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## CRACKLE GLASS

Written and Photographed by June Grayson

All crackle glass is beautiful, but some crackle glass is more beautiful than others. The exact origin of crackle glass - also called craquelle, frosted, overshot, snakeskin, and ice glass - is unknown.

The Venetian glassmakers of the sixteenth century claim credit for the technique. They produced ice glass by plunging

the red-hot glass into cold water and then reheating and reblowing it. The glass appeared to be covered with multiple fractures but the interior surfaces remained smooth to the touch. The technique was soon copied by neighboring Bohemian glass makers and spread throughout Europe.

Several examples of frosted glassware from the seventeenth and eighteenth century have been found and attributed to other European factories.

Mr. Martin Bach of the Durand glass factory in the United States claimed, however, that the Egyptian and Moorish art nouveau glassware that he manufactured in 1928 were reproductions of crackle glass from those ancient civilizations.

Evidently, we can never know who first made crackle glass. We do know, however, there was an explosion of interest in crackle glass during the nineteenth century. European glass manufacturers exhibited many kinds and colors of craquelé glass at the Paris Exposition of 1878.

Several patents were issued both in England and the United States for variations on the Venetian and Bohemian methods of manufacture. One novel technique patented in England in 1883 called for the glassware to be given a frosted finish with acids

and then covered with cobbler's glue. Upon drying under low heat, the glue would flake off together with pieces of the glass, producing the desired effect of ice or windowpane frosting.

The Boston & Sandwich Glass Works on Cape Cod and the Reading Artistic Glass Works in Reading, Pennsylvania, produced the "overshot" glassware that became popular in the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

They made overshot by rolling the heated glass gather in piles of glass that had been pounded into almost microscopic fragments. The glass shards adhered to the hot glass that was then reheated slightly and blown into the desired shape. If you run your finger over the outside surface of overshot glass you can feel the glass shards better than you can see them. You can even cut yourself on the rough edges of the glass.

Victorian glass manufacturers produced molded pattern glass that simulated the ice glass effect. William O. Davis, associated with the Portland Glass Co. of Portland, Maine, secured patent No. 3494 in 1869 for his invention, the Tree of Life design. Other glass companies were quick to produce variations of this pattern.

For more information on the history of crackle glass, you may wish to read about the Tree of Life pattern in the December/January 1989 issue of Glass Collector's Digest, and refer to the books, Nineteenth Century Glass and American Art Nouveau Glass, by Albert Christian Revi.

Fortunately, modern glass makers are still manufacturing crackle glass, making it accessible and affordable to anyone who wants to enjoy owning and using it at home today.

Richard Blenko of Blenko Glass says that Blenko started to make crackle glass in 1940. They offered the first designs with a crackle finish in their 1946 catalog. Their glass blowers achieve this decorative effect by the old technique of subjecting the hot glass to sudden cold and then reheating it to its smoother, more stable surface finish. You can see many color pictures and reproductions of Blenko crackle glass advertisements in the book, BLENKO GLASS 1930-1953.

Two crackle glass collectors were kind enough to let me photograph their collections for this article. Kathie Ramey, antique dealer and appraiser of Ramey's Old Barn, Aurora, Illinois, has five pieces of overshot glass in her personal collection of Victorian art glass. Novice glass collector that I am, I had never heard of overshot glass before, let alone seen or

handled it. I could not have had a better teacher.

"When I started collecting glassware in 1951, we did not have all the reference books that are available today," explained Kathie. "But we did have our mentors - other antique dealers who were generous with their knowledge and time. One of my mentors taught me that it is not enough to look, but you must always feel, so that you become acquainted with all aspects of glassware. The same tutors from whom I bought this glassware told me that Sandwich crackle glass is called "snakeskin" instead of overshot. They also said that you could tell the difference between Sandwich overshot glass and European overshot glass because only the top edge of Sandwich glass was trimmed with gold. In European overshot glassware, the gold decoration was also carried down the side of the glass."

Kathie's pieces of crackle glass have never been used and so the glass shards are just as crisp and sharp as when they were first manufactured - the perfect pieces to feel the way Sandwich crackle glass is supposed to be.

Aggie Theis is the owner of THE CAROUSEL, one of the shops in the Antique Two Mall of St. Charles, Illinois. She has a crackle glass collection of over 400 pieces. She bought her

first crackle glass thirty years ago - a crystal lemonade set of pitcher and glasses - and since then has not been able to resist any crackle glass. Relatives and friends always know what to give her - another piece of crackle glass - and she loves it all. She uses her crackle glass for family holiday meals. She will even deliver flowers to sick friends in her prettiest crackle glass vases, just asking that they return the vases when the flowers fade.

"The good thing about crackle glass is that you can always find some to buy," says Aggie. "The bad thing is that it is almost impossible to tell the age or origin of most of the pieces you find.

"Older pieces will show more wear marks on the bottom of the glass. The shapes may be more imperfect in the older pieces. They may lean to the side, or you can feel bumps or variations in the glass that you cannot see. The cheaper the crackle glass the fewer "cracks" it has in it. You may not want to buy any piece of crackle glass that has only a few cracks on a small part of the total area," advises Aggie.

"The best way to tell if something is old is if you can buy it from its original owner," continues Aggie. "I have some crackle glass that I bought from a 90-year-old lady who said

she had bought the glass when she set up housekeeping at the age of twenty.

"You may be able to buy pieces that still have their factory labels so that you can look them up in the company catalogs," continues Aggie. "Some of my labels say Blenko or Rainbow Glass. We know that Blenko is still in business but I have not been able to find out anything about Rainbow Glass. I even called West Virginia once and the telephone operator said that there was no such company in existence, but she connected me with another glass company. That company said that the Rainbow factory had burned down in the 1960s. However, another source said that was not true," Aggie says, "so I still have not been able to trace my Rainbow glass."

To show that we still have mentors today, I must tell you how helpful Kathie has been to me and Aggie. Our experience may also be instructive for you on your treasure hunts for more crackle glass for your collection.

I knew that Aggie wanted some overshot glass to add to her crackle glass collection, but so far she had not come across any for sale. A few days ago, I was thrilled to find a little

pitcher marked "overshot" for sale for only \$39.00 in one of our local antique malls. Arrogant with my new knowledge, I asked to examine it - but I could feel no rough glass shards. Humph, mismarked, I thought. Fortunately, I was not so arrogant that I wanted to pass up this piece for Aggie if it was overshot. I telephoned Kathie for advice. She immediately got someone to watch her own antique store while she drove from Aurora to St. Charles to examine the pitcher for us.

Her conclusion? It was overshot and it was a good buy. Evidently it had been well-used in the past for the glass shards were worn down, unlike her overshot pitchers. However, her keen eyes perceived that there was a lot of dust and dirt in among the shards, probably just from the passage of time and maybe also from lint from dishtowels used for innumerable dryings.

She advised Aggie to buy the pitcher, take it home, and soak it overnight in water with a little ammonia in it. Eureka! Much of the dirt and lint dissolved away, the shards are now sharper, the crystal brilliant, and Aggie has a beautiful example of overshot or snakeskin crackle glass to round out her collection.

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I welcome any additions or corrections to this article,



and I promise to share any letters with Kathie and Aggie. Especially welcome would be any information about the Rainbow Glass Company.

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