

# In a Glass Darkly: Reflections on the Identity of Objects

Thomas Erickson and Ian Simmonds  
IBM T.J. Watson Research Center  
snowfall@acm.org, simmonds@us.ibm.com  
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## 1. Abstract

We analyze the co-construction of identity—of objects, collections, people and institutions—by collectors of early American glass. Focusing on the glass itself, we discuss its identity in terms of intrinsic and extrinsic features, and links between them. Finally, we discuss collectors’ knowledge of glass, and some of the social and institutional mechanisms involved in establishing and vetting identity.

## 2. Overview

In this essay we look at identity through the lens of objects, in particular, a type of early American glass known to collectors and scholars as “blown three mold glass.” Glass is an interesting way to approach identity because, on the one hand, it is not encumbered with the highly charged social, legal and political issues that attend human identity, and on the other hand, as a type of manufactured object that plays both utilitarian and aesthetic-symbolic roles it provides enough complexity—particularly in its guise as a type of historical artifact of interest to collectors—to enable views of the ways in which identity is entwined with social and institutional processes.

We begin by distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic features of identity, the former being characteristics that are inherent in the piece itself. Although intrinsic features of identity contribute a certain amount of value to the piece, their most important function—particularly from the perspective of collectors, et al.—is that they provide evidence for or links to probable extrinsic features of identity. Extrinsic features include where and how the piece was made, who the artisan was, who the original owner was, what collections it has passed through, how rare various features of the piece are, and so on.

For collectors, et al., it is the extrinsic features of the glass that generate the bulk of its value, and therefore the ability to identify a piece’s intrinsic features and use them as a basis for accurately evaluating its probable extrinsic features is at the heart of collecting. Indeed, at a higher level we can view the activity that takes place in the arena of glass collecting as a set of entwined social and institutional mechanisms for vetting the links between intrinsic and extrinsic features of identity. Furthermore, it is not just glass whose identity is asserted and evaluated; all the ‘players’ in the process—from individual collectors and dealers, to events like auctions and shows, to assemblages of glass objects like private collections and museum exhibits—take, in return, some of their identities from the pieces of glass with which they are implicated.

### 3. Introduction

Identity is defined as a state of absolute resemblance or, alternatively, distinctive individuality. At the root of identity is the question of what makes one thing different from or similar to another? An elaboration of this question is what makes a thing distinctive, what gives it its own particular quality? That is, identity concerns not just what makes A different from B, but also what makes A itself, what gives A its “A”-ness, its unique character.

In this essay we look at identity through the lens of objects. Why objects? The basic reason is that we thought that focusing on the identity of objects might offer a simpler or at least different approach to the subject. Even considered as purely physical entities, humans are extraordinarily complex; the comparative simplicity of inanimate objects appears to make them more tractable. Second, human identity very quickly becomes entwined with a large number of highly charged social, legal and political issues; objects are less entwined, though by no means uninvolved. Human identity appears quite dynamic, changing throughout the human lifespan; the identities of objects generally change at slower rates. Humans take a very active role in constructing and managing their own identities; objects, on the other hand, are passive. And the human lifespan—compared to that of many objects—is relatively brief, whereas the gradual evolution of an object’s identity may be played out over centuries, thus making it more amenable to examination.

The sort of object we will focus on is a type of early American glass known to collectors and scholars as “blown three mold glass.” The principal reason for this choice is opportunistic: one of the authors is an avid collector and researcher of this type of glass, thus bringing a great fund of knowledge to this enquiry. In addition, blown three mold glass has a number of characteristics which suit it to our enquiry. As objects go, a piece of glass is remarkably complex. First, as a manufactured object, as an artifact, glass begins its existence with a connection to the human realm. Second, as a utilitarian artifact, it is sold, purchased, and used in the course of daily life. Third, its quotidian utility is complemented by its potential symbolic and aesthetic roles. Fourth, blown three mold glass, has, over the last century, become an item that is collected, studied and traded, thus engaging it in technical, social and institutional mechanisms that are very different from those that originally surrounded it. With regard to this, it turns out that while some aspects of a piece of glass’s identity are stable, other aspects grow and evolve, often continuously, but sometimes convulsively and discontinuously.

### 4. Aspects of Identity

Before we examine the identity of our glass objects, it is helpful to understand a bit about the sort of glass at which we are looking. We are here concerned with 19th century American blown three mold glass, a category defined by collectors, dealers and curators (we shall speak more of such roles and institutions later). “Blown three-mold” refers to part of the production process: a glass blower blows molten glass into a tripartite mold whose inside is inscribed with a pattern; as the glass expands, it takes on the shape and pattern of the mold. Next, the mold is removed (it disassembles into three parts) while the glass is still hot, and it may be further worked: it may be reshaped (the same mold can produce a tumbler, mug, dish or salt cellar), or it may have other pieces of glass added to it (thus a blown ‘tumbler’ may have a base and stem added and be worked into a wine glass). Figure 1 shows some typical pieces of blown three mold glass, the second and third pieces being produced from a mold with the same pattern, with the third piece being worked, after removal from the mold, into a pitcher.



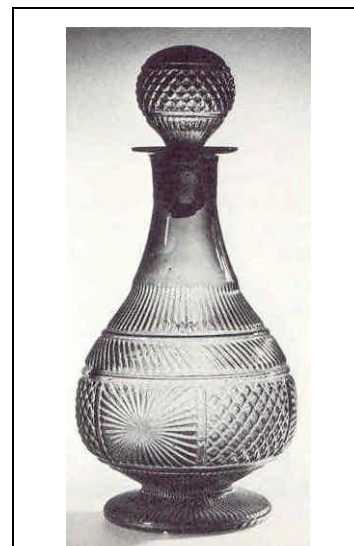
**Figure 1. Three pieces of blown three mold glass: (a) a clear GII-18 bottle; (b) and (c) two pieces from the same GI-29 mold. While (b) obtained its final shape in the mold, the neck of (c) was widened and shaped to form the body of a pitcher, and a rod of glass was added to form a handle.**

#### 4.1. Intrinsic Features of Identity

As a material object a piece of glass has a number of physical attributes that are intrinsic to it, that exist in or on the object itself. These include the color and chemical composition of its glass, its form and pattern, and its method of construction. The form and design may be a combination of hot working (reshaping or patterning by blowing and manipulation, and by the addition of other pieces such as handles, feet, decorative trails or enamels) and cold working techniques (etching, engraving and cutting). Intrinsic features also include those that were not intended by the artifact's creator—such as pattern flaws reproduced from flaws in the mold, faint lines showing the three edges of the mold pieces, bubbles and material inclusions in the glass itself, and variations in the size and nature of the pontil mark.<sup>1</sup> Finally, a piece of glass may have intrinsic features that have appeared after its manufacture. These include inscriptions engraved in the glass (for example if the piece is intended as a gift or memento); stains, discoloration or patterns of wear resulting from normal use; chips and cracks resulting from trauma; repair in the form of the grinding and polishing away of chips; oxidation as the result of burial in soil; and labels or painted identifiers added by collectors, dealers or curators. Most of these intrinsic features of identity are constant, or at least change very slowly once they appear.

<sup>1</sup> The distinction between intended and unintended features of a piece of glass calls to mind Erving Goffman's distinction between behavioral cues that are *given* (produced solely to convey information) and those that are *given off* (cues seen as symptomatic of the actor and produced for reasons other than conveying information). Erving Goffman. *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. New York: Anchor Books, 1959.

As an example, consider figure 2. This shows a glass decanter about 7 inches high and 3 inches in diameter at its base. It is of a reddish purple color known to glass collectors as “amethyst.” Its pattern—vertical ribbing above a horizontal rib, above diagonal ribbing to the left, above a horizontal rib, above alternating sunbursts and fields of diamond diapering, above a horizontal rib, above vertical ribbing—is generally known as GIII-5. Although not visible in the photograph, the decanter in figure 2 has a few bubbles and an unusually large inclusion (a fragment of one of the ingredients used to make the glass that remained unfused). It has light wear scratches particularly, as is to be expected and desired, on its base. This particular decanter is extremely fine and rare both in its rich amethyst color, and because its foot was “drawn” into the formerly barrel shaped body while the decanter was still hot. Each of these is an extremely rare feature, and the combination in one piece is remarkable.<sup>2</sup>



**Figure 2. An amethyst colored decanter with a drawn foot.**

These intrinsic features play at least two roles in contributing to the identity of a piece of glass. First, they give it a “distinctive individuality,” allowing it to be distinguished from other similar pieces. Even a series of pieces produced at the same time from the same batch of glass by the same artisan using the same mold, will differ in small details of form, coloration, and sharpness of pattern, as well as having distinctive patterns of flaws (e.g. air bubbles). Figure 3 shows an example of two tumblers produced from the same mold. Of course, as time passes, different pieces are likely to accumulate different patterns of wear and flaws, according to the different circumstances through which they pass. A second role of intrinsic features is that they affect the value of a piece of glass. Some aspects of a piece—a rare and beautiful color or unusual work such as a drawn foot—increase its value; others, such as chips and cracks dramatically decrease the value of all but the rarest of pieces.



**Figure 3: Siblings but not twins. Two small tumblers, blown in the same mold, but with slight differences in their shapes. This mold was used in Keene, New Hampshire, primarily to make inkwells.**

## 4.2. Extrinsic Features of Identity

A piece of glass is not simply a material object. In addition to its intrinsic features, it has a large number of what we will call extrinsic features—those that are not inherent in its materiality—that contribute to its identity. Thus, even the most mundane piece was produced by a particular person, in a particular factory, at a particular time. Once produced, the piece is likely to have been sold to someone, and then

<sup>2</sup> The intrinsic features we’ve described are those generally noted by collectors. Other intrinsic features are ignored by collectors and scholars either out of habit or until there is some reason to doubt an item. While handling an object its weight will be qualitatively assessed to see if it “feels about right,” but it is unusual to accurately measure and record it. Similarly, few pieces are subjected to detailed chemical or optical analysis.

used for utilitarian purposes, or perhaps given to someone else as a present. As time passed it may have been handed down through its owner's family, gradually accreting a series of intimate meanings that transformed it from functional object into a memento (e.g. a pair of wine glasses used for a wedding toast), and thence into a family heirloom (e.g. wine glasses used in three generations of family weddings). Or, it may have passed out of its original context of ownership (either by being sold, or by being lost and then re-discovered) and become a 'collectable' item with a 'public' identity, valued for its aesthetic characteristics, its historical and geographical associations, or its presumptive rarity.

To return to our example, the amethyst decanter shown in figure 2 is not simply a beautiful piece of glass. It belongs to a remarkable group of pieces that appeared on the market over a period of several months in 1934. The decanter was bought in Trenton, New Jersey, by the leading glass dealer and scholar of his day, George McKearin. It was identified as being a blown three mold piece, in the GIII-5 pattern, with wear patterns consistent with its age and use; its color and form combined to make it an extreme rarity. In his account of the purchase of this and related pieces, McKearin (1951) recounted that the dealers who sold it to him provided an affidavit from the previous owners attesting to its association with a glassblower called George Mutzer. Subsequent investigation by those dealers provided more history and stories of the Mutzer family. It was eventually included, along with four other Mutzer pieces, as plate 125 in George and Helen McKearin's now-classic reference work, *American Glass* (McKearin 1941); the plate was titled: "Colored Blown Three Mold Rarities." It is now in the Corning Museum of Glass. A sugar bowl from the same mold, with the same drawn foot and an even more unusual shade of purple became the most expensive piece of American Glass ever at public auction when it sold at Parke-Bernet Galleries in New York in 1940. It is now in the Henry Ford Museum.

Extrinsic features of a piece of blown three mold glass are the principal determinants of its value. This is particularly the case when it is recognized that presumptions of rarity are extrinsic. Thus, the color and drawn foot of the decanter in figure 2 make it valuable because it is presumed that there are very few other pieces like it. If a crate of amethyst drawn foot decanters were discovered in the ruins of a nineteenth century warehouse, or, as in the case of near contemporaneous historic flasks, the cargo of a sunken steamboat (Hawley 1998) the value of such pieces would very likely decrease. Nor is it simply rarity, *per se*, that is in play here. A modern reproduction of the amethyst decanter would not have the same value, even were its intrinsic features were identical to the original; even if the original decanter was destroyed and the reproduction was the only one in existence, it would not assume the value of the original. It is, of course, the connection of the piece to its contexts of production and use that make it valuable. Finally, the provenance and exhibition history is important part of the identity of many pieces. A piece that has passed through an important collection, or has been used as an illustration in a central reference work, may often be valued more highly than a piece that is otherwise similar. For this reason, collectors typically leave labels on a piece; some pieces may have half a dozen or more labels.

### 4.3. Forging Links

It is important to note that it is intrinsic features that, by virtue of their role in relating pieces to and distinguishing pieces from others, serve as evidence for extrinsic aspects of a piece's identity. That is, intrinsic features are used in making or validating *links* between a piece of glass and its extrinsic features. Thus, the pattern of a piece of glass, or the ways in which it was worked—folding over the rim of the base of a wineglass to strengthen it, for example, or drawing a foot into a decanter or pitcher—may suggest something about when it was made. The particular color of the piece may indicate the region in which it was made. Patterns of wear can indicate how and to what extent a piece was used.

And, of course, multiple intrinsic features may all provide evidence for a particular extrinsic feature, which may then, in turn, provide evidence for other extrinsic features. Figure 4 shows a simple diagrammatic model, summarizing this relationship between intrinsic and extrinsic features of identity.

In this section we take a closer look at the ways in which intrinsic features serve as links to extrinsic aspects of an object’s identity. As we’ve said, since by definition extrinsic features are not inherent in a piece of glass, there is never complete certainty about the extrinsic aspect of a piece’s identity. Where a piece of glass was made, how and by whom it was used, etc., are always, at least in principle, subject to revision. This, of course, can have great impact on the relative importance and value of the piece, and thus the issue of how a piece of glass gains (or loses) extrinsic aspects of its identity are the subject of great interest to collectors and dealers. In short, the identity of a piece of glass is not fixed, but rather—especially given the relationship between a piece’s identity and its value— is open to negotiation and challenge.

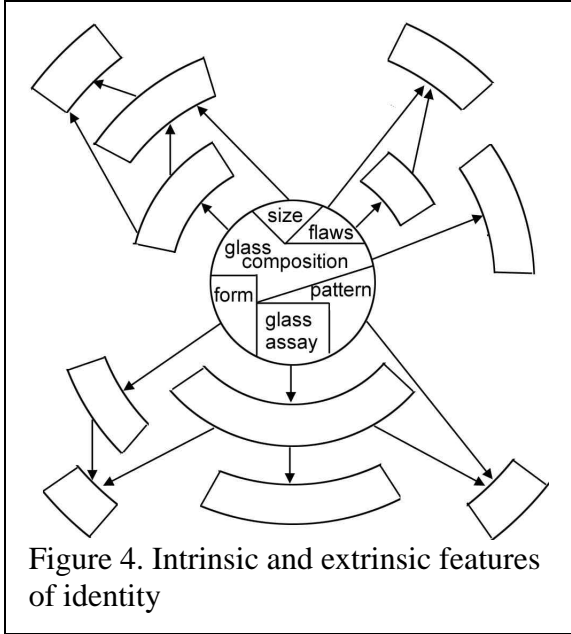


Figure 4. Intrinsic and extrinsic features of identity

As an example, let us return to the amethyst decanter of figure 2. Although it was vetted by the pre-eminent collector and scholar of the day and published as an example in *American Glass*, it is in fact now believed to be a forgery, along with the several dozen other pieces attributed to Mutzer. While there were some doubts as to their authenticity from their first appearance on the market, it was only in 1973 that the Mutzer pieces were exposed as forgeries (Lanmon et al. 1973). Comparisons to a group of GIII-5 pieces whose identity was not in doubt revealed that the pieces came from different molds; mold flaws that appeared on pieces known to be authentic were absent from the Mutzer pieces. Microscopic examination of the wear patterns suggested that the wear was added at a single time as part of an attempt to deceive. Finally, chemical analysis showed the Mutzer pieces to be closely related to each other, but quite different from the authentic pieces. This closer than usual examination of the pieces’ intrinsic features, in combination with the relatively sudden and rapid appearance of the entire group on the market, led to the general acceptance of their status as forgeries.

While today the name “Mutzer” carries connotations of fraud and deception, it is interesting to note that the Mutzer pieces did not lose all their value. By virtue of their role in the history of collecting, their citation in major reference works, their successful deception of central figures in the field, and their distribution throughout many of the major collections of American glass (where they are now, of course, labeled as forgeries), they maintain a certain degree of value due to their *new* extrinsic features.

Figure 5 shows a piece of glass, recently listed for sale on eBay, that is acknowledged in the text as a Mutzer forgery (that is, the date is given as “turn of the century” rather than early nineteenth century). Note the text describing both the intrinsic features (“Beautiful non-lead, sapphire blue ... rough pontil, good wear, 2 small bubble burst holes...”), as well as acknowledgement of its status (“Informed that

Mutzer used this particular GIII-5 mold at the turn of the century... Certainly had me thinking early 1830s American rarity.”)

Ironically, this piece appears *not* to be a Mutzer forgery, but rather a late 1940s piece by the Clevenger Brothers Glass Works, which since the 1930s has sold reproductions of early American glass. That it is a Clevenger piece is evident from the size and shape of the piece: while GIII-5 quart decanters molds *were* used during the early nineteenth century, they were only used to make decanters, pitchers and large dishes. The Clevengers’ use of a GIII-5 mold in the late 1940s and into the 1950s is well documented, as is its use in the production of a variety of pieces that are inappropriate for the 1820s to 1840s (Taylor 1987).

It is worth emphasizing the way in which the seller’s description summarizes his exploration of and conclusions about the object’s identity: the seller openly admits the likelihood that he is selling a fake or reproduction; he expresses disappointment that his “early 1830s American rarity” is likely a reproduction; he indicates that he learned of the existence of reproductions by showing his “rarity” to other collectors; he correctly quotes the name Mutzer as one source of reproductions, even though he gets the Mutzer date wrong and seems unaware of the more likely attribution to Clevenger; and he stops short of representing the piece as either authentic or a reproduction. Thus, even though the use of the name Mutzer could be interpreted as an attempt to raise the status of this piece from known reproduction to notorious fake, this does *not* feel like a deliberate attempt at misrepresentation. (We will turn to the issue of what collectors know in a later section.)


#### 4.4. Summary

So far we have provided some background about blown three mold glass, and discussed how pieces take on identity, distinguishing between intrinsic and extrinsic features. We have also argued that the intrinsic aspects of a piece of glass’s identity function as a way of making attributions about the extrinsic aspects of its identity, and, furthermore, that it is these extrinsic features that generate most of its value. As a consequence, the ability to identify a piece’s intrinsic features and use them as a basis for accurately evaluating its probable extrinsic features is at the heart of collecting, dealing, and so forth. (Hereafter we will generally use “collectors” and “collecting” to stand in for all those who are involved in the practices and processes surrounding the acquisition and study of glass.)

URL:  
<http://cgi.ebay.com/ws/eBayISAPI.dll?ViewItem&category=2707&item=2606183505>

Title: "Sandwich Glass Blown 3 Mold Decanter Hat Blue"

Description:  
"Informed that Mutzer used this particular GIII-5 mold at the turn of the century to produce some large and unusual examples like this one. Beautiful non lead, saphire blue, quart decanter formed into a hat or vase, 5 1/2" x 5 1/2", rough pontil, good wear, 2 small bubble burst holes at base edge, otherwise excellent. Certainly had me thinking early 1830s American rarity."



Images:

**Figure 5. A ‘Mutzer’ (sic) piece for sale on e-bay.**

## 5. Knowledge and Identity

The identity of a piece of glass—and particularly the attribution of extrinsic aspects of identity to a particular piece—is a knowledge intensive process. In this section, we talk about what collectors know, particularly about the contexts of production of glass, describe some of the principle sources of their knowledge, and describe the ways in which new knowledge is produced.

### 5.1. What Collectors Know

Serious collectors devote considerable time and attention to developing their knowledge about the contexts of production of glass. For example, in an email conversation between the authors of this essay, one author asked the (expert) other why it was that the Mutzer piece in figure 2 was accepted as genuine when both its color and drawn foot were so rare. As it turns out, both features are well known; it is their combination in the decanter form that is rare. Simmonds writes:

The Amethyst family of colors is relatively easy to produce and well known in earlier American glass. In particular, Stiegel "Diamond Daisy" Pocket Flasks are nearly all amethyst of one shade or another. The chemical known as "glassmakers soap" which converts naturally colored "green" glass (which may be aquamarine, greenish or amberish) into clear glass will, in larger quantities, make the pieces amethyst in color. (I should know its chemical composition, but it's too early on a Sunday to look it up)

As for drawn feet. The drawn foot is a feature that appears on a number of blown three mold pieces, most notably a number of cobalt blue-colored creamers (half pint pitchers), and on the majority of salt dishes. Drawn feet are thus somewhat typical on blown three mold pieces, although they are rare on pieces other than salt dishes.<sup>3</sup>

Similarly, the ability to recognize the piece in figure 5 as a reproduction requires knowing about the usual sizes of pieces of a particular form, and knowledge about the existence and practice of making reproductions of historic pieces.

If one engages in a conversation about glass with a serious collector, it quickly becomes evident that collectors possess an enormous fund of information about the contexts surrounding the production of glass. This knowledge spans the range from knowledge about the chemistry of glass, to cold and hot working techniques, to the location of factories and the migrations of glass blowers from various traditions. It is the possession of this sort of knowledge, and the ability to bring it to bear on evaluating the extrinsic features of a particular piece of glass, that enable collectors to judge whether or not they are getting a good deal at an antique show or auction.

### 5.2. Knowledge Repositories: Publications and Collections

Collectors in many fields impose order on the objects they collect through a variety of publications. Amongst these, catalogs or books including classification schemes are primary. The McKearins' classification scheme, which classifies figure 2 as a GIII-5, is central to the study of American blown three mold glass. Figure 6 shows one of the 16 pages that associate names with the various patterns by means of illustrations of prototypical examples (McKearin 1941). Their chapter on blown three-mold glass also includes extensive textual tables showing the various forms, sizes and colors of pieces that appear in each pattern, grouped by form. An index lists what forms each pattern appears in. Photographs of 174 three mold pieces show not only representative and spectacular pieces of American blown three-

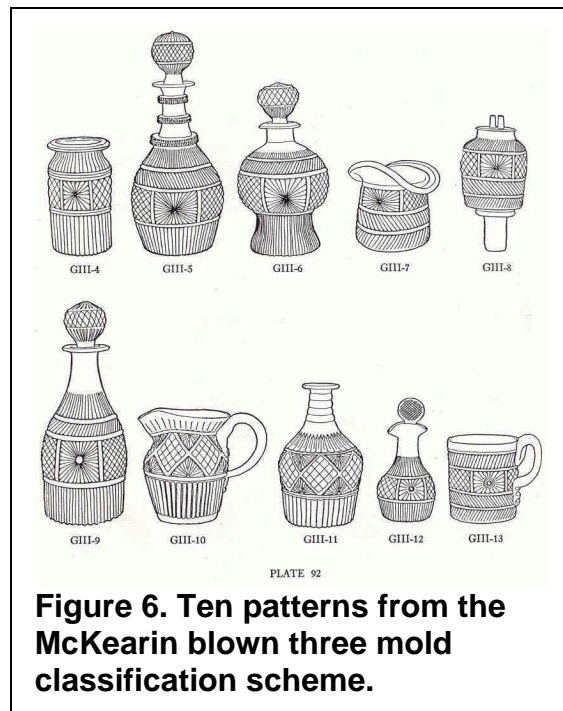
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<sup>3</sup> Email from Simmonds to Erickson, Sunday, 26 Jan 2003 08:30:22



mold pieces, but also pieces that are outside of this category, including examples of French and Irish pieces. An introductory section talks about the development of this kind of glass and the attribution of pieces to various factories, as well as giving indications as to which pieces are commonly found and which are rarities.

The blown three-mold classification scheme was invented by Helen McKearin on the basis of more than a decade's study of thousands of specimens. It was published in 1941 as part of *American Glass*, a joint publication with her father George S McKearin. McKearin, as it is usually referred to by collectors, is still regarded as the "bible" of early American glass, and is the first place that most collectors and dealers turn for information. Nevertheless, most collectors build up a library containing a great many other books, articles and auction catalogs. These include: other general treatments of early American glass; books about particular glass factories or glassmaking districts; auction catalogs of significant collections and pieces, going back to the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century; articles contained in exhibition catalogs, magazines and journals.



**Figure 6. Ten patterns from the McKearin blown three mold classification scheme.**

Museum collections themselves form a major resource for collectors. There are important collections of blown three-mold and other glass in many US museums, including the Corning Museum of Glass, the Metropolitan Museum of New York, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, the Henry Ford Museum and Bennington Museum in Vermont. There are also strong representations in collections with a regional focus, including Old Sturbridge Village with its focus on New England Glass and the Ohio State Historical Society with its focus on Ohio Glass. The Corning Museum is the major collection of glass in the United States, and much of its early American Glass was acquired from the McKearins, including many pieces illustrated in *American Glass* and several Mutzer pieces. The bulk of many museum collections is not on display, which can be a problem for collectors, although the current trend towards open storage areas such as the Luce Study Centers at the Metropolitan and Brooklyn Museums, and the willingness of curators to bring items out of storage, is a partial remedy.

Two significant functions of publications and collections are to help establish the value of pieces, and to catalog known fakes and reproductions. The article that demonstrated that the Mutzer pieces were fakes is a conspicuous example of the latter. Another is a book by dealer Ruth Webb Lee (1938) that, amongst other things, illustrates three categories of blown three-mold fakes and reproductions. Auction catalogs often give hints at authenticity, but are more reliable as guides to pricing. Auctioneers produce lists of "prices realized" for each auction which, when combined with the corresponding catalog, serve as a moment-in-time indication of value. Pricing suggestions also come in the form of price guides which either complement reference books, or are produced as periodic summaries of prices at auction. However, for pieces of any rarity, pricing is notoriously difficult to determine, ultimately being determined by the patience and knowledge of the seller and the desire and knowledge of the buyer.

### 5.3. The Production of New Knowledge

Knowledge about glass and its contexts of production is continually changing. Unlike glass objects in several other categories, most blown three-mold glass pieces bear no marks or inscriptions to associate them with a particular factory, or even with an American origin. New knowledge about the extrinsic identity of early glass rests partly upon examination of intrinsic features but also on two sorts of research into the contexts of production of glass: namely research in primary literatures and archaeology.

The primary literature on early American glass—the correspondence of glassworkers and factory owners, bills of sale and lading, newspaper advertisements, and so on—rarely includes illustrations. While no illustrated trade catalog for early American glass has emerged, examples from Norway and Portugal have proved instrumental in removing American attributions for some categories of pieces. More usually, inferences must be drawn from descriptions. This is a form of scholarly work requiring near semiotic attention to period meanings of words whose connotations have changed. For example, in reinterpreting a long known reference to the production of “enameled wares” to the 18<sup>th</sup> century Pennsylvanian factory of William Henry Stiegel, Arlene Palmer showed that it referred to strands of colored glass in otherwise clear wine glass stems rather than to the external decoration of a large group of bottles, flasks and tumblers previously attributed to Stiegel as well as a large number of Bohemian, German and French manufacturers.

The second primary source of knowledge about contexts of production is archaeology. Archaeological excavations on the sites of a number of glass factories have enabled many molds to be attributed to those factories. Excavations by Detroit-based journalist/collector/dealer Harry Hall White in the 1920s and 1930s attributed molds to several factories in New York State, Connecticut and, for the first time, to several glassworks west of the Appalachian Mountains in Ohio (White 1935).

One conclusion that can be drawn when a piece cannot be related to archaeological finds is that the piece is not American. At this point the researcher needs to turn to the literature on non-American glass, but this can be problematic. Like most early American glass, blown three-mold is more utilitarian than most of the collected non-American glass of its period. As a consequence, the literature on other sources of blown three-mold glass is considerably less well developed than that for American examples.

### 5.4. Summary

In some sense, collectors, dealers, curators, scholars of early American glass, and the literature they produce, form a complex social system (or in Latour’s term, actor-network) for computing—and sometimes revising—the identity of a piece of glass. This computation involves: 1) defining distinctions for intrinsic and extrinsic features (e.g. producing, naming and classifying); 2) relating the distinctions to one another and placing them within a particular context; 3) making claims about the strength of connection between intrinsic and extrinsic features; 4) disseminating this knowledge, and 5) placing value on various features and combinations of features of identity. It is to this last activity we now turn.

## 6. The Co-evolution of Identity

So far we have focused primarily on the identity of pieces of glass, and the sorts of resources that collectors bring to bear when they attribute various sorts of identity to glass. In this section we want to step back and take a somewhat broader look at the other entities entwined with the activity of glass collecting; in particular, we will look at the ways in which glass contributes to the identities of *people*, and in how the identities of glass and people are entwined.

### 6.1. Collectors

A person or institution becomes a collector of a certain kind of object when they start to treat objects of that kind in their possession as a collection<sup>4</sup>. A collector's criteria may or may not be explicitly articulated, and may evolve as their interests shift in response to increased knowledge, changes in purchasing ability, or opportunities to purchase new and different things.

A collector may define herself as a bottle collector, a decanter collector, a collector of blue glass, inkwells, blown three-mold glass, blown tableware or rarities in early American Glass; equally she may be a collector of Americana who collects glass along with ceramics and furniture. When the category they choose to collect is well documented then there may be a book that acts as a guidebook, telling them precisely what does and does not fit into their collection. A certain collector may fit into the community of historic flask collectors because historic flasks fit into their collection, and those flasks fit into their collection because they fit into that community.

Glass collectors take on a portion of their identity from the collections they develop. Obviously, the number and quality of the pieces in a collection contribute to the collector's identity or reputation in their community. Furthermore, the collector's reputation may be enhanced if it is apparent that he or she has engaged in clever acquisitions, recognizing the potential value of pieces that others in the collecting community have missed (i.e. making correct and heretofore unrecognized inferences about the extrinsic aspects of pieces' identities).

### 6.2. Collections

Collections, particularly as they persist over time and change hands (either in whole or part), take on identity as well. Very often, collections develop to support particular *narratives*—thus a collection might be known as the finest repository of Ohio blown three mold glass, or as depicting the variety of forms in Midwestern bottles and glass, or simply as the most complete collection of ink wells in existence.<sup>5</sup> This aspect of a collection's identity is important because it helps define what sort of pieces may be acquired (or sold): that is, given a collection's narrative(s), some pieces will “fit in” or “fill in gaps” especially well, and thus have extra value in the eyes of the collector or curator. (The nice, yet problematic, thing about ‘rarities’ is that there are so many to choose from.)

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<sup>4</sup> See Mieke Bal. *Telling Objects: A Narrative Perspective on Collecting*. Chapter 5 of John Elsner and Roger Cardinal editors: *The Cultures of Collecting*. Harvard, 1994.

<sup>5</sup> Respectively, collections satisfying these definitions are the Ohio Historical Society in Columbus, the Ballentine Collection, and the Covill collection.

Another aspect of the identity of a collection is that it may become famous, and thus possession of a piece known to have passed through the collection is desirable in and of itself. Thus, something with a Charles Gardener [collection] label might be valued more highly than the same thing without the Charles Gardener label. (Pieces of glass in collections often have labels stuck on their bottoms. Over time, having a label has become a valuable thing, to the extent that many people feel that it is bad form to remove collection labels.)

### 6.3. Dealers

Dealers are quite similar to collectors in the way their identities are entwined with glass. Indeed, many dealers are simply collectors who have discovered that their collection represents a significant source of capital, and that it can be more valuable (and fun) to “have owned” a larger number of things than it is to have a smaller, if more permanent, collection.

By virtue of their more frequent involvement in acquisition, dealers are better able to develop and display their knowledge of glass. And, by the same token, they develop reputations for honest (or not) dealing, or for having particular types or qualities of objects.

An interesting aspect of this has to do with dealer to dealer sales. When dealers arrive at antique shows, they arrive early so as to set up their wares. During this time dealers view each other’s stock, and have an opportunity to identify pieces to which they can add value, either because they possess additional information about its identity, because they know a collector who might be in the market for such a piece, or simply because they are known to be a dealer of *that sort* of thing and will thus attract more appropriate potential customers. Dealer to dealer selling or trading is quite common, and in some cases an entire chain of deals takes place before an item comes to rest for a while in someone’s collection. This occurs most for pieces that require more knowledge or work to generate maximum value from. In fact, it is likely that most of the very best pieces will end up in the hands of the top dealers, and at top prices. For similar reasons, it is also common for one dealer to bring a piece along with the goal of selling it on to another more recognized and knowledgeable dealer.

Finally, it is often the case that a dealer, having discovered an enthusiastic collector, may engage in ‘grooming’ him or her. That is, the dealer may assist the collector in developing a narrative about his or her collection (thus providing criteria for what sorts of pieces ‘fit in’), or education in the finer points of what makes a particular type of glass valuable, both of which may serve to increase the frequency and quality of the collector’s purchases.

### 6.4. Sales Venues: Shops, Shows, Auctions, etc.

A great many venues exist for buying and selling early American glass. Selling is important because it provides a way for ‘the market’ to weigh in on the value of particular clusters of features, and because it is one of the chief motivators for the primary research that produces the knowledge on which the identity of glass is based.

Because the identity of glass reflects back upon those who sell it, as well as forward to those who buy it, sales venues provide a wide range of mechanisms for modulating the identities of those who participate in them. A key distinction is between venues in which the seller and purchaser meet face-to-face or can engage in conversation, and those where no such interaction is possible. Examples of the former include

antique shows, single-owner antique shops, and by-appointment sales at the collector's or dealer's home. Examples of the latter include auctions (except for single-seller auctions) and antique malls (where many dealers sell out of the same shop), most of which typically conceal the identity of the seller. On-line auctions such as eBay offer an intermediate case, with several levels of concealment or revelation of the seller's identity being possible.

All venues allow the seller to describe the pieces that they are selling. At low-end shows labels may contain prices only. However, the more prestigious the venue, the more the seller is obliged to describe the pieces and conceal prices, and the more the prestige of the venue itself depends on the authenticity of pieces being sold and the accuracy of their descriptions. It is for this reason that the most prestigious antique shows have vetting committees who vet all items for sale at the shows. Vetting, as a guarantor of authenticity, is particularly valuable in antique shows such as New York's Winter Antiques Show and the Philadelphia Antique Show. These shows have a hybrid identity as events as part of their city's social calendar and as events to raise funds for some charitable cause, in addition to the more ostensible identity as annual fairs for the sale of antiques. The vetting process enables less knowledgeable people attending for one of these other reasons to purchase pieces in the confidence that the show as a whole believes in their authenticity.

## 6.5. Collecting Communities

Communities of collectors and dealers form around certain categories of glass. For example, the communities of "blown three mold glass collectors" and "bottle collectors" are largely distinct. Different collecting communities often have their own core reference materials and collections, aesthetics and sales venues.

An interesting consequence of this is that many items of blown three mold glass are also of interest to collectors of specific forms of glass, or glass from particular factories. For example, the decanter shown in figure 1a is of interest to decanter collectors, blown three-mold collectors, some bottle collectors, and also to more general collectors of early American glass. Similarly blown three-mold inkwells are of interest to inkwell collectors, as are blown three-mold pitchers to pitcher collectors, and miniatures to collectors of miniatures and toys. Pieces that are of interest in several major fields of collecting tend to have higher prices, since their markets are larger.

## 6.6. Summary

These are the principle roles and entities involved in the activity of collecting glass (although we have omitted the roles of those engaged in primary scholarship and curatorial work). It is interesting to note the ways in which the identities of various entities are defined: collectors and their collections, dealers and their wares and their customers, and so forth. Looking at this from a high level we can view the activity that takes place in the arena of glass as a set of entwined social and institutional mechanisms for vetting and valuing the links between intrinsic and extrinsic features of identity. Furthermore, it is not just glass whose identity is asserted and evaluated: all the players in the process—from individual collectors and dealers, to auctioneers and shows, to collections and museums—take, in return, some of their identities from the pieces of glass with which they are implicated.

## 7. Some Closing Questions

As this is work in progress—and very much near its beginning—we have no pithy conclusions. Rather, we have a few questions, which we hope interested readers can assist us with:

**Theoretical Framework.** What is a theoretical framework that is suitable for grappling with these issues? In the absence of a framework we felt comfortable with, we have tried to keep our account fairly descriptive and focused on phenomena, though, of course, theory lurks beneath our assumptions. The frameworks that have come to our attention are Actor-Network theory, Activity theory, Distributed Cognition, Communities of Practice, and Bourdieu’s habitus, field and capital; however, we are interested in other candidates as well. It is not immediately obvious to us which, if any, of our candidates will give us a good analytical hold on this topic.

**The Internet.** How does the internet, and the rise of digital media, affect all of this? One obvious way is the establishment of qualitatively new venues like eBay which open the realm of glass collecting to a far broader audience—or at least, eBay lowers the cost of entry: collectors no longer need to travel to shows or other venues to collect. As a consequence, there is, potentially, much more of a ‘knowledge gap,’ that might be exploited by both the knowledgeable and the unscrupulous. In addition, the mediation introduced by digital media means that the intrinsic features of glass are less available to inspection: the ability to heft a piece of glass; closely examine its wear pattern; or see the flaws, bubbles, and subtleties of hue as a piece is held up to the light is eliminated—instead the buyer must more thoroughly take into account the discernment and honesty of the seller. Of course, eBay also lowers the barriers to those interested in selling glass: one who knows little about glass—as exemplified by the piece offered for sale on eBay (figure 5)—may nevertheless offer it for sale in a venue side by side with reputable long-term dealers.

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## 9. Photographic Credits

Pictures 1a, 1b, 1c, 3a and 3b courtesy Ian Simmonds.

Picture 2 is taken from Lanmon et al (1973).

Picture 5 is from eBay.

Figure 6 is from McKearin and McKearin (1941).