OPALINE BOXES

Whether they display classical restraint or Baroque extravagance, these 19th-century colored-glass objets work brilliantly in contemporary interiors

By Martin Filler

The holy grail of European decorative arts from the Middle Ages onward was porcelain. As the miraculously pure-white ceramic made its way west from China, European potters were astounded and baffled by its thin cross section, hard vitreous surface, and translucent glaze. Until the 18th century, when the Elector of Saxony's ceramists finally cracked the secret Chinese formula, porcelain could only be imitated with varying degrees of failure. But even after westerners learned how to make the high-fired ware, it remained prohibitively expensive, and clever craftsmen continued to devise aesthetically and economically acceptable substitutes.

Among the most resourceful sleight-of-hand fabricators were the glassmakers of Venice, who, during the mid-14th century, learned how to make an almost opaque white glass by adding tin oxide or the ashes of cattle bones to their mix. This clever idea was eventually picked up in the glassmaking centers of Austria, Bohemia, and Germany, where it became known as *beinglas* ("bone glass"). Typically, the porcelain look-alike was painted in imitation of fashionable china, but knowledgeable connoisseurs were never deceived by the charade, and many of the wares were decorated with Islamic motifs for sale in the less sophisticated Turkish market. Nonetheless, for European ladies who ranked beneath the nobility—from fashionable demimondaines to cosseted merchants' wives—the pretty fakes provided a delightful artifice.

Opaline boxes reflect their aristocratic origins. From left: Sapphire blue "coffer," c. 1815. Napoleon III jewel casket, c. 1860. Rare 1840s emerald opaline case holds fitted scent flacons.

In post-Revolution France, a taste for simplicity asserted itself in the wake of the stylistic excesses of the ancien régime. The great porcelain manufactories such as Sèvres could no longer depend on the patronage of the aristocracy (or what was left of it), and, to fill the vacuum, solid-color glass objects made by the grand *cristalleries* became an affordable rage among the upper-middle classes. But rather than mimicking porcelain, French master glassmakers began to exploit the near-opaque material for qualities that even the finest china didn't possess.

Bone ash made glass white, the only option available until artisans learned how to introduce color into the recipe with oxides of antimony or arsenic. Fashion cannot exist where there is no choice, and it became imperative for the French to come up with new hues if the glass was to become more desirable. One of the first variants, devised in the early 19th century, was *boulles de savon* (soap bubbles), which added subtle tints that suggested a filmy rainbow-like iridescence. Another shade, now much prized, was the delicate mauve *gorge de pigeon* (pigeon's throat). The rare yellow and turquoise (much less common than the usual sky blue) were perfected in about 1810, and black was developed a decade later.

Around 1823, the preeminent French glass manufacturer Baccarat coined the term *opalin* for its high-quality version of the old doppelgänger, and within 15 years the word was in general circulation. The heyday of opaline came between 1840 and 1850 under Louis Philippe, the "Citizen >

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