

Dating Black Glass Buttons

With an emphasis on glass button history in Bohemia

Presented by: Yessy Byl

(Information with respect to button production in Bohemia , now part of the Czech Republic, is from “The Jablonec Button”, by Ludmila Kybalova, Petr Novy and Sarka Siruckova. Published by the Museum of Glass and Jewelry, Jablonec Nad Nisou. 2007)

Dating black glass buttons requires some knowledge of when various shanks were made through the centuries of button production. So we will deal primarily with that history, with an emphasis on Bohemia, and then discuss some of the questions about dating glass buttons.

Button collectors have determined there is a dividing line when referring to the age of buttons. Buttons made prior to 1918 are referred to as “Division I” buttons and those made after 1918 are referred to as “Division III” (or modern) buttons. If the age of a button simply doesn’t matter or can’t be determined, we call them “Division IX”.

History of glass buttons and their shanks

Pre - 1918

Apparently, glass buttons were being made as early as the 1500s. However, according to the Jablonec Museum of Glass, glass for buttons was first produced in Bohemia in the 1700s but for the purpose of being set in metal until the early 1800s. “Only glass insets for metal buttons were made in the region until the end of the 1820s” (Page 61). This included lampworked glass as well as pressed and cut glass.

The pressing of glass items with metal tongs was common in the early 1800s and soon, with the introduction of the metal loop, glass buttons were also being pressed. By the 1830s, area glass producers were winning medals at international exhibitions for their glass wares which included buttons. The earliest glass buttons photographed from the Jablonec collection are probably the faceted, pin shank buttons (p.124) produced 1826-1835. These have a simple metal loop shank.



Glass buttons with metal tips dating from 1830, which are likely swirl backs, are pictured in the book as well and described as “wound glass, metal”. The question I have is whether the tips are impression inlay (metal pressed into the glass while the glass is hot) or a pin shank. (p.147). The pictured button below is almost identical to the one in the book. The shank is interesting in that it is not a round wire but “half round”...not unlike 18th c steel button shanks. When I questioned the Jablonec Museum people about this button, their opinion was that it was a pin shank.



In any case, “wound glass” buttons were the most popular type of button from about 1830 to about 1860. These are largely the Division I swirlbacks that are so popular now.

Buttons were also pressed (and were primarily **black** glass buttons) but the early ones had only simple metal loop shanks. The “antiquarian” buttons and those with rounded shanks pressed into the glass are circa 1850. Antiquarian buttons are buttons with staple shanks which were pressed into the glass, forming a glass “lip” between the shank and often on the sides of the shank. This glass “lip” is also found on the sides of the round shank buttons made in mid 1800s. Cameo type buttons were starting to be produced in this time as well. At right is an antiquarian cameo.



And, there were swirl back cameos!

Paperweight buttons were also being produced around 1850.



As an aside, apparently paperweight buttons produced in Bohemia encouraged other glass artists to start making larger sized paperweights. Buttons set the fashion!

According to “The Jablonec Button”, the “calotte” or (what I understand to be) plate & loop shank was introduced about 1860 and the self shank appeared around 1866. The self shank pictured at right, with the thread grooves and a low profile, is a sure sign of a pre-1918 button, but self shanks evolved and are used up to the present time. The plate & loop shank continues to be in use to the present day.



Another interesting fact found in “The Jablonec Button” is that, on July 17, 1883, a patent was filed for “a new metal eyelet for glass buttons of all sizes, types and shapes”. This could be the hump shank (which is likely) or the 4-way box shank. There were subsequent patents filed for “metal eyelets” including one in 1891 which was for an “open-work metal calotte for glass buttons.” This latter patent could well be for the rosette shank discussed below (a “calotte” being a plate). There were various patents for metal shanks filed between 1883 and 1896 including the intriguing “innovations in free-standing metal loops for glass buttons” (Page 67). Unfortunately, the book does not give any illustrations of shanks so this clearly needs more research!

Hump shanks appeared in the later 1800s (probably 1880s) and were used until about 1914. Generally, it is believed that hump shanks were NOT used subsequent to 1918 which means that buttons with hump shanks are definitely Division I!



Variations on the hump shank:



Rosette (six segments) shank buttons were introduced in the late 1800s. The small buttons with rosette shanks are considered to be pre-1918.

The four way box shank also appeared in the late 1800s. This shank often poses problems for age identification for buttons collectors! Typically, we consider 4 way box shanks with thread grooves to be late 1800s, very early 1900s....but pre- 1918.



But of course there are few “hard and fast” rules and these two buttons with 4-way box shanks and **no** thread grooves are considered to be pre-1918. The beautiful nouveau head is based on Mucha’s “Byzantine Head” from 1897. These buttons have very flat backs.



Post 1918

So what changed after 1918?

WWI definitely changed the world..... and there are some clear changes in the button world after the war (for example, celluloid was made very differently post WWI because the chemicals used previously were needed in the war effort.) The biggest change for black glass button shanks was the evolution of the “self shank”. This became a raised glass shank,



typically without any thread grooves. The design evolved, of course and there are buttons which are likely “on the cusp” of that change.

As time went on, the shanks became higher and this marks the button as clearly post 1918.



Between the two world wars we saw the development of the cone shank. The glass produced with these shanks could become either buttons or hat pins with the buttons having a 4 way box shank or a metal loop shank. Generally they are considered to have been produced in the 1920s. Often they are very large buttons. (This one is 2 inches!)



And sometimes they have rather odd shanks!



Rosette shanks continued to be in use through the 1920s, but they were typically found on large black glass buttons representing patterns or fabric types. (This button is about 1-3/4 inches.)



There were some large pictorial glass buttons with rosette shanks made post WWII as well. (This one is 1 ¾ inches)



An interesting little aside..... key shanks are typically associated with the Leo Popper button factory in New York which made buttons before 1918. However, according to the Big Book of Buttons, some buttons with key shanks were made after 1918 and I have one example, shown below.



In the post WWI era, you no longer saw antiquarian-type shanks nor the simple round shanks **pushed** into the glass. (I do have one staple shank that is late 1800s!) But, swirlbacks which generally did use a simple metal loop shank as did lampworked buttons, plate and loop shanks, and 4-way box shanks continued to be used and made.

So how old IS this button???

Well, it isn't always easy to tell the age of a button.....especially if the button has a plate and loop shank or a 4 way box shank. Remember, button manufacturers had no idea that collectors would draw a huge dividing line at 1918! Manufacturers would use old shank stocks, employ old fashioned methods of glass production, etc. Indeed there is still at least one "button pressing hut" in operation, making buttons in the same way, with the same button presses, as the glass producers of over a hundred years ago. However, even those buttons can be distinguished from their antique forerunners. For example newly pressed "lacy glass" buttons are often found with modern looking self shanks while the original versions typically had 4 way box shanks with thread grooves.

There are some guidelines as to how to determine age (even though it is a very imprecise science). Overall, one needs to consider the shank, the quality or look of the glass (especially on the back), the style, the finish, etc. Knowing the history of buttons shanks is just the starting point.

Sometimes you just need to do the research. This is a button made between 1920 and 1930 according to "The Jablonec Button"...and it's a 4 way box shank with thread grooves! This back is not uncommon with the foil embedded paperweight styles produced in this time period. "The Jablonec Button" is an invaluable resource since it references sample cards which are dated.



Generally, it is easy to distinguish Division I swirlbacks from Div III swirlbacks. Div I swirlbacks are typically small size (to ¾ inch) although mediums can be found. The newer

swirlbacks are simply not as finely made generally speaking. In my experience, Division III swirlbacks have very smooth backs, and sometimes the shank area is lower than the rest of the back (indented). Also, I've found that many post 1918 swirlbacks have much shinier and smoother glass. Pigtail shanks are often found in post 1918 lampworked buttons (although the Big Book of Buttons states that those shanks were used in the 1800s). Also, the style of the button will help determine age. Post 1918 paperweights are typically embedded flowers and have plate and loop shanks rather than swirlbacks.

Plate & loop and 4-way box shanks have been used continuously since the late 1800s and often you'll see a very old looking plate and loop shank on a newer button. While sometimes the appearance of the shank can give you a good clue (tinny, shiny) that isn't a reliable indicator of age. There apparently were vast stores of shanks after 1918!

The best indicator of age is the appearance of the button back. Generally, newer buttons have much smoother backs. Most pre-1918 buttons have lines and have "irregular stress lines" (probably from the cooling process). Some modern buttons have a textured back but the texture is very regular and looks shiny.

As mentioned, you will sometimes find buttons being reproduced with the same molds as used in pre-1918 buttons. Fortunately, the backs are very different. Take for example, the Mucha head previously pictured:

First of all, the detail in the pre 1918 button is much finer than the reproduction. While it is difficult to see, the back of the newer button is very smooth and shiny. Also, the rim on the back is not typically found on pre-1918 buttons.

Finishes are also a clue as to age. Typically aurora finishes and the more "flashy" and colorful finishes are modern.

You do learn how to distinguish old from new by learning about buttons.....what was made and when it was made.....and by handling them and paying attention to details (like: rims on the back). You also learn that there aren't always answers! Remember that Divisions (and Classification rules) are just guidelines which help you study and appreciate your buttons. Buttons can be very enigmatic. Perhaps a button (like the Division I Mucha head) was produced by someone ahead of his or her time. Perhaps a button was produced by someone who valued old production techniques and had a store of old shanks. The possibilities are endless. And the most intriguing thing about buttons is that the variety is so wonderfully interesting. It does give you more to enjoy, study and research, doesn't it?

