

Love in taxing times

Jay Miller

When this you see
remember me
when I am farre away at sea

For the cataloguer or curator, any handwriting attached to or incorporated in a work of art or craft provides a fascinating and vivid link with the creator or past user. When such handwriting is combined with a miscellany of images the challenge to research the work becomes compelling.¹ The quotation above is handwritten on a piece of paper, adhered with several other cut-out images to the inner surface of a cylindrical glass container with two cinched ends. Such objects are nowadays described as rolling pins but in the 19th century they were of a category of works in glass known as 'friggers'. Initially these storage containers were hand-produced throughout the British Isles, from the mid-18th to mid-19th century (many more were later produced by machine as 20th century tourist souvenirs). According to Howe, the name 'frigger' comes from the verb 'to friggle' or 'mess abaht', often the result of glass blowers using up unused glass and at the same time developing their craft skills.² In this instance 'the glass blower would skilfully swing the molten glass globe'³ until the requisite hollow length was obtained; the narrow necked ends became a means of attaching a ribbon or some wire, with which to hang and display safely the

fragile container. Our example has a slightly faded and threadbare woven green ribbon attached.

In 1845 the British tax on flint glass was repealed and better quality glass was more readily available for more decorative versions. A clear amethyst-coloured glass frigger, which is part of the Ernst Matthaei Memorial Collection of Early Glass, is on display at University House.⁴ This example is catalogued as being circa 1840, but there is a good chance, given its fine quality, that it may postdate 1845 and abolition of the tax.

It could be argued that the design of the frigger in the Grimwade Collection almost suggests camouflage, an attempt perhaps to disguise highly taxed glass by swirling white paint inside and forming an opaque ground. At first sight the work appears to be a ceramic container rather than glassware. It is likely the paint used is heavily leaded and hopefully the stored contents did not become a health hazard to the owners. Just as glass was taxed, so too were luxury commodities such as tea, sugar and salt, and these were frequently presented as treasured gifts stored in these decorative containers. Arnold notes also that within a household a concentration of salt in a container such as a frigger would have

been regarded by some as a powerful symbol of luck and a protection against witchcraft.⁵ Keeping the container and contents intact and limiting the use of salt would thereby preserve not only the good fortune but also in retrospect the probable health of the household. Friggers were sometimes presented as wedding gifts but more often as keepsakes or love tokens by sailors and soldiers.

It is difficult to determine for sure if our frigger was a Grimwade family treasure. A label on one end could be an auction label or it could be an early catalogue label. The Grimwade involvement with both glass manufacturing and salt production in late 19th century Australia could have inspired an interest in the purchase of such an item for the family's private collection.⁶

The printed paper images decorating the container are intriguing, but offer some clues as to the date of manufacture. They are an odd assortment of images selected by either the maker or giver. For instance there is one graphic of an early steam locomotive which resembles a steam engine designed and built by Robert Stephenson, named *The Planet*.⁷ If the image does in fact depict *The Planet* it could perhaps be inspired by its links with the seaport of Liverpool.⁸ The National Rail

Museum archive at York has also suggested that as rail networks were established and expanded globally, navvies or engineers, who often travelled widely within the British Isles and abroad, could also have bestowed such a gift. Another unusual image for a love token is a child wearing a blood-red dress carrying a pennant, a drum and waving a sword, labelled the 'Young soldier', perhaps to invoke a sense of the giver being involved in manly deeds, or protection of the young.

The main cut-out graphic that strongly supports the theory that this container was once a love token depicts a well-dressed young woman, whose fashion suggests a date of circa 1820. This image is labelled 'The love letter' and she coyly regards the viewer over her left shoulder while holding a love letter in her left hand. This, together with the handwritten message, surely alludes to a romantic purpose, until that is, we inspect the image immediately above. Here a dramatic scene unfolds with a fainting lady and a man in Ottoman dress grasping her hand and waving a dagger; this tableau is labelled 'The fair Circasian' [*sic*], perhaps a warning to the beloved that it would be wise to remain faithful to the absent giver. With further investigation of this reference it became apparent that The

Fair Circassian as a concept was widely used in literature and correspondence of the early 18th century and continued to inspire poets and playwrights well into the 19th century.⁹ It is regularly referred to by travellers and explorers in eastern Europe and a reference was

even made in a significant legal case on the subject of the status of a slave.¹⁰ The exotic concept of fair Circassian slaves—that is, young women from the Caucasus—certainly appears to have been a popular fantasy of the era. Such an image could also be a reference to the distant





Artist unknown (English, 19th century), 'Frigger', glass, paint and paper cut-outs, length: 37.5 cm. Accession no. 1973.0207, University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest 1973.

lands where a sailor, soldier or perhaps an engineer was to be posted. Maintaining the exotic theme, there is also a female figure, almost a caricature in form, dressed in rather lewd Regency style, wielding a vegetative branch, who is labelled 'Fatima'; perhaps another character in contemporary popular literature.

The references to exotic locations also prompt speculation that the giver could have been both soldier and sailor: a member of the Marine Corps, employed in the protection and support of naval vessels, and operational in regions dominated by the Ottoman Empire. From the early 1800s during the period of the Napoleonic wars and until 1832, the Greek war of independence was waged continually against the Ottoman rulers, a source of romantic inspiration for figures such as Lord Byron. As the 1820s progressed this war became a topic of strategic interest to the British, and their forces eventually combined with those of France and Russia to oppose the Ottoman forces at the naval battle of Navarino in 1827, a significant turning point in that war.¹¹

Considering all the clues available, the method of manufacture and the images incorporated in the design, there is a fair chance that our frigger was produced at some time between

1820 and 1835. This is certainly a narrower timeframe than the original cataloguer's rather broad designation of the '19th century' and further research may lead to a more specific date of manufacture.

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Notes

- 1 This article began as a small research project to generate an interpretive label for a homely yet intriguing artefact catalogued for the University of Melbourne Art Collection as part of the Russell and Mab Grimwade Bequest of 1973, accession no. 1973.0207 (originally catalogued as a porcelain and glass rolling pin). The primary objective has been to try and narrow the possible dates of manufacture; inevitably more questions were raised than answered.
- 2 Bea Howe, *Antiques from the Victorian home*, London: Spring Books, 1973, p. 197.
- 3 Ken Arnold, *Collector's companion*, Golden Square, Vic.: Crown Castleton Publishers, 1995, p. 106.
- 4 University of Melbourne Art Collection, accession no. 1991.0022, Gift of Pat and Roger Daniels in memory of Rex Ebbott, 1991.
- 5 Arnold, *Collector's companion*, p. 106.
- 6 The Grimwade family was involved in glass

manufacture in Australia from 1872, with Victoria's first Melbourne Bottle Works Company which in 1903 became a Proprietary Ltd. In 1939 Australian Glass Manufacturers became Australian Consolidated Industries. From 1882 to 1900 Alfred Felton and Frederick Shepherd Grimwade were associates, with business interests in the Australian Salt Manufacturing Company. John Riddoch Poynter, *Russell Grimwade*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press, at the Miegunyah Press, 1967.

- 7 This theory is strengthened after consultation with the curators at the National Railway Museum in York.
- 8 'The Planet' ran on the Liverpool to Manchester railway from 1830.
- 9 For example, [Samuel J.] Pratt, *The fair Circassian: A tragedy, as performed at the Theatre-Royal, Drury-Lane by Mr. Pratt*, 2nd edition, London: printed for R. Baldwin, 1781; James Sayers, *A scene in the Fair Circassian' (Robert Bensley; Elizabeth (née Farren), Countess of Derby)*, 1781?, etching, plate: 28.1 x 36.5 cm, collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London, available online at <http://www.npg.org.uk/live/search/portrait.asp?LinkID=mp01264&crNo=2&role=sit>, accessed 28 November 2007; Thomas Maclean, 'Arms and the Circassian woman: Frances Browne's "The Star of Attéghéi"', *Victorian Poetry*, vol. 41, issue 3, Fall 2003, pp. 295-318.
- 10 'Davy asserted that Virginia law could not apply in England. England would not permit "a Turk" to "bring here his fair Circasian [*sic*] slaves" and rape them with impunity'. Henry Marchant, *Diary* (R.I. Historical Society MS 1771-2, typed transcript, Philadelphia Historical Society, 1:120), quoted by George Van Cleve, 'Somerset's case and its antecedents in imperial perspective', *Law and History Review*, vol. 24, issue 3, Fall 2006, <http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/lhr/24.3/cleve.html>, accessed 29 June 2007.
- 11 'Navarino, Battle of', *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 2007, <http://www.britannica.com/eb/article-9055077/Battle-of-Navarino>, accessed December 2007.