

Black Glass Buttons 101: CONSTRUCTION

by Claudia Chalmers

Our study of black glass buttons began with an in-depth look at backs and shanks. The next logical topic for the introductory course would be the various constructions of black glass buttons.

The term "construction" means different things for different types of buttons. For example, a waistcoat is one type of construction, snap-togethers are a type of plastic construction, twinkles are a specific metal construction, etc. One could go on and on.

However, in regards to glass buttons, construction refers to the way the button was created during the heating and/or fusing process. In other words, all of the types of buttons we will look at here took form while at least part, if not all, of the glass was still molten.

With this understanding of the term "construction," we will simply look at samples of each type of black glass button construction listed in the National Button Society Classification, and perhaps even a few that are not listed!

(Remember our terms from the last article: "Antique" means made before 1918, "Vintage" means made between 1918 and 1980, "Modern" means made since 1980, and "Transitional" means the button's age crosses over one or more of these year divisions.)

CONSTRUCTION ASSORTED

This class includes black glass and/or clear and colored glass attached to a black glass base. Keep in mind that in this class the components must be joined with heat.

Blown



You may recognize this picture from the previous article on black glass shanks. It shows a typical self shank of a blown glass button.

Blown glass must be hollow. I sometimes test it by seeing if I can stick a pin down inside of the button. This example is ball shaped (common) with a matte or acid etched finish.

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This blown glass button sports a different shape, making it less common. It is also faceted, which means it can be used in more than one category, a helpful trait for competition purposes.

NOTE: it is possible for a blown glass button to have a metal shank. It is constructed similar to a wire Christmas ornament holder.

Coronet

“Buttons consisting of a base and smaller decorative top (usually different colors) each molded separately then fused together” (Official NBS Classification, 2009/2010). The buttons below are only a few samples of this interesting construction. All of them are antique; most of them are also swirlbacks.



These two coronets have molded tops AND molded bases.

Clambroth tops are quite plentiful. The sample on the right is the most common crown design. It has seven “bumps.”



White crowns are also easy to come by, but the pictorial leaf on the right is less plentiful.



LEFT: This sample has a more unusual crown and it is a size medium which are harder to come by.



RIGHT: Be on the lookout for colored glass tops.

Foil Embedded

“ . . . glass with foil embedded under the surface” (Official NBS Classification, 2009/2010).



This foil six point star is a size medium and a swirlback.



This button is unusual because of its contour shape.



Three foil stars in a ball shape.



TOP LEFT: Unusual linear and contour shape for this type of button.

TOP RIGHT: Blue foil ring on a plain convex button.



BOTTOM LEFT: This is a red foil butterfly in an antique paperweight button.

BOTTOM RIGHT: Pink foil embedded with a black swirled overlay.



Fused

“Two or more layers of prefabricated glass cut out, artistically arranged, and fired” (*Official NBS Classification, 2009/2010*).

Fused glass buttons are modern, and usually studios. In order to identify fused glass, look for thin layers of glass – sometimes it helps to look at the button from the side. Remember, in order to be considered black glass, the base of the button must be black – the top can be any color at all!



Two fused glass buttons by studio artist Kay Ferguson. The one on the left is also foil embedded.



These were made by studio artist Cathy Mayer. They include a modern coralene effect, and the one on the left also has paste embellishments.

Impression inlay

In impression inlay buttons, pieces of metal are pressed into the glass while it is still hot. They are all antique, and many of them are swirlbacks. For more detailed information, see the March 2007 *Minnesota State Bulletin* or the December 2007 *National Button Bulletin*. The tabulation for impression inlays can be found there.



This type of impression inlay, with a beaded circlet metal piece, is quite common. Collectors call them “bracelets” (C10 and C2).



These two buttons have the same large, twisted ring inlay. The one on the right also has a white overlay center, which makes it more scarce (both samples are D1).



RIGHT: Impression inlays with multiple pieces of metal are quite rare. This one also has turquoise colored overlay (E10).
BELOW: This is another twisted wire impression inlay (D11).



Pictorial impression inlays are quite scarce. In addition to the wolf (E4) and anchor (E2), one can find thistles, roosters, stars, a chick, grapes, profile head, insects, a horse head, snails, and butterflies (if one is very lucky).

Intermixed

Intermixed black glass buttons are made by adding different colors of glass to the black in swirls and/or blends. In order to truly be considered intermixed, the multiple colors must be evident on the front, back, and sides. Care must be taken that the predominant color be black. (Sorry, no samples.)

Lampwork

Lampworked buttons are hand worked over an open flame. They are often realistic, modern studios.



Mr. Penguin, here, is by studio button artist Delilah Davis.



Lampwork studio cat by Char Behrens.

BELOW: This realistic fish by studio artist Kathy Hoppe is also a paperweight. There is a clear glass dome over the goldstone in the fish's side.



This frying pan is by studio artist Mike Edmondson.

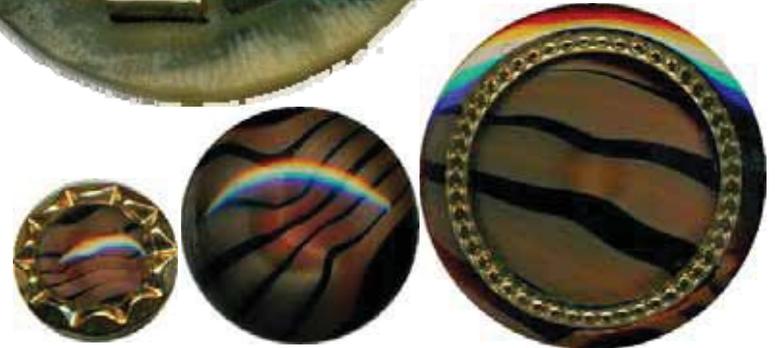
Moonglows

Moonglow buttons are a favorite of collectors of vintage and modern glass. The construction process results in a layer of clear glass over the base. Black glass moonglows must be black at the shank (sometimes it looks like a very dark purple, actually).

All of the buttons on the next page, as colorful as they are, appear black or mostly black on the back. Sometimes in order to see the clear glass layer on top, a collector must look at the button from the side very carefully, as that layer can be quite thin. If in doubt, try using a pen light to see the edge better.



This black glass moonglow is unique in two ways: it is a sew through as opposed to the normal self shank, and it has a frosted decorative finish.



A finished card of moonglows is often referred to as "eye candy." The colors, even of black glass moonglows can be vivid and varied. Here are three black glass moonglows of similar color schemes, but their sizes vary from extra small to large.



Four more black glass moonglows with various surface designs, colors, shapes and trim. The variety in this type of black glass construction is incredible.

Paperweights

The description of a paperweight button in the NBS classification is rather technical. The gist of it is that in order to be considered a paperweight, a button should have a base, a set up (decorative layer) and a cap. An alternative is a two part paperweight having just a set up and a cap. Usually the cap is clear, but not always. In order to be a black glass paperweight, the base of the button must be black. There are many different types of paperweight buttons, and they can all appear quite different.



Antique paperweight button with a rose set up under a clear cap.



Antique paperweight with a molded, clear cap (note the bumps), a white swirl set up, and a black swirlback base. Many antique paperweights are also swirlbacks.



Very scarce antique paperweight called a sulphide. The head is made of a ceramic material set on a black base.



LEFT: This antique paperweight is very plain. It has white glass and goldstone under the cap, and a plain dome shape. It is a size medium, however, and they are more difficult to come by in the older buttons.



RIGHT: This antique black glass button has a set-up called laticino. It is a lacy looking type of cane work that is quite scarce in antique paperweight buttons.



Antique paperweight, molded in a shell shape.



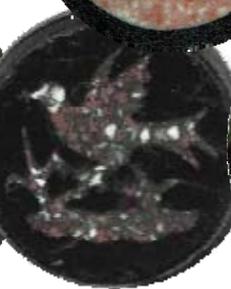
Vintage studio paperweight button made by Charles Kazium. Three silhouette designs were made, the hunter above, a fisherman, and a profile head.



Here is an unusually shaped antique paperweight.

Tile Type

Tile type glass buttons are made by creating a molded indent in the base of the button, filling it with glass or glass powder and then fusing the two layers with heat. The top of the button is then polished smooth (Official NBS Classification, 2009/2010). Sometimes they are also decorated with paint. One tends to see the same design over and over again, but done in different colors. (See the two birds below.)



Overlay

There is quite a variety of constructions under the heading “overlay,” so a few examples of each are presented here. Basically, an overlay is just what it sounds like: a layer of glass laid over the base and then fused in place with heat. In most cases the overlay is only evident on the front of the button, although there are exceptions.



Canes of white, black and goldstone fused over a black glass base.



The brown and white swirls are overlaid on the black. This is a medium pinshank.



The white overlay strips are framed with gold luster. Medium.



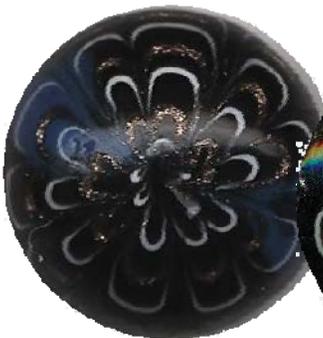
From the very ornate to the very plain. This ball has a single white line of overlay.



A pretty feathered pattern.



This black glass button is overlaid with swirled goldstone. The back is all black. Swirlback.



These two buttons are called “Nailsea” by collectors because the pattern in the overlay resembles Nailsea glasswork. The one on the left is a ball shape. They are very attractive, and highly coveted.



LEFT: This spindle shape is overlaid with a swirled white and goldstone cane. **CENTER:** This whistle is typical of a button type which collectors call “End of Day,” supposedly because the glass maker could use up his last scraps in the overlay. Again, the back is entirely black glass. **RIGHT:** This button has polished circles ground out of the overlay—like little windows, letting us see the black glass underneath. It is also overlaid with a green and white cane.

Overlay salt

Salt overlays are made by applying finely crushed glass to the surface of the button while it is still hot, thus fusing it there with heat. This results in a rough surface. The salt overlay is often colored. Salt overlays are antique.



Salt overlay with white paint/enamel in a pinwheel pattern



A floral salt overlay with a touch of gold

BELOW: This button has a black base, embedded foil and a transparent red cap. And on top of that it is faceted and has salt overlay!



LEFT: Salt overlay with red paint/enamel and gold filled outline details.



Overlay encrusted

Encrusted overlays are the Division III (vintage and modern) version of salt overlays. The surface coating on these is applied after the button is made and then fired in place. Various decorative finishes can be added, like lusters and paint.

Overlay sheath

Overlay sheath types have a central core (in this case of black glass) encased with a layer of other glass. The encasing glass can be a cane, ribbon, or other color. Many of these buttons are swirlbacks.

The sample on the left below is a cane sheath. That on the right is a goldstone sheath. Fronts and backs are shown.



This modern black glass button is not only encrusted, but also has an iridescent luster. It has a modern self shank and is a size large.



Overlay sheet

One or multiple thin sheets of various colored glass are fused to the base. Sometimes they are carved to reveal the various layers. These buttons often have metal backs or at least large shank plates. Some of them are quite thin.



These two examples have a single layer of white glass over the thin black base. The one on the left has a pictorial pin shank.

LEFT: These two examples have multiple layers of glass. The design is made by carving through the upper layers, revealing the colors below. See the black glass underneath.



Coralene

Antique coralene construction is a rarity, especially perhaps, in black glass. Small glass beads are fused over the base to form texture and design.

RIGHT TOP: "All-over" coralene design bordered in gold luster.

RIGHT BOTTOM: pictorial design. The stem is a luster filled outline.



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Resources:

Lester and Hughes. *The Big Book of Buttons*, 1981

Official NBS Classification, 2009/2010