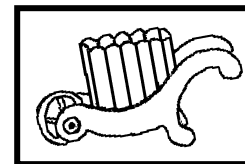


Salty Comments



Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting

Number 73

December 2000

Blown Glass Salts

When we first considered this topic, we thought there would be only a few areas to cover. As we looked at the collection, however, we found more and more salts that were made without the benefit of a glass press. As a result we will split the topic in two – this issue will be part one.

Glass blowing is centuries old. The basic technique is to pick up molten glass on the end of a hollow metal rod which is long enough to keep the heat away from the blower. A bubble is formed by blowing into the cool end. Expanding the bubble gradually while keeping the walls uniform and shaping it is a lengthy process, requiring considerable skill and judgement. The process is done using a glassmaker's bench where the rod and bubble can be rolled back and forth continuously to keep the glass from sagging.. Figure 1 shows one glassmaker, Joe St. Clair, working at his bench. The many steps required to convert the bubble to a usable dish are best understood by visiting a working glass shop, such as the ones at the Corning Museum in Corning New York, or the Wheaton Museum in Vineland, NJ.

The earliest glass salts were all blown. Steigel type salts, made from 1760 on, are the most plentiful (Figure 2). We've heard but have not confirmed that many of these were reproduced in the early 1900's, using the old techniques. To make one of these salts, after the bubble is formed it is blown into a partial-size mold to give the surface a pattern. It is then expanded further and converted to the final shape. Stiegel also advertised a "three feeted salt" which we've never seen. Based on his "three feeted creamer" which is known, we guess the salt looked like Figure 3. (The salt used for the picture was produced by Steuben early this century, and resembles the silver salts that were widely used during Stiegel's day.)

During the 18th century the English and Irish were exporting blown glass. Their salts were heavy, and had elaborate cutting, like Figure 4. About 1800 they developed a technique for molding small pieces by hand which was similar to but preceded the glass press. It was used to make a pedestal on which a blown bowl was placed, as in Figure 5. The bowl on this particular salt was blown into a mold to make the pattern, like the Stiegel types. Sometimes they put a depression with raised ribs into the bottom, now called a "lemon-squeezer foot". Figure 6 is one of many shapes made with this process. The blown bowl is decorated by cutting after the glass had cooled.



Figure 1 - Joe St. Clair at Work



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6

(2)

Another technique used in the early 1800's was blowing the glass into a full-size mold. The salts in Figures 7 and 8 were made this way. They have fairly thin walls, and the inside of the foot is hollow. The upper part of the Figure 7 salt was shaped after blowing, which leaves the pattern mostly on the lower half. The one in Figure 8 retains the mold shape completely. In both cases, the pattern from the mold can be felt on the inside surface, which is a key characteristic of mold-blown glass.

For open salts, sturdier dishes are more practical, so many heavy "blown into a mold" shapes were made in the early 1800's. Figures 9 and 10 are two of these. The latter is called a "fan end salt", and is attributed to the New England Glass Co. Both were made by blowing a heavy bubble inside a mold. The glass above the top of the mold was blown into a big, thin-walled bubble which was broken off. All salts of this type had the rim smoothed when they were made; a ground rim does not necessarily mean the dish has been to the "glass doctor".

A further development during this period was the Robinet Pump. A glassblower in France named Robinet had tuberculosis and was losing his lung power. To keep his job he invented a hand-operated pump, which he put over the end of his blowpipe to get even more pressure than lung power could produce. The idea spread, since the pump gave much sharper detail than was previously possible. Figure 11 shows a salt probably made with this technique. If you compare it with the earlier ones, you can see the greater detail in the design.

When the glass press was invented about 1825, it replaced blown shapes almost completely. Much less skill was required to make a glass shape, and production per man hour was much greater than for blown glass. Although freehand glass salts probably were still made, they were few and far between. We don't have any blown salts which might have been made between 1830 and 1880, except perhaps the one shown in Figure 12. This is clear cased glass which has a layer of white over the outside and a layer of maroon over the inside of the bowl and foot. It has a ring of circles cut to clear inside the rim. Our dating is purely speculative, but the shape looks like it belongs in this era.

About the mid-1800's mercury glass (poor-man's silver) came on the scene. This is blown glass with a hollow interior which is silvered after the glass cools. We understand that the shape is first formed with a bubble where the bowl is. The bubble is then heated, and the glassblower inhales to make the bowl concave instead of convex. It sounds like he would get a real mouthful of very hot air, but we don't know how else it could be done. There are many shapes of mercury glass salts; two are shown in Figures 13 and 14. The latter has a "gold" bowl (amber glass?) and has been engraved with leaves and vines.



Figure 7

Figure 8



Figure 9



Figure 10



Figure 11



Figure 12



Figure 13



Figure 14

(3)

We did not think about it before, but the Mount Washington Crown Milano salts were blown into a mold (Figure 15). You can feel the ribs on the inside which confirms this, and if you look carefully with a magnifying glass you can see a mold line at the top of 3 of the indented ribs.

In the late 1800's in France, the Monot and Stumpf factory developed blown art glass salts like those shown in Figures 16 and 17. They are hand made, come in a variety of shapes and colors. They are easy to find but expensive to buy.

About the same time in England, the Stourbridge glass factories turned out their own varieties of blown glass. These must have been very popular, judging from the numbers of salts that have survived. Many featured lots of applied decorations like the one in Figure 18. Some came in holders (Figure 19) and others were less fancy but still very colorful (Figure 20). Because they were hand made, there are a great variety of shapes, sizes and decorations. About the same time the British developed a method of applying evenly-spaced glass threads to the surface, as is shown in Figure 21. Sometimes the threads were cut to clear to add a design, as in Figure 22. Its silver rim has marks from Birmingham 1884. A more elaborate salt is shown in Figure 23. This is custard glass with yellow feet and pink threading. We have no firm date on its origin, but it is typical of English ones made around 1900.

Cameo glass is a rare and expensive type made about this same time. The salt in Figure 24 is one of this kind. It is custard color with a layer of pink on top. The pink layer was masked with wax to give the design, and the unprotected part removed with acid. The gold decoration followed. The silver rim marks it as Birmingham, 1885. A second one is shown in Figure 25. Here the cranberry glass was cased with white, and the top layer then carved away by hand to make the leaves and acorns. We have seen several like this, and the skill of the artist varies from one to the next. Those carved by a skillful person will have detailed shading in the leaves and acorns; those by less-skilled artists have little or no shading. The silver rim is marked Sheffield 1885.



Figure 15



Figure 16



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20



Figure 21



Figure 22



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25

The last kind of blown salts we will cover here are cranberry ones, which have their own special mystique. True cranberry salts are made with gold as the colorant, though the amount needed is very small. The color in the glass is so intense that it must be applied as a thin layer on clear glass. If only the gold-tinted glass was used, the salt would look nearly black. All the old cranberry glass is made like this. You can see it best if you put the salt in a white dish and cover it with water. Look at an edge, and you will see the thin red layer on the thick clear glass. Even when you can't see an edge, we are convinced that only a thin colored layer is involved. Figure 26 is an example. This salt was broken and repaired (we didn't do it!), and there is a tiny chip on the repaired line that shows pink over clear. Except for this one place, we can't tell that the glass has two layers.

The cranberry-cut-to-clear type of salt like Figure 27 is very attractive and very much sought after. The red color must be on the outside, of course. Sometimes the maker puts the color on the inside, and then the cutting or engraving doesn't show up nearly as well. Figure 28 is a salt like this. The engraving shows up much more in the picture than it does when the salt is sitting on the shelf. We know of one salt where they tried to make the cranberry color by pressing (Figure 29). It looks like they put clear glass into the mold, pressed the shape, added a little red and pressed again. The resulting color is not very even, with the color missing in some spots. This is the only pressed shape we have seen in this color.

This takes blown glass up near the end of the 19th century. Looking ahead, we are just getting to the art glass era when Tiffany and Carder (Steuben) produced their open salts. They were followed by a number of glass artists, including some in business today. The salts they make are for collectors, rather than for holding sodium chloride. We will pick up our story from this point in our next issue.

The salts we have discussed were made by hand and in limited quantities. We find them interesting because of the history they represent and attractive because of the considerable skill required to make them. They were relatively expensive for their time, so it is reasonable that they should be so now. We hope you have some of them in your collection.



Figure 26



Figure 27



Figure 28



Figure 29

Ed Berg
401 Nottingham Rd., Newark, DE 19711

email: DESaltbox@cs.com

Reference:

“Collectible Glass Book 4 – British Glass”, Wallace Homestead (C.C. Manley)