

1503 & 1503½ Crystolite Cream and Sugars

Eric Tankesley-Clarke

It's a curse to be common. Never mind that maybe you got that way because you were so darn good. If you don't bring high prices at auction, if no one makes a beeline to get to you first, if no one stops to admire the qualities that made you so desirable back in the day, somehow, it hurts your dignity. No matter how common, you still deserve all the respect due your more rare and choice compatriots. Common or rare, Heisey creams and sugars are on my beat, to be covered without prejudice and with full equality before the court of collectors' opinions. Maybe I added that last part, but it was a nice gesture, don't you think?

From 1938 until the end of the company's production, A. H. Heisey & Co. sold Crystolite. Boy, did it sell Crystolite. Popular then. Popular today. During hard times it saved Heisey's, um, well, it saved Heisey from closing. Its popularity then translates into reasonable prices for the collector today. Everyone wins.

The Heisey News has recounted more than once the story of Crystolite's origins. A smoking set under pattern number 1496, known as Rajah or Mahabar, came out in about 1937. Within a very short time, numerous other pieces were made under pattern number 1503, and were first called Cryst-O-Lite. Within a short time, the number 1496 was abandoned and the smoking pieces moved to 1503. Meanwhile those quirky but fashionable hyphens were dropped and the big O subdued to give us the very familiar name we know today.

The design of Crystolite represents a move away from the Art Deco that dominated many patterns in the late 1920's and early 1930's. Stanhope (which will figure later in this Crystolite story) was introduced just a few months prior to Crystolite, in 1937. The precise lines sweeping side by side and the sharp points to which those lines come help place Stanhope squarely in the Art Deco tradition, stylewise if not in time. By 1937, however, Art Deco was waning, and that may account for the sluggish reception that Stanhope received at the time.

Crystolite blunts those lines and points. Smoothly swelling ribs and rounded ends not only define Crystolite but are classic hallmarks of Art Moderne (or Streamline Moderne, if you prefer that name). Where Art Deco took pride in sharply defined shapes, Art Moderne approached things more organically, without abandoning Deco sensibility altogether. It was a movement that had been seen in architecture for a few years already, and it was beginning to move indoors as appliances and other household goods adopted the style. I fondly remember a gleaming, bulbous toaster at my grandmother's house that dated from this same time. Heisey designers kept pace (with Art Moderne, not my grandmother) and Crystolite was born.

By all measures, Heisey had a hit on its hands. Brilliant glass radiated in Crystolite, thanks both to the mostly high-grade batch formulas and to the optics of the rounded, smooth trusses along its sides. Crystolite carried the company through the war. Simple designs, easily handled during the moulding and needing little manipulation afterward, helped the profit margin and ensured that the pattern could be produced during the shortage of skilled manpower. The shape, glitter, and weight of the glass obviously appealed to the consumer. Lucky was the hometown store that sold it. Satisfaction spread throughout the land.

As a consequence of Crystolite's popularity, cream and sugar collectors have it easy when it comes to this pattern. There are three different sets. (I didn't say it would be *that* easy.) None are rare and none cost very much. No set requires a lid. There is the tray for the individual set, but it is readily available, too. Table sets are a thing of the past, so no searching for those pesky covered butters and spooners. Many a Heisey collector started with Crystolite, and, likely as not, a cream or sugar was among the first pieces.

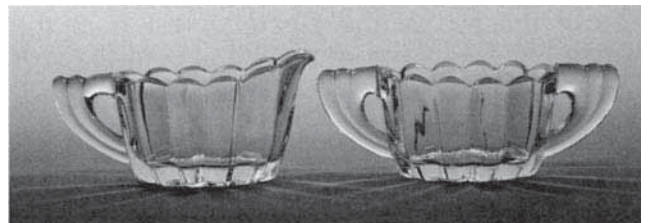


Figure 1

Likely the easiest to find of these is the standardized oval cream and sugar (fig. 1). The

prominently airborne handles epitomize Art Moderne. The only puzzle is why this distinctive motif wasn't more widely used in the pattern. The handles certainly add panache. In the sugar, the handles make up fully 40% of the total length and even more of the visual impact of the piece. In either cream or sugar, 12 wide ribs make up the body. Not only are the ribs convex, gathering the light and refracting it so attractively, but they are also gently curved from top to bottom. Each piece has a nicely ground bottom rim on an otherwise slightly concave, plain base. On the bottom of that base, you will usually find the mark. You know, the mark that suddenly makes them rare and valuable in some antique malls.



Figure 2

The individual sets are nearly perfect miniatures of the larger oval ones (fig. 2). At the reduced scale, the handle needed to be revised slightly. The connector between handle and body is reduced. The spout of the individual cream requires the frontmost ribs to be rise up sooner, so the profile isn't exactly the same as its larger counterpart (fig. 3). Otherwise, the individual cream and sugar are ground and marked in the same way

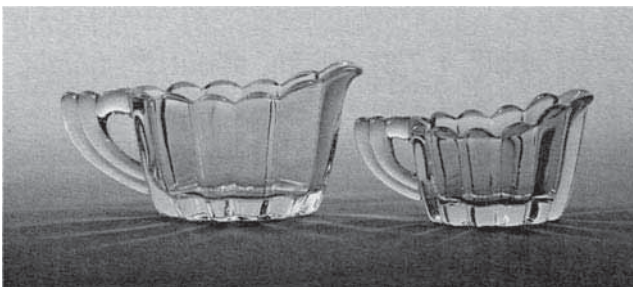


Figure 3

Of all cream and sugar sets, I'd say the individual-sized 1503 Crystolite is the one that is most likely to be found with the accompanying tray. I would also guess that this set was used as a gift for many occasions. They are often found in perfect condition, more so than the larger and (let's face it)

more useful ones. As with many gifts, they may have been displayed ("They are so dazzling!") or stored ("You really shouldn't have."). Unlike with some other patterns, Heisey seemed to consider the tray an essential part of the set. While you could buy the pieces separately, when it came to pricing as sets, Heisey always listed the cream, sugar, and tray together, never just the individual cream and sugar.

In the individual tray, we see a couple of other features of the pattern. The bottom is ribbed like the sides, or, to put it another way, the side ribs extend across the bottom to meet in the center. Four of the 16 ribs, two on either end, are re-engineered to end in pairs of rounded, compressed balls, so that each handle is formed from four of the balls. The tray is less likely to be marked. Because of the bottom ribs, there is no grinding on this piece.

That leaves us with one set to go, the 1503 1/2 cream and sugar (fig. 4). These are quite a bit less common than the other two sets, but can be found without too much ado. What strikes even the most casual observer is that these look a lot like the 1483 Stanhope cream and sugar.



Figure 4

In fact, since Stanhope didn't take off, Heisey simply re-worked the Stanhope moulds to create 1503 1/2 Crystolite (fig. 5). Where Stanhope had open handles, Crystolite filled them in. The handles' cross-sections were softened to eliminate the edges and rims of the Stanhope ones. Gone were the Art Deco up-sweeping Stanhope lines, replaced by 16 glowing Art Moderne ribs of Crystolite. The ribs lend a chunkier Crystolite profile to the formerly svelte Stanhope. Where Stanhope sat directly on its bottom, Crystolite articulated a very slight, low foot. The slightly squared tops of Stanhope became nearly round in Crystolite.

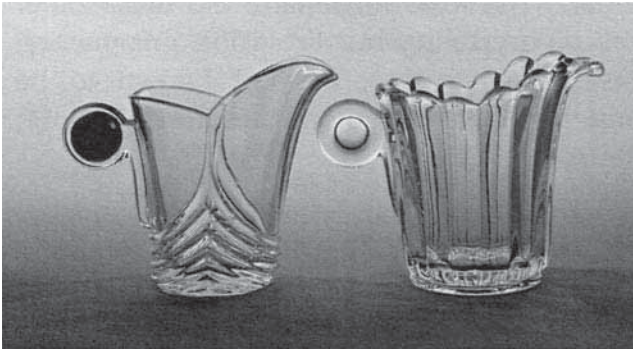


Figure 5

For all that, the Stanhope shapes in Crystolite dress still didn't make it in the marketplace. The new, improved version did little better than the original, judging from how long it was listed and its current availability. For the typical Crystolite collector, then, the 1503 1/2 round set will be the last one to enter the collection. We're just fortunate that the set made it into Catalog 212, so there is no doubt what they are. No other catalog illustrates them.

The round creams and sugars I have seen have been marked, and I'd guess they always are. I have seen the foot either ground or just fire-polished.

The Crystolite (Mahabar) smoking set came in Sahara and Zircon, and a few pieces later rarely occur in Sultana (let alone some unusual treatments using cobalt). The creams and sugars, however, are strictly crystal.

This is the point where I normally say something about decorations. This is doomed to be a short paragraph. In general, Crystolite was not decorated by Heisey. Hurricane lamp shades don't really count. The Crystolite surface didn't invite cutting, and just try laying an etching design on those bumpy ribs. You do occasionally see a little cranberry flashing, I have seen some silver, and there are a few other odds and ends. The decoration collector would do well to look elsewhere.

The oval sets, included in the first offering of Crystolite, were still being made when the factory

closed. I find it odd, therefore, that they are not recorded as having been made by Imperial. The folks in Bellaire did make other pieces of Crystolite, but the 1503 creams and sugars, of either size, are not known to be among them. They didn't resurrect 1503 1/2, either.

Crystolite collectors are often warned about look-alikes, especially Duncan & Miller's 113 Radiance. Fortunately, the Radiance cream and sugar bear little resemblance to Crystolite. Along with many other differences, the handles, in particular, are not at all like Heisey's.

Vital Statistics:

1503 oval cream—Length including handle and spout, 5 1/2"; width, 2 3/4"; height at top of spout, 2 3/4". Base about 3" x 1 7/8".

1503 oval sugar—Length including handles, 6 3/8"; width, 2 3/4"; height, 2 3/8". Base about 3" x 1 7/8".

1503 individual cream—Length including handle and spout, about 4 1/4"; width 2 1/8"; height at top of spout, about 2 1/8". Base about 2 3/8" x 1 1/2".

1503 individual sugar—Length including handles, about 4 7/8"; width, about 2"; height, 1 3/4". Base about 2 1/4" x 1 1/2".

1503 individual tray—Length including handles, 6 3/4"; width, 3 1/2"; height, about 7/8".

1503 1/2 round cream—Length including handle and spout, 5"; width, 3 1/2"; height at top of spout, 4". Base diameter, 2 1/4".

1503 1/2 round sugar—Length including handles, 6"; width, 4"; height, 3 3/8". Base diameter, about 2 5/8".

Many pieces are marked. Plain bottoms, mostly ground, except the tray and some round creams and sugars. Crystal only.

Transforming from one style to another can sometimes work wonders. What transformed you into a Heisey collector? Write me at heisey@embarqmail.com.