Glassware and the Changing Arbiters of Taste

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Collectors and scholars have communicated, through exhibits and auction house sales catalogues, that during the time of the Roman Empire glass was a luxury material highly sought after. We assume that glass in antiquity might represent the acme of human acquisitiveness, and suppose that glass was an autonomous craft with its own traditions. So when we examine and handle ancient glass, we begin to feel that we have shared some of the grandeur of imperial Rome. If so, it is only at several removes, for there is little evidence that glass played any part in courtly life.

Everything is relative, and in the case of Roman glass it has been rightly observed by Axel von Saldern that "the more elaborate the decoration of a glass vessel the more likely it is that it was inspired by prototypes in a more expensive ware." It was vessels of agate and sardonyx that informed the finer glass creations such as the Portland Vase (Fig. 1); and rock crystal pieces that inspired clear glass vessels (Fig. 2). Pliny the Elder describes how such materials were frequently imitated by craftsmen in glass. Wares made of murrhine—a rare variety of fluorspar found in Iran, and the costliest material of all—were no exception. Together with other precious materials (precious in Roman terms, semi-precious in ours), it fulfilled the role that exhibit-goers might believe was played by glass.

The surface effect of precious (and not so precious) materials appealed to ancient consumers

It was Pompey who had introduced murrhine ware, and the taste for it, to Rome. In celebrating his victories in the east (62/61 BC), he dedicated murrhine cups and bowls in the temple on the Capitolium. Pliny relates how such vessels quickly began to be used by men, as well as gods. Emperor Nero paid 1,000,000 sesterces, the equivalent of a rich woman's dowry, for a single bowl of murrhine ware, and filled a private theater (presumably the stage) with murrhine vessels he had confiscated. One Titus Petronius, on his deathbed, broke a dipper of murrhine ware that had cost 300,000 sesterces in order to spite Nero. Even fragments of murrhine might be treasured: a broken cup was "preserved, like the body of Alexander, in a kind of catafalque for display," an early forerunner of today's museum displays, although we would be more apt to see vessels of glass than of semi-precious stone.

For such vessels are extremely rare nowadays. They tend to survive only in cathedral treasuries or in those European museums that had royal or imperial foundation collections. They hardly ever occur in the archaeological record (although this is the likely source of the three surviving murrhine ware vessels that reside in London [Fig. 3], Brussels, and Oxford). In Pliny's day, rock crystal was "the most costly product of the earth's surface," and murrhine ware was to be counted among the most costly products of "the earth's interior." On this scale, gold came "scarcely tenth, while silver . . . [was] barely twentieth." Fragments of rock crystal and murrhine, being intrinsically valuable, were recycled. Glass, by contrast, was composed of sand, lime, and soda, ingredients which came cheap—if they had to be paid for at all. There was a secondhand market in broken glass, or *cullett*, but on an industrial scale, far removed from the world of luxury goods made for rich patrons.

How is it then that ancient glass has come to figure so large in the eyes of today's scholars and collectors? It is not simply that it fetches immense sums at auction or that there is so much of it or that glass is

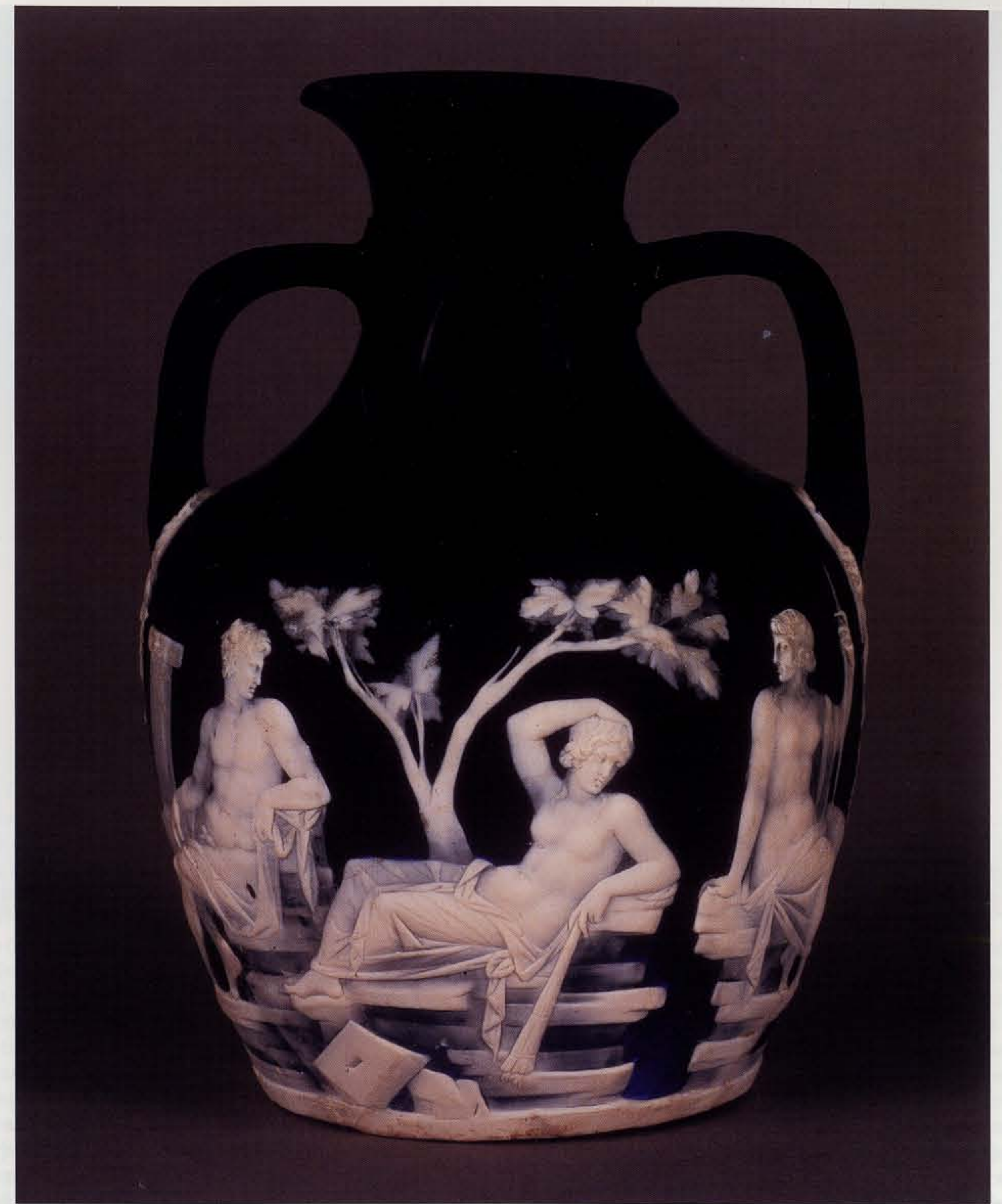

FIG. 1. THE PORTLAND VASE. This vase with its scenes depicting myths relating to the afterlife is one of the finer surviving Roman examples of cameo cut glass. In this process, two layers of different colored glass are blown into shape together, and the design of figures is created by manually cutting away chunks of the top glass layer to reveal the background of contrasting color (but the attractive suggestion has recently been made that the decoration may have been molded and then finished with a drill). It was designed to imitate more valuable vessels of agate or sardonyx.
British Museum no. GR 1945.9-27.1 (Gem 4036). 1st century BC–1st century AD. H. 24.8 cm

FIG. 2. ROCK CRYSTAL BOWL. Clear glass vessels were intended to imitate vessels like this Achaemenid Persian example. Rock crystal was considered the "most costly product of the earth's surface" in the Roman period, much more valuable than gold or silver.
Cincinnati Art Museum, no. CAM 1957.500. Ca. 5th century BC. H. 8.5 cm, Dia. 16.8 cm

what tends to be dug up and thus has to be treated by specialists in excavation reports. There is an underlying philosophical reason as well. It was only in 1516, with the publication of the saintly Thomas More's *Utopia*, that a world was created in which glass was more highly regarded than gold or silver. More's was a fictional world where the lavishness of the court of Henry VIII was implicitly criticized. The Utopians were systematically conditioned to despise precious metals: "Inasmuch as they eat and drink from vessels fashioned out of clay and glass which, though handsomely shaped, are nevertheless of the cheapest kinds they . . . make night jars and all kinds of squalid receptacles out of gold and silver" (tr. Heckscher). It is interesting to note that the immediate origins of More's image lay in the New World. Amerigo Vespucci reported that there were societies there which "held as nothing the wealth that we enjoy in this our Europe such as gold and jewels, pearls and other riches" (Vespucci 1893).

What More had done in his "provisional blueprint for a perfect society" was to forge together the views of ancient critics of luxury such as Juvenal, Seneca, and Pliny himself. His views were regarded as scandalous at first. Witness Andrea Alciati's emblem *Against those who sin against Nature* (Fig. 4), in which a naked man empties his bowels into a golden vessel while nearby stand a clay pitcher and a glass goblet. The editor Joannes Thuilius (ca. 1590–1630) commented: "[D]oes a more scandalous abuse exist than to commit one's own excrements to gold, while drinking from simple glass and earthenware?" (It should be noted that "simplicity" and "simple" were pejorative words at the time; every instance of their use in the King James Bible is negative, being the opposite of wisdom and subtlety.) With time and with the 18th century Enlightenment, clay and glass came to be accepted in polite society as proper materials from which to eat and drink; simplicity became a virtue.

in the 18th and 19th centuries, industrially made, lead-enriched glass came to play the role hitherto played by rock crystal.

"Polite society" was, by that time, a different creature than it was in More's day. No longer were kings and princes the arbiters of taste. Instead, this role was increasingly played by the bourgeoisie of Europe and America. Revolutionary changes helped bring this about, and these were accompanied by the application of new aesthetic values to the remains of classical antiquity. The values that prevailed until then had gone back in an unbroken line to antiquity. But things changed drastically and now the archaeological shots were being called by the son of a German shoemaker. Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) even invented the modern concept of "good taste," with its belief that there is an appropriate aesthetic for every medium. The opening words of his *Gedanken über die Nachahmung der griechischen Werke in der Malerei und Bildhauerkunst* (1755) are: "Good taste (*der gute Geschmack*) which is spreading more and more through the world, had its first beginnings under the Greek sky."

FIG. 3. THE CRAWFORD CUP is one of three murrhine ware (fluorspar) vessels that survive today. Fluorspar is a glassy, veined mineral containing fluorine. The colorless transparent crystals exhibit a bluish tinge when illuminated, and this property is accordingly known as fluorescence.
British Museum no. GR 1971.4-19.1. 1st century BC–1st century AD. H. 9.7 cm

Aduerſus naturam peccantes.

EMBLEMA LXXX:

FIG. 4. *AGAINST THOSE WHO SIN AGAINST NATURE*, Andrea Alciati's emblem (a picture with a motto or set of verses intended as a moral lesson), holds up to ridicule those who use gold for their baser bodily functions while eating from glass and pottery vessels.

From Alciati 1621

TVRPE quidem dictu, ſed & eſt res improba factu,
Excipiat ſiquis chœnice ventris onus.
Menſuram, legisque modum hoc excedere ſanctæ eſt,
Quale ſit inceſto pollui adulterio.

The ancients, whether Greek or Roman, were in fact largely oblivious to such considerations. Skeuomorphs (objects in another, usually cheaper material) could be made with impunity; thus objects of gold might be made in bronze, of silver in pewter, of gold, silver, and bronze in ceramic, and—of special interest in the present context—of rock crystal in silver and glass. An example of the last is the way in which both Roman silver cups, decorated with a series of hollow bosses, and analogous glass vessels look to a common, more valuable prototype in hardstone (Fig. 5a,b). The motif is one that is proper to lapidary work, and it will have been taken over by workers in glass and silver, both lower down the scale of ancient material value.

Quartz stone—rock crystal, amethyst, and chalcedony—was used for some of the more elaborate vessels preserved from antiquity, for example, the chalcedony cage-cup of which a fragment is currently in Oxford (Fig. 6). It is relatively hard (between 6.5 and 7 on the [non-linear] Mohs hardness scale). Depending on its composition, glass is softer. Glass was therefore easier to work, and elaborate effects, such as those achieved by the maker of the glass Lycurgus cup (Fig. 7) in London, could be carried out more quickly.

The Lycurgus cup (once taken to be made of jade or opal) possesses a remarkable property which probably also simulates the effects that could be achieved in hardstone vessels. When "looked at in transmitted light, the green colour and the opacity" of the Lycurgus cup "disappear and the glass changes to a transparent wine colour, to a transparent amethystine purple" (Harden and Toynbee 1959). This recalls the

FIG. 5A, B. (A) SILVER CUP from the Chaourse hoard. (B) GLASS CUP. The hollow bosses and faceted decoration of these vessels are motifs characteristic of lapidary work. They would have had a common, more valuable, prototype in hardstone.

(a) British Museum 1890.9–23.7. 3rd century AD. H. 7.8 cm, Dia. 12.2 cm ; (b) British Museum GR S. 321. 3rd century AD. H. 4 cm, Dia. 8.7 cm

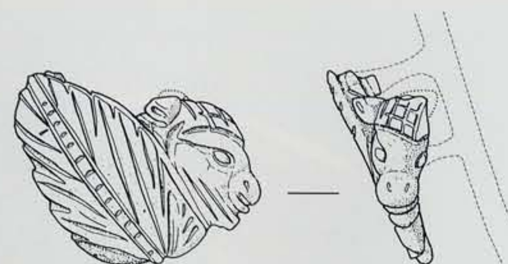

FIG. 6A, B. FRAGMENT OF A CHALCEDONY CAGE-CUP. This intricately carved leaf and bull's head would have formed part of a cage-cup, in which the decoration is cut back from the outer surface of the vessel. The design would have been deeply undercut and, for the most part, connected with the background only by short struts of glass.
Formerly on loan to the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Ca. 4th century BC. Drawing (b) by Keith Bennett at 1:1

chromatic effect noted for two other pieces. Achilles Tatius described a rock crystal cup with a design of grapes that appeared to ripen when wine was poured into the vessel (Achilles Tatius 2.3.1–2). And Heliodorus (5.13) described the strange qualities of a valuable Ethiopian amethyst "of a deep ruddy hue." The stone was decorated with a boy pasturing sheep whose fleeces the viewer would have said were golden "not by reason of the workmanship, but for that the amethyst shining with his redness upon their backs made them show so fair." There were also lambs skipping "in the flame of the amethyst, as if they had been in the sun" (ibid.). These are fictional accounts to which the Lycurgus cup stands witness, albeit in much cheaper material.

The surface effect of precious (and not so precious) materials appealed to ancient consumers, and this is what craftsmen attempted to achieve. Paradoxically, it was often the effects of corrosion products that were reproduced. Even more paradoxically, a different range of corrosion products have been prized by modern connoisseurs and collectors. The patina that forms naturally on gold and silver seems to have been tolerated in antiquity, judging by contemporary skeuomorphs. The ruddiness of accretions on gold (Fig. 8), and the duskiness of tarnish on silver seem to have been evoked by contemporary potters. The red-gloss ware that was widespread throughout the Mediterranean and beyond from the 2nd century BC to the Byzantine period, whether Arretine, Samian, Terra Sigillata, North African Slip Ware or Color-coated Ware, emulated the gold vessels on the tables of the rich. Gray and black fine pottery was made in evocation of silver vessels (Fig. 9), and even relatively inexpensive bronze was imitated by potters. There is thus a category of glazed pottery, yellow on the inside and green on the outside, which is widely thought to have been made to resemble bronze vessels which were cleaned within and left dirty without (Fig. 10).

Today, ancient silver is buffed up, bright and shiny, but the patina on bronze objects is preserved rather than being subjected to radical cleaning to restore the metal's golden appearance (for bronze was another kind of "poor man's gold"). The modern concept of a "noble patina" is another product of Winckelmann's perversion of ancient values. Even stranger is the modern taste for corrosion products ("iridescence") on ancient glass vessels (Fig. 11), a taste that is clearly catered to by the manufacturers of the pseudo-ancient pieces that fill souvenir shops around the Mediterranean. It was also a feature of art nouveau Tiffany glass. This again represents a reversal of ancient attitudes to material culture.

Another paradox is that bourgeois taste of the later 19th century was much more in keeping with antiquity than was that of its critics. A French observer of the contemporary scene could write: "Rich, one would like to appear what one is, and even a little more; poor, one would like to appear what one is not, that is to say rich, at least in a certain measure: that is not impossible, for even if wealth itself cannot be borrowed, the signs of wealth are borrowed and can be imitated." This is how it was in the classical past. For others, for whom "Beauty is truth, truth beauty," the cheap imitation of

FIG. 7. THE LYCURGUS CUP, in dull green glass, is often considered to be one of the most spectacular examples of a glass cage-cup, as indeed it is. It shows the death of Lycurgus, the legendary king of the Edoni, at the hands of Dionysus's attendants. It would not have been forgotten in antiquity that it was "only glass," and thus not made of intrinsically valuable material.
British Museum no. MLA 1958.12-2.1. 4th century AD. H. 16.5 cm

expensive materials was unforgivable; and because skeuomorphism was reprehensible in the modern world, its manifestations in antiquity were overlooked.

In the case of glass, a further erosion of traditional values occurred when, in the 18th and 19th centuries, industrially made, lead-enriched glass came to play the role hitherto played by rock crystal. This new material combined the clarity and brilliance of the hardstone with a softness that enabled it to be cut or engraved with relative ease. It was also much less brittle than either rock crystal or normal glass. Lead-enriched glass even came to be called "crystal" in its own right, with no qualification; and with the help of skillful audience targeting, it became the stuff of expensive wedding presents and the like (Fig. 12). The fact that there was a "handmade" element in this "poetry in crystal" enhanced its appeal with a public that had been conditioned by the ideals of the Arts and Crafts movement.

The Arts and Crafts movement was another manifestation of Utopianism. A seminal literary work

FIG. 8. IRON AGE GOLD JUG. In antiquity, the look of corrosion products such as the ruddy accretions seen on this gold jug were not only tolerated but mimicked in other media.

Present whereabouts unknown. Once brought into the Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, for identification. H. ca. 9 cm

was William Morris's *News from Nowhere* (Greek *outopia* = "nowhere"). The inhabitants of this earthly paradise enjoyed the use of "Banded workshops" in which

> folk collect to do handwork in which working together is necessary or convenient such work is often very pleasant. In there, for instance, they make pottery and glass . . . there are a good many such places, as it would be ridiculous if a man had a liking for pot-making or glass-blowing that he should have to live in one place or forgo the work he liked . . . As to the crafts, throwing the clay must be jolly work: the glass-blowing is rather sweltering job; but some folk like it very much indeed.

This analysis of glassworking and the motivation of its operatives is less than robust, but the underlying attitude of mind (in addition to a reluctance to notice skeuomorphism) came to prevail within the intellectual elite from which university professors, museum directors, and professional archaeologists were drawn. Collectors chose to subscribe to similar ideals (for to collect was, at least until recently, the hallmark of enlightened good taste). The media joined in, and the general public followed suit.

There is nothing inherently wrong with this, and we have all benefited from a gentler world in which rich men no longer fight over limited supplies of precious materials. It could be argued that we are all the richer if artists prefer to work with urine or dead sheep in formaldehyde rather than gold, silver, or precious stones (the autonomy of the artist is another consequence of the changes that occurred in the 18th century). What is perhaps a cause of regret is that ideas that had their origins in early modern fictions at best (or wishful thinking at worst) have been unquestionably applied to antiquity. The ancient past was indeed a foreign country, and they *did* do things differently there.

FIG. 9. ROMAN GRAY POTTERY AND SILVER BOWL. Gray and black pottery vessels were made in imitation of tarnished silver vessels such as that seen here.

Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, nos. AN R. 286, H. 4.6 cm; AN 1990.93, Dia. 8.9 cm; AN R. 287, H. 3.6 cm. 1st–2nd century AD

FIG. 10. ROMAN GLAZED POTTERY VESSELS AND BRONZE JUG. Roman potters even imitated relatively inexpensive bronze. These glazed bowls are yellow on the inside and green on the outside, achieving the effect of clean and corroded bronze to be seen on the jug in the center.

Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, nos. AN 1990.145, H. 8.6 cm; AN 1879.372, H. 18.3 cm; AN 1970.361, H. 5.7 cm. 1st–2nd century AD

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FIG. 11. ROMAN GLASS WITH IRIDESCENCE. Nineteenth century art nouveau Tiffany lustered glass was invented with the intention of artificially recreating the natural iridescent sheen produced by the corrosion of ancient glassware such as can be seen on this small Roman perfume bottle.

UPM no. 29-105-659. 1st century AD. H. 9.2 cm

FIG. 12. STEUBEN CRYSTAL GLASS ASH TRAY. From the 17th century, lead was added to glass to create a material with a high refractive index and consequently a desired sparkle and brilliance. Easier to work than rock crystal, it filled the place and took the name of the latter. The notion that it was "handmade" added value in the eyes of consumers, a fact which manufacturers were not slow to exploit.

Private collection. 1968. Greatest dimension 14 cm, H. 5 cm

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