

VIEW FROM THE SALT BOX - #32

The question came to the New England Club from a lady who belonged to an antiques study group. Her assignment was to find the definitions of 4 terms: Master Salt, Open Salt, Salt Cellar and Salt Dip. They bounced it to us, so we tried to come up with an answer.

Our first thought was our unabridged dictionary. They recognized Salt Cellar, and defined it as a small vessel placed on the table for serving salt, either open or a shaker. This agreed with our experience with the term as we have encountered over the years. We then decided to consult the Oxford Dictionary of the English Language, a 13-volume monster we had heard of but never seen. A library about 10 miles away had one, so we went there. It was no more help than our unabridged one. It gave many usages for the word "salt", including "above or below the salt", which is often quoted in antique publications. It mentioned Salt Cellar, but did not elaborate beyond the "small vessel on the table" definition.

From this lack of information we figured that we were free to make up our own definitions, based on what we have heard over the years. Here is what we arrived at:

SALT CELLAR – A small vessel placed on the table for serving salt, either an open dish or a shaker. (We agree with the dictionary, and leave it at that.)

OPEN SALT – An open dish on the table for serving salt, as opposed to a shaker. There are two general ways of doing this: either use larger dishes that are passed from diner to diner, or use smaller ones put at each place setting. From our point of view, the dish does not have to be made specifically for the purpose. If it is cute enough, it becomes an open salt as soon as it is placed in the collection. Open salts are often equipped with tiny spoons for distributing the salt over the food but it takes an artist to do this evenly. The word "open" is needed when communicating with others, since shaker collectors call their treasures "salts" too.

SALT DIP – The individual size open salt, used interchangeably by some antique dealers. It derives from the early part of this century when shallow salt dishes were used for dipping celery, radishes, onions and other vegetables in a bed of salt. I remember them on my grandmother's table at Thanksgiving, back in the days when salt was supposed to be good for you. They often came in matched sets, with a larger matching dish to hold the particular vegetables. We have seen many celery sets, and an occasional radish set. We imagine there is an onion set out there somewhere.

MASTER SALT – A larger open salt dish that is passed around the table as needed. It is a modern term for what all the old catalogs call a Table Salt. These are often shown with smaller matching Individual Salts in the catalogs. The few old references we have found say that there would be two of them on each table. When and how the word "Table" was changed to "Master" is something we would like to know.

I'm sure that most collectors will agree with these definitions, but other parts of the antique collecting world may have different ideas. Maybe the Open Salt Clubs should get a committee together to standardize the definitions and usage and publish it for the others to adopt. The Oxford English Dictionary could use some better information, in my seldom humble opinion.

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Comment by Kay: "What about salts with covers? They aren't really open." She wins the first nomination to the National Committee on Salt Dish Definitions.