

# LETTER FROM POISONLAND

BY  
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Skulls, skulls...and more skulls. In this fourth installment of our irregular series of letters, we examine that most famous symbol of death and poison: the human skull.

As everybody knows, the skull is the bony framework of the head which encloses and protects the brain. Along with pirates and trick-or-treaters during Halloween, we poison bottle collectors love skulls, especially when they're embossed on our bottles!

Originally, the skull and crossbones was used as a Christian religious symbol, apparently derived from the legend that Christ's Cross had rested on Adam's skull and bones. Adam supposedly was buried in the hill outside ancient Jerusalem where the Crucifixion occurred. Many early mosaics and paintings used such iconography, as, for example, the famous mosaic in the Church of the Dormition in Daphni, Greece. Dating from the eleventh century, the mosaic clearly shows a skull buried within a mound of rocks underneath the Cross. Griffenhagen and Bogard wrote that, "After pirates adopted the skull and cross bones for their Jolly Roger flag in the eighteenth century, the Roman Catholic Church forbade further use of the symbol on vestments." William C. Ketchum, Jr. wrote that by the time of the Middle Ages, the skull and crossbones was called the "death's head" and had come to be associated with danger and death, which may explain its adoption by the buccaneers. Presumably, its use by pirates irrevocably changed the connotation from religious to dangerous.

In any event, the symbolism was well-established by the middle of the nineteenth century, when, 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." According to Roy Morgan, the U.K. Patent Office issued a provisional patent in 1871 to G.F. Langford for a bottle "in the shape of a coffin, [which] may be externally ornamented with a death's head[.]" Although Mr. Langford's coffin-shaped bottle eventually was produced (the exceedingly rare KU-36, a photograph of which adorns the cover of Mr. Morgan's book), it did not bear an embossed skull and crossbones. Indeed, for all their unusual shapes, we do not know of any British poison bottle on which a death's head symbol is molded onto the glass. The Americans, however, made up for their British cousins, and produced almost two dozen different bottles (not including color and/or size variations) with embossed skulls and crossbones. In addition, Carlton H. Lee of Boston patented his spectacular human skull figural bottle (KU-10) in 1894. There is one known variety of Australian bottle bearing a skull and crossbones (KS-58) which was, however, manufactured by Whithall, Tatum in the United States, and another (KR-83), also blown by W, T for Bews Pharmacy in the town of Revestoke. (Does anybody know where Revestoke is? The embossed name may be a spelling error, since a town named Revelstoke does exist in the Canadian province of British Columbia.) Other than the dozen or so varieties of German poison bottles--which, with apologies to member Horst Klusmeier (#51), all have similar-looking although well-executed death's heads--every other listed poison bottle with the embossed death's head is American. And, the variety of the American skull-and-crossbones bottles is amazing, ranging from grinning foolish-looking skulls to truly terrifying visages!

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

An interesting article called "Collecting Iodine Poisons" in Vol. 1, No. 6 of The Poison Bottle Newsletter, illustrates the wide variety of embossed death's heads on iodine bottles. The affordable Parke, Davis iodine bottles (KR-7) are of particular interest, since they exhibit a number of distinct varieties that Cap and Philip dubbed as the Baby Skull, the Evil Skull, the Happy Skull, etc.

The prices of skull bottles vary widely. The common amber iodine bottles (KS-12) cost in the range of \$10-25, depending on condition and whether the stopper and/or label are present. The figural cobalt skull (KU-10) often sells for \$2,000-\$3,000 in pristine 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. A small DP coffin with a label (KU-8) sold on eBay for the sum of \$735 in November 2000, and a perfect cobalt Demert bottle (KR-1) sold in a Glass Works Auction for \$4,070 in June 1997. Some of the most unusual and flat crazy American skulls are embossed on the Sharp & Dohme poison bottles (KC-4, KO-1, and KU-19), which seem to be valued in the \$100+ range, although the KO-1s are worth far more. The skulls embossed on these Sharp & Dohme bottles are less realistic than those on the Wheatons!

Finally, on the subject of death's heads, just last year one of our members discovered an amber version of KR-3, one of our favorite death's head poison bottles that previously was known only in cobalt. The late Rudy Kuhn's words in his "Poison Bottle Workbook" ring true: "The great thing about collecting poison bottles is not only their beauty and unique characteristics, but that there is no known end. Continually there are new finds which have not been seen or even known of before. That is the excitement of collecting this category of bottle."

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#### References:

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

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

The Poison Bottle Newsletter Editor Joan Calhoun can provide members with a complete set of The Poison Bottle Newsletter, for the cost of copying.

