

The Brilliance of English Silvered Mercury Glass

By Diane Lytwyn

Among all the examples of silvered mercury glass produced in the 19th century, including ware from Bohemia, Germany and the United States, the English pieces, which were patent protected and made for the shortest duration of time, are truly the highest quality silvered glass items ever manufactured.

British patent number 12,905, which was granted jointly to Frederick Hale Thomson and Edward Varnish in 1849, provided for the successful creation of double-walled glass forms for silvering that ignited an explosive interest in the mirrored curiosity. Another patent, issued to Frederick Hale Thomson and Thomas Robert Mellish described methods for “cutting and staining” silvered glass articles. The new sensation, which drew notable attention from scientific journalists, art connoisseurs and critics, achieved an instant popularity with patrons of the decorative arts in Vic-



torian England. Silvered glass, made as decoration, can rightly be called the first, true “art glass,” or glass that was considered first as an aesthetic object for display. The picture above shows a pair of large, emerald green cased glass vases (back left and right), a tall presentation goblet in blue cut to silver (back center), a pair of gold-washed master salts (front left and right) and an amethyst cut to silver master saltcellar (front center).

The most significant venue providing widespread public access to the new, and remarkably different silvered glass articles was the Great Crystal Palace Exhibition of 1851, held in London, England. Officially titled “The Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations,” this world’s fair, of sorts, was designed to gather the best achievements in the arts, crafts and technology from all over the globe and was ultimately the greatest and grandest display of Western culture in the middle 19th century. With official royal endorsement by England’s Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, the great “Crystal Palace Exhibition” set a new standard for knowledge and appreciation among the visiting public, for the developing arts and sciences.

Although there were many publications which chronicled The Great Crystal Palace Exhibition experience, the

best work, which provided thorough analysis offered by leading journalists and art critics of the day as well as numerous drawings of the buildings, grounds and objects displayed, was the "Illustrated Catalogue London 1851, published for The Art-Journal as a special issue.

The first reference to silvered glass from the Exhibit, on page 21 of the Art-Journal Catalog states:

"The center-dish and two vases which occupy this column, are from the establishment of Mr. Mellish, of London. They are of glass, silvered by Mr. Hale Thomson's process, described at length in the "Art-Journal" for March of the present year, to which we would refer such of our readers as feel an interest in this truly beautiful manufacturing Art. There is a peculiarity in the manufacture of this glass, used by Mr. Mellish, in his process, which merits particular notice, from its novelty and ingenuity; all the articles, whether goblets, vases, or others, have double sides, between which the silver solution is precipitated."

Illustrations of a compote, along with two elaborate cased silvered glass display vases, comprised the aforementioned column. Robert Hunt, Esq., who contributed a detailed, if not verbose essay titled "The Science of the Exhibition," from the same Art-Journal publication, wrote the following:

"The subject of silvering glass is a curious one-and the examples of the most recent improvements of precipitating silver with grape sugar, found in the contributions to the Exhibition, are excellent."

In "Tallis History and Description of the Crystal Palace and Exhibition of the World's Industry in 1851," a section devoted to the discovery of glass, and recent glass marvels included the following:

"Specimens of the beautiful silvered glass lately become so fashionable, and which has formed so ornamental a feature at various public banquets, were exhibited my Messrs. Varnish, or Berners-street. The silvered globes were already familiar to the public, but there were various other articles, such as a chess-table, goblets, curtain-poles, etc., which showed the great adaptability of the material to ornamental purposes."

The 10" sapphire blue vase (shown to the right) with cut longitudinal ovals along the columnar shape ending in a round foot with spiral cut navettes to resemble braiding,

is a wonderful example of the cased and cut work made for Varnish & Company, the technique described in detail further in this article. Later in the same essay, the author describes the brilliance of color in silvered glass and states:

"In the articles exhibited by Mr. Varnish and Mr. Mellish, these colours were well shown. Messrs. Powel and Co., Whitefriars, manufactured most of the glass exhibited by them and this itself is presented a noticeable peculiarity, all the glass was double, the object, of this being to enable the patentees to fill the inside with a solution of nitrate of silver, to which grape sugar was added, when all the silver held in solution was deposited in a beautiful film of revived silver over every part of the glass. This silvering on the interior wall of the glass (globes, vases and numerous other articles were shown to be susceptible to the process) has the property of reflecting back through the glass all the light, which falls on the surface – whereas ordinarily some is transmitted, and only a small portion reflected. This exalts many of the colours manner...and we greatly admired some the coloured examples of





this process.”

Prior to the English exhibition, and going without much public notice, an article appeared in the August 31, 1850 issue of “Scientific American,” which references the glass ware made according to the Thomson & Varnish patent, although not attributed:

“A new method of manufacturing ornamental glass has been lately discovered, which presents the brilliant appearance of highly polished gold and silver. This mode of “silvering” glass is a new invention, which is now being carried on by a company in London. The various articles are blown of two different thicknesses of glass throughout, and the silver is deposited upon the two interior surfaces of the double hollow glass vessel.” “When the glass is cut, the brilliancy of the silver is heightened, and, on the other hand, when the glass is ground, the effect of frosted silver is produced”

In addition to the more elaborate cased and cut pieces, smooth mirror surface items were produced as well. A plain chalice, with a wide pan top, deep bowl, and baluster-shaped stem ending in a broad round foot probably appealed to those with more austere tastes. Some speculation, regarding the use of unembellished silvered chalices, is that pieces were used in Christian liturgies during the preparation and dispensation of the Holy Eucharist. Whether or not this is true, the fact remains that the footed



compote chalice shape was more utilitarian than other items made of silvered glass.

The chalice (shown left), which measures 7” tall with a 6” open diameter, is extremely heavy for its size, and is marked “E. Varnish & Co. Patent London” in the metal seal underfoot.

Other items, such as the footed master saltcellar (shown above) was made from green uranium glass, now known as “Vaseline glass,” so that the base color of the glass itself comprises the color of the finished article.

Measuring 2” $\frac{3}{4}$ ” tall with a 2” foot and 2” $\frac{3}{4}$ ” top opening, this vivid green salt is marked “Hale Thomson’s Patent London” underfoot.

The method by which hollow double-walled blown silvered glass was made involved several steps. A batch of molten glass, or “gather” is picked up by the glass-worker at the end of a blowpipe, which is a hollow metal tube about four feet long. The worker, known as the gatherer, begins to inflate the hot ball of glass by blowing air through the pipe, while rotating the blowpipe to maintain the bubble shape. Constant vigilance to maintain the correct viscosity is paramount to success with the process of glass-blowing. The gatherer works closely with the servitor, who attached a long, flat-topped iron rod known as the punity or pontil rod to the opposite end of the piece, so that the article is transferred to the pontil rod. The piece is shaped and finished, then cracked off the pontil rod, leaving the aperture through which the silvering is introduced. A shaped bubble can be coated with another batch of glass in a contrasting color, thus producing the gold interior of open pieces like compotes, goblets or salts, such as the pair illustrated here.

This matched pair of master saltcellars (shown top left), in plain silver and gold, measure 3” tall and 3” in di-



imeter, have the impressed E. Varnish & CO. Patent London seal underfoot.

Another technique, which truly distinguishes the English silvered glass items from other makers, involves casing. Cased glass is made by attaching a “gather” or batch of molten glass in a contrasting color, creating the outside layer. Cased English silvered glass was comprised of a clear layer, covered with a colored layer overlay, the cut through to show the silvered interior. The 7” vase (shown



bottom left), with a knopped, ovoid body and long, trumpet neck, is cased with a bright emerald green glass overlay, then cut with intersecting lines and circles, ending in a fancy spiral cut foot. This unusual vase has the rare “Thomson’s Patent London” mark embossed in the seal underfoot.

Cut patterns on cased silvered glass are found with oval shapes, geometric intersecting lines, or a combination of both. The outer layer of glass for casing was usually a bright, vivid jewel tone, such as amethyst, emerald green, ruby red, or sapphire blue.

The low vase (shown above), in a footed compact cylindrical form, is intaglio-cut with arched diamond panels and cut floral motifs, and finished with a scalloped top and matching foot trim in deep sapphire blue cut to silver. The vase measures 6” tall and marked Varnish & Co. London.

The origins of cased glass as a decorating technique can be traced back to the Bohemian makers in the early 19th century. The English adaptation of this technique was superior, producing items of better quality since the objects were made from heavy flint, non-lead glass.

A rare and unusual shape for silvered glass, this extraordinary decanter (shown at the top of next page) has a cased overlay of brilliant amethyst, cut in swirling ribs to silver, with a cut chevron edge gadrooned finish to the bottom rim, and the matching stopper, a bulbous turban



shape, was cut to match the bottom. The piece measures 8" high and has a wide bottom. This decanter was likely used for water or for spirits.

Another interesting piece is the tall candlestick (shown bottom right) made in Bohemia of non-flint glass, but with a thin ruby glass flashed casing that resembles the items produced for Varnish & Thomson. The swirled rib effect, achieved during annealing, along with the cameo silver embellishments on the cup and foot are amazingly analogous to many cased English silvered glass forms. This candlestick is light-weight for its size and measures 11" tall.

As opposed to the extra layer of actual colored glass used for English ware, the Bohemian method utilized a quick chemical staining or color "flashing" which was markedly different in the finished appearance. While it is true that the Bohemian glassmakers of the 19th century exerted an influence on English work, the decorative elements of this Bohemian candlestick prove that English glass provided reciprocal inspiration. However well intended, the Bohemian candlestick, although more ambitious than other silvered glass articles made there, is simply incomparable to the superior grade of the English specimens as can be readily seen.

Red flashed glass was very popular in the forest re-

gions of Bohemia, and the colored glass made in Bohemia certainly influenced the growing lexicon of Art glass which developed in Victorian England. A comparison of mid 19th century glass from Europe, England and the United States shows the almost concurrent origin and evolution of luxury glass, or glass made more for aesthetic reasons. Silvered glass was concurrently developed in Bohemia, England and the United States in the third quarter of the 19th century. The emerging middle class in Victorian England, which was shaped by the demographic, industrial, economic and social changes, created a new market for decorative accessories as had never been seen before. Silvered glass, whether mirror plain, gold washed or in bright, cased brilliant jewel color, reached a level of great popularity during the middle 19th century.

Silvered glass made in England was clearly marked, with an impressed or embossed metal wafer covered by a round glass disc. The English makers, as opposed to Bo-





hemian makers, paid close attention the sealing methods, which are finished with great care. The pontil opening was carefully polished, and the seal was ground to fit perfectly, so that the area is completely smooth to the touch.

Bohemian mercury was also sealed with a metal seal and glass disc, but the fit was awkward, the pontil areas rough, and were often subject to accidental opening which caused deterioration of the silvering. Silvered glass made in the United States, with the exception of items made at The New England Glass Company, was sealed with a simple cork. As a result of clever sealing, many pieces of English silvered glass have survived in as brilliant a condition as the day they were made.

English silvered mercury glass was made into vases, footed goblets, chalices, compotes and many types of tableware, including sugar bowls, creamers, master salts and saltcellars. This rich amethyst cased cut to silver master salt shown below) has a pleasing double-drape festoon



cut and large-scale oval gadroon work around the top and bottom rim. Measuring 3" tall with a 2" $\frac{3}{4}$ " open top diameter and 2" $\frac{3}{4}$ " bottom foot, the piece is signed E. Varnish & Co. Patent London.

English silvered glass was quite costly to produce and very labor intensive. Decorative glass using other artistic embellishments quickly replaced silvered glass, and production ceased around 1855. Since the window of production was so short, from 1849-55, surviving pieces are very rare to find, and therefore, extremely expensive to acquire. In 1998, the collection of Michael Parkington, which included rare pieces of silvered Varnish glass, was sold at Christie's London South Kensington Gallery. A single vase, in deep amethyst color cut to silver and measuring 10" tall, far exceeded its high estimate of 2,500 British Pounds Sterling, and was sold for 4,025 British Pounds – the equivalent to approximately \$7,220.00 dollars – setting a record for English silvered glass.

Collectors should note that English silvered glass is difficult to find, and when offered for sale, pieces are priced accordingly. However, with the advent of the Internet and marked determination, it is sometimes possible for collectors to acquire a piece English silvered glass to treasure and admire. English silvered glass is of investment quality, and should be appreciated for its unique and intrinsic beauty.

References:

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