

Outstanding Glass Collection at Getty Villa near Los Angeles

By Dave Maryo

Ancient Glass

from the Collection of Erwin Oppenländer



In 2003 the J. Paul Getty Museum acquired more than 350 works of ancient glass from the private collection of Erwin Oppenländer (German, 1901–1988). A manufacturer who lived near Stuttgart, Oppenländer formed his collection in the mid-twentieth century. He purchased the majority of his glass from auction houses and art dealers in Europe, and many pieces were from private collections assembled in the late nineteenth century. A discerning collector, Oppenländer had a refined aesthetic sensibility. His taste and determination to form a comprehensive collection are evident in the quality of the objects and by the fact that there are no duplicates—each piece stands on its own merits.

The Oppenländer collection is remarkable for its cultural and chronological breadth. It includes works made in Mesopotamia, Egypt, the Greek world, and the Roman Empire, and spans the entire period of ancient glass production, from its origins in Mesopotamia in about 2500 B.C. to Byzantine and Islamic glass of the eleventh century A.D. Also notable is the variety of ancient glassmaking techniques, such as casting, core forming, mosaic, inflation, mold blowing, cameo carving, incising, and cutting. All these techniques are still used by glass artists today.

718



(EDITOR'S NOTE: Gremlins got into the story published in the January-February issue of Bottles and Extras. To be fair to author and readers, it was decided to rerun the correct version of the story in this issue).

Most bottle collectors highly prize glass bottles that are mold-blown and finished by hand. Mold-blown bottles are thought to be a manufacturing improvement that was developed over the last couple of hundred years.

The fact is, the mold-blown process was developed over 2,000 years ago. Examples of the ancient bottles are regularly found buried in areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea. Museums are your best option if you are interested in seeing ancient glass.

I would highly recommend any bottle or glass collector visit the Getty Villa north of Los Angeles to see one of the finest collections of ancient glass available for public viewing. The collection is impressive not only in the rarity of the items, but the quality of this glass is as fine as many examples of art glass produced today.

The finest collection of ancient glass at Getty Villa was acquired from the private collection of Erwin Oppenländer. The more than 350 works of ancient glass compose one of the most important collections ever assembled. The collection contains many of the finest glass examples existing from the time period 2,500 B.C. to 1100 A.D.

Do you think your bottle collection is a significant collection of glass? Can your glass collection even compare with one that contains hundreds of examples that span a period of 3.5 thousand years? I doubt many glass collections in the world can compare to what is available for public viewing at Getty Villa.

As to my earlier reference to bottle collectors believing mold-blown glass is a fairly recent development, in a way that is correct as the mold-blown technique was developed 2.5 thousand years after the earliest form of glass production. But that is still thousands of years before anyone in America produced glass.

The Oppenländer collection's earliest pieces are core-formed examples. Core forming was a process that used a ceramic core coated with molten glass. When the glass cooled, the core was removed, resulting in a glass container.

The collection also has many glass objects formed by casting glass into molds. Cast glass also was a very early process and the cast glass was often cut and polished to further enhance the objects being produced.

It was not until the last Century BC when free-blown glass techniques were developed. The free-blown examples in the collection are my favorites since they show the glass blowers' artistic skills in working with gathers of molten glass.

Shortly after the free-blown technique was developed, artisans started using molds in the first century A.D. Some



of these Roman examples would still be highly prized if they were created by craftsmen today. The quality of Roman glass is startling when you think about the time when it was produced. You'd think that glass produced thousands of years ago would be crude in form and material, but many of the more common examples are not nearly as crude as most pieces produced just 200 years ago.

I hope you have an opportunity to visit Getty Villa in the near future. You will not be disappointed by this amazing glass collection. But don't limit your visit just to check out the glass. You should plan to spend some time looking at other ancient art in this wonderful museum, housed in the building and gardens modeled after the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, Italy. It is well worth your visit.

More information is available at the Getty Museum web page at <http://www.getty.edu>.



Getty Museum Acquires Treasure Trove

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He purchased the majority of his glass from auction houses and art dealers in Europe and many pieces were from private collections assembled during the 19th century.

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Also notable is the variety of ancient glass-making techniques, such as casting, core forming, mosaic, inflation, mold blowing, cameo carving, incising and cutting. All of these techniques are still used by today's glass artists.

ANCIENT GLASS

Glass vessels for eating and drinking are to be considered in the class of household goods, just as earthenware vessels are, not only the common ones, but also those that are more costly.

—Julius Paulus, *The Digest*, about A.D. 200

Glass was first created in Mesopotamia in about 2500 B.C., probably by artists experimenting with vitreous (glassy) glazes for ceramics. The three main elements of ancient glass are silica, from beach or river sand; soda (sodium carbonate), found in the naturally occurring substance natron and in the ashes of certain plants; and lime, from seashell particles in beach sand. Some minerals were added to impart color, such as cobalt for blue; others were added to decolorize, such as antimony or manganese. The earliest glass-making techniques—casting and core forming—were labor intensive, and for centuries glass was considered a luxury. With the invention of glassblowing in the first century B.C., vessels could be made more easily, and glass became an affordable commodity.



This 18th-century depiction of glassblowing at work before the first glassblowing used iron-rod tubes. The man on the right inflates a vessel in a furnace.



The objects shown on this timeline represent the earliest and latest pieces displayed in this gallery, along with another key work.