

AMERICAN GLASS

If the hand-blown art glass produced by Louis Comfort Tiffany's firms were symbols of wealth and taste for the upper tier of society, it was by no means the only fine glass consumers of the era acquired to make a statement in their homes. Three Face, hand-carved, and carnival glass are other pathways in the history of American glassmaking. Although generally far less expensive than Tiffany glass, they were loved by the many Americans in whose visual world they were prominent.

Three Face pattern glass (c. 1878–90), designed by John Ernest Miller of George Duncan & Sons, was wildly popular for entertaining. Made in shapes ranging from biscuit jars to compotes, its three identical classical faces, cast in a mold, undoubtedly refer to the goddess of magic and spells, Hecate. In antiquity, three-faced pillars were placed at crossroads and doorways to ward off evil spirits coming from any direction. Forming the stem of a goblet in an American dining room, she could keep the family safe.

At the 1876 Centennial Exhibition in Philadelphia, the exhibits of U.S. cut glass were so superior to their European rivals that they generated a major revival of the cut-glass industry in this country now known as the Brilliant Period. Works by Libbey Glass Company, T.G. Hawkes & Company, and J. Hoare & Company—all represented in this exhibition—became the height of fashion.

Carnival glass, pressed glass that sold for pennies and was often given as prizes in carnival games, has been called “poor man's Tiffany.” Produced by several makers, the most famous of which is the Fenton Art Glass Company (est. 1905), carnival glass is iridescent, dramatically colorful, and unmistakable.