Gilded Age Grandeur:
Mount Washington Art Glass

The Mount Washington Glass Company was an innovator in the American art glass industry, which reached its zenith between 1885 and 1895 during the post-Reconstruction Gilded Age. Beginning in 1878 with the company’s first patented art glass, known as Sicilian or Lava glass, Mt. Washington developed several styles of immensely popular glass, including Burmese, Peach Blow, Albertine/Crown Milano, Royal Flemish, Colonial and Napoli, all of which are represented in the collection of the Forsyth Galleries. Featuring pieces from the Bill (‘35) and Irma Runyon Art Collections, and pieces borrowed from the collection of Robert and Pamela Smits, Gilded Age Grandeur illustrates the opulence and splendor of the Gilded Age, as well as the influences of Exoticism and the Aesthetic movement on decorative arts.

The Mount Washington Glass Co. began as a nameless glass studio in the Mt. Washington section of South Boston ca. 1837. Under the direction of Luther Russell and known locally as “Russell’s Glass House,” existing records do not indicate the use of the name Mt. Washington Glass Works until 1852. William L. Libbey and Timothy Howe purchased the firm in 1863, retaining the name and relocating to the whaling hub of New Bedford, Massachusetts in 1870. Frederick Shirley (1841-1908), who was initially hired as the manager of the company’s chandelier department, was promoted to Company Agent in 1874. By the time he left the firm in 1891, Shirley had registered 27 patents for inventions and processes, five design patents and four trademarks on behalf of the Mt. Washington Glass Co.
Sicilian

During the late 1870s, Mt. Washington was steadily producing lighting goods, Rich Cut, blown and pressed glass. The first art glass patented by the Mt. Washington firm, Sicilian Glass, was introduced in 1878. Sicilian Glass (also known as Lava Glass) was advertised as containing volcanic slag from the Sicilian volcano, Mt. Etna. The glass is usually black with colorful inclusions, but a few examples in other dark hues exist. Most pieces were undecorated, but a handful of pieces with enameled decorations survive. The glass was only produced for a few years; perhaps because of its difficulty to make or because of a lack of commercial success. Regardless of the reason, today Sicilian Glass is very scarce—the Forsyth Galleries’ collection includes only a single example.

Burmese

Between 1885 and 1890 the Mount Washington Glass Co. developed several unique lines of art glass. Burmese, Peach Blow, Pearl Ware, Albertine (Crown Milano) and Royal Flemish were all developed during this period. The most prolific and well-known of these glasses was Burmese, which is a translucent glass that shades from canary yellow at the bottom of each piece to salmon pink at the top. The glass was produced by Frederick Shirley as an accident while he was working to make a yellow-toned glass. While credit has erroneously been given to Queen Victoria for naming the glass after the beauty of a Burmese sunset, it is thought that an employee of the Mt. Washington factory suggested the name to Shirley because of the association of the color yellow with Burma (now the Republic of the Union of Myanmar), perhaps because of the golden-colored robes of the country’s Buddhist monks. The glass was created with a shiny finish, but most of the Mount Washington Burmese was exposed to the fumes of hydrofluoric acid or was actually dipped in the acid, giving it a satin, or “plush” finish.

Burmese glass proved to be very popular, and much of the company’s efforts went toward its creation between the years 1886 and 1891. To aid in the advertising of the line, Shirley sent pieces to the new bride of President Grover Cleveland in 1886 and also brought pieces to England to give to Queen Victoria and to her daughter, Princess Beatrice, during the same year. While in England Shirley received a British patent for Burmese and quickly sold the rights for the glass’s production to Thomas Webb & Sons; the English firm produced the glass under the name “Queen’s Burmese Ware.”
Both Burmese and Peach Blow were executed in organic shapes and decorations. These characteristics were also evident in the decorative art, fine art and literature of the late 19th century Aesthetic movement. The movement represented a backlash from the perception of the characterless products of the Machine Age and emphasized sensual and natural forms. Popular themes included birds, flowers, vines and ferns, as well as Japanese and other Far Eastern motifs; a muted palette of green, pink, rust and beige was also common. Although it is possible that the Mt. Washington Glass Co. and other art glass manufacturers were influenced by the ideas of Aestheticism, it is more likely that they were mostly interested in designing pieces that they felt would appeal to the public's fancy and therefore sell well, increasing company profits.

It is believed that at least 250 different Burmese shapes were produced by the firm over the years. According to an 1886 price list, options for Burmese decoration included 10 patterns of “regular” decoration and 28 patterns of “rich” decoration. Some of the examples represented in the Forsyth's collection include no. 8, “small blue flowers,” no. 30, “Lace Embroidery, Queen’s Patt.,” (which was the pattern given to Queen Victoria) and no. 260, “Storks, Egyptian Landscape, raised gold.” The most expensive examples of Burmese ware did not include enameling or gold decoration, but instead incorporated applied decorations; such pieces sold for around $8.00 each, depending on the finish.

Burmese glass continued to be produced by the firm until at least 1895, when it began to be overshadowed by other Mt. Washington offerings such as the Royal Flemish and Crown Milano lines. Mt. Washington Glass Company’s successors, Pairpoint Manufacturing Co. and Gunderson-Pairpoint Co. were among the firms that continued to sporadically make Burmese glass into the 1950s, but the ware never achieved the high regard that had made it so popular during the late 19th century.

**Peach Blow**

Peach Blow was another shaded art glass released onto the market by the Mt. Washington Glass Co. at roughly the same time as Burmese. However, public demand for Peach Blow never reached the level of Burmese, and it was not as widely produced, creating a much smaller sample of the ware surviving today. Peach Blow shades from a bluish-white at the base to bluish-pink near the top. Although other firms produce similarly-colored glass, Shirley managed to patent the use of the word “peach” in the product’s name, so other companies called their versions Coral Ware, Mandarin and Wild Rose. Many of Mt. Washington’s Peach Blow shapes and decorations were identical to Burmese examples, although not as many different shapes and decorations were used. It is believed that Mt. Washington continued to produce Peach Blow until about 1895, but the scarcity of existing pieces and related documentation make the final production date difficult to determine.
Albertine/Crown Milano

Albertine glass and Royal Flemish glass were the first lines introduced by Mt. Washington after the great commercial success of Burmese. Albertine was put on the market around the beginning of 1889 and was probably named after Mt. Washington designer Albert Steffin. Albertine was made from an opal (white) blank that was exposed to acid, creating a “plush” or satin finish, and was then decorated with enamel and raised gold decoration. Most Albertine glass was produced as utilitarian products, such as cracker jars and relatively simple vases. Perhaps because of lagging sales, in 1891 the company chose to reintroduce the glass as a “new” line, calling it Crown Milano. Crown Milano featured slightly more elaborate decorations that Albertine, with flowers and birds being the most popular decorative subjects. The product’s image makeover was a huge success, making Crown Milano one of Mt. Washington’s most well-known lines of art glass; the line was produced until at least 1894.

Royal Flemish

Royal Flemish glass was introduced by Mt. Washington around the same time as Albertine in early 1889, and was created from blanks of colorless glass that were decorated with sections of coloring outlined with gold enameling, creating a look similar to that of leaded glass. The forms and decorative themes of Royal Flemish were more exotic in nature, and featured “Oriental” influences. This contrasted with the more “Victorian” shapes of Burmese, Peach Blow, and another earlier Mt. Washington offering, Rose Amber. Natural elements such as flowers, plants, fish and ducks were well represented in the Royal Flemish designs, and are demonstrated in the Forsyth’s Royal Flemish pieces. Frank Guba (1867-1938), one of Mt. Washington’s most skilled and prolific decorators was known for the beautiful ducks he used to illustrate his works. Today, ducks used to decorate Mt. Washington pieces are often called “Guba Ducks” by collectors, even though not all Mt. Washington ducks were painted by him. Medieval “grotesques,” such as dragons and double-headed eagles, were also popular Royal Flemish decorative elements, and can be seen in a lidded jar featuring cupid attacking a winged monster. Unlike Albertine/Crown Milano, most Royal Flemish pieces were designed as decorative, rather than utilitarian pieces. Mt. Washington ceased production of Royal Flemish glass around 1895.
Colonial ware

Colonial ware was developed by Mt. Washington in late 1892 and was first introduced in advertising in early 1893. Colonial was a milky-white, translucent glass with a shiny finish, unlike that of Albertine/Crown Milano. In fact, some call Colonial ware Shiny Crown Milano, but the company considered them two distinct products. Although some of the shapes and decorations of Crown Milano and Colonial ware were similar, many Colonial ware pieces featured rather elaborate, unique shapes not found in other Mt. Washington lines, as well as decorative figures dressed in 18th century costumes of the American colonial period. Other out-of-the-ordinary Colonial ware decorations included French King Louis XVI, Venetian scenes and fleur-de-lis. The ware was only produced for about three years, illustrating the speed with which such ornamentation went out of fashion.

Napoli

Napoli glass was first marketed as “Neapolitan” glass and feature decoration on both the inside and outside of each piece of glass. While the outline of a figure was painted in gold on one side, the shading used to fill in the figure was painted on the other. This process not only created a very interesting visual product, but it also eliminated the need for the two separate firings that had been necessary when dealing with enameled colors and gilding. Even though the steps followed in the creation of Napoli were relatively efficient, the product was still extremely difficult and time-consuming to make, and Napoli was only produced by Mt. Washington for about two years, from mid-1894 until 1896. Almost all Napoli pieces are labeled with the word “Napoli,” so even though they can be difficult to find, they are relatively easy to identify. “Brownies,” characters created by the children’s illustrator Palmer Cox (1840-1924) were featured on Napoli glass and on other Mt. Washington art glasses. The Brownies were first published by Cox in 1879. Cox was the first American artist to commercially license his work, and the Brownies appeared in advertising and on many products throughout the 1880s and 1890s. Some businesses used the Brownies on their products without Cox’s permission. No evidence has been found showing that the Mt. Washington Glass Co. applied for licensing from Cox or his attorney, but the Brownies appear on Napoli, Royal Flemish, and Crown Pairpoint (a decorated French ceramic) pieces.

The Mt. Washington Glass Co. continued to produce decorated art glass products until at least 1904 or 1905, but the demand for such pieces had peaked before the turn of the century. After 1900 the company’s concentration moved to the creation and marketing of Rich Cut glass and lighting. The Mt. Washington Glass Co. was officially absorbed by the adjacent Pairpoint Manufacturing Co. in 1894, and Pairpoint continued to market glass under the Mt. Washington name until at least 1907. Pairpoint folded in 1938, and after a brief reopening as Gunderson-Pairpoint Glass Company in the 1950s, the Mt. Washington furnaces that were still being used by the company were shut down for repairs in 1956 but never reopened.