POISON LAND

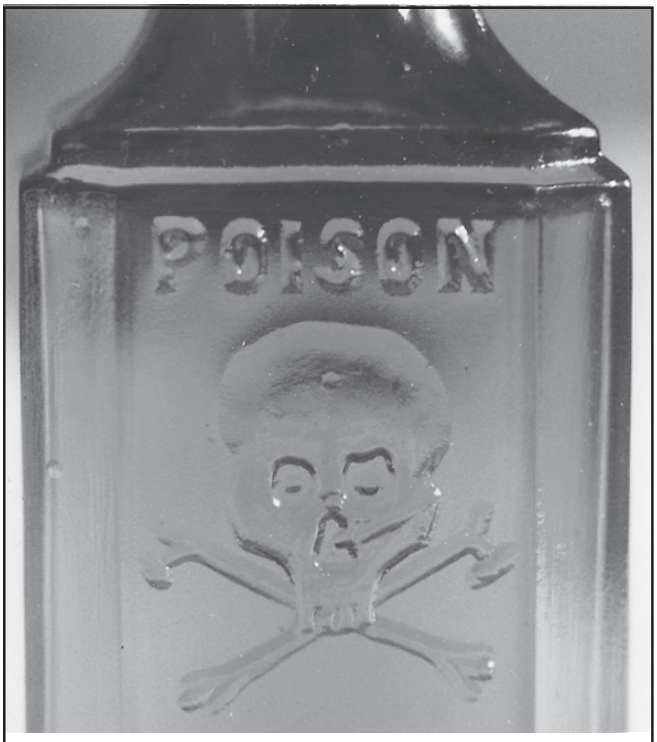
by Mike Dickman

Photographs by John Gregory and Mary Riggin

In previous articles, we saw how glass makers created bottles with unusual shapes, projectiles, colors and embossings as a way to warn a largely-illiterate population about poisonous contents, without having to rely on labels and words. Surely, one of the most interesting of these non-verbal warning devices was the infamous symbol of death: the human skull. Today, along with the trick-or-treaters during Halloween, we poison bottle collectors love skulls, especially when they're embossed on our bottles!

As everybody knows, the skull is the bony framework of the head which encloses and protects the brain. Originally, the symbol of a human skull with several bones laying beneath it was a positive Christian religious symbol. Apparently, the symbol derived from a legend that Adam had been buried in a hill outside ancient Jerusalem and that Jesus Christ was crucified atop the very spot where Adam's skeleton was buried. The religious iconography of the skull-and-bones was widely recognized among early Christians and was used in many mosaics and paintings, as, for example, the famous mosaic in the Church of the Dormition in Daphni, Greece. Dating from the 11th century, the mosaic shows a skull buried within a mound of rocks underneath the Cross. The skull-and-bones symbol also was embroidered on vestments and used in various religious contexts.

Over the ensuing centuries, however, the symbolism changed, just as today's hip-hop rappers use the word "bad" to mean "good." Although the reasons are not clear, the skull-and-crossbones symbol gradually came to assume negative connotations. According to William C. Ketchum, Jr., the skull-and-crossbones symbol was known as the "death's head" by the time of the late Middle Ages, and was associated with danger and death rather than religiosity and piousness. Research by Griffenhagen and Bogard reveals that in the eighteenth century, after pirates apparently had adopted the symbol of a skull and cross bones for their villainous Jolly Roger flags, the Roman Catholic Church expressly forbade further use of the symbol. Presumably, its use by pirates had solidified, and irrevocably changed, the connotation from religious to dangerous.



Even if you couldn't read English, you'd surely know not to drink the contents of this bottle! It is extremely rare KR-1.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the negative symbolism of the skull-and-crossbones was well-established and universal. In 1853, the American Pharmaceutical Association adopted a resolution that "all packages or bottles [containing poisonous substances] shall be distinctly labeled with the word "Poison" or a death's head symbol, conspicuously printed." Embossed death's heads on poison bottles soon followed. According to Roy Morgan, the United Kingdom Patent Office issued a patent to G.F. Langford in 1871 for a bottle which "may be externally ornamented with a death's head." Although today we know of four surviving examples of Mr. Langford's coffin-shaped poison bottle (the exceedingly rare KU-36), none bear an embossed skull. (But who knows what other varieties of the KU-36 may be hidden in an attic or dump?) Indeed, for all their unusual and sometime bizarre shapes, none of the many known types of British poison bottles has a death's head symbol molded onto the glass.

We Americans, however, made up for our British cousins. From the late 19th century until 1936, American glass manufacturers produced almost two dozen different poison bottles with embossed skulls and crossbones, not counting color and size variations. Although there is one known Australian bottle embossed with a skull and crossbones (KS-58) and one Canadian bottle (KR-83), both of those bottles were designed and blown in America by Whithall, Tatum and Company of New Jersey. Apart from several types of German poison bottles bearing embossed death's heads and a few French bottles, however, every other known poison bottle embossed with a death's head is American. And the variety of the American-made skull-and-crossbones bottles is truly amazing, ranging from grinning foolish-looking skulls to truly terrifying visages! In addition, the unique and spectacular figural bottle in the shape of a human skull resting upon a base of two crossed human legbones (the KU-10) was patented in 1894 by Carlton H. Lee of Boston.

The last American poison bottle to bear an embossed skull and crossbones apparently was the amber KO-3 iodine bottle, patented in 1936, which in fact was the last "classic" American poison bottle. However, use of the death's head on labels of poisonous substances continues to this day, as a trip to your local pharmacy will show.

The prices of skull-and-crossbones bottles vary widely. At the low end are the iodine bottles, which almost always feature an embossed death's head and

This skull (KU-19) looks positively malevolent.

EXPO 2004 FOHBC Awards Banquet

Friday, August 13, 2004 - 7:00 P.M.

Memphis Marriott Downtown
250 N. Main St., Memphis, Tennessee
MENU
All-You-Can-Eat Buffet

Price $30.00 per person
Reservations Available

Make Check Payable To:
EXPO 2004 Happy Hour - 6:00 PM

If you need any other information regarding the banquet, contact:

Gene Bradberry
P.O. Box 341062, Memphis, TN 38184
PH: (901) 372-8428
E-mail: Expo2004@midsouth.rr.com

often embossed writing as well. There are at least four such types of American iodine bottles, which were blown in different sizes (from 1/4 to 1-ounce) and colors. The most common iodine bottle (the amber KS-12) costs in the range of $10-25, while the cobalt KR-3, which bears a realistic, fearsome skull-and-crossbones, may cost about $125. Notwithstanding their relatively modest value, the iodine bottles are blown-in-mold and exhibit a wide variety of interesting renditions of death's heads which collectors have nicknamed the Baby Skull, the Happy Skull, the Evil Skull, etc. At the other end of the price spectrum is Carlton Lee's cobalt figural skull (KU-10), often selling these days for $3,000 or more in mint condition; this particular bottle, of course, is an archetypical figural bottle in addition to a poison bottle, and therefore commands a great deal of interest. Although the bottle is American, several examples have been found in defunct British pharmacies.

Although I admit I'm biased, I think that every bottle collector should have at least one "death's head bottle" in his or her collection.

Mike Dickman can be reached at: 120 Solana Dr., Santa Fe, MN 87501.

References:

The late Rudy Kuhn's numbering system of poison bottles (i.e., KU-10) was explained in an earlier Poisonland column (B&E, Vol. 14, No. 3). Volumes I and II of "Poison Bottle Workbook" are available from Rudy's widow, Terry Kuhn, 3954 Perie Lane, San Jose, CA 95132; (408) 259-7564; cost is $20 per volume plus $5 shipping. The 60 or so pages from unpublished Volume III are available for the cost of copying plus postage from the Antique Poison Bottle Collectors Association, which publishes the informative quarterly Poison Bottle Newsletter. Contact Joan Cabaniss, Secretary/Editor, 312 Summer Lane, Huddleston, VA 24104.

Griffenhagen, G. and Bogard, M., "History of Drug Containers and Their Labels" (American Institute of the History of Pharmacy, Madison, WI 1999), p. 92.

Ketchum, William C., Jr., "A Treasury of American Bottles" (Bobb-Merrill Co. 1975)pp. 184-185.

Morgan, Roy, "The Benign Blue Coffin" (Kollectarama, England 1978) pp. 7, 10.

Stokstad, Marilyn, "Art History" (Henry N. Abrams Inc. 1995) p. 327.