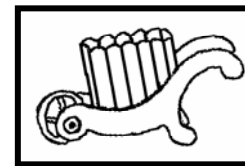


Salty Comments

Facts and Opinion about Open Salt Collecting



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Decorating; Portieux & Vallerysthal

One thing we look forward to each Christmas season is the original greeting cards that we get from our salt collector friends. Several will have a picture with open salts, sometimes on a wreath or a tree and sometimes standing alone just being decorative. We used them ourselves in our Christmas letter to our many relatives - just pictures of attractive little dishes that people who don't see salts regularly will appreciate. Yes, our relatives see our collection, but there are so many salts that few people look at them one by one. Although they make up a valued collection, we think our salts deserve to do more than just sit on the shelf (or piano, or windowsill, or all the other available flat surfaces). Can't they be used for more than dust catchers?

Their most obvious use is for serving salt at the dinner table. At Christmas dinner last year (last century?) we had an individual open salt at each place setting, alternating red and green colors and complete with salt spoons. We didn't go whole hog, and use doubles with coarse ground pepper in the second bowl, but put pepper shakers on the table as well. We're not sure how many were actually used during the meal, but the salts were there, they looked nice, and they lent a bit of color to the table. We've done something like this before, using a set of 10 porcelain pedestal ones that Kay has for the purpose. We have yet to use two master salts for the table, as was done 150 years ago before shakers - it might be interesting to try sometime.

There are ways to use your salts for decoration without serving sodium chloride in them. Kay has a centerpiece with 3 shelves that fits nicely in the middle of the dining room table. Around Valentine's Day she sets a group of heart-shaped salts on it - both china and glass. Having colored ones as part of the display helps make it more attractive. The same centerpiece has held turkey, chicken, goose and other poultry salts around Thanksgiving. Even without a fancy holder, salts can make an interesting decorative display. The club meetings often feature them - why not put one in a conspicuous corner in your house to show off your collection, and change it regularly? Sometimes it could feature a theme appropriate to the calendar: rabbits and eggs at Easter; pumpkins at Halloween; salts with shamrocks around St. Patrick's Day; a two-face salt on April Fool's Day; elephants and donkeys around Election



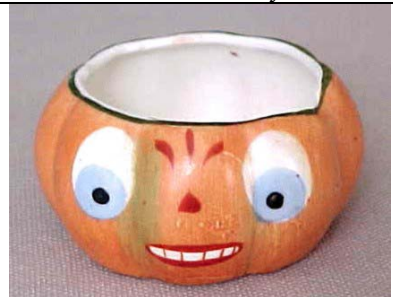
Valentine Display



Easter Bunny



Easter Egg



Jack-O-Lantern

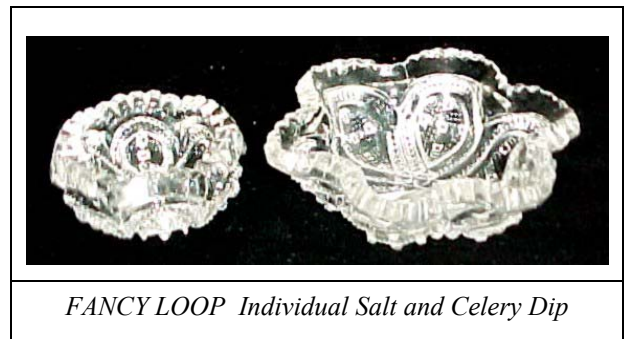
Day. You can also sneak a few into a party setup, like ducks with cheese on a hors d'oeuvres tray. A small “Quackers and Cheese” sign would help the uninitiated understand what is going on.

There are also practical uses for your open salt dishes. A rectangular master size is a convenient holder for packets of sugar, sweetener or tea bags. An individual one makes a good holder for the pills we older folks take every day, or for pierced earrings which could otherwise get lost on the dresser. At the dinner table, open salts are a nice way to serve nuts, mints or M&M's at each place setting. A master salt on the piano makes an attractive candy dish, but it had better be a sturdy one if you have small grandchildren who might go after it. If you think about it, there are probably a dozen other places where a little dish would come in handy around the house.

		
<i>Shamrocks</i>	<i>Two-Face (top)</i>	<i>Two-Face (bottom)</i>
		
<i>Republican</i>	<i>Democrat</i>	<i>Quacker</i>
		
<i>Dog Days of Summer</i>	<i>Bridal Shower</i>	<i>Columbus Day</i>

Besides looking for ways to use our open salts today, we are constantly looking for information about how they were used in the past. We have seen bits and pieces of information, but never a complete “how to” for a condiment that probably seemed too common to need rules of etiquette. The oldest reference we have seen dates from the 1700's, where a writer said that salt should be “taken with a clean knife”. These were the days of master salts, and we don't know if royalty had any different rules for their dining tables. A recent article reported that according to an 1869 newspaper article, a standard table setting was suggested for every dinner. The meat should be placed in front of the man, the soup in front of the lady, and the vegetables close to the older family members. If only two salts were used, an individual salt spoon was necessary at each place setting. These spoons could be dispensed with if individual salt dishes were provided. This is interesting because it does not associate the little spoons with individual size salts, which is how we think of them today.

We once talked with a man who was approaching 100 years old, and he remembered having master salts on the tables when he was young. They took the salt with their teaspoons at the time. Around the turn of the century it was popular to dip vegetables into a dish of salt set at each place, and a number of glass companies made “celery dips” as well as individual salt dishes in some of their pattern lines. This vegetable dipping lasted for many years, though the salts grew smaller in size.



Vegetable dipping lasted for many years, though the salts grew smaller in size . Celery sets and Radish sets with their tray-like salts that match the dish for the vegetable can be found in antique shops and shows. I still remember Thanksgiving dinner at Grandma Emerson’s, which was served on a big set of flow blue china (still in the family) with a little square or ARGUS pattern open salt at each place. I used it for dipping my celery and enjoyed having it; today I’m on a low-salt diet.










Turning abruptly to a different subject, we recently found an article in a milk glass book that led to new information about French glass. The salts they showed were marked SV, which led us to our book on glass marks. It didn’t mention the mark, but buried in the information on Vallerysthal, it mentioned that there had been a “Société des Verreries” (Society of Glassmakers?) in the area about 1855. The salts with this mark are figural doubles which weren’t popular that early, but we’re 90% sure those are the words that the SV stands for. We think there must have been an organization like this late in the 19th century when the figurals were popular, and these salts belong with the Portieux and Vallerysthal ones.

The Vallerysthal Glassworks was founded about 1836 in the northeast of France in the province of Lorraine. Portieux was founded not long after, and the two firms merged in 1872. We speculate that the combination used the SV mark. In 1870 after the Franco-Prussian war and until the end of World War I, the area was taken over by Germany so the French market dried up. To replace these customers, large amounts of glassware were exported to the US. This is probably the period when our salts marked Portieux, Vallerysthal and SV were made.










Today both glass factories are still there. We found reference to them on the Internet, which has an article (in French) about festivities at the Portieux glassworks in the year 2000. The Cristalliere De Vallerysthal is mentioned as making “verre creux”, which we think means blown glassware. If you understand French and want to explore, do a search on the Internet for the two names.

Our collection includes only two with a Vallerysthal mark – the hen on the basket weave nest and the ram’s head salt with 3 legs. Our hen is milk glass, with the gray cast to it typical of their milk glass formula. The ram’s head is a blue milk color and is marked inside the bowl.

We have 5 SV salts, all but one a double. The dog with baskets comes in two versions, both marked. They are similar but with enough differences to show that two different molds were used. The setting hen between two basket bowls is marked SV, but there is another unmarked version which is quite different and may be another maker’s imitation. The double with the facing hens has the SV mark. Our double with the squirrel handle is not marked, but looks exactly like a marked one pictured in a book on milk glass. The last of this group is a blue hen with a bowl on her back, which may be an egg cup.

		
<i>Vallerysthal Hen</i>	<i>Ram's Head – 3 Legs</i>	<i>SV Dog #1</i>
		
<i>SV Dog #2</i>	<i>SV Hen Double</i>	<i>Unmarked Hen Double</i>
		
<i>SV Facing Chickens</i>	<i>Squirrel Double</i>	<i>SV Bird (Egg Cup?)</i>

We have quite a few salts with the Portieux mark in the collection. The one we see most often is the swirl pedestal, which comes in a variety of colors. There is a similar unmarked salt that is taller (1-3/4" vs. 1-5/8") and whose origin we don't know. There is a pink Portieux that looks new, and is somewhat like the "tiny thumbprints" salt being reproduced by Summit. The oval faceted salt resembles many that were made in this country, but it has "Portieux" in the bottom. The square footed master salt comes in milk glass, a brown opaque color, and possibly other colors we have not seen. The low salt with the swirl pattern matching the pedestal ones is blue milk, and the shape is not common in our experience. . The leaf shape with the handle at one end is cobalt, and the "coffin" shaped master is a light blue milk color. The two very unusual ones with the Portieux name are the knife rest double and the touring car double.

		
<i>Swirl Pedestals – Portieux on Right</i>		<i>Portieux Thumbprints</i>
		
<i>Oval Faceted</i>	<i>Footed Master</i>	<i>Swirl Individual</i>
		
<i>Leaf-Like</i>	<i>"Coffin" Master</i>	<i>Knife Rest Double</i>
		
<i>Portieux Touring Car Double</i>		

There is a lot more to discover about the Portieux and Vallerysthal factories and their salts but we may need to learn French first. In any event, the salts are interesting ones and are an attractive addition to any collection. If you ever get to France, try to schedule a side trip to the Lorraine area to see what these factories are doing today and let us know what you find out.

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