A Quick Guide to Vaseline Glass

What you need to know about the collectible antique tableware that glows when exposed to sunlight or blacklight, bringing a sophisticated take on neon to your decor

by ALEXA BRAZILIAN

WHILE VASELINE GLASS may have a rather unappealing name, the antique tableware—distinguished by its radiant yellow-green hue—is anything but. Typically seen in the form of Victorian-style bowls, pitchers, plates and candlesticks, the glass can look coolly classic or surfer-dude modern depending on the room it inhabits.

"It’s really a grown-up take on neon," said Zandra Pappas, who co-owns the Manhattan interior design firm Pappas Miron with Tatyana Miron. "We love using Vaseline glass candlesticks or big bowls in all sorts of interiors, whether it’s a breezy screened-in summer porch or a moody paneled library." The partners have been collecting the style for years, snapping up pieces at estate sales, on eBay or at the Manhattan vintage tableware emporium Fishs Eddy, which consistently carries a small stock in its shops and online.

Boston decorator Gary McBurnie, whose book "Living Color" (Pointed Leaf Press) came out last month, has a similar appreciation for the acid-toned tableware dating back to his childhood. "I was fascinated by my grandmother's collection, which to me was prettier than all the surrounding crystal in her china cabinet," he recalled. "I remember waiting patiently for her to serve dessert on these magical dishes."

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Originally known, more appealingly, as "canary glass," the tableware first emerged in the 1830s—crafted by blowing glass doped with small amounts of uranium dioxide. "The style was popularized by the Austrian artisan Franz Xavier Riedel [1786-1844], who realized that adding the chemical resulted in those lovely transparent yellow and greenish-yellow hues," said Reid Dunavant, senior vice president and general appraiser for the auction house Doyle New York. The glass's peak popularity spanned the 1880s through the 1920s, he said, with demand supplied by manufacturers ranging from France-based Baccarat to the emerging American brand Steuben. Sometime in that period, the now-common moniker Vaseline glass was coined—inspired by the way the glass's hue resembles the opaque, lemon-yellow color of petroleum jelly. With the Cold War came strict limitations on the availability of uranium, bringing production of the glass largely to an end.

Thanks to that bit of uranium, the glass emits a supernatural neon-green glow when held up to a black light—a tricky seller uses to prove their stock is the real McCoy and not simply colored glass. (Sunlight also triggers the effect to a lesser degree.) Though the radiation levels are negligible, added Mr. Dunavant, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency nevertheless advises using the glass pieces as ornaments rather than as serving dishes.

Whether you want to give a little kryptonite kick to an alfresco dinner with a set of chartreuse candlesticks, or enhance a bouquet of wildflowers with a leaf-green pitcher, Vaseline glass is both charming and relatively cheap. "$10-$75 on eBay, while rare, handblown examples fetch around $2,000 on antiques sites. "It makes a unique statement without being a big commitment financially or stylistically," added Ms. Pappas, who appreciates the glass's "inner glow." It has, she said, "always reminded me of phosphorescence in a moonlit ocean."

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