

Pining for Pyrex: The Latest Midcentury Collectible

By Liz Logan

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A previously vintage-averse writer falls under the midcentury spell of the longtime kitchen staple's mellow colors and endearing patterns.



ON ANY OTHER DAY, I would have walked right past those pastel-colored bowls. One was pink, charmingly decorated with striped berries, leaves and buds; the other, turquoise, bore a bucolic pattern that depicted a giant rooster and an Amish farming couple standing near stalks of wheat.

Before this, I'd never purchased a piece of vintage kitchenware—it always seemed a little dirty to me—but on that Saturday in May at an outdoor flea market, I recognized these bowls immediately as opal Pyrex.

I'd just spent hours looking at images of an exhibit now on view at the Corning Museum of Glass that celebrates the 100th anniversary of Pyrex. I was particularly entranced by the more than 150 designs of opal Pyrex—an unusually colorful version of the glass cookware manufactured from the 1940s through the 1980s.

The first Pyrex products were mundanely (if practically) clear, allowing home cooks to monitor how their food was doing on all sides. As kitchens became vibrant, informal communal spaces after World War II, Corning introduced opal Pyrex, which fused the technology behind their incredibly durable glass with applied colors and endearing patterns.

As I learned more about my new acquisitions, I started to really fall for them. Even their name was romantic: They were “Cinderella” bowls, a style characterized by handles that double as pouring spouts. I loved the way light transformed the colors of the translucent glass into soft, watercolor-like hues. As I cut a head of broccoli, tossing florets into the turquoise bowl—a pattern known as Butterprint—it felt as if I were cooking in a quaint country cottage rather than a modest Brooklyn apartment.

Within weeks, I was scouring the many eBay and Etsy listings for vintage mixing bowls, coffee pots, casserole dishes—and started keeping a list of my personal favorites: Spring Blossom Green, a simple illustration of flowers on avocado green; Friendship, a red-and-orange design of highly stylized birds; Daisy, an exuberant yellow and orange floral; and Early American, recognizable for its ochre-colored images of colonial-era tools and soaring eagles.

I also quickly discovered that, as all things midcentury have grown increasingly trendy, vintage opal Pyrex has exploded in popularity over the last decade. Complete sets that are still in their boxes can run in the hundreds of dollars, and rare pieces—a hard-to-find pattern such as Lucky in Love, featuring clovers and hearts on a white background—have sold for more than \$1,600 on eBay. On the other hand, common patterns, such as my Butterprint designs, can often be had for just a few dollars. I’d paid \$22 for three bowls in good condition, a luckily smart investment for someone as ill-informed as I was.

The variation in pricing can be maddening. Michael D. Barber, author of “Pyrex Passion: The Comprehensive Guide to Decorated Vintage Pyrex,” owns nearly every opal Pyrex product produced, a collection he amassed over 10 years of thrifting, antique shopping and eBay bidding. He remembers spending years searching for a gold-and-black striped pattern informally called Musical Staff. He finally bought a set online for “an outrageous price,” he said, only to find it priced at \$26 in a thrift store a few days later.

As with other midcentury collectibles, nostalgia is the primary appeal. Mr. Barber’s fascination started when his mother handed down a blue bowl from her Primary Colors series. Alabama-based cookbook author Christy Jordan prefers standard patterns from the ’60s and ’70s, because they remind her of the dishes she grew up with. “When I got married, I wanted to make banana pudding for the first time, so I got an avocado green Cinderella bowl, because that’s what my mama always made it in,” she said.

Not all of the patterns may be worth collecting, though. A 1960 release nicknamed Fruit Salad is disturbingly anthropomorphic, said Ms. Jordan. It features “a pear covered by a leaf in a way that makes it look like a baby,” she said. “Once you see it, you can’t un-see it.”