

A Most Unexpected Pressed Glass Dish

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During a recent trip through the Midwestern United States a most curious and previously unpublished pressed glass oblong dish/tray came to light. I discovered it while sorting through an eclectic estate collection assembled by a traveling salesman during the 1940s and 1950s. There among the conglomeration of mostly familiar and common tablewares was a wonderful, quirky dish strongly molded with playful domestic animals prominent among otherwise familiar design elements (fig. 1). I immediately recognized the mold form as closely paralleling that of the small-size pressed lacy Butterfly dish produced by the Boston and Sandwich Glass Co. during the second quarter of the 19th century (fig. 2). What follows is a systematic comparison of the newly discovered animal-motif dish (Dish 1) and the standard Butterfly dish (Dish 2).

Size

Both examples measure 1 1/4 in. high and 5 3/8 in. x 8 1/8 in. at the rim.

Glass composition

Longwave blacklight indicates that both dishes are composed of a lead-based glass formula.

Mold shapes

The overall shape and rim configuration of each dish is identical. The only differences are that the long side rims on the Butterfly dish exhibit tiny scallops while the same edges of the animal dish are smooth with a narrow, slightly raised top edge; and the Butterfly tray rests on a traditional table ring while the animal tray is raised on six distinct, tapered circular feet (four large and two small). On both examples the upper surface of each end handle is molded with symmetrical curved plumes flanked by bosses.

Central pattern

Dish 2 displays a central butterfly framed by a beaded ring and flanked by two V-shape ornaments, the whole surrounded by beaded bull's-eyes and a band of tiny beads situated inside the table ring. Dish 1 exhibits two roosters (complete with spurs) and two dogs' heads, each set apart by a central "X" of five ringed, pointed bull's-eyes. The aforementioned feet are spaced around the outer edge of the base.

Shoulder pattern

Each long side of the Butterfly dish features a symmetrical design of opposing fleur-de-lys flanked by pinwheels and plain-stem flowers, while both ends display a five-lobe, shell-like ornament. Each long side of the animal dish is molded with a standing dog, a dog's head (different from the heads in the center), a quail-like bird, and a rose spray, amidst S-scroll and opposing C-scroll ornaments, while each end exhibits a dog in a slightly rearing position. The under-edge of each dish features a single course of beads conforming to the shape of the rim.

Additional related dishes

Several other pattern variations of this specific mold form have been recorded. The design elements of another example (Dish 3) closely connect Dish 1 and 2 (figs. 3a and 3b)ⁱ. It features the same central layout as Dish 2, however, the butterfly is replaced by a heart and the small beaded bull's-eyes are replaced by the same ringed bull's-eyes that are seen on Dish 1. The design elements on the shoulder of Dish 3 are the same as those found on the Butterfly dish, however they are executed in a decidedly more naive, primitive manner; in addition, the handles of Dish 3 feature the heart motif repeated from its center. Longwave blacklight indicates that Dish 3 is comprised of a non-lead glass formulaⁱⁱ.

Another lacy dish (Dish 4 – fig. 4) of the same form is in the Corning Museum of Glass. It features a seemingly unrelated central design of opposing stippled medallions; however, its shoulder pattern is the same as the Butterfly dish except that the pinwheels are replaced with scrolled acanthus leaf ornaments. Interestingly, the Corning Museum also owns a non-lacy dish (Dish 5 – fig. 5) that directly parallels Dish 4, mimicking each design element in a more primitive manner, much in the same way that the heart dish naively imitates the Butterfly dish.

Conclusion

The virtually identical and distinctive shape of the five dishes/trays discussed here indicates that all were produced from a standard mold form that was cut with differing patterns. It seems safe to assume that the two lacy dishes (Dishes 2 and 4) are the earliest manufactured examples of the group, likely dating between 1835 and 1850. Both are attributed to the Boston and Sandwich Glass Co. based on fragments found at the factory siteⁱⁱⁱ. The remaining three non-lacy designs (Dishes 1, 3 and 5) were likely made between 1850 and 1870. It would be easy to simply attribute them to a Midwestern glasshouse that was copying Boston and Sandwich designs, but there is no reason why they could not have been produced by a firm in the east under the same pretense. That said, a second example of the animal dish is in the collection of the Bennington Museum – it was purchased at a Garth's Auction in Ohio during the early 1980s^{iv}. The fact that both known animal dishes have a collection history in the Midwest serves to strengthen an attribution to that region.

Another argument for a Midwestern attribution of the non-lacy dishes can be formulated based on the "Ray" pattern produced by McKee & Brother/M'Kee & Brothers of Pittsburgh, PA. This non-lacy pattern closely mimics the lacy Crossed Peacock Eye pattern produced by the Boston and Sandwich Glass Co., and undoubtedly other firms, from around 1835 to 1850. McKee's production of Ray is documented through the firm's catalogues of 1859/60, 1864, 1868, and 1871^v, including several different sizes of nappies and dishes that closely relate to forms attributed to Sandwich^{vi}.

The dishes in this article provide a compelling illustration of the evolution of styles and transference of design elements within a 40-year period of American pressed glass. Further investigation into the adaptive reuse and recycling of early glass molds would likely provide additional insight into the manufacture and possible history of this group of dishes.

Much is yet to be learned about the social history of glass in the American home and the industry that produced it. An understanding of not only how objects were made and used, but also the manner in which manufacturers responded to consumer demands and the latest technologies greatly enhances our comprehension and appreciation of the material culture of American glass, thereby providing a relevant context that can be used to develop and engage future generations of collectors and scholars.

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Figures 1, 2, 3a and 3b courtesy of Jeffrey S. Evans & Associates; William H. McGuffin photographer.

Figures 4 and 5 courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass.

Figure captions

Figure 1 – Previously unpublished pressed lead-glass dish/tray molded with domestic animals, circa 1850-1870. Possibly Midwestern United States. (Dish 1).

Figure 2 – Lacy pressed lead-glass Butterfly dishes/trays in three sizes, circa 1835-1850. Boston & Sandwich Glass Co. and possibly others. (Dish 2 – center example).

Figure 3a – Comparison of pressed glass dishes/trays: Dish 2 (left) and Dish 3 (right). Dish 3 is non-lead glass.

Figure 3b – Comparison of pressed glass dishes/trays: Dish 1 (left) and Dish 3 (right).

Figure 4 – Lacy pressed lead-glass Scrolled Acanthus Leaf dish/tray, circa 1835-1850. Boston & Sandwich Glass Co. and possibly others. (Dish 4).

Figure 5 – Pressed glass dish/tray adapted from figure 4, circa 1850-1870. Possibly Midwestern United States. (Dish 5). Catalogued as lead glass but based on the tested composition of Dish 3 it is possible that a blacklight would show this example is of a non-lead formula.

ⁱ An opaque white example is illustrated in Spillman, *American and European Pressed Glass in the Corning Museum of Glass*, 77. It was included in the 1954 Corning exhibit, item 452, and described by James Rose as “a western adaptation of the New England butterfly and cognate tray.”

ⁱⁱ Another example also catalogued as “non-lead glass” is illustrated in Wilson, *American Glass 1760-1930: The Toledo Museum of Art*, 398.

ⁱⁱⁱ Raymond E. Barlow and Joan E. Kaiser, *The Glass Industry in Sandwich*, vol. 1, 138.

^{iv} Emails with Ian Simmonds (8/2/11) and Kirk Nelson (8/29/11).

^v M’Kee and Brothers, *M’Kee Victorian Glass*, 21, 23, 25, 63, 144, 152, 165, 178.

^{vi} Barlow and Kaiser, vol. 1, 128.