

## Collecting: Gilded Age China and Glass

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Visit the Flagler Museum in Palm Beach, and you'll probably remember oil tycoon Henry Flagler's private railcar. But when celebrity makeup artist Kimara Ahnert—pictured above with her mother, Bonnie Rudeski—visited the mansion 10 years ago, a set of 3-D dinner plates blew her away. Captivated by the ethereal, cloudy-white cameo design, she asked the curator who made them (Minton), when (circa 1900), and how they were made (pâte-sur-pâte).

Today, she owns a dozen pâte-sur-pâte (paste-on-paste) plates and enough other glittering porcelain plates and glassware for a Gatsbyesque soiree. "I'm all about the Gilded Age: hand-painted porcelain, silverware, and raised-gold glassware," says Kimara, who picks the dishes before deciding what to serve dinner guests.

"I don't want a big piece of prime rib covering up my pâte-sur-pâte," laughs the blond, blue-eyed New Yorker, who lives with her husband, Glenn, and 4-year-old son Jonathan in a sunny apartment overlooking Central Park. A self-described "girlie girl," Kimara is also a go-getty girl who runs her own cosmetic company, including skin-care studios in Manhattan and Greenwich, Connecticut. Among her high-profile fans are Gwyneth Paltrow, Isabella Rossellini, Catherine Zeta-Jones, and Princess Firyal of Jordan.

Kimara contracted chinamania from her mother, Bonnie Rudeski, a third-generation hotelier, now retired, and a longtime doll collector. (Think French dollmaker Jumeau, not Barbie.) Together and alone, mother and daughter hunt for vintage tableware at auctions, antiques shows, online (rubylane.com), and favorite shops (Devonia Antiques in Boston, Massachusetts). She has scored plenty of cut-glass jars and engraved bowls at Paris's fabled flea markets, but some prized treasures were inherited from glamorous grandmothers.

"Glenn's grandmother gave us the Mettlach plaque hanging on our bedroom wall," says Kimara. Best known for creating ornate beer steins, the stoneware factory in Mettlach, Germany, was opened in 1836 by Nicholas Villeroy and Eugene Francis Boch, admired today as Villeroy & Boch. "It's marked 'Mettlach VB' on the back, and dates to about 1900," explains Kimara. The 21-inch plaque is worth about \$1,700, but it's invaluable to the couple. "It's the same pâte-sur-pâte technique I fell in love with at the Flagler," she says.

More comfortable in tottering Louboutins than sneakers, Kimara banishes milk cartons from the breakfast table and prefers to pour juice from a cut-glass crystal pitcher. "That's the way I was raised," she says, slowly running her fingertips along the cameo panels and 22-karat-gold scrollwork as if reading Braille. A pair of Minton cameo plates signed by Albion Birks, an apprentice to Marc-Louis Solon, the factory's famed French-born paste-on-paste practitioner, retails for about \$4,000 today. A set of 16 Minton plates with quarter-size portrait cameos and signed by Birks went for \$13,750 at Christie's in 2008.

For fun, Kimara arranges and rearranges the gem-like placecard holders (above) and glowing raised-gold fruit bowls by Moser. "It's like jewelry for the table," she coos. The feast for the eyes she creates is pure pleasure. "I would set a table just to entertain myself. It's almost like playing house."

Antique Moser bowls in a set of 12 each bear the three-letter monogram JCE, which, Kimara says, only adds to their charm. "I really admire the workmanship. That level of detail isn't easy to find today," she adds. She did recently order Moser's new "Maharani" champagne flutes during a trip to Prague. "The new glasses have all the elegance and detail of old glass. I'm very comfortable mixing it up, and I use it all. My porcelain and glassware isn't sitting around gathering dust."

Her favorite finds are by glassmakers Baccarat, Moser, and Lobmeyr as well as domestic powerhouses T.G. Hawkes & Co., Pairpoint, Steuben, and C. Dorflinger & Sons. She drops the names of porcelainmakers as if they were old school chums: Coalport, Dresden, Limoges, Minton, Sèvres, and Tiffany. Her BFFs are the classics—whites, creams, and golds—but only if the surface has some depth. "I really go for raised decoration, whether it's gold or pâte-sur-pâte. I like the way raised gold or cut glass feels in my hand."

Audrey Hepburn chic, Kimara isn't moved by minimalism. Even the Reed & Barton's "Francis I" sterling flatware she inherited from her grandmother offers comforting texture and weight. She registered for the same feminine, flowery 1901 pattern as a 25-year-old bride. "My grandmother and mother have the same pattern, so I can still use the good stuff when I entertain," she explains.





The raised, cloudy white pâte-sur-pâte decoration is carved to look like a cameo on a Minton dinner plate collected by makeup artist Kimara Ahnert.



Kimara inherited this pâte-sur-pâte wall plaque by Johann Stahl for Mettlach, circa 1900. It once belonged to her husband's grandmother.



Hand-blown compotes with wheel-engraved decoration by Pairpoint, circa 1910, and new "Maharani" champagne flutes by Moser.



A Limoges vase, one of a pair collected by Kimara. The vase is signed by "B. Madeline" and dates back to the 1880s.



The *pâte-sur-pâte* process requires brushing on layers of liquid clay (slip) to build a low relief on a tinted surface and carving the details to resemble a cameo. "The technique creates depth and transparency," says dealer Lori Hedtler of Devonian Antiques. "You can see right through the floating veils and water." *Pâte-sur-pâte* first appeared in 18th-century China, but superstar French ceramist Marc-Louis Solon perfected the process at Sèvres, then headed to England where he shared his secrets with Minton in 1870. Minton plates signed by Solon command some of the highest prices, but there's also a premium for work by his gifted apprentices like Frederick Rhead and Albion Birks. Today, talented English artist and ceramist Dale Bowen keeps the craft alive. For a closer look at his attractive vases and jars, go to [patesurpate.com](http://patesurpate.com).



A Dorflinger & Sons cut-glass and etched punch bowl (circa 1914) is admired by the collecting duo who are fans of the Corning Museum of Glass, where the super-sized bowl is on display. Marked only by paper labels that often fell off, Dorflinger's works are identified and dated now through patterns found in original catalogs.

The poppy punch bowl combines acid-etched (poppy motif) and cut-glass (panels and chisel marks) techniques. Acid-etched decoration is created by coating the glass in wax, then scratching the design through the wax. Dipped into hydrofluoric acid, the exposed glass is etched by the corrosive acid. Diamond-point engraving, an earlier and costlier process, requires cutting directly into the glass by hand. Copper-wheel engraving requires a lathe-like machine fitted with grinding tools to cut decoration into glass. Always feel for a slightly raised design to separate engraved glass from the more affordable but flatter acid-etched glass.

The curvy, scalloped, cut rim crowns the punch bowl with a shapely silhouette few can resist. The rough, chisel-like pit marks look hand-hammered but were cut on a wheel. The flowery Kalana series, designed by Englishman Charles Northwood, includes poppies, lilies, and geraniums. The floral pattern was inspired by the Art Nouveau movement.



Exquisite decanters handcrafted in 1870 by the legendary glass company J. & L. Lobmeyr in Vienna, where its boutique still stands today ([lobmeyr.at](http://lobmeyr.at)). Kimara has purchased glass from its archival collection.



Raised 22-karat gold scrollwork plates by Minton, circa 1900, with Reed & Barton's ornate "Francis I" knife, a family heirloom. Kimara is attracted to the shimmer and texture of raised gold.



Machine-made glass lacks the sparkle of cut crystal, says Kimara. "Machine cuts aren't as sharp," agrees mom Bonnie. Detail of a cut-glass decanter probably by Dorflinger or Hawkes.



The underside of a *pâte-sur-pâte* plate custom-ordered through Tiffany but made by Minton. "Special-order china hit its peak from 1890 to 1910, the Gilded Age," says Lori Hedtler of Devonia.



Intaglio (Italian for engraving) is a technique that involves cutting the design deep into the glass (as opposed to a cameo, where the image is raised). The technique was developed by the ancient Greeks and later used by Egyptians and Romans, who carved precious stones.

The technique was revived in 17th-century Germany and Bohemia by gem-cutter Caspar Lehmann, who adapted intaglio to glass. Victorians were fond of reverse intaglio crystals (carved out cabochon crystals that were painted from the back). Think fox-hunt cuff links that have a 3-D trompe l'oeil effect. Kimara often sets her table with colorful Czech intaglio glass placecard holders, circa 1910 (left). One of her favorite scenes depicts the Three Graces in a circle holding hands.



Grandmother's cut-glass lamps are back. One of a pair, Kimara's treasure was a gift her grandparents received on their 25th wedding anniversary. Nearby is a French Jumeau automaton doll that Kimara purchased for \$10,175 at an auction in Pennsylvania.



At the turn of the last century, Mary Lily Flagler was Palm Beach's best-known hostess. For a peek inside her Gilded-Age mansion, Whitehall, go to the [Flagler Museum Web site](#). See Flagler's French Renaissance-style dining room (left) and other sumptuous interiors that inspire Kimara.