Drinking tea from a saucer instead of a cup, that strange aberration of etiquette we recall in the phrase “a dish of tea,” was a general custom three or four generations ago. Along our not too remote folk ways one can still see an occasional veteran of this old tradition, but there are more engaging souvenirs of the practice. Early in the nineteenth century potteries and glasshouses recognized it by supplying little plates to receive the cups while their saucers were in use. It was really encouraged, however, in the 1830’s when the more progressive American glasshouses, finding such cup plates a made-to-order product for their newly invented glass-pressing machines, deluged the market with their output. A great number have survived and for the past score of years have been enthusiastically collected and studied, not as relics of an outmoded custom, but for the interest of their patterns.

The new technique in glassmaking provided, in addition to a standardized, inexpensive article, fresh possibilities in design. Creative artistry was by no means eliminated by the intrusion of the machine. For, if the new process shifted the emphasis from the craftsman in glass to the mold designer and cutter, the latter were craftsmen in their own right, who continued for several decades to give their work the spirited, intimate attention of the traditional bench artisan. Their designs, translated into a lead glass of quite consistent purity, often in one of many controlled colors, initiated a new era in glassmanship. Conventional patterns of a wide variety typical of an eclectic age—and these adapted in an almost endless list of attractive combinations—record many fugitive aspects of popular taste.

Within the borders of a number of the plates pictorial subjects commemorate events that quickened the public pulse a century or so ago—the coronation of Queen Victoria, the dismantling of the early steamship Chancellor Livingston of the New York to Providence run, the completion of the Bunker Hill monument in 1841, sixteen years after Lafayette had laid the cornerstone, and numerous political excitements.

Much of the novel ware was molded with backgrounds of delicate stippling, a sort of tour de force that gave a peculiar, scintillating relief to the designs. America could not easily afford skilled craftsmen to cut glass in the best English fashion, labor costs being what they were in this country. Responsible historians claim that high labor costs have been an important factor in the development of our democratic way. They did, in any event, lead to such industrial short cuts as the glass-pressing machine, which in its American development long remained the envy of European imitators. By means of such apparatus the tiny facets of this "lacy" glass, precisely modeled beyond the reach of any glass cutter, could be endlessly repeated—and were, during the 1830’s and 1840’s. If anything could, these attractive little forms lent luster to a graceless fashion.

Tippling folk as well as tea drinkers received the attention of the glasshouses. America never had been a temperate nation and, during the cup-plate period, the frontier, ever a force in national life, was providing distilled spirits in ever-increasing quantities from the unprocessed grains it could not otherwise market so profitably. Kentucky alone already had two thousand distilleries by 1810. Here, again, glasshouses added inducement to native propensity by selling appealing equipment. Bottles and flasks, in this case blown, with endlessly varied molded designs were familiar accessories of the day.

Like the cup plates they constitute an en-
Pressed glass cup plates. American, 1830-1850
Blown and molded whisky flasks. American, second quarter of the XIX century

tertaining record of popular enthusiasms and interests over several decades of the last century. Recurrent representations of the seal of the United States, the American flag, and such heroes as Washington, Lafayette, and Franklin reflect the self-conscious nationalism of the time. The democratizing influence of the frontier finds expression in portraits of its favorite personalities, Andrew Jackson, Zachary Taylor, and General William Henry Harrison—“Old Hickory,” “Rough and Ready,” and “Tippecanoe,” as they were affectionately dubbed. Lafayette, Jenny Lind, and Louis Kossuth, popular visitors to our shores, were celebrated in those molded designs, as were the railroads and other tokens of a progressing civilization.

The colors of the bottles add particularly to their interest. Here are the same variable hues, often a casual result of economical furnace chemistry, which feature the extra-commercial products blown offhand at the same factories. The aquamarines, olive greens, and browns of various shades and, more rarely, sapphire blues, rich ambers, emerald greens, and other colors, virtually range the rainbow.

The Museum has long owned a modest collection of both these types of early American glass, which the recent bequest of Constance R. Brown has considerably enriched. Since the bequest alone numbers several hundred examples, only a representative selection is exhibited in Gallery M 15 c of the American Wing.