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FROM IMITATION TO INNOVATION: THE ART AND INDUSTRY OF BRISTOL GLASS MANUFACTURE IN THE LONG EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

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The period between the sixteenth and the nineteenth centuries in the city and county of Bristol, in particular the long eighteenth century (roughly 1660 to 1830), witnessed a great transformation in the character and history of luxury glass.

At the beginning of the Tudor Renaissance, what contemporary Bristol residents considered as the great centres of luxury glass making lay in the Mediterranean and in the Low Countries. It was luxury glass objects created in places such as Venice that were coveted; not those made in Bristol.

Venetian glass had set the fashion amongst the well to do in Bristol, as it had done so in the rest of Britain (and indeed Western Europe) at this time. Such glass was desired as a signifier of wealth, knowledge and social standing. Writes one Elizabethan gentleman of the preference for such glass in 1568:

*...Our gentilitie as lothing those mettals (because of the plenty) do now generallie choose rather the Venice glasses...such is the nature of man...that it most coveteth things difficult to be atteyned...and as this is seen in the gentilitie, so in the wealthie communitie the like desire of glasses is not neglected...the poorest also will have glasse if they may; but sith the Venician is somewhat too deare for them, they content themselves with such as are made at home of ferne and burned stone.*¹

Despite the extra cost, or perhaps because of it, it was luxury glass from Venice that Sir Nicholas Poyntz, a Bristol merchant, had ordered to impress King Henry the VIIIth and his wife Anne Boleyn on their visit to his country estate at Acton Court, near Bristol, in 1535. Archaeological excavations in the moat of the estate, undertaken in 1986, revealed a glass goblet, decorated with glass threads, and two glass tazzas, or shallow bowls, with opaque white glass decoration, belonging to the mansion dating to this period.

Painted enamelled 'lattimo' (i.e. opaque white) glass from Venice had been in the possession of Henry VIII at this time as evidenced by the fact that such glass is listed amongst his household goods in an inventory of Nonsuch Palace undertaken less than a decade later in 1542.² It was on this point, that of a shared, well crafted, fragile, Italian luxury glass commodity, that Nicholas Poyntz was able to stress to the King while on his visit that, in fashion at least, he too was like him: a Renaissance man of the world.

Despite the spread of the growing taste for luxury, particularly of glass, at this time, the inhabitants of Bristol had to wait a further century and a half before the city would finally itself be in the business of the production of glass of any similar craftsmanship or design. It was not until 1651 that glass making in Bristol was first recorded. In that year Edward Dagney (or Dagnia), an Italian glassmaker, is said to have kept a

¹ W. B. Honey, *English Glass*, London, 1946, p. 15.

² Dan Klein and Ward Lloyd, eds. *The History of Glass*, 1984, p. 72.

glasshouse in 'Bristow'. Before this date, fine table glass was almost exclusively imported from the continent.

By the time of the Georgian Era (c. 1714-1830), a century later, however, everything had changed. Whereas before in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the inhabitants of Bristol had seen little that was admirable in the luxury glass goods being produced in their own city, Bristol luxury glass in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was greatly esteemed and admired.

Whereas Bristol had previously been heavily dependent on imports for the supply of glass luxury, the situation had, by the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, reversed. Bristol had become a leading supplier of such goods to the rest of the world. This was not only through its port, but also through its own production of glass. The huge diversity of luxury glass objects created in Bristol at this time was being used and displayed throughout Britain and the world.

It was luxury glass from Bristol that Harriet Keyser had imported in order to impress her friends at a summer dinner party she was hosting in America in 1808. Eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Americans, like their Renaissance European counterparts, communicated perceptions of status and politics to others through items of everyday material culture. As the American historian, Tim H. Breen has demonstrated, social status was defined through commodities. These provided Americans with what Breen has termed a 'common framework of experience, a shared language of consumption'.³ They showed their taste and knowledge of trends in their purchasing of new 'novelties'.⁴ One item eighteenth-century colonists demanded in the latest fashion was English manufactured glass. Much of the glassware imported to the colonies at this time was either produced in, or originated from, Bristol.

Harriet, a native of Bristol, in a letter to the Jacobs Glass Manufactory in Bristol, requested:

...1 stand for jellys or any other glasses in the middle of the table. 2 doz. good cut bonnet rummers. 2 do cut lemonades. 2 do jelly glasses. 1/2 do blue and gilt edge wine coolers. 1/2 do finger cups. 1pr quart decanters to match the last sent. 2 pr pint do. 1 do champagne glasses. 1 water jug with initials JHK on a rais'd medallion. 1 pr handsome cut butter glasses...

The letter reads:

My Dear Punch, ...you were kind enough to promise me faithfully (and I know I can depend on you) to send me some Glass which we are very much in want of-Please God the 24th June we are going to have a large party to Dinner if you do not send it before then you never shall have one kiss of me anymore your own Darling ... a present promised by you. Do my dear Davy let us have it before the 24 or really we must buy here in town and don't forget the pretty little things... HK.⁵

³ T.H. Breen, 'The Baubles of Britain', *Past and Present Society*, May 1988, pp. 73-105.

⁴ See Maxine Berg, 'New Commodities, Luxuries and Their Consumers in 18th Century England', in Maxine Berg and Helen Clifford, eds., *Consumers and Luxury*, 1999, pp. 63-75.

⁵ Letter, Harriet Keyser to David Samuel, June 10th 1808, Bristol Records Office.

Such a transformation in the history and character of Bristol's luxury glass was visible in not only Bristol's export trade, and the different importance its luxury glass was given by natives and by foreigners, but also in its methods of luxury glass production.

I am stressing the word 'luxury' here in order to separate decorative from useful glasswares. Crown window and bottle glass was also produced in the city in great quantities. Both were well esteemed, traded and exported around the country and the world as early as the seventeenth century and this trend continued into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Whereas previously, the techniques employed by native British glassmakers, in the production of luxury glass objects, had been dependent on the skills of immigrant craftsmen from continental Europe, Bristol trained artists and makers now produced luxury glass objects to the highest international standards of technique and design. Whereas in the sixteenth century innovation had come mainly from abroad, Bristol in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries had become a leading innovator in technique, design and style. The shift was from imitation to innovation.

The commercial applications of art techniques in Bristol to luxury goods in the eighteenth and nineteenth century greatly assisted its luxury glass to achieve this transformation. Cutting, colouring, gilding, etching, engraving, printing and painting techniques borrowed from the art of the jeweller, potter, pewterer, silversmith and painter combined in the city at this time to create glass objects that were truly delectable consumer goods.

This transformation could be seen not only in the methods, but also in the objects of Bristol's luxury glass production. The glass goblets and tazzas made in Venice, ordered by Nicholas Poyntz in 1535, had been of a light, thin-walled, lime soda glass. Soda glass, as used in Venice, lent itself to the creation of such thin-walled vessels, to decoration with trailed lines and to delicate complicated stems and handles.

The glass made in Bristol, ordered by Harriet Keyser in 1808, on the other hand, was requested to be of a heavy, thick-walled, lead glass. The bonnet rummers, lemonade, jelly and butter glasses were asked to be cut. This would reduce the weight of the glass for tax purposes and increase light refraction. The wine coolers and finger cups were requested in a coloured blue glass. Their edges were asked to be gilded. The water jug was requested to have a medallion that was raised. On this, Harriet's own initials were asked to be engraved.

William Greethad's Phoenix glasshouse contingent from the 'Coronation Procession for William IV', 1831, (**Figure 1**) illustrates just some examples of such Bristol made luxury glasswares. The glassworkers of the Phoenix glasshouse are shown displaying a series of held aloft works in clear, opaque white, blue, purple, green, and red flint glass exhibiting their skills in glass moulding, gilding, blowing, enamelling in colours, cutting, engraving, etc.

The works are illustrative examples of the types of wares Phoenix glasshouse were known for producing and of the manufacturing and decorative techniques its glassworkers were known to have employed. They visually translate a fashionable

assortment of Bristol produced luxury glasswares, which were available to home and foreign consumers.

This great transformation in luxury glass objects made in Bristol was undoubtedly influenced by an alteration in the way in which Taste was formed and objects judged. The period between 1530 and 1830 witnessed a significant change in Bristol, in the identity of those who had the power to lead taste and shape current notions of what was correct, pleasing, and desirable.

Such power had initially rested in the hands of the monarch, the Royal Court and the Church. As the long eighteenth century progressed, however, a widening spectrum of people including professional designers, manufacturers, societies and retailers came to wield this very same power. Thus in 1535 Nicholas Poyntz had wished to impress the King, while in 1808 Harriet Keyser had wished to impress her friends.

In 1831, with the coronation procession of William IV, the Phoenix glasshouse had wished to impress both King and country, whetting the appetites of both the new royal and the on looking purchasing public. It was through such public display that the glassmen of the city were able to publicly advertise and market their designs and skills, both in person and in the round, as opposed to verbally through word of mouth or impersonally in 2-d form in print, in advertisements and in illustrations on trade cards and bill heads.

With such changes in the way Taste was being formed came a great expansion in the variety and range of luxury glass artefacts available. Such innovation greatly modified the ways people lived. New ways of eating, new modes of entertainment all relied on specific kinds of objects. Thus, in 1535 it was glass goblets and tazzas that Poyntz had ordered, while, in 1808, it was jelly stands, water jugs, bonnet rummers, wine coolers, finger cups, decanters and lemonade, jelly, champagne and butter glasses that were ordered by Keyser. Greethead's image as well shows us dolphins, crowns, lanterns, vases, flowerpots, pitchers, sauce bottles, drinking glasses, decanters, trays, bowls and other ornamental lassware of all sizes, shapes and colours.

a focus on the cities of Bristol and Liverpool. The database was compiled over the course of a year and comprises of over 4,000 entries taken from sources held in a variety of libraries, archives, record offices, universities and museums.

For those interested in the history of the Bristol glass industry and its place in the socio-economic and artistic development of the city and country as a whole, the database provides easy access to detailed information about the people, places, products and techniques of Bristol's glass manufacture, including wherever possible, extracts or descriptions taken from contemporary literary and visual sources. The data has been gathered from a wide variety of primary and secondary source material. This includes items from the collections of the Bristol City Museum and Art Gallery as well as trade directories, poll books, fire insurance records, custom accounts, newspapers, business and personal papers, letters and diaries held in both London and elsewhere and in the Bristol Records Office and Bristol Reference Library.

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