

Ancient Glass at the Getty Villa

By Dave Maryo

Most bottle collectors highly prize glass bottles from the late 1880s that are mouth-blown and hand-finished.

Mold-blown bottles are thought by most collectors to be a manufacturing improvement that was developed over the last 100 years. The fact is, the mold-blown process was developed more than 2,000 years ago. Examples of those bottles are found buried in areas surrounding the Mediterranean Sea.

Museums are your best option if you are interested in seeing ancient glass. I'd highly recommend any bottle or glass collector visit the Getty Villa located 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 Getty Villa display was acquired from the private collection of Erwin Oppenlander. It contains many of the finest glass examples existing from 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 3-1/2 thousand years? I doubt many glass collections in the world can compare to what is available for public viewing at the Getty Villa.

As to my earlier reference to mold-blown glass being a fairly recent development, in a way that's correct as the mold-blown technique was developed 2-1/2 thousand years after the earliest form of glass production. But that recent development is still thousands of years before anyone in America produced glass.

The Oppenlander collection's earliest pieces are core-formed examples. Core forming was a process that used a ceramic core that was coated with molten glass. When the glass cooled, the core was removed, resulting in a glass container. The collection also has many objects formed by casting glass into molds. Cast glass also was a very early process. It often was cut and polished to further enhance the objects produced.

It was not until the last century B.C. when free-blown glass techniques were developed. The free-blown glass pieces in the collection are my favorites as they show a glass blower's artistic skill in working with gathers of molten glass.

Shortly after that technique was developed, artisans started using molds in the first century A.D. Some of these Roman glass objects would be highly prized if they were created by today's craftsmen. The quality is startling when you think about the time when it was produced.

You would think that glass produced thousands of years ago would be very crude in form and material, but many of the more common ancient glass objects are not nearly as crude as most pieces produced just 200 years ago.

I hope you have an opportunity to visit the Getty Villa in the near future. You will not be disappointed by this amazing glass collection. During your visit you should plan to spend time looking at the other ancient art in this wonderful museum. Just to see the building and gardens modeled after the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, Italy is well worth your time.

For more information, visit the Getty Museum Web page at www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/molten_color/

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Molten Color: Glassmaking in Antiquity

October 8, 2010–ongoing at the Getty Villa

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Over 180 ancient glass objects from the collection of Erwin Oppenlander are featured in this exhibition.

The Oppenlander collection, which the Getty acquired in 2003, 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 in the Oppenlander collection 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.

Blue Perfume Flask with White, Yellow, and Turquoise Feathered Decoration, Greek, 400–200 B.C.

Core-Formed Glass

Core forming was one of the earliest glassmaking techniques. Glassmakers shaped the body of the vessel around a core of ceramic-like material, wound colored trails of hot glass around it, and added handles and a rim. They then let the vessel cool and removed the core.

Most early core-formed containers were small

Visit the Video Gallery

Watch a glassmaker demonstrate ancient glassmaking techniques.

- Core-Formed Glass (2:05)
- Mosaic Glass (2:50)
- Free-Blown Glass (1:59)
- Mold-Blown Glass (1:47)

Learn More about Glass

- Glassmaking Techniques

Visit the Exhibition

Book free tickets to the Getty Villa.