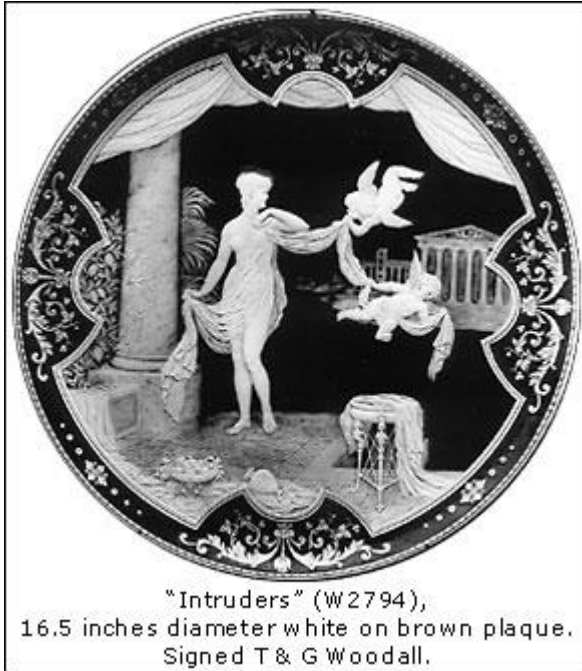


The Cameo Glass of Thomas and George Woodall



Mention the term 'cameo' and most people delve into their jewellery box and hold up a brooch. It is remarkable that so many people are still unfamiliar with a form of glass sculpture that has existed since Roman times. Cameo work by definition is a design produced in relief in a colour or colours on a background of a different colour. With glass this is achieved by producing the design on a cased article. Two main methods were used to case glass.

The first method involved taking the blowing iron and gathering about three-quarters of the amount of glass required to make the article from a pot containing the base or underlying colour. After slightly blowing and truing the gather, the glass required for the outer layer was gathered from another pot. This was then manipulated so as to coat or thoroughly encase the first gather.

The second method, which was probably a secondary development, was referred to as the cupping method. This involved producing an open cup from the glass required for the outer layer and whilst this was still at a working temperature placing a pre-formed bubble of glass on a blowing iron into it. This was then blown and expanded in such a way that it expelled all the air from between the two items of glass and the cup could be picked up and manipulated. This process had the advantage of being able to more easily control the thickness of the layer and be repeated where multi-coloured layers were required.

With most cameo articles the main body of glass is crystal. The base colour is generally a very thin layer on the inside of the crystal and the outer layer(s), which were to be carved, are on the outside. It is likely that both methods described above were used in combination to produce the blanks. The gathering process would be used to cover a small amount of coloured glass with the main body of the crystal and the outer layers applied using the cupping method.

The crystal performed a number of functions: it first provided the mechanical strength of the article. Second, since crystal takes on the colour of any glass in contact with it, less coloured glass needed to be used and more subtle colours could be achieved. The third important function was to provide the artist with a greater tolerance of error in the depth of etching, cutting and carving needed when producing the design.

Cameo glass was revived in the nineteenth-century through the skill and dedication of two men. Philip Pargeter who used his Red House glassworks to produce the necessary glass blanks, and John Northwood who developed the art of carving away the unwanted glass layers to produce the images on the layers of glass. Two of his apprentices were Thomas and George Woodall. The first child of Thomas and Emma Woodall, born in 1849, Thomas followed his father's lead and became a skilled musician and passionate churchgoer. From an early age he played the harmonium, wrote music and conducted choirs and bands. After an education at the Wordsley National School and Stourbridge School of Art, Thomas became an apprentice at J & J Northwood.

John Northwood used Thomas to work on the preparatory stages of the Portland Vase, which remained Woodall's proudest accomplishment. In 1877 Thomas was employed by Thomas Webb & Sons where he later became Manager of their cameo operations. Thousands of pieces of commercial (flower, fruit or foliage) cameo were produced under his guidance, plus many unique vases and plaques decorated by the Woodall brothers. Fascinated by Chinese art glass, he designed and carved many oriental-inspired pieces and worked alongside his brother carving decorative borders on larger cameo plaques. Important pieces of work from the Woodall team were marked with the distinctive Webb's GEM CAMEO trademark. His keen love of local causes led to him avoiding publicity. Combined with his unwillingness to sign his work, his name slipped from the public's eye and his great achievements in glass were largely forgotten.

Instead, Thomas Woodall preferred to spend his time advocating the Liberal Party manifesto of social reform and equality for all. Through sitting on various local committees, including Holy Trinity Church Parochial Church Council and the Stourbridge Board of Guardians, he championed many local causes including a much needed Art School for Wordsley. In 1899, under his guidance as Treasurer, the first students

entered that building. After Frederick Carder's emigration to the USA, Thomas Woodall remained and raised enough money to extend and complete the Art School in 1906. He retired to relative obscurity as a music dealer and died in 1926 a modest man.

From an early age George Woodall developed a sense of flair and showmanship. Through successful publishing ventures George became a local celebrity in Kingswinford. Like his brother he also went through the local Art School, worked for J & J Northwood and left them to work at Thomas Webb & Sons where he helped to re-apply the cutting and polishing techniques to produce pieces in the 'rock crystal' style. His tireless work refining the production processes for cameo glass brought its reward, as he became an international icon at numerous exhibitions where he showcased fabulous pieces of glass sculpture. Many of the maidens depicted in his work were modelled on his four daughters – Amy, Alice, Connie and Pamela.

His house was decorated with photographs of his favourite pieces: The Toilet of Venus, Sappho, Lord Kelvin, Syrena, Aphrodite, The Origin of Painting, Andromeda and Dancing Girl. Moorish Bathers was his greatest achievement with seven figures carved in glass. He signed the majority of his work, ensuring that he carved his name in history. He retired to continue working as a freelance cameo artist and died in 1925.

George Woodall was also a keen photographer and left behind a unique record of his own cameo works and of life in the Kingswinford and Wordsley area in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. At international auctions his pieces fetch five-figure sums and his work is valued by glass collectors world-wide. In 1980 the Daily Telegraph described him as "the Rembrandt of Glass".

'The Cameo Glass of Thomas and George Woodall' by Christopher Woodall Perry, the great-great-grandson of George Woodall, documents the work of his gifted ancestors. His research has spanned several years and taken him as far afield as Australia, resulting in a detailed record of the cameo glass produced by the Woodalls and a fascinating insight into the brothers' lives and times. In addition to archive material held by world-wide museums and universities, the author has been given access to the collections of sketchbooks, documents, letters, tools and photographs, owned by the many Woodall descendants. The book contains hitherto unpublished pictures of pieces in family and private collections and reproductions of George Woodall's own photographic negatives of cameo work. It is to be a richly illustrated volume containing a wealth of new material and information on nineteenth-century cameo glass, including an expanded record of Thomas Webb's price book and previously-unpublished sketches from Webb pattern books of Woodall work.

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