

'Tis the Season...for Victorian Illumination Lamps

by Rick and Berny Baldwin

Commonly referred to as “Victorian Christmas lights” in the U.S. because of their celebratory and festive usage, Victorian illumination lamps represent a class of vintage glass collectibles that possess historical provenance, a diversity of form and color and a relative ease of acquisition. During the Christmas holiday season, lamps in the more common patterns can be found at most antique malls, as well as at Internet auction sites. Popularized in Victorian England in the 1800s along with many Yuletide traditions, such as the “Christmas tree” custom being introduced to Windsor Castle, these lamps are characterized as single-piece glass “tumblers” in which a candle or an oil-fueled wick was burned. Typically, these lamps, which were produced in every color of the rainbow, had patterns in the glass that aided in refracting and reflecting the light produced. A thin copper wire was commonly used to suspend a lamp from a tree, a section of a residence or building, a frame that outlined a symbol or design or from whatever support was desired. Wire frames outlining a “crown”, a “VR” or other symbol were popular lamp holders, especially for Jubilee celebrations. Photographs accompanying this article show a Victorian-era decorated canoe with illumination lamps hanging around the sides and a building decorated with lamps during a coronation celebration for King George V.

Also during the Victorian era, “fairy lights” were popularized in England as decorations and as functional nightlights. These lamps are characterized as

possessing multiple pieces, with a saucer for a special candle and a decorative shade as a minimum. The single-piece illumination lamps are also often called “fairy lights” in the UK.

The earliest illumination lamps used for decorative or festive purposes date back prior to the nineteenth century, although they flourished from the mid-1800s up until about 1920, when electric lighting became widespread. The earliest lights were probably church votives, which made their way outdoors. The earliest lamps made in significant quantities were pontil-scarred, free-blown or mold-blown examples, and they can be found in a variety of sizes, colors and workmanship-quality. The majority was made with diamond or quilted patterns, but occasionally examples with ribbed, swirled or hobnail patterns can be found. Sometimes antique dealers refer to these as “Stiegel” lamps, but the vast majorities have been attributed to the UK. During a visit in 1858 by Queen Victoria to Stoneleigh Abbey in Warwickshire, she was treated to the sight of about 15,000 of these whale-oil-burning lamps decorating the buildings and grounds. Recently, several hundred of these lights were found stored on the abbey grounds and made available to collectors.

Around the early 1870s, glassmaking technology in England was maturing and flourishing, and the introduction of pressed glass manufacturing resulted in the illumination lamps becoming much more abundant and affordable by the populace. In 1882, a patent was issued to James Pain for the mass production of lamps utilizing two- and three-piece

molds. The most common lamps that collectors can find today are mold variations of a diamond-quilted pattern, and these were mass-produced up until about 1920. This single pattern with all of its variations and colors can yield a large and diverse collection at an affordable price. Red and cranberry glass is less abundant and demands a little larger monetary investment to acquire. Scarcer lamps in the pressed diamond-quilted pattern can be found with letters or symbols on their sides, as can a few earlier blown examples with such.

Another relatively common and abundant lamp form was also made in a diamond-quilted pattern and is embossed “Brock’s Illumination Lamps” and the European country of manufacture around the base of the lamp. C.T. Brock, as well as James Pain, was in the business of staging extravagant fireworks-based “illuminations” for festive events, exhibitions and celebrations throughout Europe. These colored lamps were utilized to complement their productions, as well as to illuminate gardens, such as the Royal Gardens at Vauxhall and the Crystal Palace. In the 1920s, the Bournemouth Corporation purchased the remaining stock of lamps from Brock so they could carry on the tradition of the Victorian illuminations for visitors to their gardens during certain times of the year. As the original lamps became broken over the years, the Corporation commissioned a glassworks to manufacture replacement lamps, which possessed a characteristic “square-grid” pattern, for them.

The use of illumination lamps as festive lighting was also gaining





popularity in the U.S., as well as in Australia, France and Germany during the later portion of the Victorian era, and it is common to find lamps manufactured in these countries which have their own characteristic forms. A German-made lamp, which is marked "D.R.G.M.", was made with a tin screwcap serving as the base on which the candle sat, thus allowing the candle to be more conveniently replaced. A "pineapple-shaped" lamp made in Australia was abundantly made in a characteristic deep amethyst coloration.

There are several lamp forms that are attributed to U.S. origin. One is a "lantern-shaped" form with a heavy wire handle that can be found with three known embossing variations - the most common of which being "Chicago Lamp & Candle Co." across the base. A scarcer lamp found in the same form is embossed "H.B. Thearle Co.", and Thearle was also in the fireworks business. Lamps were also made in the U.S. in the popular "thousand eye" pattern, which was prevalent in pressed glass in the 1900s.

The most sought-after and scarcest lamps are "figural" in form, and these were primarily manufactured in England during the later part of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, although some earlier scarce examples can be found. The London-based supplier "Hearn, Wright & Co." had several figural forms manufactured by the Eclipse Glass Works to commemorate Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee in 1897. As per the advertisement accompanying this article, the forms included a "cluster-of-grapes", a "tulip" and a bust of Queen Victoria. Other highly desirable figural busts of royalty are those of Edward VII, George V and Queen Mary, the latter two being made for their 1910 coronation celebrations. Other lamp forms include various figural fruits and nuts, various geometric patterns and several styles with cameos of Queen Victoria on the sides.

The popularity of utilizing candle illumination lamps for decorations and festive occasions continued into the Edwardian era, although electric lighting was rapidly becoming a competitor. Also,

many Victorian-era English parks and bandstands had permanent gas-fueled lamp fixtures for decorative lighting, which utilized the colorful blown or pressed glass shades. A hole and brass fitting in the base, which fit over the gas jet, characterize these shades.

As collectors of these lamps for over seventeen years, we know of very few other historical glass collectibles that can compete with respect to the variety of forms and color variations that can be attributed to them. Unfortunately, many of the scarcer forms are becoming increasingly difficult to find, although they could show up essentially anywhere, and several patterns have been reproduced and marketed in gift shops during the past few years. The photograph accompanying this article is of an educational exhibit that was displayed several years ago at an antique bottle show held in Cherry Hill, NJ. For supplemental historical information about these lamps, please see the excellent article by Mary Ballentine that was published in the December 2001 issue of *Bottles and Extras* magazine.

