Identifying Georgian Drinking Glasses

An Introduction to Georgian Drinking Glasses. Part II

By John Ainsley

In my Introduction to Georgian Drinking Glasses Part I in the November/December 2005 edition of Antiques Info, I covered a brief history of glass, a longer survey of glass in England from the middle ages and finally a summary of all of the types and when they developed between the end of the seventeenth and the start of the nineteenth century. Here the story continues with a broad look at the current market including pitfalls, plus a point by point recognition analysis which should seriously help the reader to enter the market and begin to form a collection with confidence. Both the positive recognition factors at each stage and the pitfalls and problems associated with the analysis will be integrated, exposing the reader to a balanced discussion which should help prevent misleading assumptions being formed.

The hunt for Georgian drinking glasses isn’t quite like hunting for the more common collectibles. You could trawl around the more common antiques and collectables fairs and centres for months and not even find one good specimen. If you do there is usually only the very odd one in the ownership of a dealer who may know only very little about it. As a consequence prices can be inflated, dramatically. This does not detract from the value of the glass.

Now for my ABC of recognition from a distance. Study the forms. These are unique. Later copies, reproductions or fakes, or doctor glasses are rarely quite right. The particular nuances of history are gone, along with the craftsmen, the tools, and the material. Beware, however, as there are always exceptions to any rule. Glasses have been reproduced which are very close to the originals. Others have been reproduced by craftsmen using original tools and methods and chemically accurate material. These can be testing and even threatening to experts. Luckily most are awful and represent no threat to anybody with knowledge of the subject. At a distance genuine Georgian drinking glasses have a grey appearance - the colour is darker than modern glass which is much brighter and whiter. There are exceptions: nineteenth and even early twentieth century glass, up to about George V, may still have a grey appearance.

Finally, still without handling the glass, note the much wider feet on most eighteenth century glasses. When placed together, feet touch first. In modern glasses the bowls always touch first. Press the rim of a Georgian glass into your palm to leave a white mark. Reverse the glass and note that the foot nearly always extends beyond the mark made by the rim.

Now pick up your glass. The most important part for recognition purposes is the foot. Underneath in the centre is usually a pontil mark. That is a snapped off scar of glass where the foot was held by a pontil rod (see fig. 1), enabling the gaffer of the team to work on the bowl after it was cut from the blowing iron. Such feet are usually domed (see fig. 2 and 4) thus ensuring that the rough pontil cannot touch and damage the surface it stands on.

Above: fig. 1. Note in the centre of the foot the clear pontil mark made as the pontil rod was snapped from the glass. Note the extensive wear at the edge of the foot (b). A magnifying glass and good lighting are essential for spotting such fine detail.
Late in the eighteenth century it became the practice to ground out pontils, giving a hollowed appearance to the centre of the foot. As the late eighteenth century progressed, ground out pontils became more common and feet gradually flattened as the need to protect surfaces disappeared. Note that in the first half of the eighteenth century folded feet were common but began to give way to the plain foot around 1750. Note the handmade feel of the foot, and the concentric striations and for the first time apply a magnifying glass to the bottom edge where the glass would meet surfaces. There should be heavy ‘moss’ wear which will extend over a greater area of the foot if it is flattened (see fig. 2). All genuine Georgian drinking glasses, having survived for 200-300 years have this and other wear unless the foot rim has been ground away to hide any chipping.

Check the edge of the foot very closely as you rotate the glass. It should be as shiny and fire polished as the rest of the glass and there will be very tiny nicks here and there where it has come into contact with other glasses over the centuries (see text for an explanation). Dating on one or two features only is risky - every feature described here can only occur for all practical purposes on genuine period drinking glasses. Above all, study the forms of eighteenth century glasses. Make friends with specialist dealers, generally a fraternity willing to discuss their subject and share their knowledge with a cordiality rarely matched in other fields. John Ainsley is always willing to receive enquiries on Georgian drinking glasses. Please e-mail enquiries@georgianglass.com and include pictures where possible.

Check the glass for imperfections such as stones, seeds and air bubbles. They are usually present in genuine glasses. Stones are usually whitish foreign bodies which have fallen into the batch and seeds are blackish, foreign objects from the glass mix (see fig. 5 and 6). Finally, hold the foot or stem and tap your fingernail against the rim. Lead glass will ring clearly for some time, non-lead glasses will not. Many of the features discussed can appear on nineteenth and even early twentieth century glasses: a darker colour, hand made features, striations, stones, seeds, air bubbles can indicate glasses up to George V, but never later. English lead crystal has been continuously made since its invention by Ravenscroft in the late seventeenth century. But all of the features previously described can only occur for all practical purposes on genuine period drinking glasses. Above all, study the forms of eighteenth century glasses. Only then check out all of the other features. Make friends with specialist dealers, generally a fraternity willing to discuss their subject and share their knowledge with a cordiality rarely matched in other fields.

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