



Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change

March 23 – June 11, 2000 The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts

Roman Glass

Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change, a traveling exhibition opening at The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts on Thursday, March 23, 2000, illustrates how the craft of glass-making was influenced by historical events and changing social values in the ancient Roman world. Organized by the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, the exhibition features more than two hundred glass vessels—bowls, cups, jugs, and unguent bottles—dating from the late second century B.C. to the early seventh century A.D. *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change* will be on view through Sunday, June 11, 2000.



Hexagonal Flask,
late 6th century A.D.

Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change offers a new perspective that complements the mission of the Bard Graduate Center by considering the decorative arts in a broad socioeconomic context. Breaking with the tradition of treating this ancient glassware as an exceptional art form, the exhibition instead places glass in the more natural setting of a Roman household. Like pottery, glass came to be used in everyday life for all kinds of domestic storage vessels and tableware, and for the small bottles that held the spices, perfumes, and medicines that were so much a part of the Roman affluent lifestyle. Beginning with the changing technology and changing role of glass, the exhibition provides information and insight into culture and lifestyle in the ancient Roman Empire.

The glass artifacts in *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change* come from various archaeological sites, including Beth Shean (Israel) and St. Hermogenes (Cyprus), and they illustrate a remarkable range of forms and decorative elements. In addition to fine examples of glass, the exhibition features several related items in pottery and bronze, together with text panels and maps.

Glass Production

The Romans did not invent glass—that event occurred around 2200 B.C. in Mesopotamia. In fact, Romans showed hardly any interest in glass at all until the last decades of the first century B.C. at which time the emperor Augustus decided to concentrate the production of various crafts on the Italian mainland. Syrian and Judean glassworkers, imported as slaves, brought with them experience in traditional Hellenistic casting techniques and the then-novel idea of glass blowing.

Within a few decades the glassmaking craft had blossomed into an industry, with some standardization of products, a well-organized work force, and a distribution process that took full advantage of the network of roads and seaways crisscrossing the length and breadth of the empire.

Casting produced some visually striking tablewares—monochromes in emerald green or peacock blue, polychromes in swirling patterns of amber and white, and colorful mixes of green-and-white rosettes and yellow “sea-grass” showers. Free blowing provided low-cost wares

that soon replaced several kinds of pottery vessels in the domestic marketplace; in time, free-blown wares came to dominate Roman glass production. This development set the foundation of our modern industry, which now produces close to sixty million tons per year worldwide for our everyday needs.

When, circa 45 A.D., craftsmen came up with the idea of blowing glass into a prepared mold, the industry moved forward again. Mold blowing allowed the rapid reproduction of vessels of fixed size and took glass into the trade arena for use in the short-range shipping of oils, preserved produce, and other products. It also offered a new aesthetic for vessel decoration that found its strongest expression in religious imagery of every kind.

Colorless glass that mimicked rock crystal became fashionable around the middle of the first century A.D. Bright monochrome and polychrome glass vanished from the scene just decades later. Facet cutting of symmetrical patterns and cameo carving also became fashionable at this time. So within just a century or so of becoming involved in glassmaking, the Romans refined and mastered almost every decorative and production technique the medium would allow.



Flask,
4th century A.D.

The Use of Glass

With production increases, glass found a place in every part of the Roman day, from the early preparations for social and business activities to the midafternoon public bathing and the dining pleasures that followed.

Containers for Spices, Cosmetics, and Medicines

The natural fertility of the Italian valleys and hillsides produced plenty of homegrown herbs, flowers, and fruits to flavor banquet fare, scent a perfume, or add power to a skin-soothing lotion or pain-easing concoction. However, with the expansion of the empire into the lands of the eastern Mediterranean and the control of key trade cities such as Palmyra and Alexandria, the Romans had access to a whole new range of Oriental commodities of this kind. The ability to buy and use these exotics soon became a status symbol in Rome. Gluttony in banquetry, the lavish use of perfumes both in everyday cosmetics and in funerary rituals, and a fickle search for things new and rare became the norm of the Roman affluent lifestyle. The glassmaking industry responded by producing tens of thousands of containers of every color, shape,

and size. Close to half of the vessels displayed in *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change* are believed to have been made for these purposes.

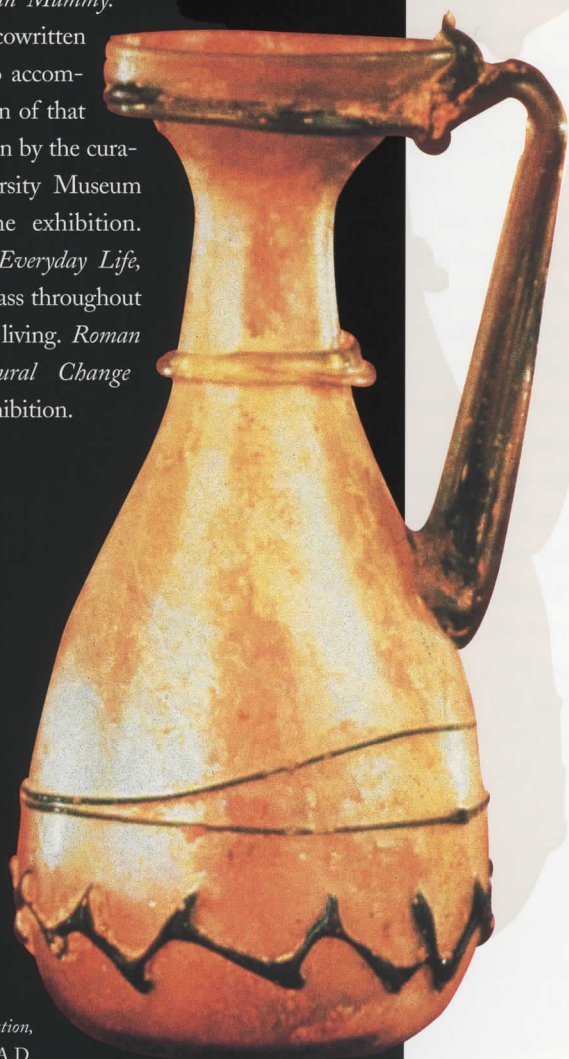
As Tableware

From the early first century A.D. onwards, glass vessels shared the table with pottery vessels at every meal among the middle classes of Rome. The shape and decoration of these vessels often mimicked the banquet silverware of the city's patrician families. An array of these different kinds of tablewares is displayed in *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change*, and some of the complexities of Roman dining etiquette are examined.

In Funerary Rituals

Most ancient Romans believed in a conscious existence after death. Their tombs were furnished with many kinds of glass vessels for domestic necessities, such as cosmetics and toiletries (sometimes even an inkwell), and for food and wine intended to provide nourishment in the afterlife. During the first two centuries A.D. many domestic vessels—particularly large jars, but also grain measures and large bottles—found a secondary but final use as containers for the cremated remains of the deceased. About three-quarters of the vessels to be displayed in *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change* come from funerary contexts.

Dr. Stuart Fleming, scientific director of the Museum Applied Science Center for Archaeology (MASCA) at the University of Pennsylvania Museum, is curator of *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change*. Dr. Fleming is the author or coauthor of almost two hundred articles on scientific structural interpretation of pottery, bronze, glass, gold and jade. His books include *Authenticity in Art* (1975), and *The Egyptian Mummy: Secrets and Science* (1981), cowritten with Dr. David O'Connor to accompany the continuing exhibition of that name. Two books, both written by the curator and published by University Museum Publications, accompany the exhibition. *Roman Glass: Reflections on Everyday Life*, explores the ancient uses of glass throughout the various routines of daily living. *Roman Glass: Reflections on Cultural Change* explores the themes of the exhibition.



Juglet with thread decoration,
4th century A.D.

This exhibition was organized by and from the collections of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

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The exhibition will be accompanied by an array of Public Programs, including tours, courses, lectures, and a scholarly symposium. Special events for youth and senior audiences will be held. For information on these offerings, please call 212-501-3013, TTY 212-501-3012, or e-mail programs@bgc.bard.edu.

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*Unguentarium (perfume bottle),
mid 1st century A.D.*

*Cover: Hexagonal Bottle,
2nd century A.D.*