

The Importance of Provenance in Glass Collecting

by Anthony P. Picadio

When we visit an art exhibition at an art museum we can usually be confident that the artworks we are looking at are important and represent a high level of artistic achievement. Our confidence is derived from the fact that the artworks are being displayed in a museum and were selected by a museum curator who is expert in the field of art represented by the exhibition. In other words, the artworks we are looking at went through a process of selection by which lesser works were filtered out and the ones selected were deemed to meet a high standard of artistic merit. The museum curatorial process is efficient in the sense that it saves us the time and trouble of looking through a large population of artworks in order to find those that are truly worthwhile, assuming we would have any idea of what was truly worthwhile. Left to our own devices, we would probably merely pick what we like, in which case we would probably end up with a lot of low grade art. The curatorial process provides us with an objective, informed, expert opinion of the merit of the works in the exhibition. We know when we start looking that we are looking at the best.

We collectors do not usually employ our own personal curators to select objects for our collections, or to provide us with objective expert advice on prospective acquisitions. We are left to our own devices to sort through the available material and choose what we think will enhance our collections. Over time, we usually acquire a relatively high level of knowledge about the area in which we collect and we

eventually become our own curators. In the meantime, we make many mistakes. And, even after we think we know what we are doing, we often make an acquisition which we later regret for one reason or another. Hopefully, our personal error rate diminishes over time, but even the most knowledgeable collectors make mistakes.

There are a number of ways we can minimize our personal error rate in making acquisitions for our collections. I have found that one of the best is to acquire objects that have an illustrious provenance. In this case I am using the word “provenance” not only to mean the record of an object’s ownership, but also to include the record of an object’s public attention. Under this broader definition, an object’s exhibition history, the number of times it has been mentioned or illustrated in books, articles and catalogues, and its auction history would all be included in the definition. In other words, “provenance” pretty much means “history” for purposes of this discussion.

Some areas of collecting are more difficult than others. In the glass field for example, collecting early blown tableware is much more difficult than collecting historical flasks. In the latter case, information concerning the maker and rarity of a particular mold is readily available, as is information concerning rarity of various colors. The historical flask collector’s judgment comes into play only regarding condition, strength of impression, glass quality and price. In the case of early free-blown tableware, especially the non-production tableware made from bottle or window glass, the situation is much more difficult.

When and where it was made, whether it is authentic, is it rare, what is its artistic merit, are all questions with which the collector must wrestle in deciding whether or not to add it to the collection. As the number of questions proliferate, the chances of making a mistake increase.

This is where provenance is most important in minimizing the chances of a mistake. If a piece was once owned by a well-known and respected collector, then it has already undergone a selection process similar to the museum curatorial process discussed above. Someone with a certain amount of expertise has placed a stamp of approval on the piece. If it went from one well-known collection to another, then the screening process becomes even more select. If the piece was published and discussed in an important article or book written by an acknowledged expert in the field, then you can be pretty sure that you are dealing with a piece of some importance. Your chances of making a mistake have been greatly reduced.

Let me give a few examples of how I used provenance to make a decision on a piece. The amethyst creamer shown in Plate 1 turned up in an Americana auction a few years ago. It was catalogued simply as “unusual amethyst blown glass sixteen rib creamer, ca. 1820.” It was not attributed to any particular geographic area or country. While I found the piece very appealing, I was not sure what it was. From the catalogue description, it was clear that the cataloguer did not know either. So I passed and did not bid. However, I didn’t forget it, because I thought it had perfect proportions and was made of strikingly



Plate 1: Amethyst creamer



Plate 2: Wine-colored master salt



Plate 3: Sarah Roberts Cream Pitcher

beautiful striated amethyst glass and the pattern-molded vertical rib decoration added the perfect decorative touch. As it turned out, the piece had an important history which had been entirely lost. It had once been owned by George S. McKearin, the author of *American Glass*, the bible for most serious collectors of early American blown glass. McKearin published a picture of it in his book (plate 23, no. 12), and said its design was the type that “entered the stream of American Glass designs in the very late 18th Century.” He went on to say that it was of the type believed to have been made in Pittsburgh in the early 19th century. But the thing that impressed me most, was not so much what he said about it, but rather, the fact that he thought enough of the piece to acquire it, put it in his collection and illustrate it in his book.

The piece then passed into another great collection of American glass. When that collection was sold it was illustrated in the catalogue of *The Superb Collection Formed by Mrs. Fredrick S. Fish*, published by Parke Bernet Galleries in 1940. The Fish collection was one of the great collections of American glass. It next passed into another well-known collection and then by descent to the last owner whose estate was consigned for auction. I was able to completely reconstruct the provenance of this piece with the help of John DeCaro of Glass International, who has a comprehensive library of auction catalogues and who happened to know who bought the piece at the auction. With DeCaro’s help, I was able to acquire the creamer and it now resides in my collection with its important history completely restored to it. Without knowing the provenance of this piece, I simply lacked the confidence to acquire it. After I learned who had previously owned it, the risk of a mistake was pretty much eliminated and I ended up owning what I consider to be a little masterpiece of early American blown glass.

The second example is represented by the small wine-colored master salt shown on Plate 2. This is my most recent acquisition.

This salt is a rare example of a piece of tableware being made from the same glass used to make historical flasks. I believe it is the only example of a lily pad decorated piece of tableware made from bottle glass of this color. This piece recently came to auction with its complete provenance intact. It also is illustrated in McKearin, *American Glass*, (plate 17, no. 2). It was owned by one of the great early collectors of early American blown glass, Frederick Gatson. When the Gatson collection was disbursed at auction, it was purchased by Alberta Patterson and her husband, who were well-known collectors of American glass. In 1993 the Alberta Patterson collection was sold at Garth’s and this piece was purchased by Barry Hogan, who owns the most comprehensive collection of American glass I know of. Mr. Hogan is one of the very few collectors who has collected both historical flasks and blown glass tableware on a significant scale. The appeal of this piece of blown tableware made from historical flask glass must have been irresistible to him. With this provenance, I could not pass up the opportunity to own this piece and become part of its illustrious history.

The final example of how I use provenance to build my collection is represented by The Sarah Roberts Cream Pitcher shown on Plate 3. This piece was published in an article on pattern-mold glass by Harry Hall White in *The Magazine Antiques* in August 1935. He had purchased the piece in the mid-1930s in Southwestern Pennsylvania. It came with a handwritten note by Hazel Kirk saying that a German-trained glassblower had given it to her great-great-grandmother, Sara Roberts, in appreciation of her kindness while he was incarcerated by her husband, the sheriff of Washington County. The piece had remained in the family for several generations and had passed by descent to Hellen Kirk. Harry Hall White sold the piece to the Detroit Institute of Art in 1935, where it remained until the late 1990s when the Detroit Institute deaccessioned its glass collection. It was eventually purchased by Larry Jenson, a collector and student

of Amelung glass, who thought it might have been made at the Amelung glasshouse in Frederick County Maryland. He apparently eventually decided otherwise and sold it to me. The German-trained glassblower who gave the creamer to Sarah Roberts was probably employed at one of the early glasshouses in southwestern Pennsylvania. New Geneva and Pittsburgh are both possibilities, with New Geneva being more likely due to its proximity to the Washington County jail. The piece is almost unique in being both pattern-molded and decorated with all-over threading. The provenance of The Sarah Roberts Cream Pitcher, having remained in the same family for several generations and then being discovered and owned by Harry Hall White, who thought enough of the piece to publish it and offer it to a museum, is one of the principal reasons I acquired the piece for my collection. The other, of course, is its overall quality, rarity and early form.

Provenance is a very useful tool in building an important collection. It provides the collector with a way to use the informed opinions of others as a screening device to enhance the quality of a collection. It also provides an opportunity for a collector to participate in the history of glass collecting by acquiring pieces that have been passed from one great collection to another down through the years. Of course, provenance is never a substitute for the collectors’ own judgment. We have all seen mediocre pieces with great provenances. In the final analysis, a collection, taken as a whole, is a reflection of the collector’s own interests, taste, knowledge and, most of all, judgment.

Editor’s note: Anthony P. Picadio has been a life-long resident of western Pennsylvania and has collected American blown glass for more than 30 years. He is working on a book about Wistarburgh, the first successful glasshouse in the American Colonies. Contact Anthony at: picadio@icloud.com