

Contemporary Collectibles: When kerosene lamps lit the world

by Linda_Rosenkrantz

Although it had a relatively short reign as a primary source of artificial light in this country - only about 40 years, until electricity superseded it - the kerosene lamp has come to be seen as a symbol of the Victorian era, and has its own sizable coterie of collectors.

In the first half of the 19th century, the most prevalent lamps in this country were glass-chimneyed lamps containing a tubular wick, fueled by whale oil, or the highly flammable blend called "burning fluid" (a mix of distilled turpentine and alcohol), and sometimes even lard. Most of these products were expensive as well as dangerous. The discovery of kerosene, a refined liquid fuel produced at first from shale oil (and known as paraffin in Great Britain), was a major breakthrough. The oil was first demonstrated by Canadian geologist Dr. Abraham Gesner in 1846, though others credit a Scotsman named James Young with developing the process in 1847. Young's company would form the basis of the energy giant British Petroleum.

In American, Samuel Kier distilled petroleum to yield a lamp oil as early as 1854 in Pittsburgh. The discovery of a plentiful supply of petroleum-yielding oil beneath the hills of Pennsylvania in 1859 provided an abundant and inexpensive source of kerosene, enabling the kerosene lamp to become a primary source of light for Americans during the latter part of the 19th century and inciting a rush by manufacturers worldwide to produce a range of lamps that could utilize its combustible properties. Among the best known U.S. firms are Edward Miller & Co., Bradley & Hubbard Mfg. Co., American Lamp & Brass Co., Bristol Lamps & Clock Co., Cleveland Non-Explosive Lamp Co., and Rochester Lamp Co.

They were seen in a wide variety of forms, ranging in size from miniature night lamps to piano lamps and tall standing lamps, as well as chandeliers, other hanging examples and wall or bracket lamps. As electric lamps entered the picture, kerosene lamps became increasingly elaborate and decorative to hold on to their market share, with fancy shades, cast figural lamps stands and elaborate hanging fixtures coming to the fore.

One of the main categories of interest to collectors is the Aladdin lamp, produced by The Mantle Lamp Co. of America, later known as Aladdin Industries Inc. These were unique in their use of a round wick that produced a non-flickering flame and a mantle that glowed to produce the light of a 60-watt bulb. The confidence of the company was so great that they offered a reward of \$100 to anyone who could produce an oil lamp equal to theirs - a reward that was never collected.

Another distinctive category is what has come to be known as "Gone With the Wind" lamps - a term that came into use following the release of the 1939 film, even though such lamps were not actually available during the time frame of the movie. These were parlor lamps often extravagantly hand painted with floral motifs. These were somewhat counterproductive as the decoration tended to reduce the light output, but it produced an atmospheric Victorian glow.

RECOMMENDED REFERENCE: "Center-Draft Kerosene Lamps 1884-1940" by J. W. Courter (Collector Books) is a hefty, up-to-date identification and value guide concentrating on one specific genre. Illustrated primarily with examples from the author's own extensive collection and augmented by a profusion of interesting and informative reproductions from vintage catalogues and ads, the book provides a history of kerosene lamps and information on lamp identification, in addition to comprehensive chapters on more than 50 of the major companies producing these lamps.

Values are given for all examples shown, ranging from a simple Aladdin stand lamp made by Matthews & Willard Manufacturing Co. (\$75) to a military wall or bracket lamp dated 1899, made by the Charles Parker Co., priced at \$1,750 without its customary white opal dome shade.

Linda Rosenkrantz has edited Auction magazine and authored 15 books, including "The Baby Name Bible" (St. Martin's Press; www.babynamebible.com). She cannot answer letters personally.

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