jar has at some time been trimmed slightly so that it would fit into the metal base. Never mind, it is otherwise undamaged, a nice 'dumbbell' shaped albarello that is almost exactly a pair to one I already owned (photographed together, above right). These were made in Rome in a technique called *berretino* where blue painting sits on a lighter shade of blue glaze. The pair dates from about 1600-20. Incidentally, the inscription 'Loc SANVM' stands for *lohoch Sanum et expertum*, an anti-tussive and anti-asthmatic medication made from more than ten, mostly sweet ingredients.



Locked down again, I have just taken delivery of a bottle that appeared in an auction at Mellors and Kirk. This time a lamp fitting had been un-ceremonially glued into the neck (above, left) and it has taken me ages to gently pick at a chunk of wood firmly held in place with strong adhesive. Cleaned up (right), it now looks a whole lot better as a drug bottle again. It was made at Caltagirone in Sicily early in the 18th century.



As a post-script I am reminded of another drug jar from Caltagirone that served a purpose other than for which it was intended. The painter Renoir was a collector of Italian maiolica drug jars and he liked to use them as props in his paintings. In different versions of his *Young Girls at the Piano*, various Sicilian jars full of flowers sit on top of the piano. The Renoir painting (left, in the Musée D'Orsay) is probably worth rather more than my empty Caltagirone albarello (right). But then again, I could always improve the value of mine by turning it into a lamp. Or maybe not...