

# Alight with Style

Candlesticks of the 17th and 18th Centuries

by Ann K. Wagner



Fig. 1: (left) Candlestick, Germany or the Netherlands, circa 1650–1700. Brass. H. 10½ in. 1961.1470. (center) Candlestick, England, circa 1640–1660. Earthenware (tin-glaze). H. 9½ in. 1964.621. (right) Candlestick, England or northern Europe, circa 1650–1670. Wrought iron. H. 6 in. 1953.173.9.

and upper shaft, drip pan, lower shaft, and base. The sizeable tin-glazed earthenware (called delftware) candlestick (Fig. 1, center) with a thin, broad drip-pan and base illustrates an elegant, but less costly alternative ceramic. The wrought iron example in figure 1 (right), is a rare survivor of the form in iron.

In the late 1600s influences of French-trained Huguenot metalworkers became evident in English silver and brass candlestick designs favoring baluster-shaped shafts, smooth or engraved surfaces, and stepped or domed geometric bases. The brass example with a short shaft and a low octagonal base is a modest rendition of this style (Fig. 2, left). The blue and white porcelain candlestick (Fig. 2, right) represents one of the earliest European forms made in China. Its shaft and octagonal base mimic contemporaneous brass candlesticks, right down to the round ejector holes in the candle socket. Slightly later silver and brass candlesticks have hidden internal screw mechanisms for the same purpose.

Silver forms were often the harbinger of stylistic change in metalwork. By the mid-eighteenth century, silver designs favored spiraling forms, irregular naturalistic shell and plant motifs, and textured edges, all of which were adapted to

Candlesticks provide evocative evidence of lives once illuminated only by flame. Their delightful forms add color and texture to a room, contributing to stylish decoration of interior spaces. Candlesticks were most popular during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. As such, this was a flourishing time for British and European candlestick manufacturers. Growing colonial markets, which were prohibited by law from making most of their own finished goods, imported candlesticks like those advertised by Rebecca Abbott in Boston in the *New England Weekly Journal* on July 31, 1732: “Very lately Imported from divers [sic] Parts,... a very great Variety of Fine Glafs Ware, viz Decanters, Salvers, Candlesticks...” Probate inventories and wills on both sides of the Atlantic record metal candlesticks as possessions of value, and reflect desire for more refined lighting than simple rush lights or fat lamps. This article offers a brief overview of some leading styles and shapes.

Since the late medieval era, candles were typically made from tallow (animal fat) or wax (primarily vegetal material) and had wicks that burned irregularly, causing the liquefying candle to flow over the sides of the cup. To catch the hot, escaping liquid, some candlesticks made in the 1600s and early 1700s featured wide drip pans and flared or bell-shaped bases. The mid-level drip pan on the brass candlestick in figure 1 (left) is a form that was used extensively for both ceramic and metalwork candlesticks. Brass sticks were generally sand cast in four separate parts: candle socket



Fig. 2: (left) Candlestick, England, circa 1700–1725. Brass. H. 4½ in. 1958.1563. (right) Candlestick, China, circa 1700–1730. Porcelain (hard-paste). H. 7½ in. 1958.744.




**Fig. 3:** (left to right) Candlestick, England, circa 1730–1770. Brass. H. 8½ in. 1961.845.2. Candlestick, England, circa 1720–1755. Glass (lead). H. 8¾ in. Museum purchase with funds provided by Collectors Circle. 1986.129. Candlestick, England (London), Ebenezer Coker, circa 1764–1765. Silver. H. 10 in. 1961.546.2. Candlestick, England (Staffordshire), circa 1740–1760, Stoneware (salt-glaze). H. 9¾ in. Gift of Mr. and Mrs. John Mayer. 1982.130. Candlestick, England, circa 1750–1770. Enamel on copper. H. 10½ in. 1961.921.1.

candlesticks. A relatively conservative expression in silver, the candlestick pictured in figure 3 (center) has a bobèche (removable candle cup and drip pan) with raised shell ornament; the shaft has leaf-tip patterns, and the stepped base incorporates leaves and shells into its corners. By the later 1700s, flourishing brass and fused-plate (silver on copper) industries in England encouraged the proliferation of pattern books and trade catalogues that disseminated designs to media other than silver. The rococo-style brass candlestick (Fig. 3, far left) with a petal-shaped base was cast in Birmingham during the city's rise to supremacy in the brass industry.

Variations on the rococo silver candlestick form inspired imitations in less costly materials, which in turn allowed their creators some design license. The lead-glass candlestick (Fig. 3, left) has the same general profile as silver and brass candlesticks from the period. The relief-decorated, salt-glaze ceramic candlestick (Fig. 3, right) was probably modeled after a silver example. It captures the rococo taste with a flaring upper edge, leafy borders, surface patterning, and domed, scroll-edged base. The white candlestick decorated with pastoral vignettes was made with enamel colors baked on a less expensive copper form (Fig. 3, far right).

By the 1760s a growing cultural enthusiasm for what we now call the neoclassical style ushered in a taste in decorative arts for designs similar to those found in Greek and Roman antiquity. Candlestick manufacturers quickly responded with new patterns inspired by antique architectural columns and vases in silver, fused plate, brass, bronze, and paktong (a white-colored alloy of copper, zinc, and nickel) (Fig. 4, left). The pearlware candlestick with portrait medallions at the base (Fig. 4, center) and the stoneware example (Fig. 4, right), represent variations on the type.

Although candlesticks, multi-branched candelabrum, chandeliers, sconces and other candle-lit devices continued to be manufactured, technological inventions involving brighter lights and cleaner fuels quickly supplanted their prominence. François Pierre Ami Argand's 1784 patent of a tubular wick creating brighter

oil lamps was widely adapted by lighting manufacturers. Many design improvements and the use of gas as a fuel followed, illuminating the next century with interior brilliance far exceeding that possible with candles. Their enduring forms, however, are evidenced by this brief investigation into historic designs that are still produced today. 

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*All photography courtesy Winterthur Museum.*



**Fig 4:** (left) Candlestick, England (Birmingham or London), circa 1810–1830. Paktong. H. 12 in. 1964.960.2. (center) Candlestick, England (Staffordshire), circa 1780–1800. Stoneware (salt-glaze). H. 12.6 in. 1958.904. (right) Candlestick, England, circa 1790–1810. Earthenware (pearlware). H. 9¾ in. 1959.1117.2.