

Let There Be Light

IN THE BEGINNING GOD CREATED
THE HEAVEN AND THE EARTH,
AND GOD SAID, LET THERE BE LIGHT;
AND THERE WAS LIGHT.
AND GOD SAW THE LIGHT,
THAT IT WAS GOOD...
AND GOD MADE TWO GREAT LIGHTS;
THE GREATER LIGHT TO RULE THE DAY,
AND THE LESSER LIGHT TO RULE
THE NIGHT;
HE MADE THE STARS ALSO.

Genesis: Chapter 1

ALL THAT GLITTERS
IS NOT GOLD.
SOMETIMES IT'S SILVER,
CRYSTAL AND EVEN
MIRRORS

BY JOYCE MACRAE
PHOTOGRAPHS BY KARYN MILLET

Almost every faith and culture celebrates a holiday near the winter solstice when the days become short and light becomes very special. There are many lights with which we celebrate. There are lights that help make the end of the year a season of remembrance and hope; there are lights that glitter and twinkle all around us with festivity and joy.

To talk about light we must also talk about the opposite: darkness. You've read about light before in this column (see January/February 2004 issue) in which I tried to paint a picture of life before the flick of a switch created all the light we need. For centuries all life and its surroundings were simply dark. The sun, the moon and the stars were it. And they were not always available at your convenience. The only alternatives were the light of the fire, torches, and crude lamps of oil burning in hollowed-out stones or seashells.

Little is documented about the history of the candle, but it is well known that candles were very dear and therefore cosseted and used most sparingly. Though costly and precious (for instance, candle



ABOVE AND RIGHT: A mid-19th century chandelier from Lombardy, France has a large 18th-century rock crystal pendant in the center with smaller glass drops falling like rain from every part of the cage-form fixture. At Therien & Co., Los Angeles.



ends were always saved to be melted into new candles), candles seem to have been in fairly wide use in affluent societies in the fourteenth century. As late as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries candle holders and other lighting devices like lanterns were precious enough to appear in wills and be passed down through generations of families.

By the seventeenth century, in the palaces and mansions of the rich, the reflective quality of polished metal (the ultimate metal being silver) was used to enhance the dim, flickering candlelight. The use of wall sconces backed with polished metal witnessed to the affluence of the owner. In more rare instances, a mirror lined the backs of sconces; this was because sheets of mirrored glass were even more precious than silver, and more reflective of candlelight.

One thinks of mirrors and thoughts turn to Louis XIV and his magnificent Galerie Des Glaces at Versailles (1684) which whetted an appetite for light-enhanced glass which has never abated. The rich and the fashionable sought to

deck their rooms with chandeliers, wall sconces and candelabrum, all aglitter with beads and prisms of glass or crystal. As glass became less expensive and more available, even the upper middle classes, the haute bourgeoisie in Europe, were able to enjoy the fashion for glass. In the last half of the seventeenth century, rock crystal, a transparent, colorless natural quartz, was used in very expensive lighting devices to create the desirable glitter and sparkle when lit with a myriad of candles. These costly and scarce accouterments of fine living were so desirable that Martin Mortimer in his book *The English Glass Chandelier* cites "records in the latter part of the seventeenth century of chandeliers being hired or lent for great occasions when the venue lacked furnishings of sufficient calibre. Sometimes they were simply hung on a pole and taken through the streets." He also mentions references to chandeliers, sconces and candlesticks being sent out to be "boyled and refreshed" to remove built-up wax and dirt.

In the eighteenth century vast improvements in glass-making made it

more available, though not necessarily less expensive. Glass that once had to be hand cut to achieve shape and decoration now could also be blown into a variety of shapes. Rosettes, beads and pendants flourished, and when lit by dozens of candles became the jewels of a room.

In palaces and grand houses not only was darkness held at bay, but glittering, diamond-like lighting brought the stars and the moon into one's very own ball-room or dining room. All one needed was money.

The last quarter of the eighteenth century was the apex for exquisitely ornate glass chandeliers, made throughout Europe (Sweden, Russia, France, England, Germany) for houses of great wealth and great scale. They cascaded with multiple tiers of shimmering glass or crystal beads, festoons of crystal ropes and sensuous drops, shaped like elongated raindrops or faceted like huge diamond pendants. The results of all this light-reflecting glass must have been quite magical and ethereal.

The beauty of these fixtures continued to dazzle through the dawn of the nine-



teenth century (you'll remember that the nineteenth century was a century of "great change"). If you were on the inside enjoying the festivities or on the outside looking in, one of the newly emerging middle class, you knew things were happening. The development of colored glass made the dazzle a little more exotic. Bohemia quickly became the source for affordable colored glass: cobalt blue, amethyst, amber and ruby.

England's Great Exhibition at the Crystal Palace in 1851 and other world class expositions accelerated changes and reinforced the wonders wrought by the Industrial Revolution and enhanced the growing affluence and spending power of the middle class. (America's first great exhibition followed in 1876 in Chicago greatly influencing trends in this country.) Gas was rapidly replacing the flicker of candlelight. Electric lights were on the horizon and inevitably, the flick of a switch.

May your holidays be bright and full of hope and sparkling light! ❧

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Little is known about the early production of chandeliers by the famous Irish firm, Waterford, but this early 19th-century one reflects the style of the 18th-century in a glorious display of Waterford's famous crystal. At Hollyhock, Los Angeles.

One of a pair of 19th-century gilded wood wall sconces made in Genoa. The light-as-air strings of glass beads are in the style of Louis XVI. At Urban Chateau, San Francisco.

A beautiful Mid 19th Century French Rococo style ten light, two tier gilt metal chandelier. Cage form with beaded S-scooled arms. Foliate metal accents festooned with cut glass stringing, drops with 18th Century rock crystal, Venetian glass details and supporting beaded bobeches. Urban Chateau, San Francisco.

