Donation of the Month

Object: Open Salts
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Donor: Marcia Newitt Estate & Museum Purchase

“Salt of the earth” - “above the salt” - “not worth his salt” - odd little phrases that have lost their original meanings. But each idiom reflects the importance of salt to human life. Whether used for seasoning, preservation, currency, or a host of industrial uses, sodium chloride is one of the most important minerals on the planet. Salt is obtained by mining land-based deposits (left over from ancient oceans) or by extraction from brine (salty water).

Over the millennia salt has had an impact on nearly every aspect of life. Salt formed the basis of trade for many ancient civilizations, whose cities often sprang up near large deposits. Salt rations for Roman soldiers were called *salarium argentum,* hence today’s term “salary.” In Greece slaves were bought with salt, prompting a buyer viewing a less-than-strapping individual to remark that he was “not worth his salt.”

Salt played a big role in shaping nations and their people. During the Revolutionary and Civil Wars, the capture of saltworks was an important military stratagem. In 1812 thousands of Napoleon’s troops died during their retreat from Moscow because the lack of salt in their diet prevented their wounds from healing The Erie Canal is known as “the ditch that salt built” because it was principally engineered to haul bulky loads of salt.

It was salt, more than molasses or rum, which underwrote the West Indian slave trade. And India’s independence from Great Britain began with Gandhi’s 1930 rebellion against an onerous salt tax.

Because of salt’s importance, superstitions have surrounded it. In Scotland a gift of salt on New Year’s Day is thought to bring good luck, while spilled salt connotes bad luck, as depicted by the overturned dish of salt at Judas’ hand in Leonardo da Vinci’s painting *The Last Supper*. Even today people toss spilled salt over their shoulders to avert bad luck.

Of course most folks are familiar with salt’s culinary aspects. It adds flavor to food, tenderizes meat, and aids in digestion. More importantly, salt’s ability to slow microbial spoilage makes it the perfect ingredient

in reserving a variety of foods such as ham, fish, and olives. In the days before refrigeration and the year-round availability of fresh fruits and vegetables, the European diet was filled with salt-preserved foods. Modern-day food processors rely on artificial preservatives instead of salt, but salt is necessary to make bland, highly-processed food taste good. Today's average American ingests twice as much salt as did the average European of long ago.

Salt's importance through the centuries meant that it held a key position on the table. For informal meals at home, salt was kept in a small glass or pottery bowl and passed from hand to hand, with each person taking a pinch or two. During Medieval times large, highly decorated porcelain or silver salt cellars were necessary tableware in palaces and well-to-do homes. Because dinner guests were seated based on their rank, anyone placed "above the salt" (the host-side of the salt cellar) was deemed a person of consequence. By the late 17th century small but elaborate silver salt dishes were often placed by each diner's place setting in upper-class homes as a way to demonstrate the host's status and wealth.

With their penchant for specialized tableware and intricate rules of etiquette, late 19th-century Victorians embraced the notion of individual salt dishes. Known by a variety of names - salt dip, salt cellar, salter, trencher salt - today's collectors call them "open salts" or "salts" to distinguish them from salt shakers. While metal and porcelain salts were widely available, glass salts were the most common.

Up until the 19th century glass was made by a highly trained glass blower who used a pipe to blow air into a blob of molten glass, which was then shaped freehand or in a mold; such pieces were often round and simple. With the development in the 1820s of a machine to press hot glass into a mold came the ability to efficiently make thousands of shapes and patterns. In fact, early pressed glass was highly patterned, both for novelty and to disguise any flaws resulting from the manufacturing process. By the 1840s glass-pressing technology had improved, allowing for simpler, more elegant designs.

Salts were available in a multitude of colors and a variety of shapes, from simple geometrics to novelty figurals such as swans, boats, carts, goblets, and garden urns. Patterned glass often reflected the design aesthetic of the time - Gothic arches in the 1830s and 40s and classical silhouettes in the 1860s. As in the past, tableware was often used to demonstrate status and wealth. Not satisfied with pressed glass, the elite made cut-glass salts popular by the end of the 19th century; their leaded glass provided clarity while their diamond-like facets gave sparkle and brilliance.

The salts pictured here were likely made around the turn of the 20th century. The pressed-glass individual salt (top left) was made as an inexpensive imitation of its cut-glass cousin (bottom right). Both would have had a tiny glass or metal serving spoon since during the Victorian era it was considered rude to remove salt with one's fingers or the tip of a knife blade. The large master salt (top right) was used to refill the small, individual salts.

The fanciest salt of all in the Museum's collection (bottom left) was made by the Louis Comfort Tiffany Company of New York. Produced between 1893 and 1910, this salt was handblown in a ribbed mold, then tooled into shape. Its iridescent gold art-glass finish, made with metallic oxide salts and trademarked "Favrile," was sprayed on before the glass was annealed (allowed to slowly cool to reduce fractures). Lucky was the diner who sat at table where this salt was used, because the meal and the rest of the tableware were sure to have been top notch!

The Museum is fortunate to have about 100 salts in its collection, most of which were bequeathed by the estate of Marcia Newitt. Mrs. Newitt also bequeathed several other collections, including turn-of-the-20th-century dolls, fairy lamps, and miniature toys which are often on display in the Museum's period home, the 1895 Hawkins House.

The demise of open salts came about in part because of a little girl holding an umbrella and touting the slogan, "When it Rains, it Pours." In the early 1910s the Morton Salt Company added magnesium carbonate, an anti-caking agent, to its salt to prevent it from clumping or hardening in humid weather (today it uses calcium silicate). This improvement allowed salt to flow freely out of salt shakers, which had been slowly growing in popularity since their introduction in the 1860s. By the end of World War I, fussy

Victorian table settings and etiquette were on their way out as well.

The 20th century saw a significant change in salt's status as geologists discovered the mineral could be found almost anywhere. Efficient extraction technologies were soon developed, making salt plentiful and cheap. In just a hundred or so years salt went from a prized commodity to a common road de-icer. But as the popularity of gourmet cooking increases, expensive salt is making a comeback, this time in the form of "boutique" salt - salt which comes from an exotic locale or is processed using old-fashioned, labor-intensive methods. Since these designer salts are often coarse and hard to use in a shaker, can the return of open salts be far behind?

CREDITS

The *Knopf Collector's Guides to American Antiques: Glass*, Volume 1 (1982); Alvina Breckel's article "Lacy Glass" (home.earthlink.net/~petcoff/lacyglass.html); articles on websites from the Salt Institute (www.saltinstitute.org), the Morton Salt Company (www.Mortonsalt.com), the Arlecchino Antique-Shop (www.studiosoft.it/AntiqueTiffany.htm), and the Cooperative Learning Center (http://www.patternglass.com/History/HistHome.htm); Linda Stradley's article, "Linda's Culinary Dictionary" (2000-03) on the What's Cooking America website (whatscookingamerica.net/Glossary/S.htm); the article "Salt Facts" on the Redmond Real Salt website (www.realsalt.com/facts.html); Adele Kenny's article "Open Glass Salts" for *New York City Antique News* (2001) on TheBarnSale.Com's website (www.thebarnsale.com/saltglass.htm); and Mark Kurlansky's book, *Salt: A World History* (2002).