

MOSSY COMMENTS - #12

After the beginning of the 20th century, better salt was developed that would flow freely (most of the time) from shakers. This did not eliminate open salts completely, but shifted the emphasis on their use. Before shakers, salt was sprinkled on the food from the salt dish. Now the shakers did a much better job, but there was still one popular use for an open salt – dipping vegetables.

Before the medical profession decided that too much salt was bad for you, the usual theory was that you needed lots of salt, especially if you perspired a lot. Salt pill dispensers were hung in hot workplaces. At the dinner table, you salted your celery, radish, scallion or whatever raw vegetable was served before taking a bite. This was a perfect reason for placing individual open salts at the dining table.

About this same time, the Japanese were worried about their trade imbalance. Too much of their gold was leaving the country to buy goods from America with little coming back. They decided to develop a porcelain industry to sell tableware and retrieve some of the money being spent here. Their decorators grew up writing Japanese, so they knew how to do delicate work with paint brushes. They applied this ability to decorating porcelain, and a large number of different designs were produced. Many tableware shapes were exported, but the ones we are interested in are open salts.

Judging from what we see today, there must have been a huge market for sets that had a large dish for a raw vegetable and small salts that matched, one for each diner. Our collection has a number of these “celery salts”, with a variety of shapes and decorations. We don’t have the bigger dish for the vegetable, but we have seen matching ones in many cases. There are a large variety of shapes and decorations, and they could be a collection in themselves if we tried to get one of each. Instead we concentrate on a representative variety of shapes and the decorations that please us the most.

The most obvious decoration for these salts is a picture of the vegetable itself. Sometimes this was, celery, (Figure 1), sometimes a radish (Figure 2) and sometimes both (Figure 3). The first of these – the leaf shape – is particularly attractive. We have seen the complete set, and the celery dish matches the individual salts.

Another category of decoration is the lake scenes. This seems to have been a popular subject with the Japanese artists. Some of these are in Figures 4 to 6. The last of these is a little puzzling – the building looks just like a good old American barn. We wonder if they have something like that in Japan.

Many of the higher grade salts from Japan have raised gold decorations. One of these is in Figure 7. It also has two bluebirds – we think. Their forked tails don’t fit with the Eastern Bluebird we know, but the rest of the bird does. Maybe there is a Japanese one like this – please enlighten us if you know of it. Or maybe it’s a barn swallow turned blue.

Finally there is the desert scene showing an oasis with palm trees (Figure 8). What looks like water in the picture is painted as sand on the salt – the photography was a real problem on this one because of light reflections.

We hope you have a nice variety of celery salts in your collection. If you want to focus on them, you could get a lot of different shapes and many attractive decorations.

Ed Berg

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