

# Dry Tank Set-Ups for Vintage Aquariums and Fishbowls

By Gary Bagnall

An aquarium set-up with tropical fish is a beautiful “living picture” that rivals anything used to decorate the modern household. Add to this an antique aquarium or fishbowl set-up with plants and fish and you have something genuinely spectacular along the lines of the finest Tiffany lamps or other museum pieces. The only problem arises when your antique aquarium collection gets slightly out of control. Hence, you take the other route (as in no water and live fish) and do a “dry-tank” set-up using vintage or new aquarium ornaments and plants. The following images outline some of the design work I have seen with collector friends in the “dry-tank set-up” vein over the years. I want to thank Ken Larimer, Paul Wettlaufer, and Ron Luceti for using some of their dry-tank images in this article.



A group of rare vintage castles and grottos used for dry-tank set-ups. These are not inexpensive and difficult to find, costing \$50. and up for the small-sized ones and \$300. and up for medium to large size castles and grottos. Most tropical fish stores will have a large selection of resin-style castles and grottos with prices much less than original antique ones.



Victorian era “eagle tank” (named because of the eagle finials on the top corners). This aquarium used coral sand, scallop shells, red pipe coral, a black sea fan, and a vintage Bavarian mermaid for this dry tank set-up. Most of these shells and coral can be bought online or at a shell shop, and some tropical fish stores will carry the coral pieces. The antique Bavarian mermaid is rare and usually sells in the \$400. and up range, when you can find one.



A Fiske Victorian-era aquarium with vintage terra-cotta castles, coral sand, and mermaid.



A green “splatter-paint” aquarium from the 1940s with original bulb-edge glass. This aquarium used coral sand, vintage aquarium ornaments, and cat “hangers” at the top, plus added a couple of vintage aquarium book titles to the ensemble.





A rare Grassyfork "reed tank" from the 1920s. They used coral sand, vintage castles, a Grassyfork fish food tin, a rare Henry Bishop Aquarium and Bird Guide booklet, hanging cats, and a sitting (on rim) fishing boy.



A very unusually shaped antique copper aquarium with lion heads on both ends plus lion feet on the bottom. They used coral sand, a dried sea fan in the back, shells, and a vintage bisque bathing beauty.



A Faux-Bois (French for fake wood) aquarium using coral sand, aquarium ornaments, a small vintage castle, and a small old fish-keeping booklet in the back.



A small 2-gallon 1930-40s iron aquarium with roll-top finials. It contains large-size pebble gravel with vintage ornaments, including Metaframe and Pemco aquarium items from the 1960s.



A Metaframe aquarium used to display vintage 1960-70s Metaframe products inside.



A small aluminum Jewel Aquarium made in the 1930s. Contains large size pebble gravel with vintage ornaments and a castle including a vintage Penn-Plax ornament.



Black splatter-paint aquarium made by Aquarium Stock Company in the 1950s. They used large coral sand, a combination of vintage aquarium products and a small castle.





Johann Maresch terra-cotta fishbowl holder using aquarium gravel, mermaid, grotto, hanging cat, and a vintage mermaid trade card in the back.



1920s Vaseline fishbowl with stand, which includes coral sand, bisque ornaments, vintage fish food box, sea fan in the back, and fishing boy sitter on the top back rim.



1930s Jewel "Bungalow" Aquarium with a charming set of vintage sleeping beauty ornaments.



1920s fishbowl stand with modern reproduction bowl, includes gravel, bathing beauty in lotus flower, cat hangers, and bird sitters.



Gillinger Brothers 1920s embossed glass turtle bowl with vintage turtle tins and boxes inside.



1930s Relpaw small 2-gallon fish tank with coral sand, small castle, sea fan, hanging cat, and rare vintage diving mermaid.





Rare 1920s Jewel Seahorse Aquarium includes coral sand, vintage castle and aquarium ornaments, Hartz Mountain fish food tin, cat hanger, and bird and google-eye girl vintage sitters.



Victorian Parlor Aquarium with swan or duck finials at the top. The aquarium has coral sand and various ornaments from the 1930s through the 1960s.



Jewel Seahorse Aquarium showing a close-up of the google-eye fishing girl sitter (1930s) and swan sitter.



Vaseline fishbowl (1920s) showing a rare German bisque "hanging" mermaid. The bowl in front has a fun hanging frog, plus what looks like a Nelson diver fighting an octopus inside the bowl.



Rare small “eagle finial” Victorian-era aquarium with coral sand, a large terra cotta castle (from the 1890s-1910), and an interesting old advertising card with a fish wagon.



Closeup of an aquarium showing coral sand, 1940s “flowing” mermaid, a vintage fish food box, and two small German ceramic castles.

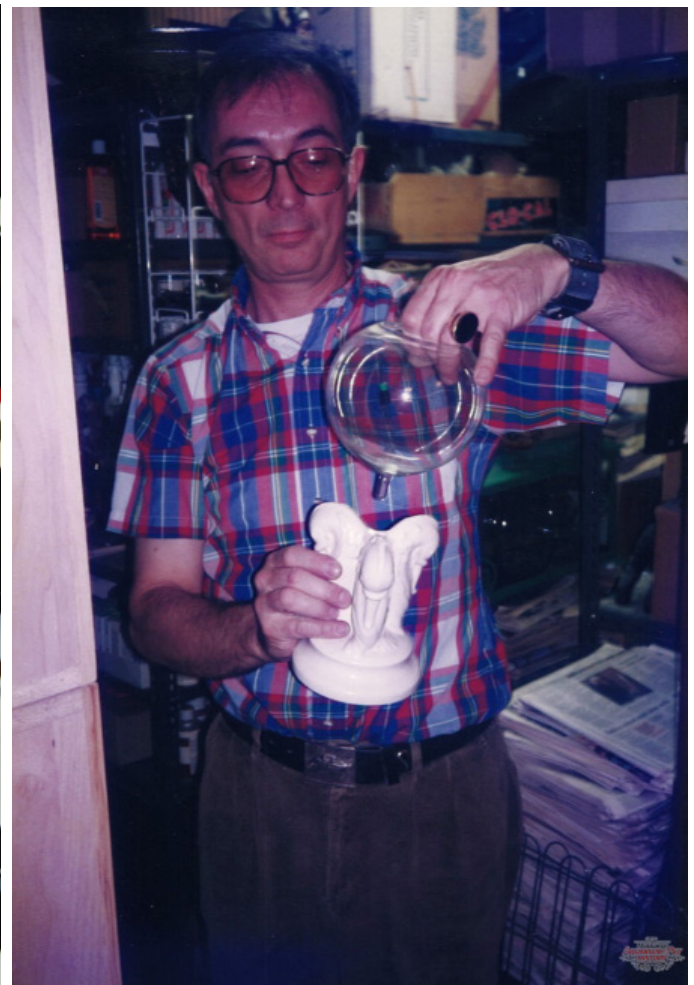


Closeup of an aquarium showing coral sand, a German mermaid in a shell, vintage fish food tin, various aquarium ornaments including a bisque goldfish floater, plus black sea fan and blue coral.





20.) 1920s Relpaw (made in Germany) fish bowl and holder with coral sand, fishing boy, and interesting diver escaping from the one-piece blown fishbowl.



22.) I would also thank my friend Paul Wetlaufer from Piranha aquarium in Ontario, Canada who passed away in 2021. An aquarium (and pet) historian who is sorely missed. This article is dedicated to Paul.



21.) Left to right, I would like to thank three aquarium friends who shared images for this article: Jim Gilbert, Ron Luceti, and Ken Larimer.