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And The Winner Is... 'Carnival Glass!'



SMACK DAB IN THE MIDDLE: Design Trends of the Mid-20th Century

DONALD-BRIAN JOHNSON

"Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up, knock down the milk bottles, and win a prize! A stuffed panda bear for the little fella . . . a kewpie doll for his baby sister . . . and, for the lady of the house, a shimmering glass water pitcher, complete with matching tumblers!"

Wait, let's back up a bit. Stuffed animals, check. Dolls, sure thing. But decorative glassware? When did you last see them handing that out at your county fair?

The answer: not recently. But well into the mid-twentieth century, glass décor items shared Midway shelf space with pandas and kewpies at carnival games of chance across the United States. That's why they

call it "carnival glass." Originally, carnival glass was intended for a loftier fate. Introduced in the early 1900s, it was first known as "iridill," a reference to its iridescence. Iridill was molded, like other pressed glass of the era. When removed from its mold, the glass was sprayed with a solution of metallic salts (aka "dope"). Once cured, the effect was magical: the metallic finish refracted light with an ever-changing colorful lustre. The goal was to mimic the look of iridescent hand-crafted Tiffany glass at a fraction of the cost. That mass-production plan proved a success—so successful, in fact, that iridill was soon referred to as the "Poor Man's Tiffany."

Among the prominent manufacturers of carnival glass were such established firms as Northwood, Fenton, Dugan, and Imperial. Northwood led the pack with its top-selling "Grape and Cable" pattern, a festive design consisting of bunches of grapes, leaves, and connecting cables. Since many carnival glass items were serving pieces (bowls, pitchers, plates, and other tableware), the "Grape and Cable" pattern proved appetizingly apropos. A myriad of other patterns included everything from Imperial's quite similar "Grapes," to Dugan's "Persian Garden," Fenton's "Stag and Holly," and Northwood's "Star of David." Since so many makers eventually joined the carnival glass brigade, many pieces were unmarked. A knowledge of which companies produced which patterns is essential in determining a particular item's provenance.

A rainbow of colors awaited the buyers of

iridescent glass, including the often-seen marigold, cobalt, and amethyst. In addition to the satiny iridescent finish, other carnival treatments included opalescent, translucent, "radium" (which created a mirror-like appearance), and frosted.

For the first twenty years or so of its lifespan, carnival glass, like other decorative glass of the time, was marketed in traditional giftware outlets, such as department stores. However, with the 1929 onset of the Depression, household budgets became limited to the basic necessities of life. Those necessities did not include iridescent glassware.

With warehouses filled with barrels of unsold inventory, manufacturers were forced to explore other means of distribution. Some glass was sold to companies which offered it as premiums.

(Lee, a major distributor of baking powder, notably sold iridescent glass filled with its product.) But what about all the rest?

Carnival game entrepreneurs were always on the lookout for something new to tempt patrons into parting with their pennies—and what could be more alluring than temptingly shiny glassware? Snapped up at bargain prices by wholesale distributors, iridescent glass quickly became part of the barker's "step right up" spiel. "Carnival glass" at last earned its enduring title.

Although production of original glass ceased, reissues and "new" carnival had a resurgence in the 1960s and '70s, making age determination at times tricky. With nearly 24 thousand carnival glass items listed daily on eBay, today's collector prices are remarkably reason-

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Punch bowl by Imperial in the popular marigold color. "Grape" pattern, 1970s. 11-3/4" d.



Two-handled relish dish by Imperial. Marigold, with "Grape" pattern, 1970s. 8" d.

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Mckittrick: The talented Mr. Tiffany



Quote of the Week

We first make our habits, and then our habits make us.

John Dryden