

## **WEBB DECORATIONS – ORIGINAL AND NOT SO ORIGINAL, by Jim<sup>1</sup>**

In recent months there have been numerous examples of modern decorations on Victorian-era art glass. The first example appeared on eBay Auctions in August 2008. Since that time, there has been a proliferation of similar modern decorations. Some of these decorations were on Victorian-era Burmese ware by Thomas Webb and were apparently done to recreate the well known original decorations by Webb's chief designer, Jules Barbe.

Over the past six months these modern decorations have appeared on a variety of glass types, including Burmese and satin glass, and on a variety of shapes including fairy lamps, cabinet vases, and rose bowls. They also have been seen on contemporary art glass items such as epergnes and fairy lamps.

These modern decorations are reaching epidemic proportions and seem to be originating from a single source in the United Kingdom. The decorations, originally in colored enamel, are now showing up as gold colored designs, again to simulate original Webb/Barbe designs.

I will not speculate on the reasons why these modern decorations are being applied to Victorian art glass. Some of the decorations, however, are close enough to the original designs that beginning collectors and even some advanced collectors and dealers could easily be fooled into thinking the decorations are original. Of course, decorated Victorian-era art glass commands a higher value than undecorated ware and that poses a risk to the uninformed buyer.

The consequences of decorating Victorian-era art glass go far beyond today's antique

art glass market. Today, by exposing these practices, collectors and dealers are cautioned to inspect their purchases carefully before making an ill-informed purchase. But, what about tomorrow's market?

As we know, knowledge is fleeting. The information we learn today is often not passed on to new collectors. In ten, twenty, or fifty years from now this information will have been forgotten and many modern decorated pieces of Victorian-era art glass could be easily accepted as original work. Could it be that some of the "unusual decorations" that we see today are products of a "cottage industry" some fifty years ago and not original to the maker?

It is important to remember that this article does not address the legitimate decorating shops that routinely decorated Victorian-era art glass blanks provided by the glass manufacturer of the time. That was a legitimate practice and not to be associated with these modern decorating practices.

In preparing this article, I gave some thought to recounting what we already know about Webb's decorations on fairy lamps. As you may know, there are four common decorations and several others that are original designs but not as common. I have decided to delay that explanation for another time and instead focus on the most important issue of today – the modern application of well known Webb decorations on Victorian-era art glass.

### **The proliferation begins**

On August 31, 2009 I began a thread on the Fairy Lamp Forum<sup>2</sup> titled *Webb Burmese "hand-painted in the manner of Jules Barbe."* I chose that title for the thread because it was the description used by the eBay seller. I believe the wording was carefully chosen so as to not imply that the deco-

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<sup>1</sup> Article from Fair Lamp Club Newsletter, Issue LVI, August 2010

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<sup>2</sup> [www.fairylampforum.com](http://www.fairylampforum.com)

ration was original. It was simply "in the manner of" Jules Barbe.



These are the first items that caught my attention. As we well know, decorated Burmese is difficult at best to find and to find four pieces at once is indeed unusual. To be honest, I was impressed with the collection and was looking forward to participating in the auction. However, my first impression was short lived.



Upon closer inspection it was apparent that the decoration<sup>3</sup> was not right.

<sup>3</sup> This decoration pattern is Number 2363 Hawthorn registered by Jules Barbe, 1886-1888. The pattern was previously referred to as "Prunus"



The most obvious difference is the bright green color of the normally "shaded leaves" and the presence of brush marks in the enamel. There are other features that are not typical, but it is obvious that this decoration is not original to the Webb Burmese ware.

I was certainly disappointed that someone had decorated these previously undecorated pieces of authentic Webb Burmese. At the time, however, I did not believe that this was anything more than a single occurrence and was not too concerned that it would occur again. I was sadly mistaken.

Not too long after, another piece of decorated glass showed up on eBay. This piece, perhaps a toothpick or match holder, was also decorated in the Hawthorn pattern,



The glass has similar coloring to Burmese but it is not Burmese glass. The decoration is quite similar to the four cabinet vases and

was probably done by the same artist. I was, at the time, relieved that this decoration was no applied to another piece of Webb Burmese. Less that a month later, however, I would be disappointed again.



These two pieces of Victorian-era Webb Burmese have been decorated in the same manner of the previous examples.



Looking at the decoration closely, you will recognize the bright green "shadow leaves" and the very distinct brush marks not found in authentic Webb decorations. Once again this "artist" has defaced choice examples of Victorian-era Burmese ware. At least they were not Burmese fairy lamps. That sad day, however, was just around the corner.

Like clockwork the proliferation of modern decorations on antique Burmese ware continued.



This small bowl appears to be shiny Burmese ware; it may simply be pink glass. The decoration is typical of previous examples with the signature bright green leaves.



This is a choice example of Webb's shiny Burmese ware. This creamer would have significant value in its own right without any decoration. The question is, of course, "Does adding a modern decoration add to or diminish the value of antique Burmese ware?" For me, the answer is clear. It is not much different than painting over the patina of a piece of prime antique furniture.



This decoration is unknown to me, however, I do not believe it is a Victorian-era design. I have included this example because of the unusual decoration and because it employs very similar bright green colors found in the previous examples. Could this be the same artist developing their own unique decoration?

For over eight months I watched the proliferation of modern decorations on antique art glass, predominately Webb Burmese ware. I certainly suspected that it was simply a matter of time that the defacing of antique Burmese would eventually find its way to Clarke's Burmese fairy lamps. In April 2010 that sad day finally arrived.

This is the first example of a Clarke Burmese fairy lamp with a modern decoration. As you can see it has the same distinctive bright green leaves as the previous examples. There are, however, other features of this decoration that are uncommon to the original decoration, including the "berry-like" shape of the flower buds.



The above illustration shows three sides of the same fairy lamp. As you can see, the blossoms appear both sides of the shade. Within my small collection of decorated Burmese fairy lamps, none have the blossoms on both sides of the shade. It may not be unprecedented, but it certainly is very uncommon.

For me it is clear that modern decorations "in the manner of Jules Barbe" are being added to Victorian art glass, primarily Burmese ware. If you are not yet convinced, perhaps the following examples will remove any doubt.



Many of you may recognize this elaborate epergne as the work of Nick Inman, Horncastle Studios,<sup>4</sup> in the United Kingdom. Nick is an exceptional glass artist who has produced many exceptional contemporary fairy lamps, including Burmese ware using Fenton's glass formula.<sup>5</sup> I have seen this epergne many times before, but never decorated.

When I first noticed the decoration, I was disappointed that Nick would decorate his products in this manner. So, I sent a note to Nick asking if this was his epergne and, if so, did he decorate it? Or, if not, did he know who did? Nick replied:

*"The answer to your question is yes, this is one of my epergnes and no the decoration has not been carried out by me or on my behalf, but added after the sale."*

While it confirms the decoration is "modern" and eliminates one source for the decoration, it does not provide any leads to who is doing the decorations.



As you can see, the decoration is very similar in technique and color as the previous examples. There are subtle differences, but

<sup>4</sup> eBay Store: [www.stores.ebay.co.uk/Horncastle-Glass-Studio](http://www.stores.ebay.co.uk/Horncastle-Glass-Studio)

<sup>5</sup> Horncastle Burmese Fairy Lamp Candelabra, FL-XLVI-10

the "trademark" bright green leaves is clearly evident.

I have been monitoring these "modern decorations" for some time. While most have been done in the past year, one example was done much earlier.



In August 2005 this item showed up on eBay. Most of you certainly will recognize this as a base for one of Fenton's fairy lights. The decoration, of course, is not a Fenton design but added by someone else to simulate the Webb/Barbe Hawthorn decoration. The seller of this base provided the following description:

*"Victorian Clarke Fairy Lamp Custard Satin Glass Base. This item dates to around 1880 and is vintage Victorian Custard Yellow opaque glass. This mold blown piece is the bottom of one of Clarke's Fairy lamps, it has no markings. This piece has the hand painted floral design on the front. There is a ground polished smooth edge done at the factory and has no damage. This piece measures 2"x3" and the dome would be 2 3/4" across the bottom to fit on this piece."*

You could write a book on the inaccuracies in this description. It is not the inaccuracies that troubles me; it is the potentially poor investment made by an uninformed buyer who relies on the description provided by an equally uninformed seller. While unfortunate, this type of transaction happens every day in a broad range of antique sales.

This decoration seems to be much different than the most recent decorations. It appears to be done by another artist. That said, could this example, done over five years

ago, been the genesis of the proliferation of modern decorations we are seeing today? Perhaps, but we may never know.

So, what is the impact of this "defacing" of antique Burmese ware?

Some may say the expression "buyer beware" is good advice for anyone buying decorated Burmese. I may tend to agree, but my concerns go deeper than that. I have serious concerns on the effect this may have on the current and future value of decorated Burmese ware, especially if these decorations continue to improve in quality and accuracy. At some point, the ability to tell "original from not so original" may become difficult at best, or impossible at worse. The following may be a good example.



This marriage of two unrelated pieces of Burmese showed up on eBay in August 2008. Putting aside the "marriage" of unrelated pieces of Burmese, what do you think of the decoration?



The decoration on the saucer appears to be modern, but what about the fairy lamp dome? Is the decoration original or modern? Are you sure? Is there any doubt? That, I believe, is the crux of the problem. Where there is doubt, there is diminished value.

I have spent considerable ink and paper in an effort to expose these modern decorations – not for my benefit, but for the benefit of others who may be just beginning their collections. If this article does nothing more than to cause someone to "think twice" before investing in decorated Burmese, it is time well spent.

By now, you may think that this is all there is to this story. Unfortunately, you would be wrong. There has been an equal proliferation of modern gilt decorations on antique glass, possibly by the same artist. I will continue to collect examples of these gilt decorations and report on them in a future article. In the meantime, invest wisely.

#### **For more information**

If you would like to see more examples of these decorations and to read the discussions on the Fairy Lamp Forum,<sup>6</sup> visit the following threads:

eBay Discussions > *Webb Burmese "hand-painted in the manner of Jules Barbe"*

eBay Discussions > *After Market Decorations*

Victorian Art Glass > eBay Discussions > *Paranoid over Webb Decorations*

Victorian Art Glass > eBay Discussions > *Webb decorations on cased glass*

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<sup>6</sup> [www.fairylampforum.com](http://www.fairylampforum.com)