

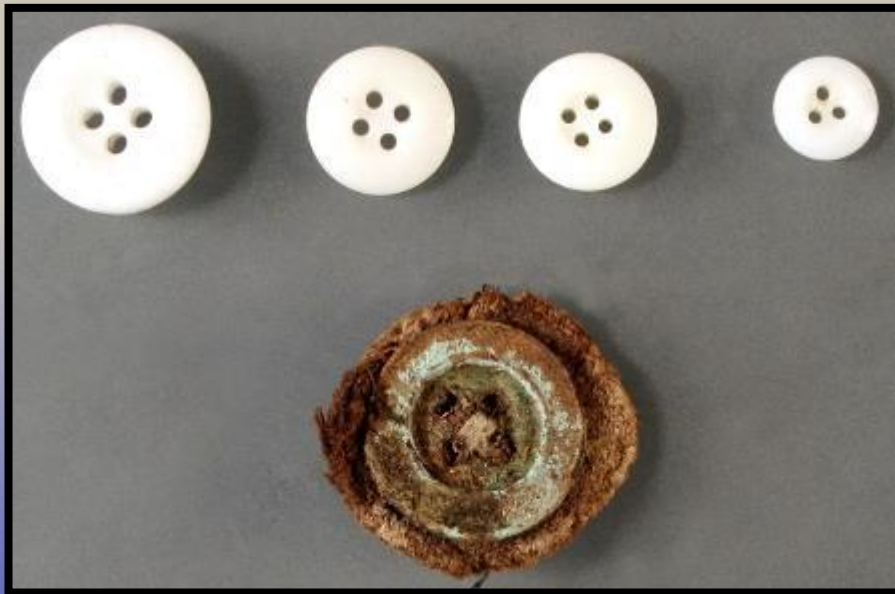
Unraveling the Mystery of China Button Bodies: A Hands-on Lesson in Identification



A bit of history...

China buttons were some of the first buttons manufactured in massive quantities at the beginning of the industrial revolution around 1840. They continued to be manufactured until 1950 when the last factory in Briare, France ceased production of buttons.

China buttons were known as *agates* by manufacturers. They are called *Prosser* buttons by archaeologists. China buttons are one of the most common types of buttons found in archaeological excavations in America. They hold up much better than metal buttons.



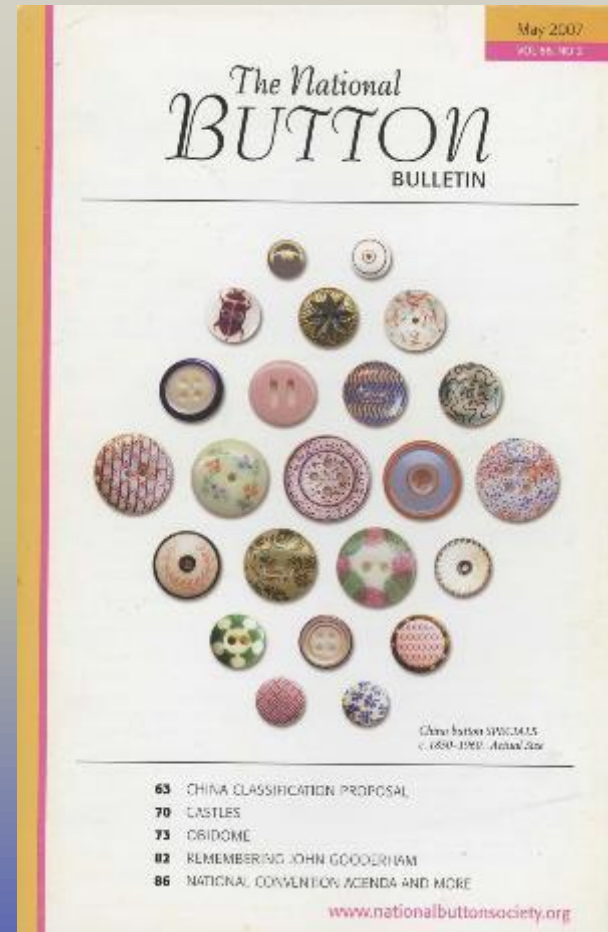
A pebbled back....

One of the biggest telltale marks of most china buttons is a pebbled/orange peel back like this one. A few will have a glassier smoother back. We'll talk about why the glassy versions are still china buttons in a moment.



So, what is a china button?

- If a button has historically been considered a china, appears in the Guidelines or in later articles of the NBB where it is identified as a china, it is a china button regardless of whether the exact pattern or color was listed and regardless of kiln testing that would indicate a composition more consistent with glass.
- The oldest china buttons are composed of a type of high fire porcelain. Later china buttons have more glass in their composition. There is almost no way to tell them apart unless you put them in a kiln and try to melt them.





- Remember when your mother warned you that you would be known by the company you keep? It is true for china buttons too. If a button has been documented by its appearance on a sample card of buttons in the company of other known china buttons and has a china-like appearance, it is a china button.

- Like this tiny four-hole Radiating Line Rim... It isn't in the Guidelines but a large quantity of these appeared on eBay a few years ago. The best provenance that I've been able to establish is that they originate from "new" old stock from a general store in Franklinville, NY.



- If a button is not listed in the Guidelines or in later NBB articles but is substantially like other china buttons and exhibits china-like qualities, it is a china. Like this odd little green china that I acquired at auction recently.

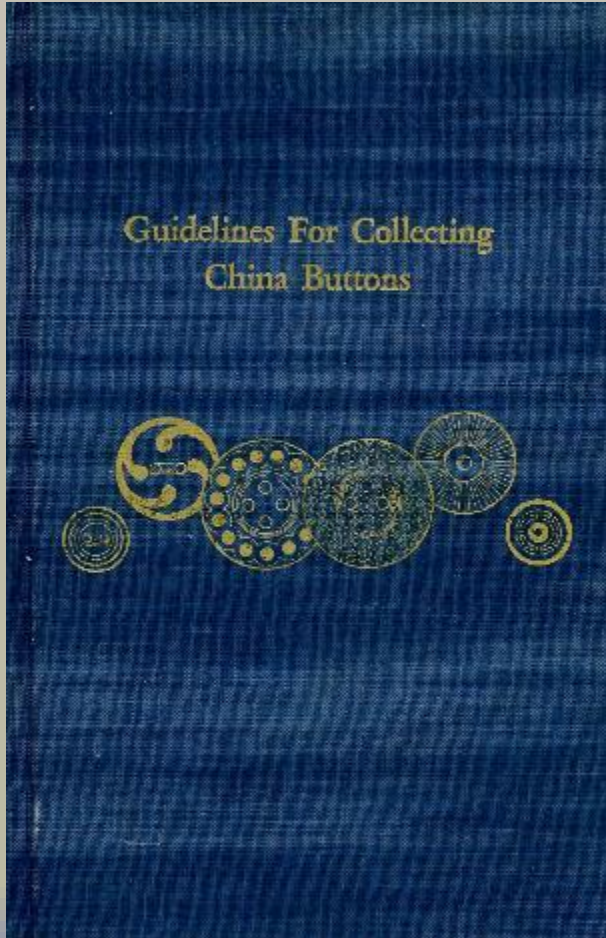




- If a button has been firmly linked to Briare in France via the Bapterosses factory discharge area and has a definite china-like appearance, it is a china even if it looks a bit glassy.
- Like these lovely large china tire type variants that came from the dump in France...



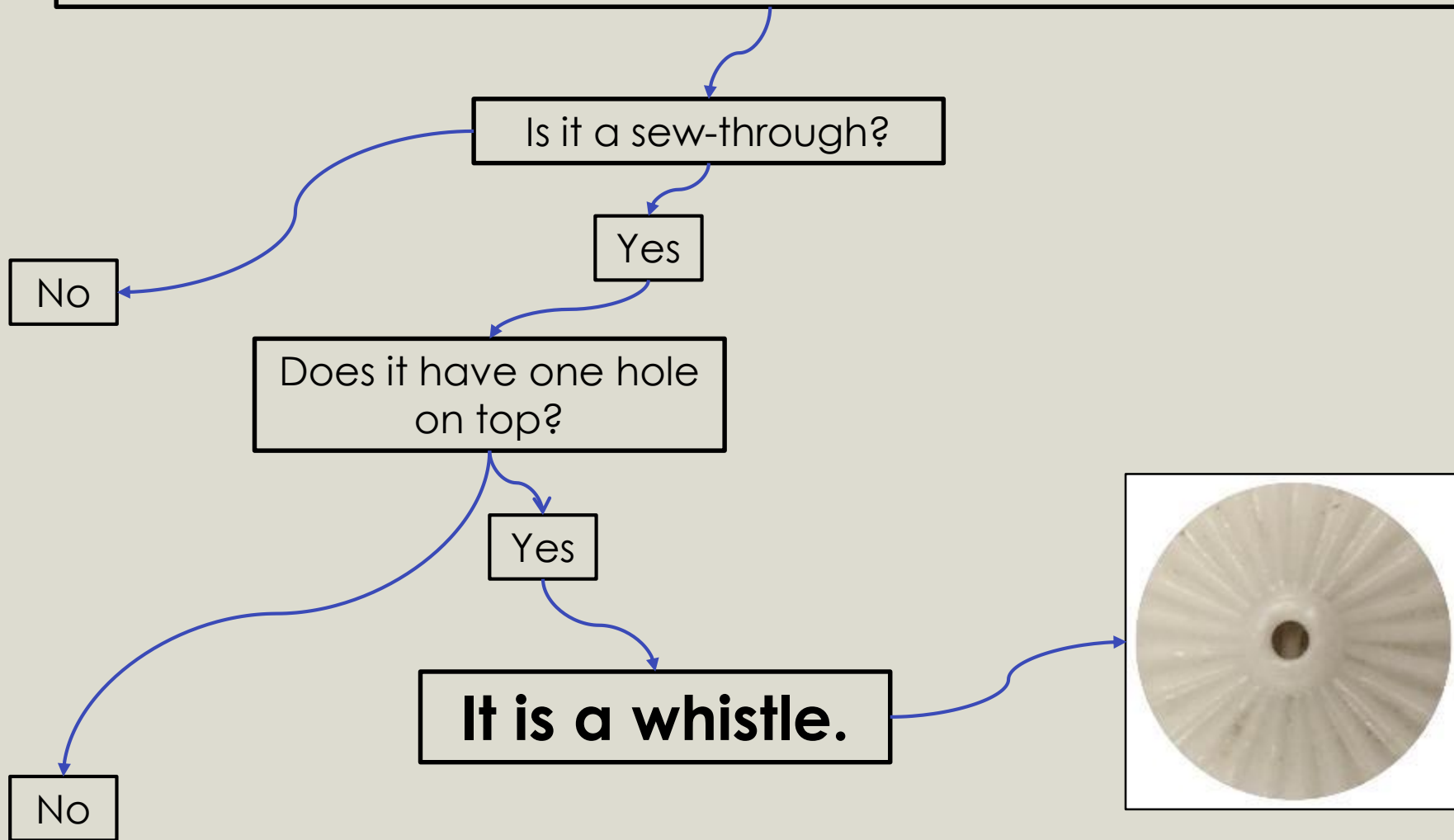
China collectors tend to start here when learning about how to identify china buttons:



The Guidelines for Collecting China Buttons divides china body styles into four basic sections: complex construction, 2 holes, 3 holes and 4 holes.

The Guidelines will allow you to identify most china buttons, but it will make you a bit crazy if you are accustomed to the Blue Book way of organizing things. Also, there are a lot of unlisted chinas that are not included in the Guidelines. I am working on a new book but that is taking a while. Today, we will use a flow chart...

So you want to learn to identify china
button types...



China Whistles can be found in over twenty different body types. Twenty are listed in the Guidelines and there are at least 2-3 unlisted whistles that I've seen. A lot will be white...



Look at the backs. If the holes are not round, you've got a glass whistle on your hands.

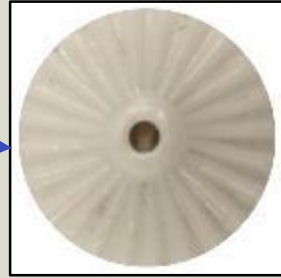
"D" shaped holes on glass buttons often mistaken for china whistles



Janet White has a fantastic article on her website, baublesandbuttons.com. This image of glass whistles comes from her site.

Does it have one hole
on top?

Yes. It is a whistle.



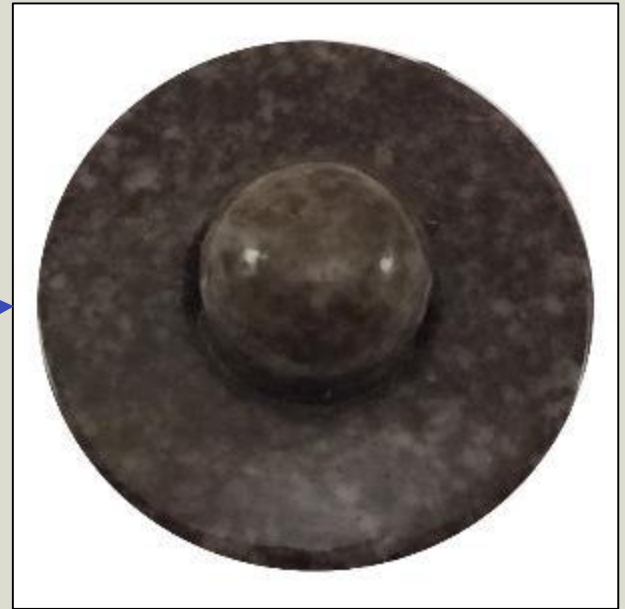
No

Does it have a hump
on top?

No

Yes

It is an igloo.



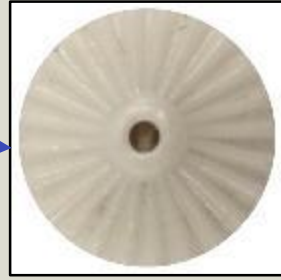


Igloos are quite rare and are a bit pricy. They come in a small variety of colors and patterns. They are unusual enough that they are easy to spot. As you can see, the reverse of an igloo looks like a simple two hole sew-through button.



Does it have one hole on top?

Yes. It is a whistle.



No

Yes. It is an igloo.



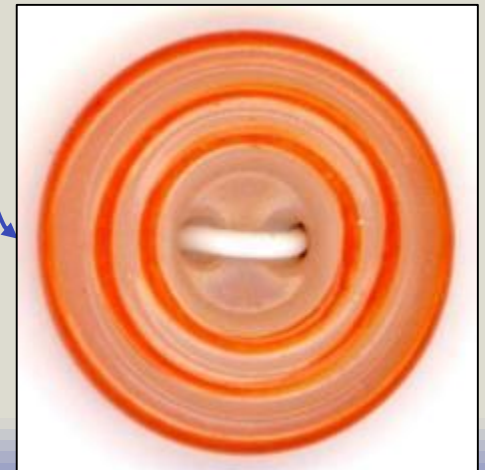
Does it have a hump on top?

No

Does it have two holes in a perfectly circular well?

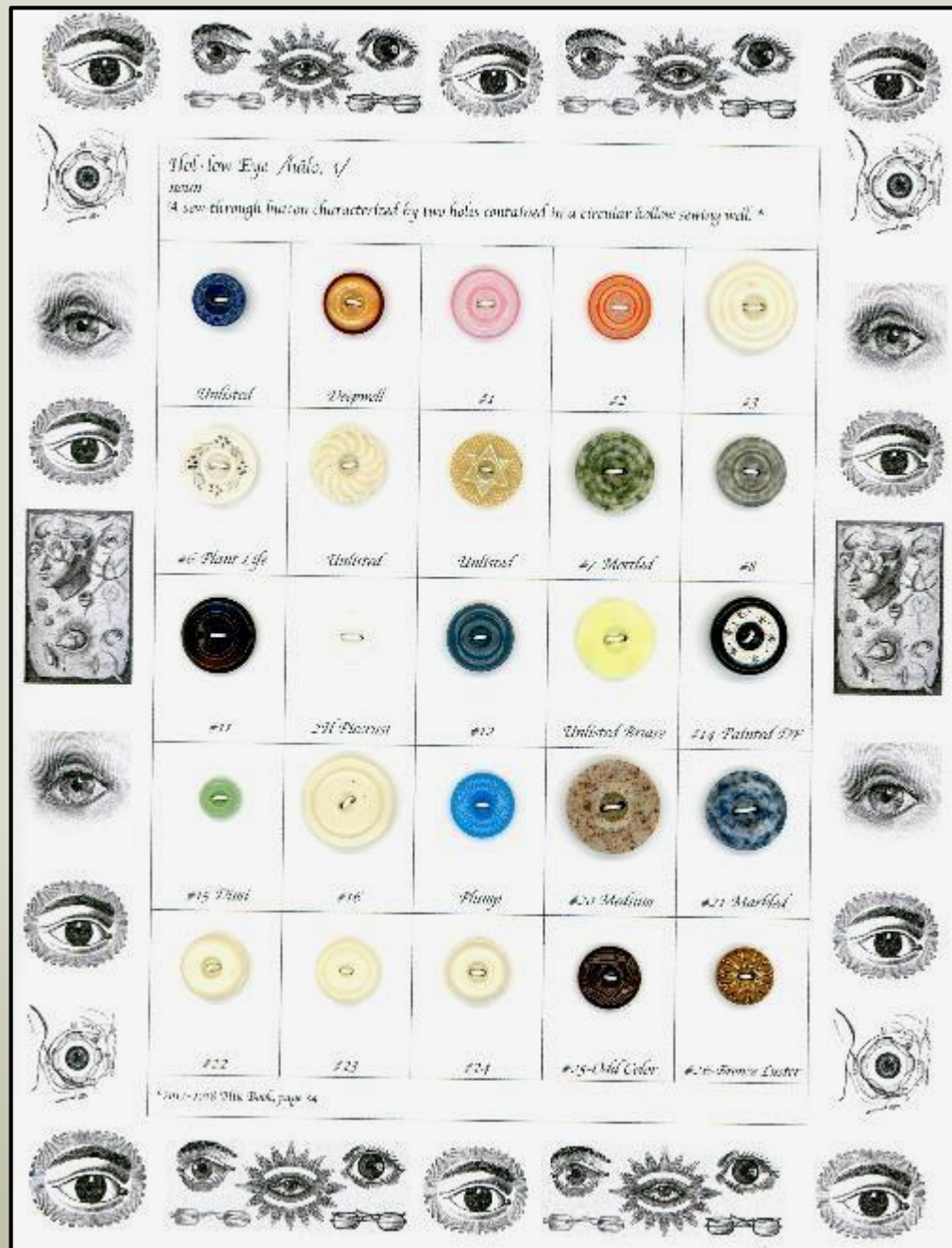
Yes

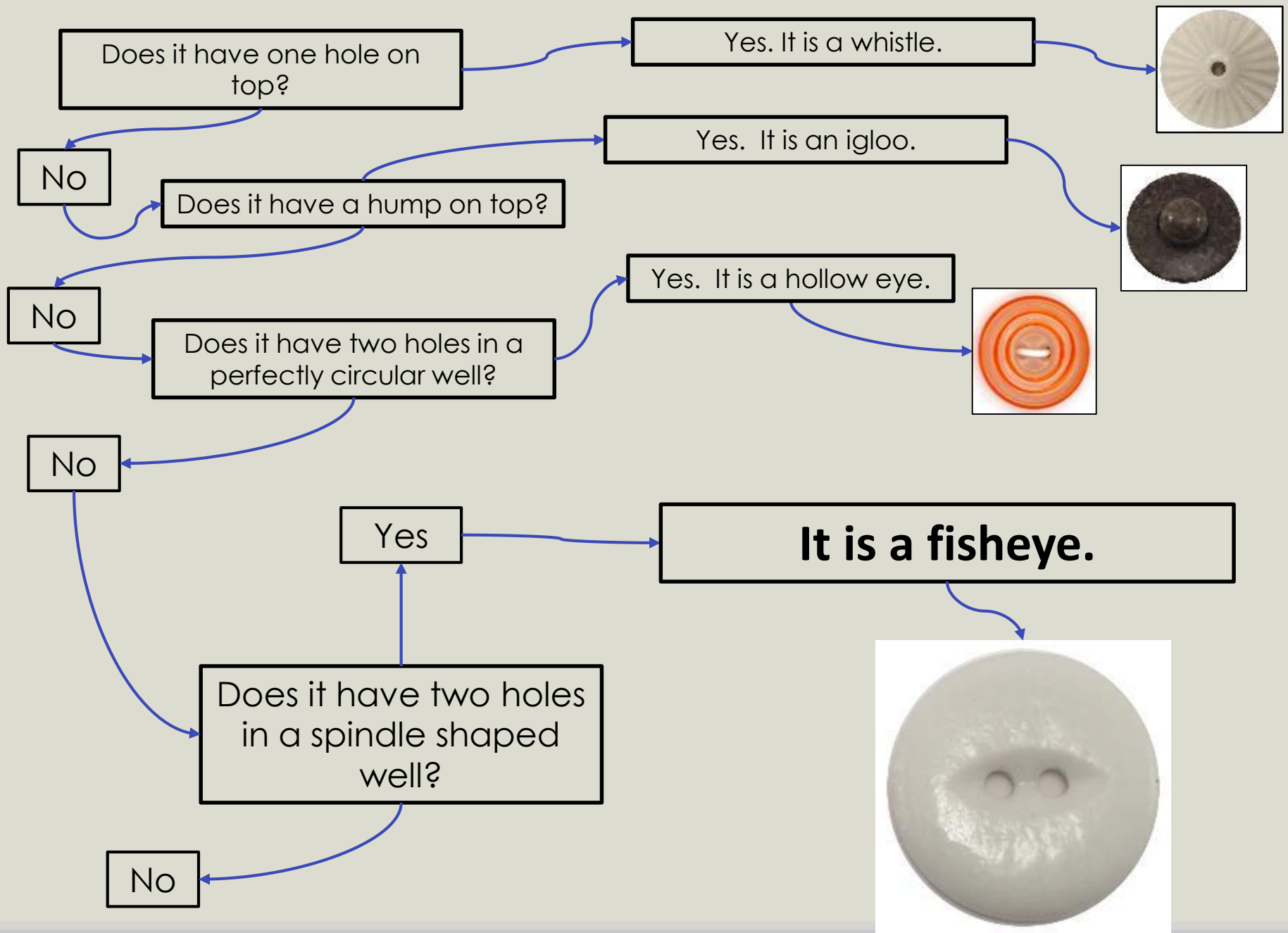
It is a hollow eye.



No

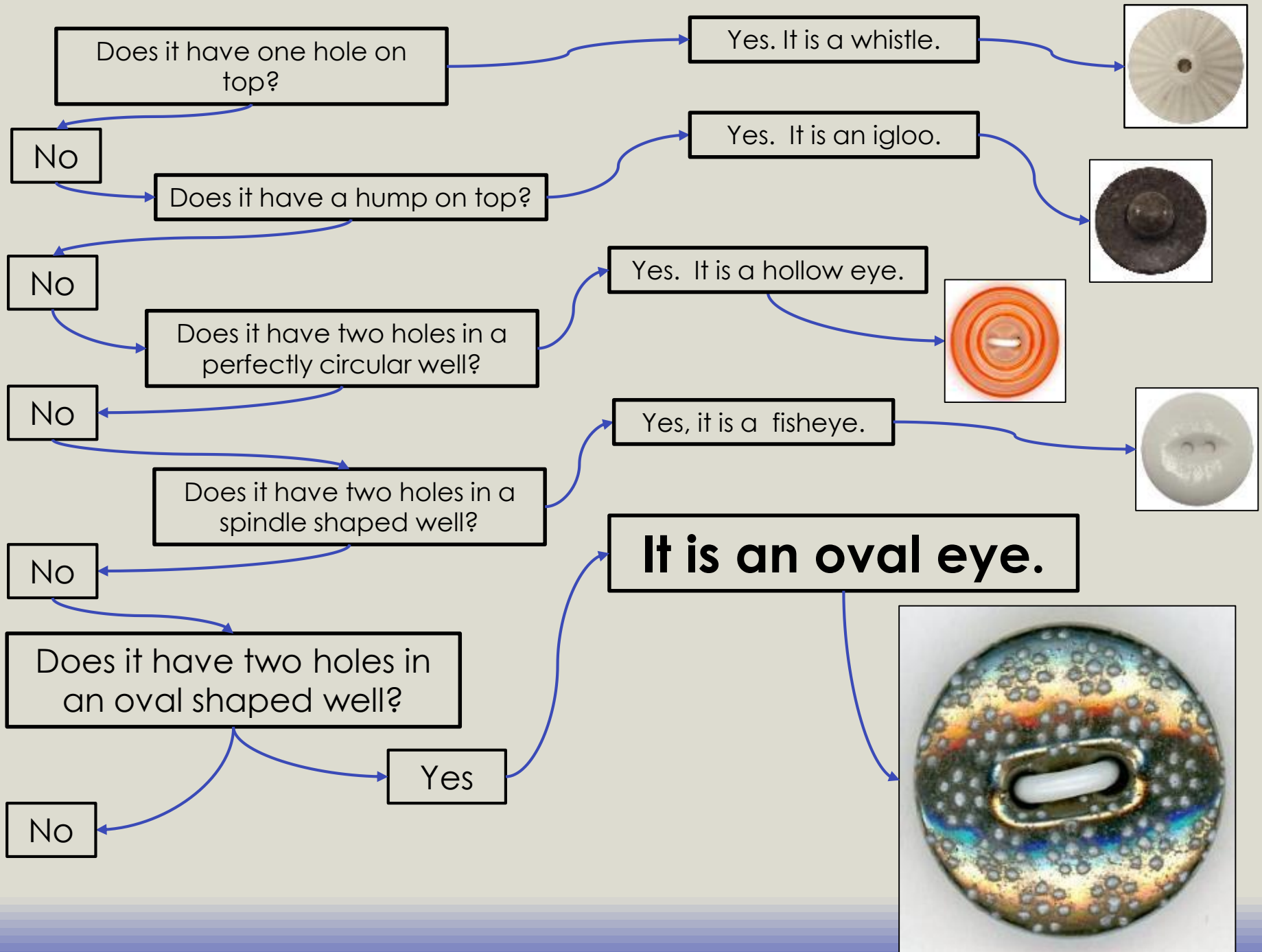
Hollow eyes are some of my favorite china buttons. You find them in poke boxes all the time. Most are very easy to find and very inexpensive, but with a bit of effort you can put together a beautiful and varied tray. I received a measles on this tray because the green dimi does not have a perfectly circular well...





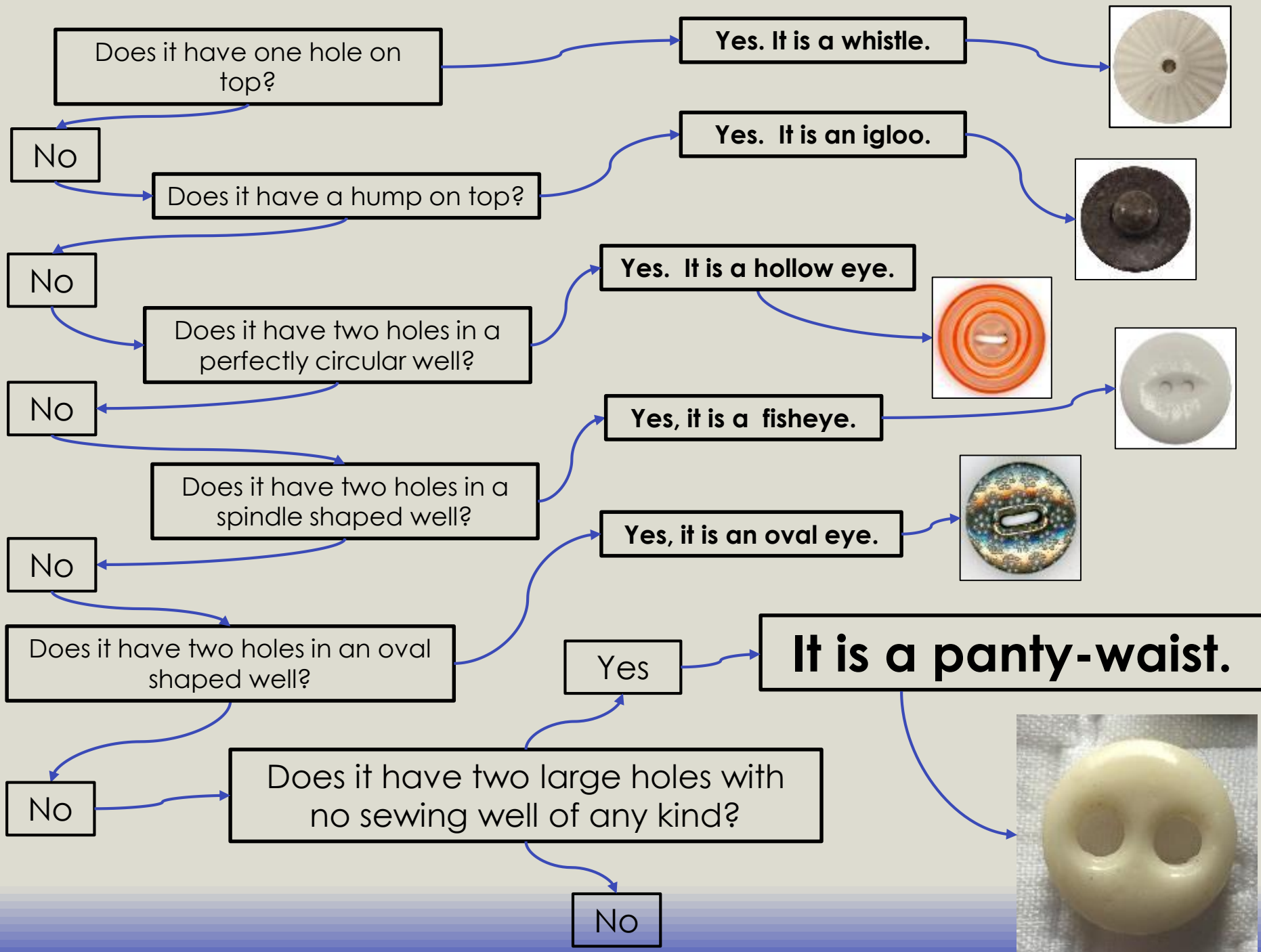


Fisheyes appear in few different body types. The Lansing fisheyes have an indented edge filled with color. There are modified squares both in stencils and plain white. The best part is the wide variety of colors.



Oval eyes are described in the Blue Book as a sew-through buttons with 2 holes set within an oval depression having either boxed or rounded ends. There are seven listed body types that vary quite a bit. You find calicoes, stencils, gingham, solids.







Panty-waist chinas are visually very similar to oval eyes but they lack the distinctive oval shaped sewing well. People also tend to decorate them. You will often find bone panty-waist buttons among the chinas.

Does it have two holes in a spindle shaped well?

Yes, it is a fisheye.



No

Yes, it is an oval eye.



Does it have two holes in an oval shaped well?

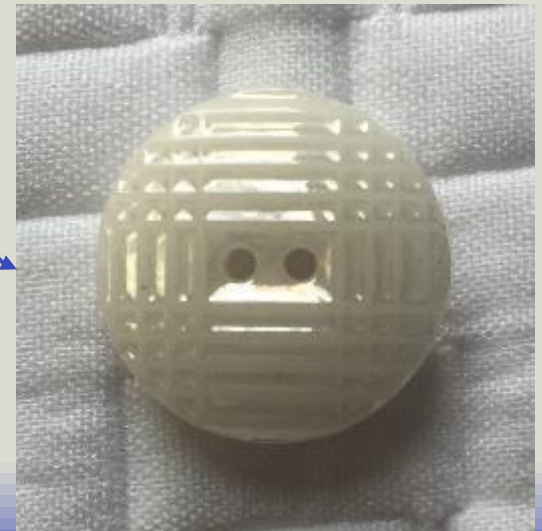
Yes. It is a panty-waist.



No

Does it have two large holes with no sewing well of any kind?

It is pattern eye.



No

Yes

Does it have only two holes with a design molded in the top of the button and do the holes integrate into the over-all design?

No



Pattern eye chinas include only three main types: the two hole shell, the pattern eye with the plaid pattern and the eight-point star. The plaid pattern is quite easy to find in a variety of colors.

Does it have only two holes with a design molded in the top of the button and do the holes integrate into the over-all design?

Yes. It is pattern eye.

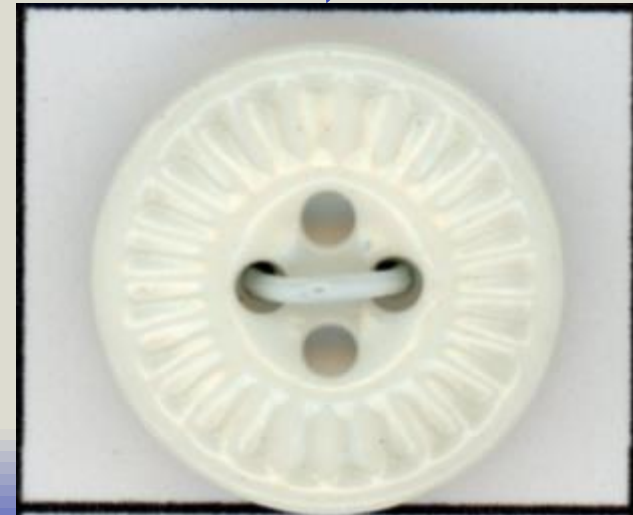


No

Does it have two, three, or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly of lines that extend from the center outward? Note that the holes don't integrate into the over-all design.

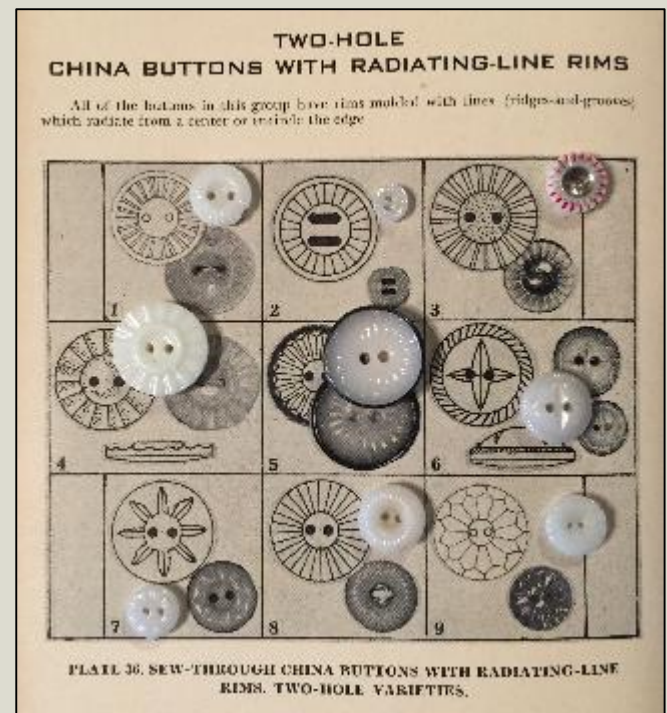
Yes

It is radiating line rim.



No

Radiating line rim (RLR) chinas can have two, three or four holes. The Guidelines separates the two hole RLRs from the three and four hole RLRs. There are loads of these chinas. Some are super common and some are quite rare. Example are piecrusts with and without rims, bias sawtooths, plumps that look like a tiny bundt cake pan, stars with various numbers of points...



Does it have only two holes with a design molded in the top of the button and do the holes integrate into the over-all design?

Yes. It is pattern eye.



No

Yes. It is radiating line rim.



Does it have two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly of lines that extend from the center outward? Note that *the holes don't integrate into the over-all design.*

No

Does it have two, three, or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly of concave or convex bumps?

Yes. It is a hobnail.



No

Hobnails will have two, three, or four holes. We saw the two hole version earlier when looking at the oval eyes but it is still a hobnail. Some china buttons will fit in more than one category because they have characteristics of more than one type of body.

Note the inverted hobnails. Inverted hobnails are quite hard to find.



Does it have two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly of lines that extend from the center outward? Note that *the holes don't integrate into the over-all design.*

Yes. It is radiating line rim.



No

Does it have two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly concave or convex bumps?

No

Yes. It is hobnail.



Does it have two, three, or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button and does it *fail to fit into the pattern eye, radiating line rim or hobnail categories?*

Yes

It is an offbeat china.



No

Off beat chinas are basically those sew-throughs that don't neatly fit in any of the other categories. They will have a design molded into the button but will not meet the criteria for a pattern eye, a hobnail, or a radiating line rim.



Does it have two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly of lines that extend from the center outward? Note that *the holes don't integrate into the over-all design.*

No

Does it have two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button composed mainly concave or convex bumps?

No

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button and does it *fail to fit into the pattern eye, radiating line rim or hobnail categories?*

No

Does it have only two, three, or four holes with a smooth concave surface?

No

Yes. It is radiating line rim.



Yes. It is hobnail.



Yes. It is an offbeat china.

Yes

It is a saucer.



Saucers are slightly concave on the top with straight sides and a convex back.

You will find them with two, three, and four holes and in a variety of decorative finishes. Calico saucers are another favorite of mine.



Does it have only two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button and does it fail to fit into the pattern eye, radiating line rim or hobnail categories?

Yes. It is an offbeat china.



Yes. It is a saucer.



No

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a smooth concave surface?

No

Does it have two, three or four holes with a smooth beveled rim?

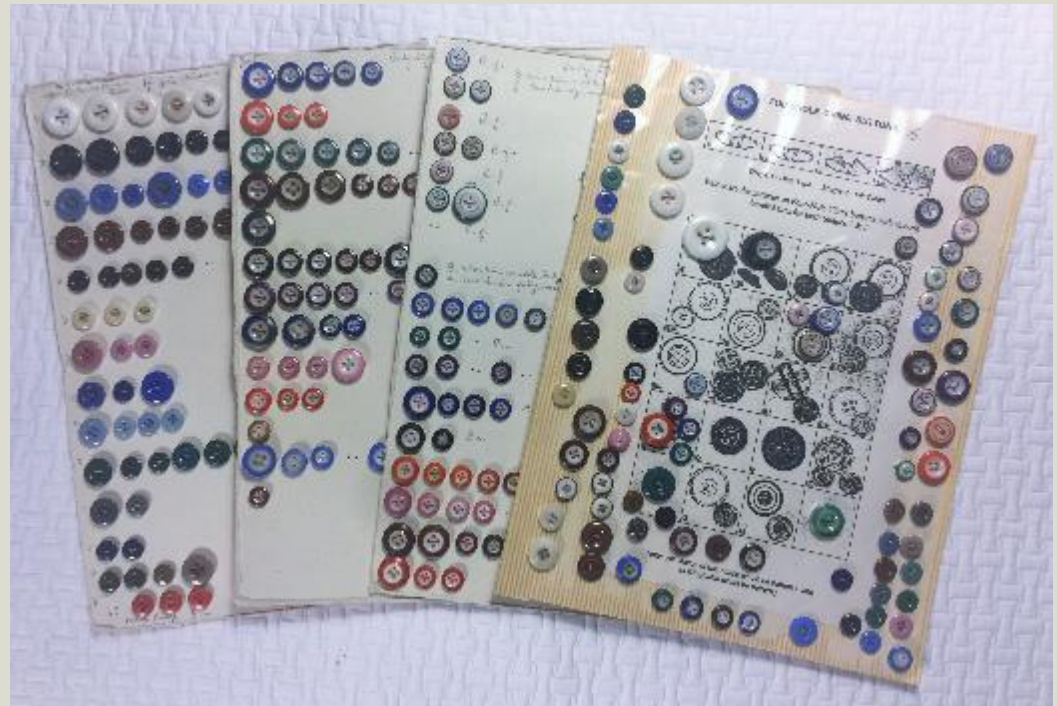
No

Yes

It is either a dish or an inkwell.



No



Smooth beveled rims, dish and inkwell types some of the most common china buttons. Nearly all calicoes are dish shaped. Inkwells can easily be distinguished from dishes by their height. Inkwells resemble mini volcanoes.

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button and does it *fail to fit into the pattern eye, radiating line rim or hobnail categories?*

Yes. It is an offbeat china.



No

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a smooth concave surface?

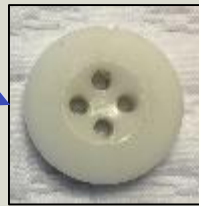
Yes. It is a saucer.



No

Does it have two, three or four holes with a smooth beveled rim?

Yes. It is either a dish or an inkwell.



No

It is a tire or tire type variant.

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a rounded or raised rim?

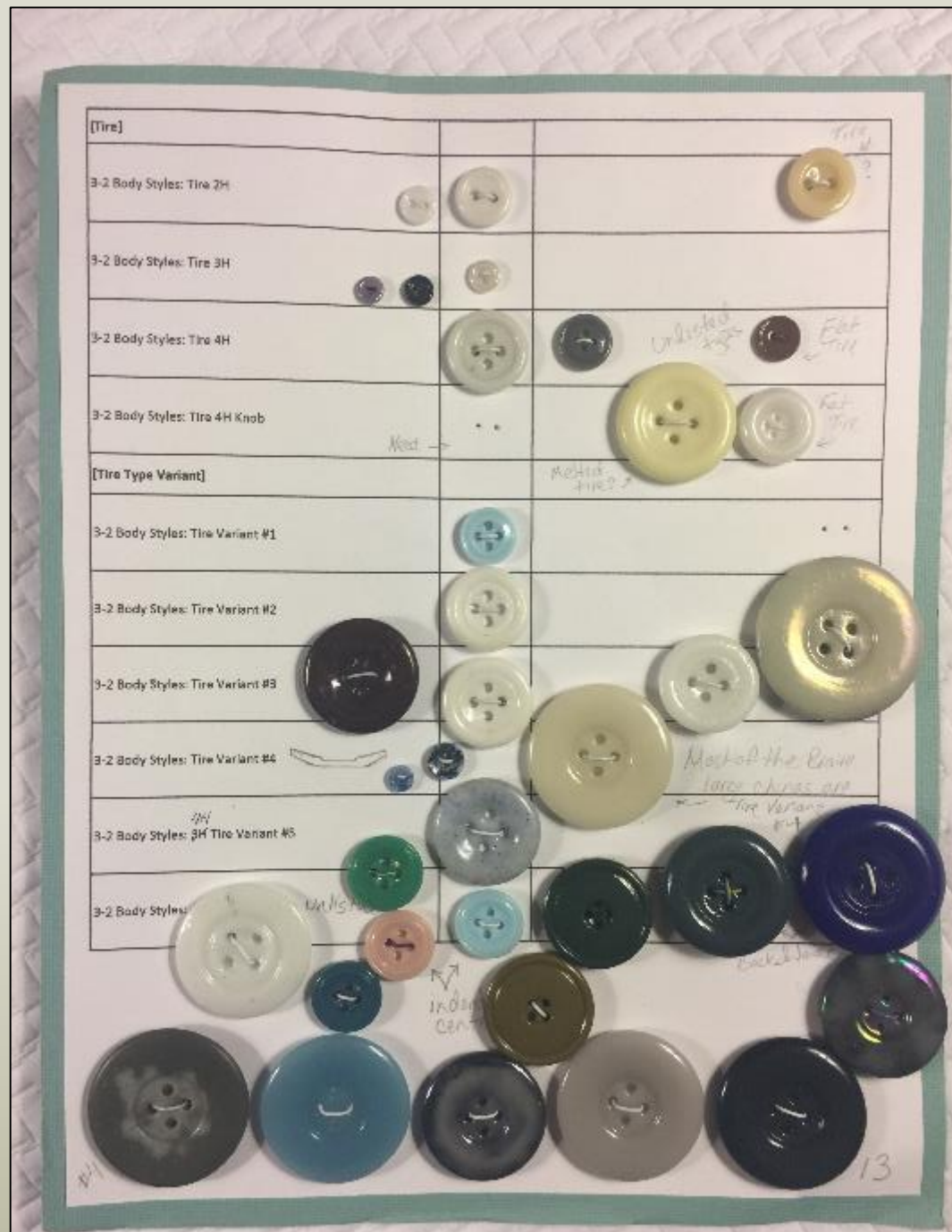
No

Yes



Tires and Tire Type Variants can be found in two, three, four and five hole china buttons.

For such humble little buttons, there is a lot of variety. The large chinas from the factory discharge area in Briare appear in this category.



Does it have only two, three or four holes with a design molded in the top of the button and does it *fail to fit into the pattern eye, radiating line rim or hobnail categories?*

Yes. It is an offbeat china.



No

Does it have only two, three or four holes with a smooth concave surface?

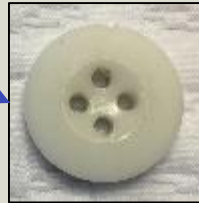
Yes. It is a saucer.



No

Does it have two, three or four holes with a smooth beveled rim?

Yes. It is either a dish or an inkwell.



No

Yes. It is a tire or tire type variant.



Does it have only two, three or four holes with a rounded or raised rim?

Yes

No

Does it seem to fit in none of the above categories?

It might not be a sew-through china....

Even more china body types...
Remember this question from the beginning?

No

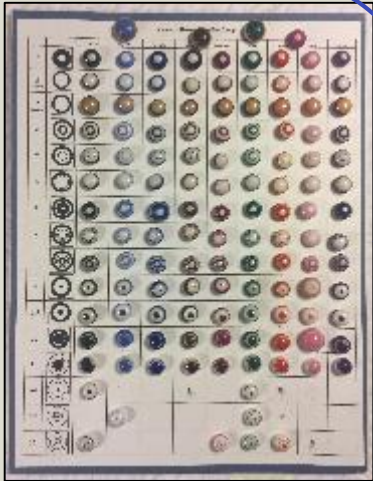
Is it a sew-through?

Yes

**It could be a gaiter,
birdcage, TWISS, pin
shank, self shank or
a shoe button...**



**Gaiter
(plate & loop)**



**TWISS
(2 way shank)**



Pin shank



**Shoe Button
(loop without a plate)**



**Birdcage
(4 way)**



**Self shank
(shank is part of
the button)**



- A complete flow chart for all of the non sew-through china is a job for another day.
- These images focused on samples of each of the main categories of china button bodies. Keep in mind that there are many different varieties of each one other than the just samples of the few shown here. Focus on the main types and whether the button fits in the flow chart.

- Since it is hard to learn the various types from just looking at photos, we've put together a few poke boxes of china buttons and a work card of the main types.
- Help yourselves to a sample of each type from the poke boxes. Not every type is available in the poke boxes but the most common types can be found with a bit of searching.

Thank you.