

VIEW FROM THE SALT BOX - #12

Intaglio salts have long been popular with collectors. There are many shapes and colors, but all have a picture of some type indented in the bottom and usually frosted. Some of the scenes are classical, but others are a dog's head, an animal, card suits, a soccer or polo game, a woman smoking, etc. We know of one collector who has over 400 different dishes.

The first question that many people ask is whether they are really salts. Enough boxed sets have been found to establish that they were intended for this use - sometimes. We recall seeing a box that called them "Useful Dishes", and another labelled ash trays. We think they were popular in the 1920's, when porcelain celery sets were in vogue. These sets used small shallow dishes for dipping, and included a larger dish decorated with the same pattern for holding the celery. The intaglio salts had the same proportions as the china dips, and certainly could be substituted for them on the dinner table.

We are not sure of relative rarity of the intaglio salts, but from what we have seen the scarcest are red and black. Phil and Jane Koble showed a red one at the last OSCAR meeting, and we have seen a black one also in their collection. Both were made in limited quantity, probably because the design does not show through the color very well in red, and does not show through at all on black. Emerald green is also uncommon, probably for the same reason. The Kobles have studied intaglios for years, and are working on a book on the subject.

The thing that brought intaglios to our attention recently was a salt sent us by Warren and Kay Chapman of Plymouth, MN. It was a dish with true intaglio cutting - something that we did not have in our collection. In the world of cut glass, intaglio designs are made by holding the glass object on top of the cutting wheel. The artist has to look through the glass to make the picture, and works freehand. It takes a true artist to make an attractive picture.

In the 1920's, a Czechoslovakian firm developed a process to imitate intaglio cutting without the need for a skilled artist. The design was carved in raised relief on the bottom of the mold, so that it was impressed in the bottom when the dish was pressed. After annealing, the design was treated with acid to frost it, making it look like intaglio cutting. The bottom and often the sides were then polished to produce the dishes we are familiar with. When the intaglio process was discussed in our cut glass class, we brought in several of our dishes that we thought would qualify. None did - all were pressed-in designs.

We are not experts in true intaglio cutting. From what we learned, however, the main thing to look for in identifying it is tiny irregularities in the design, where the artist's hand was not quite as steady or accurate as he might wish. If you can find two dishes with the same picture, there should be tiny differences between them, like the differences between roses on hand-painted china. We thought our oval dish with the pheasant on the bottom (Smith 451-3-3, no H&J) might be one, but our instructor would not agree. From what he described, all of the intaglios in H&J are made by the pressing and frosting process.

With this background we were understandably excited when the Chapmans sent us their salt for identification. It had the artist's signature, a WA monogram. (The dealer told them it was a Waterford mark, which it is not.) They said there was one other like it in the shop, but no monogram, and they were kind enough to buy it for us. Now we have one more salt on top of the piano - no room left on the shelves.