VIEW FROM THE SALT BOX - #11

One of the collecting specialties that includes open salts is cut and engraved glass. We have always wanted to learn more about this area so we could understand our salts better. As a result we have just taken an evening course at Camden Community College in New Jersey to learn something about the topic.

The course is being taught by Dave Dorflinger, which is interesting in itself. His family once ran one of the largest glassmaking and cutting operations in the U.S. The business was shut down in the 1920's when cut glass went out of fashion, but much information and and many pieces of glass have been handed down in the family. In addition, Dave has a cutting and engraving shop of his own, so he teaches from personal experience as well as family knowledge.

We are far from experts, but we learned a number of things that makes us look at our salts differently. All real cutting is done by hand. Lead glass (flint glass) is preferred, because the glass cuts easier and the resulting dish has more sparkle. A good cutter will make all his miters (deep grooves) of equal depth, and when they meet the bottoms will intersect at a point. It takes a lot of practice to be a good glass cutter, because there is no way to undo your mistakes. Once you are good at it, the cutting can be done much faster than we originally believed possible.

Engraving can be done with copper wheels fed with a stream of water and abrasive, or with stone wheels cooled with just water. A good stone wheel can last for decades - Dave uses some that are over 50 years old. Really good engraving requires more skill than cutting, because the artist must create the pictures rather than just move in straight lines. We were shown some engraved pieces with detail that rivalled paintings on canvas.

In the early days of cut glass, the final polishing was done with wheels, just like the cutting itself. After the turn of the century, a process was developed for polishing with an acid dip. The resulting work looks just as good as the earlier pieces, but the edges are not as sharp.

Today's collectors look for cutting which was done on "blanks" - blown shapes with a smooth outside surface. Working from these requires more skill and more time, and so they are scarcer. On items that were made in quantity, the factories often used "figured blanks". On these the design was pressed into the dish, and the cutters had only to follow the pattern to make the final product. Not as much glass was removed and less skill was needed, so the costs were less. As with other antiques, some cut patterns are scarcer than others, and command much higher prices from collectors.

Cut glass reproductions have recently become a problem. Someone has been making dishes that are excellent copies of expensive patterns and shapes. This has the collectors up in arms, especially those who own valuable pieces. There is considerable debate as to whether the new pieces can be distinguished from the originals. This may spoil the cut glass market for years.

In taking the course we hoped to learn what makes a piece of cut glass valuable. Is it the special pattern, the shape, the lead content, or some other factor known to the cut glass fraternity but not to us? After 10 weeks of classes we have decided that the larger or unusual shapes and more elaborate cuttings are considered more valuable, and that a shape that can be accurately attributed to its source will also be worth more. The biggest factor is one we knew all along, however - if the piece has the makers mark on it, the price rises substantially. People will "buy the mark".

Everything we learned applies to open salts as well as to the larger cut glass pieces. There is one difference, however - many of the salts that we have called "cut"

are made from ordinary soda-lime glass, and have remarkably little hand work done on them. A pressed dish that has its faces polished is not considered true "cut glass", even though it appears alongside the more elaborate pieces on the cut glass pages of our open salt books.

Take a little time to look at your cut glass salts closely, with a magnifying glass if you have one. Look at the designs and see if the deep grooves look like they were made with a cutting wheel. Look at the rays on the bottom to see if they are pressed into the glass or truly cut. When you find one that was cut from a blank, try to figure out how the cutter made it, using little wheels to grind away the glass and other little wheels to polish it. If you think about the process, we believe you will appreciate the work that went into your salt, and will appreciate that it really was made by a master craftsman.

Ed Berg
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