

## Bohemian Glass Salt Cellars c. 1800

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### Introduction

Four glass salt cellars with miniature painted portraits. All have the same eight-pointed oval shape with scalloped edges. SC.01 is a set of two salt cellars with portraits of a man and a woman. SC.02A is a single salt cellar with a portrait of a woman. SC.02B is a single salt cellar with a portrait of a young man or boy. SC.02A and SC.02B may have originally been part of matching sets like SC.01. All four salt cellars have no identifying marks such as signatures or glass manufacturer marks.

The glass is mold-pressed with cut bevelled edges. Molten glass was poured into the bottom of a mold, which shaped the outside. A plunger came down and pressed the glass into the mold while simultaneously shaping the inside.<sup>1</sup> The bevelled edges were cut with a rotating wheel made of stone or iron.<sup>2</sup>

An oval glass disc covered in red lacquer and painted with a miniature portrait is sealed to the underside of each salt cellar using colourless resin (Figure 1). Each portrait has a decorative border of gold leaf (SC.01, SC0.2A) or silver leaf (SC.02B). The salt cellars are decorated using a cold decoration method. The pigment, often

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<sup>1</sup> The process of mold-pressing glass was first mechanized in the United States in the 1820s but was preceded by manual methods. Molds might be made of wood, stone, or metal. See Hess and Wight, *Looking at Glass*, 59; Moore, *Old Glass*, 53.

<sup>2</sup> Wheels were coated with glass or diamond dust for cutting. See Moore, *Old Glass*, 53; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 85.

oil paint, is applied to the surface of the glass after firing as the last step. Cold painting is an impermanent decoration method as it is easily rubbed off the surface of the glass.<sup>3</sup> To compensate for this, glassworkers devised methods of protecting glass decorated with cold colours, which are discussed further below.

Set SC.01 is likely Bohemian crystal glass c. 1800 and was a wedding gift with portraits meant to represent the newlywed couple.<sup>4</sup> Rather than custom portraits of the real couple, the figures are likely standard decoration patterns that could be purchased from a glass dealer or an independent decorator. Such salt cellars may have been part of a popular trend of novelty commemorative glassware produced in Bohemia and exported during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

SC.02A and SC.02B are likely imitations of Bohemian portrait salt cellars (such as SC.01) from the early-nineteenth century. Bohemia enjoyed a prominent position on the global glass market and had significant stylistic influence during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The popularity of Bohemian-made novelty commemorative glassware may have given rise to trends of mass-produced copies or to small-scale local revivals of the portrait salt style.

## Glass Industry in Bohemia

Bohemia is an historical region in Europe, today part of the Czech Republic. Glassmaking in Bohemia began in the thirteenth or fourteenth century and was heavily influenced by Venice, which was a prominent glassmaking centre in Europe,<sup>5</sup> but did not expand significantly until the late-fifteenth and early-sixteenth centuries

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<sup>3</sup> Hess and Wight, *Looking at Glass*, 14; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 73.

<sup>4</sup> Matching portrait salt cellars as wedding gifts has been suggested by Jzyk and Robertson, *The Open Salt Compendium*, 74; Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 106.

<sup>5</sup> Moore, *Old Glass*, 51; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 327.

when the demand for wood fuel in Germany rose dramatically due to expansion in the German mining industry. German glasshouses seeking to cut fuel costs moved to Bohemia and the neighbouring region of Silesia, which were heavily forested, providing cheap and abundant fuel. By the early-sixteenth century there were approximately forty established glassworks in Bohemia<sup>6</sup>—a high concentration for a small region.

By the late-seventeenth century, the glass industry in Bohemia had expanded and stabilized enough that guilds emerged for glassmakers and glass decorators. Bohemian glass production began outstripping domestic demand, and by the end of the century Bohemia began exporting glass on a commercial level. The exportation industry began with individual travelling salesmen who distributed their wares around the world. Salesmen began to build export companies, and by the end of the eighteenth century there were Bohemian glass agencies in fifty-four cities across Europe and six cities overseas. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the small region enjoyed a prominent position in European and global glass markets.<sup>7</sup>

Like many European glassmakers, Bohemian glassmakers initially copied Venetian *crystallo* glass, which was known for its exceptional clarity but was thin and too fragile to be altered after firing. Bohemian glassmakers developed their own formula for crystal glass which soon became known for both its clarity and its strength; it was possible to make pieces that were very thick and very clear. Unlike *crystallo*, Bohemian crystal glass was thick enough to be cut and engraved after firing.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 96.

<sup>7</sup> Before export agencies were established, individual salesmen would begin their travels in the spring and return home in the winter months to prepare for their next trip. Export agencies established warehouses and brokerages for distribution. For more information on guilds and exportation, see Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 39-53; Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 102-11.

<sup>8</sup> Venetian *crystallo* was a soda glass and Venice held a top position in European glass markets for several centuries with *crystallo* exports. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Venice

Thick glass with exceptional clarity and colourlessness was a hallmark of Bohemian glass during this time period.<sup>9</sup> The glass of set SC.01 is thick but remarkably clear and colourless, with no visible tint or distortion. When viewed horizontally, the portraits are refracted clearly through the scalloped sides. The bevelled edges are perfectly uniform (Figure 2).

In contrast, these characteristics are not present in SC.02A and SC.02B. The glass of SC.02A has a grey tint (Figure 3). Ripples or waves are present in both, and the portraits are distorted when viewed horizontally. This is more easily seen in SC.02B; ripples in concentric circles are visible on each scalloped panel (Figure 4). The bevelled edges of both are cut unevenly and there are irregular polishing marks on the sides. These characteristics are not consistent with the high standard of quality that led to Bohemia's prominent position on the global glass market during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

## Decoration on Bohemian Glass

Eighteenth-century Bohemian glassworkers became known for perfecting particular protection techniques for cold painting using double-walled glass. *Zwischengoldglas* (German, "gold between glass") was a style of drinking glass comprised of two layers. The inner layer was decorated on the outside with gold leaf and pigment. A slightly larger outer layer fit snugly over the inner layer and the two layers were sealed with resin, sandwiching the decoration between them. An additional glass medallion was sometimes painted and

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lost its position to more durable glass such as Bohemian crystal, a potash-lime formula, and English lead glass. See Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 39-41; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 81, 327; Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 265; Tait, "North of the Alps," 179.

<sup>9</sup> Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 39-41; Moore, *Old Glass*, 51-3.

inserted into the base. Bohemian-produced *Zwischengoldglas* enjoyed widespread popularity during the mid-eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup>

A similar technique was perfected in the 1780s by Bohemian glassmaker Johann Josef Mildner (1763-1808). Mildner's technique involved cutting a recessed oval into the outside of a drinking glass. A reverse-painted medallion with a portrait or other scene was inserted into the recessed section and sat flush with the surface of the glass.<sup>11</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there also emerged a specific niche of Bohemian glassware that was commemorative. Such glassware might commemorate historical and political events as well as personal events such as weddings and birthdays. Commemorative glassware dates back to ancient times and is certainly not unique to Bohemian glass production.<sup>12</sup> However, fashionable Bohemian spas became well-known for producing "spa glasses" which were decorated with local scenery or even portraits of spa visitors. This type of Bohemian glassware became a popular novelty in Europe<sup>13</sup> and may indicate the existence of other such novelty niches.

The perfection of double-walled glass techniques by eighteenth-century Bohemian glassworkers suggests a clear precedent for the method of adhering a portrait medallion to the underside of a glass salt cellar. The popularity of novelty souvenir glassware suggests

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<sup>10</sup> The term *zwischengoldglas* sometimes refers generally to any method used to sandwich gold leaf between two layers of glass (*doppelwandglas* or "double-walled glass"), and sometimes is used specifically for the Bohemian method practiced during the mid-eighteenth century. See Jzyk and Robertson, *The Open Salt Compendium*, 74; Moore, *Old Glass*, 57; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 351; Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 105-6.

<sup>11</sup> Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 55; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 195, 197-98; Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 106.

<sup>12</sup> Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 75-6.

<sup>13</sup> For an entry on spa glasses see Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 289. The mass-production of Bohemian novelty ware is suggested by Phillips, *The Encyclopedia of Glass*, 110.

that set SC.01 may have been part of a niche trend in Bohemian glassware exports.

### **Josef Franz Römisch (1788-1832)**

Römisch was a Bohemian glass dealer. He married into wealth and enjoyed success as a travelling salesman. In the early 1800s Römisch exported Bohemian glass, mostly to Russia and to America via Hamburg. In 1811, the Austrian state, which ruled Bohemia, went bankrupt and his family was stripped of their wealth. Römisch was forced to leave the glass industry; he set up a barley shop and a wine bar in Kamenicky Senov and also became a painter for hire.

In the mid-1820s Römisch began work on an album of patterns for the glass industry containing thousands of forms and decorations. While some designs were from other manufacturers, most are likely Römisch's original work. Rather than a sales catalogue for buyers, it was likely intended as a resource for glass manufacturers. The album was published in 1832 but did not see commercial success, and Römisch died in poverty later that year. After his death, Römisch's son established a glass painting studio and was reportedly a prolific figurative painter.<sup>14</sup>

There is little information available about Römisch, but his sample book is highly relevant. Two pages feature illustrations of salt cellars with different decoration options.<sup>15</sup> One salt cellar option has an eight-pointed scalloped shape identical to SC.01, SC.02A, and SC.02B. Another shows a portrait decoration option. Other shapes and decorations are also illustrated. The Römisch sample book is thus evidence that the portrait salt cellar was part of a stylistic

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<sup>14</sup> For the most detailed biography available on Römisch, see Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 65-66.

<sup>15</sup> For images of the relevant pages from the Römisch sample book, see OpenSalts.US: <https://opensalts.us/References/Catalogs/catalogs-Czech.html>.

vocabulary for Bohemian glassworkers by at least the early-nineteenth century and perhaps earlier.

Bohemian glass dealers were trained in glass painting and engraving, and would decorate their wares to suit buyers' tastes.<sup>16</sup> It is thus a strong possibility that Römisch himself was decorating salt cellars in this way for customers during his career as a travelling salesman. In addition, a new industry of independent glass decorators emerged during the eighteenth century. Mainly operating in Germany, *hausmalers* ("house painters") purchased blanks from glass factories and decorated them with painting or engraving before reselling them. *Hausmalers* worked out of their homes or, if they were successful enough, maintained studios with assistants and apprentices. The most skilled house painters were often more highly regarded than factory painters.<sup>17</sup>

## Comparative Analysis

It is probable that the salt cellars were decorated by travelling glass dealers or by independent decorators. Decoration methods such as enamelling, where glass was fired again after decorating to fuse the pigment to glass, were long-lasting but more labour-intensive and costly. Cold painting, while less durable, was convenient and inexpensive as it did not require a kiln and could be done quickly.

Another significant discovery is that the figures depicted in set SC.01 are not unique. Images from a private collection (Figures 5 and 6) show four portrait salt cellars with the same eight-pointed, scalloped shape. The portraits show striking similarities in facial features, hairstyles, clothing, and accessories.<sup>18</sup> A nearly identical outline has

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<sup>16</sup> Langhamer, *The Legend of Bohemian Glass*, 46; Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 43.

<sup>17</sup> Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, 147.

<sup>18</sup> Another image of a nearly identical portrait of the woman in SC.01, see Jzyk and Robertson, *The Open Salt Compendium*, 74. Figure 217. Shown in three-quarter view rather than in profile, she has the same powdered hairstyle, the same clothing, and the same parasol.

been used, and the clothing is painted with varying colours and patterns—the most significant difference between the portraits.

These remarkable similarities suggest one decorator—likely a salesman or *hausmaler*, perhaps one with a studio—with a particular style who created multiple portrait templates drawn from the same models. Customers may have selected a “wedding couple” set from an array of available portrait variations as a cheaper and quicker alternative to custom portraits of the individual recipients. Such salt cellars were perhaps part of the popular trend of Bohemian-made novelty glassware, similar to spa glasses.

SC.02B has similarities to set SC.01 in terms of portraiture but stylistic differences are noticeable. SC.02A, however, is markedly different. In comparison to SC.01 and SC.02B, the woman’s portrait is simple and almost cartoonish. In combination with the difference in glass quality and characteristics, this suggests that SC.02A and SC.02B are imitations of Bohemian portrait salt cellars produced elsewhere in Europe or in America. Considering the extensive reach of the Bohemian glass export industry during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the novelty glassware trend may have given rise to numerous style revivals or productions of copies elsewhere in the world.

### **Recommended Reading**

Harold Newman’s *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass* (1977) is an excellent comprehensive guide to terminology for glass production and history around the world.

Antonín Langhamer’s *The Legend of Bohemian Glass* (2003) is to date the most comprehensive and detailed history of Bohemian glass, spanning its early beginnings to contemporary Bohemian glass production. Chapter 3, “Bohemian Baroque Glass Meets the



World,” and chapter 4, “Rococo and Classicism,” are particularly relevant.

*The Encyclopedia of Glass* edited by Phoebe Phillips (1981) makes specific reference to glass portrait salt cellars in the chapter “Germany and Bohemia” (and is one of the only existing academic works to do so).

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## Appendix



### SC.01 Marriage Salt Cellars

Glass (pressed and cut), paint, gold leaf  
Bohemia, c. 1800  
6.3 x 7.6 x 2.5cm  
Private Collection, Winnipeg, Manitoba



### SC.02A Portrait Salt Cellar

Glass (pressed and cut), paint, gold leaf  
c. Early 19th century  
6.5 x 7.6 x 2.3cm  
Private Collection, Winnipeg, Manitoba



### SC.02B Portrait Salt Cellar

Glass (pressed and cut), paint, silver leaf  
c. Early 19th century  
6.3 x 7.8 x 2.5cm  
Private Collection, Winnipeg, Manitoba

Images



Figure 1. Underside of woman from SC.01.  
(Photo by author.)



Figure 2. Man from SC.01 refracted through side. (Photo by author.)



*Figure 3. SC.02A has a grey tint.  
(Photo by author.)*



*Figure 4. Ripples on sides of  
SC.02B. (Photo by author.)*



*Figure 5.* Two male portrait salts with the same eight-pointed, scalloped shape as SC.01. The portrait on the right is particularly significant. Although the figure is shown in profile rather than three-quarter view, his face, hair, and clothes are nearly identical to the male portrait in SC.01. (Photo courtesy of Robin Grube.)



*Figure 6.* Two female portrait salts with the same eight-pointed, scalloped shape as SC.01. Nearly identical to each other, these portraits also bear remarkable similarities to the female portrait in SC.01, particularly in clothing style and the closed parasol. (Photo courtesy of Robin Grube.)