

CARNIVAL GLASS SOCIETY – CONCISE GUIDE TO CARNIVAL GLASS

SECTION 2: CARNIVAL GLASS -THE EARLY YEARS

We saw in Section 1 that during the 1880s and 1890s, the desire for exotic, iridised glass items reached new heights in America as the flamboyant Louis Comfort Tiffany and then Frederic Carder at Steuben entered the market inspired by Bohemian manufacturers such as Kralik and Loetz. This expensive art glass was still fashionable in the early 1900s, for those wealthy enough to afford it, providing an incentive for glass manufacturers to find a way of reducing manufacturing costs so that it could be made affordable to the working and middle class families of the day.



It is perhaps ironic, that the very thing which made this glass so special - the metallic salts which give the iridescent finish - were relatively cheap to buy.

The process of applying the metallic salts had become so commonplace that even Tiffany could not patent it - other than for a very specific variant - which meant that all an entrepreneurial glass manufacturer had to do was find a less expensive way of producing the glass item itself.

Of course, pressed glass was an obvious candidate for reducing the base cost of the product and by 1907 the Fenton Glass Company, of Williamstown, West Virginia - which had been founded two years earlier - recognised the potential to bring Tiffany like glass into the homes of the everyday people.

In the autumn of 1907 Fenton introduced a range of pressed, iridised glass items which went by the generic name of *Iridill*, known today as the first Carnival Glass. It was well received and by the following year Fenton was in full production, making this new type of glass in various patterns, some of the earliest being Waterlily and Cattails, Vintage and Diamond Point Columns.

Photograph Above: Fenton ruffled bowl in the Vintage pattern in Celeste Blue (Courtesy Gwilym Elis Jones).

Photograph Right: Fenton Waterlily and Cattails tumbler (Courtesy S&T Auty) in Marigold. One of the earliest Carnival Glass patterns.



The Pioneer Manufacturers in America.

Fenton's *Iridill* range started what is commonly known as the Prime or Classic period of Carnival Glass, the glass being made in and around the Ohio Valley from 1907 to the late 1920s and shipped, not only across America, but around the world.

Hot on the heels of Frank L Fenton's launch, was Harry Northwood, who more than twenty years earlier, in 1885, had written in reply to an article about his father John Northwood's Portland Vase

'But there must come a time when the taste of the multitude will be cultivated and the desire for rich, artistic and beautiful goods will predominate'.¹

It seems he realised that vision when in 1908, applying the knowledge he had gained from working in Stourbridge before he moved to the USA, he introduced a range of pressed and iridised glass items which enabled the less wealthy to bring a touch of luxury into their homes. Northwood named his exotic new glass *Golden Iris* and it took the market by storm.



Harry Northwood's Peacock and Urn Ice Cream Bowl and Matching Sauce Bowl in Amethyst

The launch of Fenton's *Iridill* and Northwood's *Golden Iris* started a boom in the sale of Carnival Glass in an ever increasing range of shapes, colours and patterns, which led to the relative demise of expensive, hand crafted iridised items made by Tiffany and Steuben. As Carder noted *'when the maid could possess iridescent glass as well as her mistress, the latter promptly lost interest in it'.²*



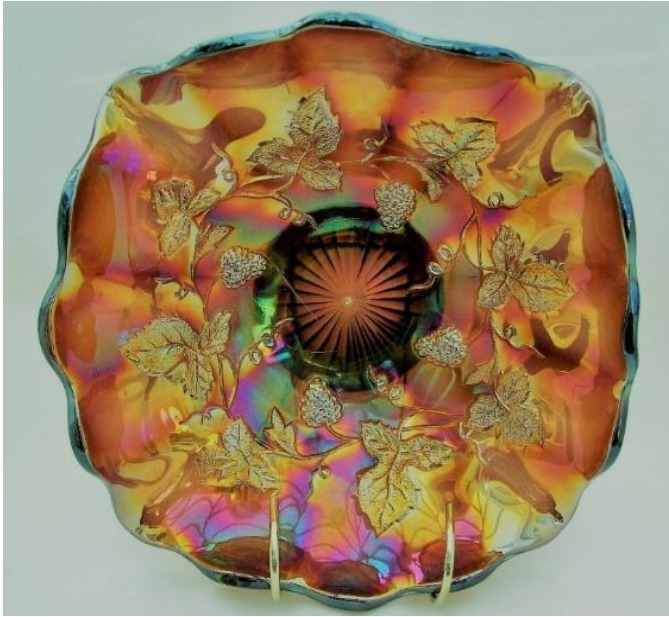
Amethyst Dugan Squatty 'Pulled Loop' Vases and Amethyst Dugan Bowl in the 'Victorian' Pattern. Courtesy S&T Auty

Other glass manufacturers in the region were quick to jump onto the bandwagon and in 1910 the Dugan Company, headed up by Harry Northwood's cousin Thomas Dugan, produced Carnival Glass for

¹ Quote taken from *'Harry Northwood. A Stourbridge School of Art Success Story'* by James Measell, *The Glass Cone*, Autumn 2012.

² Raymond Notley's *'Carnival Glass'*, Shire Publications.

the first time. When Thomas left in 1913, the company changed its name to the Diamond Company and continued making Carnival Glass up to the factory's closure in 1931.



L: Millersburg Strawberry Wreath Bowl, Courtesy Graham & Ann Sheldon. R: Imperial Grape Pitcher Courtesy S&T Auty

John Fenton left the family firm to start his own company with his brother Robert in Millersburg, Ohio. The Millersburg Factory did not last long, producing Carnival Glass during the two years of 1910 to 1911. The last major producer of prime Carnival Glass was the Imperial Glass Company of Bellaire, Ohio, where its production started in 1910 and lasted until 1930.

The only other Carnival Glass manufacturers of note at that time were Westmoreland and the United Glass Company.

Production and Hand Finished Shapes

As with any moulded glass, Carnival Glass started with the creation of a mould which was cut to produce intricate exterior and/or interior patterns on the finished item.



L: Fenton Butterfly and Berry spooner, external pattern (©CGS 2011) R: Fenton Green Dragon and Lotus bowl, internal pattern, S&T Auty



Different shapes could be produced from a single mould, the simplest to achieve being a shallow bowl. Once it had been pressed, the item could be further worked to produce a flat plate or a deep bowl.

Left: Trio of Northwood's Strawberry Bowls in Purple with Piecrust Edges, Courtesy Gwilym Elis Jones.

Vases were generally pressed in their own mould but could be 'swung' using centrifugal force to produce a number of height variants which stretched the patterns with pleasing effect.



Each item could be further individualised by the glass maker who could reheat the glass and create different edge effects – such as ruffled, crimped or piecrust. The edges of the glass could be pulled up on one side and down on the other to produce a 'jack in the pulpit' effect which had been popularised by Tiffany and others at that time. *(Photograph left, Corinth vase in Teal Green with 'Jack in the Pulpit' shape, courtesy S&T Auty)*

Carnival Glass was made in most of the shapes that are feasible in press-moulded glass, for example: bowls, plates, water sets, punch sets, bon-bon dishes, comports, vases, breakfast sets, dressing table sets and 'whimsies' which added novelty to the company's offering. Some items, such as bulbous pitchers, were blow-moulded to achieve the desired shape.

Looking at this list, you might imagine that the Carnival Glass produced was purely functional but that is far from the case. In fact, it is a characteristic of the prime period of Carnival Glass that many items were produced solely for their decorative purpose. Clearly, plates and bowls which had magnificent, raised patterns of fruits, flowers or birds on the inside were intended to be admired by friends sitting in the parlour - not eaten from or used.

Photograph Right: Centre of Northwood Amethyst Rose Show plate showing high relief detail pattern on surface, clearly not for use. Courtesy S&T Auty



Iridising, Acid Etching and Other Finishes

Once the glass had been shaped it was reheated and sprayed with a solution of metallic salts to produce the iridescent effect, after which it was annealed. The chemical composition of the metallic solution, the temperature of the glass and the number of times the process was repeated were all factors that determined the final appearance which could range from a 'satin' finish - more matt; to an 'electric' finish - which reflects a vibrant array of colours; or a 'radium' finish - which has a glossy sheen which is often found on Millersburg items.



Dugan 'Nautilus' Dish in Peach Opal. Mould possibly came from his cousin, Harry Northwood, Courtesy S&T Auty

Other effects could be achieved. For example, re-heating glass containing certain chemicals produced an opalescence in the base glass. In 1912 Harry Northwood introduced a range of pastel colours³ by applying an acid etch to the surface of the glass which resulted in beautifully frosted Ice Blue, Ice Green or White shades – colours which particularly benefit from being displayed against a dark background.



L: Fenton 'Pond Lily' Bonbon Dish in White, S&T Auty R: Northwood Peacock and Urn in Ice Blue A&M Ward Collection

³ *Dave Doty Field Guide.*

A Full Palette of Colours and Iridescent Finishes

Anyone who is a collector of Carnival Glass will know that it is often dismissed as ‘that orange stuff which you sometimes see around the fairs’. It is true that the earliest pieces, such as the *Waterlily and Cattails* tumbler shown above were produced by applying a thin film of metallic salts, including selenium, to flint glass which gave it the vibrant colour of marigolds. This was highly desirable at the time since it brightened up homes that were dimly lit at the start of the 20th Century. However, that was just the start and from there around 50 to 60 different base colours of *Prime Carnival Glass* evolved, although it is suspected some resulted more from accidental changes or impurities in the glass mix rather than an intended colour variant.

The colour of the item is determined by the mix of elements in the glass batch and is best seen by holding it up to a strong light and looking through the base. It is this which generally categorises Carnival Glass colour although there are exceptions, notably ‘marigold’, where the base glass is generally clear.

The most frequently seen base colours are purple, green, blue, amethyst and marigold. Colours such as red, teal and aqua opal are rarer which means they generally command a higher price, although value also depends on the rarity of the shape and pattern as well as the quality of the iridescence. (Photograph Right: Fenton Holly Plate in Teal Green with satin finish. Courtesy S&T Auty)



Patterns and Design Inspirations



The design inspirations for this early phase of Carnival Glass manufacture came from a number of earlier movements including Art Nouveau, still in vogue in 1908, the Aesthetic Movement, the Arts and Crafts Movement and Orientalism.

Emblems of these design influences abound in the form of Sunflowers, Peacocks and oriental styled dragons, lotuses and chrysanthemums (Left: Fenton Chrysanthemum bowl in green from the Anthony and Maureen Ward Collection).

In some cases, glass manufacturers used this new finish to revitalise objects made from existing moulds, whether to hasten the product to market to catch the new craze or increase the return on investment on this expensive manufacturing tool.

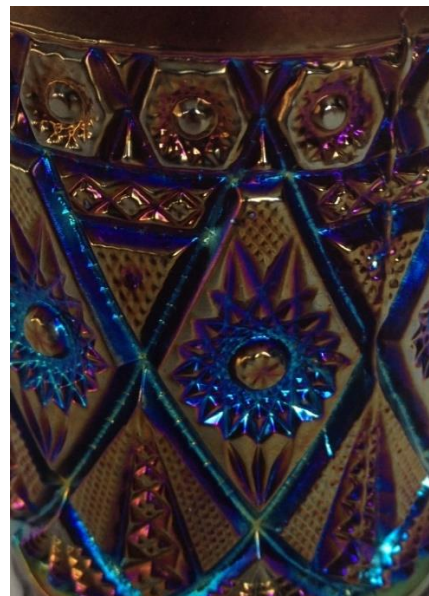
In other cases, it may have been driven by the background of those pioneers who introduced Carnival Glass. For example, many of Harry Northwood’s patterns were based on nature and the botanical

themes of fruits, flowers and foliage that were prevalent in the South Kensington Curriculum which he had studied as a young man at the Stourbridge School of Art; together with more classical themes from his student days, such as the *Greek Keys* pattern.



Northwood's 'Greek Keys' bowl in amethyst (Courtesy S&T Auty)

Whatever the driving forces, many Carnival Glass patterns were floral with a number featuring animals or birds. Others emulated the vogue for cut glass; the various lines and facets created by the mould being accentuated by the iridescent finish.



Imperial Diamond Lace tumbler with geometric design emulating cut glass. Courtesy S&T Auty

This is a theme that continued into the Secondary Period of Carnival Glass manufacture which is covered in **Section 3 'Secondary Carnival Glass Production - Europe and Beyond'** which also considers that whilst volume production of Carnival Glass started in America in 1907, there were pioneers of carnival glass manufacture in Europe who started to iridise press moulded glass in much smaller volumes including companies in the UK in the late 1800s as well as Brockwitz in Germany and Eda in Sweden in the early 1900s.