Ancient Glass in the J. Paul Getty Museum

Foreword

Ancient artisans first discovered the technology of glassmaking as early as the third millennium BCE, likely in Mesopotamia, through the heated mixture of raw materials found in nature. By the late Bronze Age (1550–1200 BCE), glass was being manufactured for usable objects, such as vessels and pendants, and fashioned as ingots for transport. In the centuries that followed, craftspeople across the Mediterranean and Near East developed new methods for mixing and shaping this versatile material. The earliest glass products—beads, inlays, and small vessels for precious oils and perfume—were treasured objects, likely made for use in religious practices and burials. As the art of glassmaking evolved, notably with the development of glass blowing in the first century BCE, glass became more affordable while the market for luxury glass, such as mosaic and cameo glass, also continued to thrive.

The J. Paul Getty Museum has a diverse and comprehensive collection of ancient glass objects, presented here in 584 catalogue entries, which illustrate the long technological and artistic history of the material. The origins of the Museum’s ancient glass collection date to 1940, when J. Paul Getty, who had started collecting antiquities the previous year, bought a group of sixteen vessels at a New York auction. When Getty established the Museum in 1954 and opened his ranch house in Malibu to the public, these vessels were prominently displayed. And when the newly constructed Villa Museum, based on the ancient Roman Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum, opened twenty years later, a marbled glass bowl was shown with other luxury vessels of agate and silver.

The glass collection continued to grow in the following decades, as curators acquired both individual works, such as the exquisite cameo glass skyphos, and selections of works from the Kofler-Truniger collection and others. The most transformative addition occurred in 2003–4, when the Museum acquired 420 works from the renowned Oppenländer collection, greatly expanding the geographical, chronological, and stylistic scope of the Getty’s ancient glass holdings and placing it among the finest and most important in the United States. Since the reopening of the remodeled Getty Villa in 2006, the ancient glass collection, or a special exhibition drawn from it, has been a permanent aspect of our displays.

This publication continues the Museum’s tradition of sharing scholarly catalogues of our collections with a wide and diverse public, increasingly both online and in print. Previous comparanda include *Roman Mosaics* (2016), *Ancient Terracottas from South Italy and Sicily* (2016), *Ancient Lamps* (2017), and the *Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum of Athenian Red-Figure Column and Volute Kraters* (2019).

Since the Oppenländer glass collection was first published in 1974, our scientific understanding of ancient glass technologies and typologies has greatly advanced, and a comprehensive review of the collection was well overdue. In the fall of 2019, former senior curator Jeffrey Spier invited Anastassios Antonaras, a leading specialist in ancient glass, to examine the collection for the creation of a scientific catalogue. This publication, researched and written by Dr. Antonaras following that initial study and a second visit in the fall of 2022, with the support of Getty curatorial and conservation staff, brings this project to fruition.

Introductory essays include a discussion of the formation and display of the Getty’s ancient glass collection, by Nicole Budrovich, and an in-depth survey of the history and technology of ancient glassmaking by Dr. Antonaras. An analytical study of ancient glass colorants by Monica Ganio of the Getty Conservation Institute is provided in the appendix.

The body of the catalogue begins with vessels, presented chronologically and grouped according to shape, followed by glass appliqués, jewelry, and implements. The individual catalogue entries provide detailed descriptions, conservation notes, comparanda, and images.

The Getty’s team of photographers, led by Tahnee Louise Cracchiola, created new images of nearly 300 objects and 360-degree photography of 11 highlight pieces, successfully capturing the reflective, transparent, opaque, and iridescent qualities of this material at a new level of clarity and fidelity.

We are most grateful to Dr. Antonaras and the Getty staff who have contributed to this catalogue, for ensuring that the work continued across time zones and despite the difficulties of the pandemic. There can be no doubt that this open-access digital publication will become an essential resource to scholars and art lovers across the globe.

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J. Paul Getty Museum