$4.00

January 2013

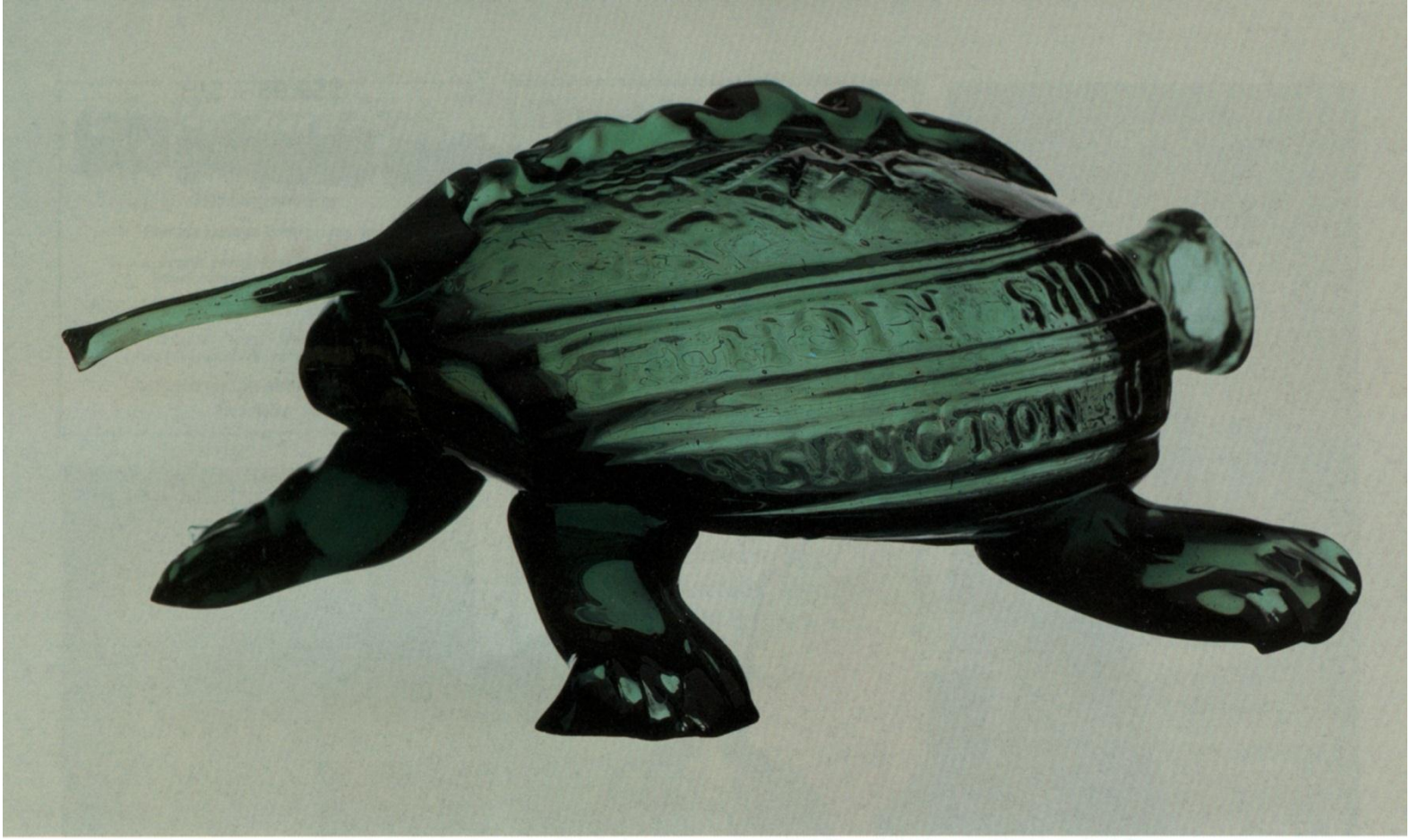
ANTIQUE BOTTLE & GLASS COLLECTOR

An Incredible Turtle Tale (Tail)!

PAGE 30

IN THIS ISSUE:

The Magazine That Keeps You Informed!



Mr. Garvan's Extraordinary Turtle

A wedding anniversary gift that all collectors of glass can enjoy

By Ian Simmonds

One of the most surprising images in Helen McKearin and Kenneth Wilson's *American Bottles and Flasks & Their Ancestry* (Crown Publishers, 1978) is of a whimsy: a turtle made by adding a spine, tail and legs to a Dyottville flask. However, the image and accompanying captions on pages 432-3 do not prepare you for the turtle itself. It is the most extraordinary whimsy in the bottle world.

The Dyott turtle is included in Yale University Art Gallery's new installation of its American Art collection, opening Dec. 12. Its inclusion will bring it to the attention of the museum-going public, and gives bottle and glass collectors their first chance to see it in more than 40 years.

To celebrate its reappearance, I spoke with three people involved in creating the new installation at Yale. I asked how they assembled the installation and about the place that the turtle plays within it. Patricia Kane is the Friends of American Arts Curator of American Decorative Arts at Yale. John Stuart Gordon is Benjamin Attmore Hewitt Assistant Curator of American Decorative Arts. From 2008 to 2011, Diane Wright completed a Marcia Brady Tucker Fellowship in American Decorative Arts at Yale. She has recently been appointed marketing and communications manager at the Pilchuk School of Glass near Seattle, Wash.

Ian: Pat, the American collection at Yale was largely a gift of a single collector, Francis P. Garvan. Who was Francis Garvan and what was his unique vision in building a collection for Yale?

Pat: Francis Patrick Garvan (1875-1937) was a New York City attorney who graduated from Yale in 1897. In the second

decade of the 20th century, he and his wife began collecting American art in a serious way. As the Old Yale Art Gallery neared completion in 1928, Garvan conceived of the idea of placing his collection on loan at Yale. By 1930 he offered it to the University as a gift that included "my collections of American silver, prints, furniture, pewter, china, crockery, glass, coins, iron and other metalwork." The gift was made on his 20th wedding anniversary in honor of his wife and was to be known as the Mabel Brady Garvan Collection. The gift also was made with the hope that the works would become "a moving part in a great panorama of American arts and crafts which, under the leadership of Yale University, shall be made to pass over the years before every man, woman and child in our country." Garvan was ahead of his time in his vision that objects could be used to teach Americans about their past.

Ian: I know from talking both to you and to curators of other museums that reinstalling and reinterpreting their collection is a major, multi-year project. Many consider themselves fortunate when an opportunity to reinstall falls within their tenure. Is that equally true at Yale? How often do you have the opportunity to reinstall the American collection?

Pat: I have had the opportunity to organize major reinstallations of the collections twice before—once in 1973 in the galleries designed by Chermayeff and Geismar, which was a revolutionary installation at that time, and again in 2001.

John: We began planning this reinstallation shortly after I arrived at the Gallery in 2006, and the opportunity to learn a collection and revaluate how it is presented has been extraordinary. As Pat mentions, the 1973 installation broke new ground in how museums presented art. For this installation, most of our galleries are in a 19th-century building and we have tried to be sympathetic to the space. We have re-created 19th-century casework and done away with platforms for furniture — subtle details that profoundly shift the viewer's relationship to the objects.

Ian: Diane, I visited you several times in 2008 and 2009 during your fellowship at Yale. What were your goals as you looked through Yale's glass collection, and how did that contribute towards the reinstallation?

Diane: The primary goal of my fellowship was to do a general assessment of the glass collection, update catalog records with new research and make recommendations for acquisition, conservation and for the 2012 reinstallation. Part of this included reading through archival records pertaining to Garvan's collecting practices. He assembled a significant collection of early American glass, which contains a number of notable pieces in the world of early American decorative arts.

Ian: Garvan received a great deal of help from some of the early dealers whose names are familiar to collectors of American glass and bottles.

Diane: Yes, the museum archive contains a great deal of correspondence about the glass collection. The most prominent dealer working with Garvan was Rhea Mansfield Knittle of Ashland, Ohio, who first offered her services to him in 1917 and worked with him from 1924. The letters that Garvan and Knittle exchanged provide insight into the dealer / collector relationship in addition to identifying key personalities in the glass world of the early twentieth century.

Ian: One of the better stories that emerged from Garvan's correspondence was his chance to buy the McKearin collection in 1929.

Diane: Yes, George McKearin did offer his collection to Mr. Garvan, and if that sale had taken place the story of glass at Yale would be a very different one today. In late 1929 Mrs. Knittle wrote a letter to Mr. Garvan to inform him that George McKearin was interested in selling his collection of over 5,000 pieces in its entirety. McKearin valued his collection at $500,000 but was offering it for a mere $400,000. Mrs. Knittle offered her services and those of her husband to Mr. Garvan to conduct a thorough appraisal. She discounted her rate to $3,000 for what she suggested would take about one month, citing her appraisal of the Montague collection as qualifying experience to now appraise the McKearin glass.

Ian: What did Garvan think of that?

Diane: Mr. Garvan balked at her fee, stating that she was asking "more than the Judges of the Supreme Court of the United States and the traffic won't bear it." Mr. Garvan eventually decided against the purchase of the McKearin collection, part of which was sold at auction in 1931 and 1932.

Ian: Was it Knittle who found the turtle for Garvan? What do their letters say about that?

Diane: Unfortunately the letters do not give an accounting of where or how the turtle was found. However, the letters do discuss Mrs. Knittle's extensive travels around Ohio and other mid-Western states to procure glass for Mr. Garvan. In an undated letter Mrs. Knittle mentions cataloging the turtle, referring to it as a "Free Trade and Sailors Rights bottle turned into a turtle."

Ian: Was the turtle ever exhibited at Yale, or was it leant out as part of the circulating collection?

Diane: Mrs. Knittle's only other mention of the turtle in her letters was to say that it went to Andover, Massachusetts, where Garvan had part of his collection on display at the Addison Gallery of American Art at the Phillips Academy.

Ian: The turtle is made from the best Dyottville emerald green glass. After being patterned and shaped in a flask-shaped mold, the body was reshaped to give a curved back and a skinny rear end. It was given thick legs with ends flattened and pincered into feet with webbed toes. The spine is a thick rigaree, and the thin extra

The many sides of Mr. Garvan's extraordinary turtle.

gather forming the tail is a remarkable survival. It has been very well looked after at Yale. I remember being blown away when it was recovered from storage.

Diane: I first saw the turtle in a black and white photograph, and so was struck by its brilliant color when I finally saw it in person. I have always been attracted to whimsies and not only is this a charming example of one, it also gives wonderful insight into the sense of humor of the craftsmen involved in the production of glass during the 19th century.

Pat: When I first saw the turtle, which was more than 40 years ago, my first reaction was that it was too good to be true.

Ian: You certainly do have to pinch yourself when you see it! Fortunately, there is no doubt about its authenticity and while its color is rare, it is well known in Dyottville glass.

Diane and I looked at the flask in May 2009. We reminded you about this remarkable object — the turtle — and I was jumping up and down saying that bottle collectors would line up around the museum, just to get a glimpse. What else needed to happen for it to be included in your reinstallation?

I am most familiar with the most recent installation, which included some very special glass, from a Stiegel creamer and Amelung's City of Boston tumbler through to 20th century art glass. In contrast, an earlier display included a large case devoted to glass.

Pat: The Garvan collection is best known for its extraordinary American silver — still the best collection in the country — and furniture, each of which has been thoroughly researched over the last 40 years. When I first came to Yale in the late 1960s only some furniture and silver were on view. All this changed when Charles Montgomery became curator in 1970. We brought the Charleston library bookcase into the galleries and displayed glass and ceramics on its shelves. Then in the

Chermayeff and Geismar installation there was an alcove devoted to glass. In recent years, we have tended to mix all the media together in our cases.

Ian: When you started working on the present installation, which came first, a set of themes or a selection of objects?

John: The main thrust of the past and current installation was a chronological thread, because this is the way the collections are most useful for teaching. Beginning with the 2001 installation, we began to introduce the idea of sub-themes within the chronology. For instance, we had a case devoted to new industries at the end of the colonial era that included Stiegel glass.

Ian: I remember corresponding with you about the date of the turtle, and your plan to include it in a display related to the War of 1812 and its aftermath. How do you present this period in your new installation?

Pat: We have a part of one case that has objects relating to the War of 1812, such as a gold sword that was presented to Stephen Decatur for his naval victory in capturing the Macedonian. The flask will be exhibited in that case.

Ian: The turtle was made from a flask that the McKearins classified as GIV-34. One side features the ship FRANKLIN, surrounded by the words FREE TRADE AND SAILORS RIGHTS. The other side shows a Masonic arch, beneath which is an assemblage of farm implements — a scythe, rake, shovel — and a sheaf of wheat, all surrounded by the words KENSINGTON GLASS WORKS PHILADELPHIA. Do the ship and slogan place it firmly in the War of 1812 period?

Pat: During the War of 1812 "Free Trade and Sailors' Rights" became a popular slogan championing the ability of countries to trade unencumbered, and the protection of sailors from impressments. Since the flask was made several years after the war, it is perhaps a stretch to connect it to the war, but obviously the slogan still had meaning in the popular culture when the flask was made.

Ian: You asked whether it was reasonable to date the turtle to the period 1815-35. I found the answer in Helen McKearin's impressive little book *Bottles, Flasks and Dr. Dyott* (Crown Publishers, 1970).

The Kensington Glass Works was built in 1816 and Dr. Thomas Dyott had a controlling interest by 1821. In an ad that first appeared March 4, 1822, he mentioned "American Eagle, ship Franklin, Agricultural and Masonic Pocket bottles, &c." In an 1825 ad he listed many familiar flasks including "2,000 [dozen] Ship Franklin and Agricul[tural Flasks]".

I believe that 1822 is too early, as is 1825, because GIV-34 is one of several Dyottville patterns that are the result of modifying earlier molds with extra wording around their edges. The McKearins listed the earlier, unmodified version, without the FREE TRADE and KENSINGTON inscriptions, as GIV-35.

The most famous mold in this group is the "Washington and Eagle Pint Flask", GI-15, which was modified soon after July 4th 1826. It received an inscription—ADAMS & JEFFERSON / JULY 4 A.D. 1776 around the bust of Washington—that commemorated the death of two former presidents on the 50th anniversary of independence. Its reverse inscription became KENSINGTON GLASS WORKS PHILADELPHIA, an ad for its maker. The result is the famous "firecracker" mold, GI-14.

It seems likely that this was the time that all of the Dyott molds were given their extra inscriptions, including the GIV-35 that became the turtle's pattern, GIV-34. Otherwise, the GI-15 mold would have first been modified with a different inscription that did not mention the events of July 4, 1826, but no such flask exists. No doubt the fancy colored pieces from the modified molds were among their earliest products, allowing them — and the turtle — to be dated to 1826 or shortly thereafter.

These and other historical flasks remind us that memories of the War of 1812 lingered for many years, until 1826 at least. Is that also true of other American decorative arts in your new installation?

Pat: I doubt that in the 1820s many Americans still thought a great deal about the War of 1812, although military leaders, such as William Henry Harrison and Andrew Jackson used their involvement in that conflict to advance their political careers in the 1820s and later.

Ian: It is wonderful to see Mr. Garvan's turtle on display. Yale is fortunate that he chose to leave it in your care. For me, it is particularly exciting to see a major historic flask being used so prominently to tell an important chapter in American history. That is precisely what makes these flasks so exciting to collectors.

Yale University Art Gallery is located at 1111 Chapel St., New Haven, Conn. Its website artgallery.yale.edu includes a catalog of its entire collection, including its glass. Admission is free. It is open Tuesday, Wednesday and Friday 10 to 5; Thursday 10 to 8 during the academic year; Saturday and Sunday 11 to 5. Across the street is another major Yale museum, the Yale Center for British Art.

Ian Simmonds deals in, researches and writes about early American glass. His website is www.iansimmonds.com