SALTY COMMENTS #3
(Facts and opinions on open salt collecting)

Perhaps the most difficult area for researching open salts is that of ceramics. These materials are a natural for salt dishes, and lots of pottery, stoneware and porcelain ones have been made in the past. There have been so many makers with so many different techniques, however, that accurate identification of unmarked pieces can seldom be done by studying books. Even the terminology is confusing. We tried to list the various types of china which are given in the books. There were so many, with no clear way of telling one from the other, that we gave up trying.

Identification of ceramics seems like identifying colors, and the best way of understanding it may be by an analogy to colors. The visible spectrum goes from red to deep violet. The human eye can distinguish about 10,000 different color shades if they are put side by side. A "pure" green is easily identified, but if you gradually shade toward blue, who can say when it passes bluish green and becomes greenish blue. Ceramics has the same sort of range - from crude earthenware like sun-baked bricks to the true porcelains such as those made by the Chinese and later by Meissen, Belleek and others. The main differences are the materials used and the firing temperatures which control the strength and porosity of the final product. The best materials can be fired at very high temperatures, and will be hard, dense and strong. Clay from the local pit which is shaped into a flower pot can only be fired at a relatively low temperature before it will sag out of shape. The resulting product will be porous and will break rather easily.

In making tableware, manufacturers normally use mixtures of clay and other lower-melting materials. These latter fuse while the clay retains the shape of the vessel during firing. This makes a vitreous or vitrified product, such as stoneware. These dishes are not porous, but a glaze is usually used to get a better appearance and hold the decoration. The unglazed ware is the "bisque" which we sometimes see. Further improvement in the quality of the china is achieved by going to better clays which can stand higher firing temperatures. By using the best clay, kaolin, and ground-up glass as a vitrifying agent, you can get semi-porcelain, sometimes called soft-paste porcelain, which is denser and stronger and makes thinner dishes practical. True porcelain, which is the ultimate, is made from a mixture of kaolin, quartz and a natural feldspar. This gives the beautiful, translucent thin ware like Irish Belleek or some Meissen. This is called hard-paste porcelain and is considered the best tableware ceramic made.

Between the flower pot and Belleek is a whole spectrum of clays and mixtures. Names such as earthenware, ironstone, bone china, basalt ware and others represent compositions somewhere in this spectrum. These sometimes contain unusual additives to change the final properties. Names that represent makers or locales, such as Limoges, Moorcroft, Dresden or Noritake do not truly specify a ceramics type, although a certain quality is often associated with each. We do not know enough to identify the type of ceramic in any given piece when we see it - we have to rely on the makers mark and what the books say he has made. One rough test is interesting though - the true porcelains in thin sections will "ring", much like flint glass. If we hold the dish at the center and tap it very gently, we can hear quite a difference. Our thin Meissen salt and our Haviland tableware are really much like a bell in the length of time the ring will

be sustained. Lesser quality dishes have some ring to them, but not as much. As with flint glass, however, the only way we can be sure about the ring is by direct comparison with a known piece. Many times we have tapped a glass dish at a shop and said "Oh yes, that's flint", only to find that it didn't really compare to a genuine article when we got home.

In making porcelain dishes, many steps are involved. Simpler dishes can be shaped by hand, but most of them are made in molds. A thick "soup" of finely ground ingredients is poured into a plaster form and allowed to set for up to an hour. The plaster soaks up water, leaving a thick coating on the mold in the desired shape. The excess "soup" is poured out, the mold opened, and the "green" dish taken out. Any mold lines can be removed by hand, and a first low-temperature firing is done to set the piece so it can be handled. The steps after this depend on the maker, and can include:

Under-glaze decoration, which must be done with special pigments which can withstand the firing temperatures.

Applying a glaze, a mixture like the original material with more glassy elements in it.

The second firing, at much higher temperatures, to vitrefy the dish and the glaze.

Over-glaze decoration, which can use a wider range of pigments since further heating can be done quickly. Decorations can be hand painted, or can be from printed decals which are transferred to the dish.

Firing to fuse the decorations into the glaze.

A second decorating and firing for the gold trim.

The ceramic salt dishes we have seen cover the entire range of materials. We recently purchased an earthenware double salt which came from Guatemala. It is crude but interesting and unusual. Several of our figurals, such as donkeys pulling a cart, are also glazed earthenware. We can test for this by seeing if the unglazed part will soak up water. The thin porcelains are very delicate and beautiful to behold. They ring when tapped (carefully!), and are translucent when held up to the light. We think we know the difference between earthenware and vitreous china which is not porous, but as of now we are not sure how to tell the difference betwen the semi-porcelains and hard-paste ones made with feldspar. Perhaps some of you are deeply enough into ceramics that you can let us know of an accurate way to distinguish them.

Hand painting of ceramics was a popular activity 100 years ago. During the last half of the 19th century it was fashionable for ladies to visit Europe to study ceramic decorating. In 1891 the National Ceramics Association was formed, and over 10,000 women were active. Half of these were doing it for a living. The Cincinnati Pottery Club which they founded led to Rookwood pottery, which is very collectable today. We have salts signed Nelle Jackson and Carpenter, along with several with initials, which are undoubtedly from that era. The hand painting is usually quite expert. It is interesting to look closely at decorations and try to distinguish between those from printed decals and those which are not. I believe you will find more hand-painted ones than you first expect.

The sgraffito technique of decoration uses designs scratched into a light-colored glaze to show the darker material underneath. The scratching is done before the second firing. Several such salts are shown in the books (Smith 311-6-1, H&J 4583). This method originated in Italy, and was later used by the Germans in Pennsylvania.

One interesting area which overlaps salt dish collections is Heraldic China. These little dishes have English coats-of-arms on them, and many are a perfect size for a salt dish. (Smith 182-6-3, H&J 1195 to 1197, 1761, 1765, 1771). We have one whose crest says "Sal est Vita", Latin for "Salt is life", along with "Northwich". Obviously a salt dish from the Northwich family! Then we found in the encyclopedia that Northwich is a salt mining center in England, so our theory went out the window. We recently found a book which explains these dishes. In the 1880's, the Goss Company in England organized a campaign to sell souvenir items with town crests on them. They used miniature models of buildings, artifacts, shoes, animals or whatever seemed appropriate for the particular location. Since they were available only in the the town represented, they were an excellent memento to show your friends where you had been. The crests were printed in black and the colors applied by hand. Once the idea caught on, other potteries started making similar items. The collecting craze survived until the 1920's. Today there are several thousand collectors of crested china and Goss china in England, and a museum is being built for the National Heraldic China Collection. Interestingly enough, although the book shows a sugar basin, two lip-salve pots and a salt cellar (shaker), it does not label any of the dishes as open salts.

Our collection of ceramic salts includes a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Many types have been made, because plaster molds are inexpensive compared to the iron molds used for pressed glass. Any one shape can have a number of different decorations, since much of this was done by independent hand decorators. An interesting collection can be made by getting one of each shape, one from each country, a variety of decorations on a single shape, or one of each maker's mark that you can find. In the latter case you will find a number of good books which tell about the marks to help you identify the source and age of the piece. Whichever way you choose, we think it best to specialize. You will have severe overcrowding on your shelves if you try to get one of everything. Don't overlook some phase of ceramics, however, because the variety of forms and the beauty of a well-decorated piece of fine porcelain are an asset to any collection of open salt dishes.

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SOME REFERENCES:

"Open Salts Illustrated", ten books by Allan & Helen Smith, 1972-1984
"5000 Open Salts" by W. Heacock & P. Johnson, 1982
"German and Austrian Porcelain" by George W. Ware, 1963
"Goss and Other Crested China" by Nicholas J. Pine, published in England, 1984