TWO TUMBLERS AND A CUSTARD CUP
Understanding the place of table-glass in the 19th century

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When the Ghost of Christmas Present whisks Scrooge to the Cratchit household, we are told '…at Bob Cratchit's elbow stood the family display of glass. Two tumblers, and a custard-cup without a handle.'[1] That Dickens found, of all the possessions they might have had, the Cratchits' status, indeed the whole nature of their domestic environment, was best summed up in three pieces of table-glass tells us of the significance of this most anonymous of products to the domestic sphere.

Table-glass proliferated in the industrially developed economies of the 19th century, responding to dining 'a la Russe' and bourgeois tastes for display. The Cratchit household's holdings in the 1840s would look mean then, but they would seem far moreso a generation later. The inherent fragility of glass, its capacity for reflection and sparkle and use for alcoholic beverages gives it a special status in the realm of table-wares; yet, it largely remains anonymous. It is rare to find any indication of maker and determining a period or region of origin is usually more a matter of connoisseurship than documented fact.

This paper considers the place that table-glass had in the domestic space in the 19th and into the 20th century. How it was used to define status both as a visual statement and in terms of practicality bounded by codes of use. The paper will particularly focus on the nature of the objects, the thing that in the museum are difficult to express, yet essential to understanding, its feel to the hand and lip. The Cratchits' handle-less custard cup was still likely to be the most handleable of their display when it came to use, particularly if filled with 'hot stuff from a jug'[2].

[1] Charles Dickens *A Christmas Carol* (1843) p57 (1858 edn)
[2] Ibid p58

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It's cheap, it's commonplace, it's just too easy to buy… not like it was in Cratchit's day… A proliferation of glass, NOT a collection.

I come to this paper first as a collector, then as a design historian at first trained in ceramics and glass making. The term 'collector' requires qualification. I have accumulated a fair quantity of 19th century table-glass over the years, but I do not really consider it as a collection, for me a collection has to have a clear method and 'tell a story' through the objects it contains. Crucially, a collection

will contain items the collector might not want to own for their personal appeal, but *needs* to own for the sake of the collection. My approach to table glass is controlled merely by taste and preference and bounded by fairly subjective material factors. I like the feel of a ground-out pontil mark or foot ground flat, I like the sound of high lead content, I like the metal to be clear (with a view to use), I like bold, sharp cutting, then wheel engraving, then hot formed decoration …it has to really appeal to be plain. While the collector in me likes difference; to me, glass on a formal table should match, therefore the user in me wants suites of identical, or near identical glasses; yet, place a suite of seemingly identical stemmed glasses in front of me and I will reject all those without the pontil mark or that does not ring. The collector in me sees this as daft, but then I do not consider myself a collector when it comes to glass. Meanwhile, the design historian in me is horrified by my approach, not only is it prone to subjective whim and fancy, my tendency to use the object in a pastiche of how they might have been intended to be used verges on misrepresentation, anachronism and, let's face it, downright romanticism. Luckily, I'm more a collector and then academic than a museologist, because the conservation issues of my approach is the stuff of even greater horror. Every so often a 150 year old glass will meet its end and be unceremoniously tipped into the local bottle-bank, often along with the original container of what filled it.

Not quite *ALL* the characteristics, I prefer a wider foot, but, at $10 it will do.

However, their sheer materiality over-rides all that. Here is a white wine bowl with all the characteristics I admire, I'll pass it round.

Just feel it, the slice cut stem with knife edge corners - someone likely contracted silicosis to effect them; so, the least you can do is appreciate their work; run your finger under the foot - is not that ground-out pontil mark just a pleasure to the touch? Tap it - just enjoy the perfect tone ringing on and, that rim - just made for the lips. All for about $10. Can I resist? No.

Left - Hotel ware. Right – Domestic.

Let's compare it to this late 19th century example of hotel ware, typically made of low-lead metal and with a nip line across the foot, not spun from below.

Can't *SEE* the difference? You're right, I couldn't either, and bought it on eBay. Only when you engage with the thing by touch can you appreciate what, in fact, it is. I've tried to show the nip-line, it runs diagonally, top left to bottom right.

It may have the cut and the form, but does it have the materiality? I don't think so. Unlike the other it is dull, not only to the ear, but to the finger-tip. Fine for the shelf in a museum cabinet, but would never get further than a kitchen shelf in my house. And there's the rub, table glass is best understood on the table in use, not on the shelf behind a sheet of glass. Everyone here will be familiar with the issue.

There's not much to be said its of its making. It could be could be repeated wherever glass was blown, but we work on generalities and assumptions. Lead oxide is not rare, but its use as a significant element at 20% or higher 'to make it

'crystal' and 'ring' is particularly associated with the UK and its realm of influence and Bohemia. Meanwhile, the working of the glass from its foot, leaving an obvious pontil mark, places this glass in the UK, as Bohemian makers liked to grind feet flat. Grinding out a pontil is associated with the period from about 1820 until about 1910. Show the glass to anyone who is into 19th century table glass and they are most likely to say 'English, late 19th century', although there is nothing that really makes this a certainty.

Back in 1843, when Dickens published *A Christmas Carol*, the UK was on the verge of becoming the world's first truly industrialised nation with a majority of the overall population living in towns and cities. A lassiez-faire attitude to social policy resulted in the period famously being described 'the bleak age' by John and Barbara Hammond in the title of their 1947 book[3], but it was also a time of unprecedented opportunity that resulted in an ever-expanding, new middle class, at the bottom of which was the 'junior clerk', of which Bob Cratchit was an example. We never know exactly what his employer, Ebenezer Scrooge, the senior and surviving partner of Scrooge & Marley traded in, but the suggestion is unseen commodities at an exchange, rather than a traditional market, therefore a representative of the disaggregation of capital from actual value, something that increasingly troubled the ethically aware and which Marx

[3] J L & Barbara Hammond *The Bleak Age*. Penguin (Pelican) 1947

would have a lot to say about a few years later. Unlike those employed as 'machine fodder' in industry, Cratchit's post was normally at the bottom of a long ladder leading to wealth and bourgeoise comfort and, to a Victorian reader, clearly respectable, in spite of its poverty; what would later be termed 'white collar'. Cratchit, however, is frustrated by circumstance; his employer seems so mean that he has only one clerk, *his* ladder has only one rung. At fifteen shillings a week (p15) Cratchit is being paid about the same and possibly even less than his working-class equivalents in the mills[4], but, to the reader, this is tempered by respectability. The Cratchits' circumstances are defined by 'the family display of glass' on (we assume, as it is 'at Cratchit's elbow') the kitchen mantle, an ironic reference to the bourgeoise status of the family, as if Dickens was in a dining room and surveying the sideboard.

[4] A useful gauge of wages at the period can be found at: https://www.louthlincs1838.org.uk/background-notes/value-of-money/earnings/ Here the salary scale of the local Poor Law Commissioners (1840) gives 'Clerk Fourth class' (the most junior) some 34s per week, well over twice that Scrooge eked out to Cratchet.

‘…and at Bob Cratchit’s elbow stood the family collection of glass, two tumblers and a custard cup without a handle.’

It’s not much of a display, here I recreate it, two tumblers and a custard cup. The tumblers typical of the mid-century and only used for water at a respectable table in the 1840s, but the stuff of a gin palace as well, requiring no formality to hold. These ones are heavy and robust, more the gin palace than the dining room table. I’ve chosen them not to match, and the posher, slice-cut one, to

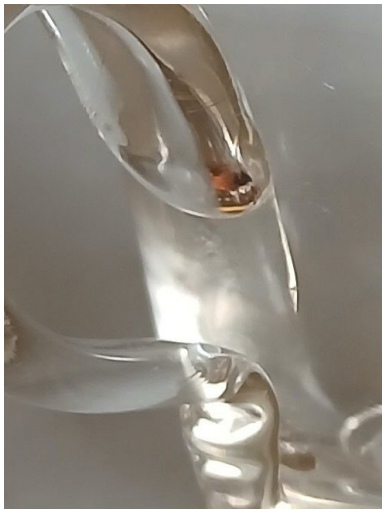
have a chip. A curatorial decision that goes over and above Dickens' description.

Slice cut tumbler with wide ground out pontil mark and resulting vulnerable foot ring: Uncut tumbler with normal ground out pontil mark is more robust.

The custard cup is from the very early 19th century, we *know* it is early because it does not benefit from slice cuts and is more obviously hot-formed, it also has an unground pontil – *Feel* it to appreciate it. I've not got one without its handle; so, I have brought one with a heat crack instead (almost certainly a consequence of being filled with 'hot stuff from a jug') and missing a decorative tail to the handle. If I were a curator charged with setting the scene, should I break the handle off? It's one of a suite of ten and already damaged…so there'd be no real loss, while anyone familiar with the novel would instantly call you out were the

cup to *have* a handle. A curatorial quandary when faced with the mass made and not very valuable.

Custard cup, not (quite) lacking handle.



Whatever, Dickens' choice of a custard cup is not by chance. Like the Cratchits themselves, it reeks of respectability that has fallen on hard times. Once, only the wealthy rose to custard cups, a vessel associated with the deserts of a dinner

‘a la Française’ after the second remove. Custard was served quite thin, ‘crème Anglaise’, and could be drunk directly from the cup, or used to accompany other dishes on the table. In 1843, dinner ‘a la Française’ (a sort of buffet of various dishes placed on the table, light ones first, then ‘removed’ for a similar display of heavier ones, before a second remove to make way for the deserts) was teetering on obsolescence, rapidly giving way to the course-by-course dinner ‘a la Russe’ still familiar today (and a style I indulge in regularly).


Table set ‘A la Russe’ for five courses… but, horrors, not on a cloth… AND with the desert setting added above…even A la Russe expected a full remove for the desert, but these days servants are expensive...

Whereas in ‘la Française’ there tended only to be two glasses per setting, the wine glass rinsed between different types, along with only three items of cutlery, knife, fork and tablespoon, in ‘la Russe’ there was a different glass for each wine and different cutlery for each course. A standard setting would rise to three wine glasses, for sherry (accompanying the soup), white (fish and poultry), and red (game fowl and meat), along with a water tumbler.

Table set ‘A la Française’ for two removes.

By the mid-century stemmed glasses were hedged with formality, the stem was what one held, to hold the bowl was an indicator of bad breeding, a white wine bowl, in particular (derived from the Venetian ‘tazza’), invited the clumsy and ‘badly bred’ to spill its contents or awkwardly clutch its bowl. Dessert wines would require another suite of glasses brought to table with them. That the entire Cratchit glass display rose to less than one setting in number would not be lost on most readers in 1843, nor the significance of the custard cup. Yet, that they had any glass at all said something; in the UK glass was a luxury, taxed by weight until 1850 and therefore expensive, much of the working class rose to nothing grander than earthenware tumblers and mugs.

In this small analysis a lot of tried, tired even, but still very live issues are raised. The disconnect between the world of collecting and connoisseurship and

the actual nature of the objects, designed to be handled and redolent with meaning, even when ‘valueless’ (NSV as auctioneers would term it). In general glass is displayed as individual items in cabinets full of related glass, even if it was designed to be seen as a suite on a table. Then, the problem of objects designed to be held, felt and used being denied that possibility by conventions of curation. There is a small addition in that the complexity of conventions is rarely exhibited even when table glass is displayed ‘in context’, on a table as if waiting for the diners to arrive (which we saw yesterday at the Gropius house). With the benefit of a novel, three quite random mundane items, two damaged, with a combined value quite likely lower than $15 and of little interest to those usually entrusted with their curation, take on far greater meaning. But how can that meaning be displayed effectively? I’m not sure that outside the rarefied context of this conference, it can.

1748 words = 17 mins