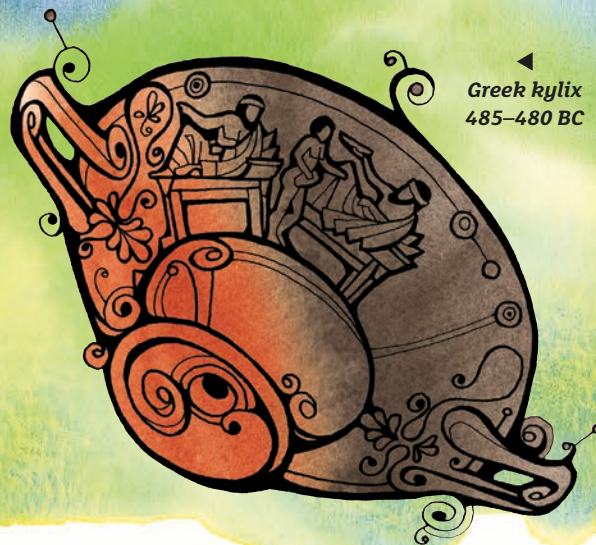




Egyptian cup
945–715 BC



Greek kylix
485–480 BC



Roman skyphos
late 1st century BC–early
1st century AD



German chalice
1230–50

Chin, chin

WORDS: Christina McPherson

ILLUSTRATIONS: Jenny Proudfoot

Raise a toast to the wine glass on a brief, yet enlightening, journey through its many incarnations

The wine glass. An everyday object that belies a remarkable history. A history of sweeping empires, the dissemination of religion, unprecedented skill and technological breakthroughs. The evolution of the wine glass can tell us much about the world we live in.

In the ancient world, wine was considered sacred. As Marc Millon writes, it was a drink for kings, pharaohs and warriors, believed to be a “veritable gift from the gods”. Wine even accompanied pharaohs on their journey to the afterlife with their tombs brimming with ceramic wine jars. “When you get into a lowland region like Egypt or Mesopotamia, where the grape can’t tolerate the high temperature and it is more difficult to

grow it, it then becomes a luxury item and first it is going to be used for the high officials and the rulers,” explains Dr Patrick McGovern, a Biomolecular Archaeologist at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. “Eventually, like in Egypt, [it is] incorporated into social religious structures.” Wine cups too were precious. Made from glazed Egyptian faience (a ceramic in shades of turquoise), chalices dating from 945–715 BC were decorated with reliefs of myths surrounding the sun god and imitated the blue lotus flower, a popular motif in Egyptian art that symbolised creation and rebirth.

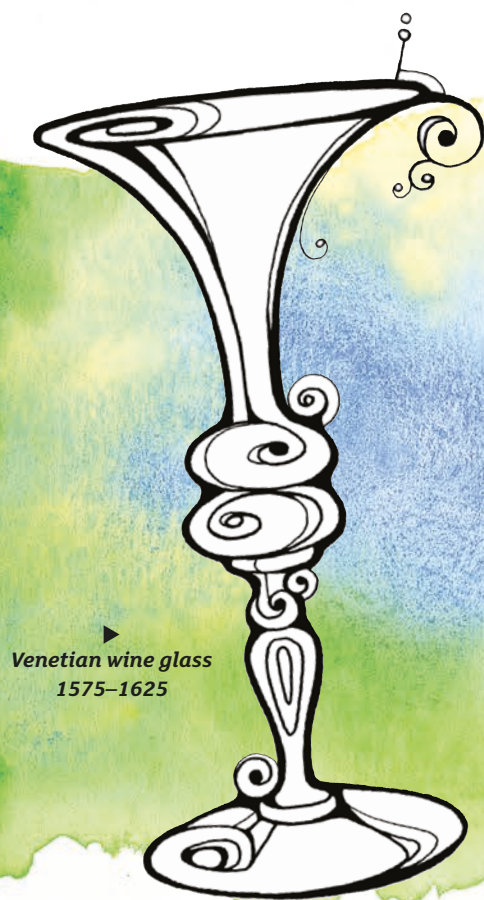
Reliefs on wine cups were common in the ancient world and the Greeks, like the Egyptians before them, bedecked their cups with scenes

that reflected their values. The symposium, a rather sophisticated drinking party, was a Greek, and particularly Athenian institution, where citizens would gather to discuss politics, philosophy and business. With an emphasis on drinking communally, the kylix, a two-handled painted cup, took centre stage, passed from citizen to citizen as they lounged on couches and mattresses debating the big issues of the day. The Greeks weren’t so sophisticated, however, that they didn’t partake in a drinking game or two. According to the British Museum, the kottabos involved holding the kylix by one handle to throw the last drops of wine at an unlucky (or lucky) target.

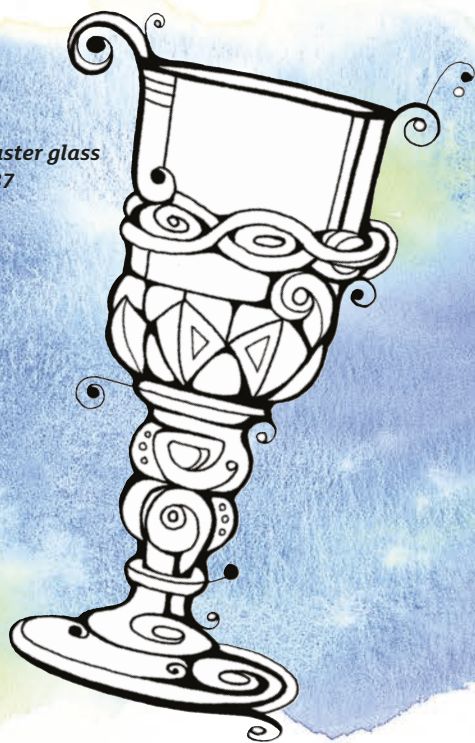
Unlike the Greeks, who mixed their wine with water in large bowls

known as kraters, the Romans watered it down in their own cups. Fashioned in metal or pottery, the skyphos, which comprised a deep body and ring handles with thumb rests, was a common shape. The cups were elaborately adorned with natural motifs, erotic scenes or imagery of Dionysos, the Greek god of wine, intoxication and revelry. Glass vessels first existed as early as the 15th century BC in Egypt, formed by dipping a cloth bag of sand into a crucible of molten glass. When glass-blowing was invented in the first century BC in Syria, it revolutionised ancient glass production. The speed at which vessels could be manufactured led to new shapes and a burgeoning glass industry in the first half of the first century AD in Rome. >>>

Chalices dating from 945–715 BC were decorated with reliefs of myths surrounding the sun god and imitated the blue lotus flower



Venetian wine glass
1575–1625



English baluster glass
1687



18th century wine glass
1760–1775



Victorian wine glass
1851

What is perhaps most fascinating is how a culture of wine drinking has evolved through time. McGovern says: “If you look at the New World, they have developed their wine cultures, and it really takes over the economy and a lot of the social activities, so it isn’t any different from what happened in ancient times. Wine begins in the Near East and there is a culture that grows up around it.” As Christianity spread beyond Rome, vines were planted to fulfil the daily quota of wine needed to celebrate Mass and silver chalices were used, often depicting the life of Christ or scenes from the Old Testament.

It was the Venetians, however, who truly elevated wine vessels to an ingenious level. They perfected *cristallo* in the 15th century, a clear glass utilising quartz pebbles as

opposed to sand which gave glass a yellowish tinge. “As the introducers of clear blowing crystal, the Venetians bought a new quality to wine glasses,” says James Maskrey, Glassmaker at the University of Sunderland’s National Glass Centre. “This quality of material and their ability to decorate using elaborate techniques of coloured canes, precious metal leaves and superior sculpting skills made for flamboyant objects. Most of the stems and feet were blown, making for very light vessels. The joins

were particularly fine giving both a lightness and fragility.”

Venetian wine glasses, a luxury which would have graced the tables of wealthy families, became coveted objects of art, a vessel through which master craftsmen could display their finely honed skills and families could display their money. Indeed, from about 1675, Venetian drinking glasses, and particularly their stems, which featured symmetrical wings or even animals, became increasingly ostentatious and thus almost

The Jacobite glass was used by members of secret clubs and political societies to pledge their allegiance to the Stuarts

impractical. “These skills meant the Venetians had quite a monopoly on the luxury market for many years, the masters’ secrets were closely guarded and there were severe penalties incurred by any who may have chosen to leave,” Maskrey continues. “Eventually, the skills spread and domestic Venetian-styled glass houses began to appear across Europe.”

The master craftsmen succeeded in maintaining their monopoly until around the first half of the 16th century, when Italian workers migrated from Murano and took their skills to neighbouring European countries. British dependence on imports from Venice also came to an end in the following century. In the 1670s, George Ravenscroft (1632–83) pioneered the use of lead oxide to create a stronger, heavier and softer glass acclaimed for

its clarity. Taking its name from a short pillar, the heavy baluster-stemmed wine glass became fashionable in the 1690s and featured a variety of ‘knops’ incorporating air bubbles as a central decorative feature. “The lead content of the glass had many different functions. It made the glass clearer (or ‘whiter’), it made it have a longer working time allowing the glass to be shaped and blown for a longer period without reheating, allowing the making of more complicated shapes and stems,” says Maskrey. “It also made it softer, meaning cutting the glass was easier and it was easier to polish, both by hand or with an acid, so introduced a new style in its own right.”

Coinciding with the rise of consumer culture and the Industrial Revolution, English wine glasses of the 18th century varied considerably

in style and form, but importantly were no longer objects of luxury. One of the most controversial types of wine glass at the time was the Jacobite glass, used covertly by members of secret clubs and political societies to pledge their allegiance to the Stuarts. Glasses were engraved with Jacobite symbols such as a rose and were filled with claret to toast ‘the King’ over a jug of water. The Victorian wine glass too was engraved with motifs and also featured Venetian opaque twists. Indeed, the Victorians adored anything Venetian, and glassware from the Venice and Murano Glass and Mosaic Co. Ltd was favoured in the late 19th century.

Now to the incarnation we are familiar with today. The incurving bowl of the wine glass is a very recent development; glasses prior



▶ **Bordeaux
Grand Cru glass
20th century**

to this were based much more on aesthetics and driven by technological developments and societal changes. “I would always recommend a glass that tapers towards the top, because of course, the huge pleasure in wine is the wonderful aroma, and you should never fill up your glass,” explains Anne Krebiehl, Master of Wine and wine writer. “Just pour in a little and therefore you can swirl, let the wine breathe and the compounds rise, and because the glass is tapered, they won’t evaporate into thin air.”

With a 300-year-old history rooted in the forests of Bohemia, Riedel launched the Sommeliers Series in 1973, a series of grape varietal-specific glassware, which Krebiehl believes was a “game-changer”. “Consumers at the time were primarily interested in the aesthetics of a glass - the more ornate the glass, the more attracted the consumer would be,” explains

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Georg Riedel, 10th generation Master Glassmaker and owner of Riedel Crystal. “Claus [9th generation of the Riedel family] had a different approach which brought a change to the wine world - he realised the importance of content and why different shaped glasses have an impact on our perception of different wines. By being very close to wine

makers and carefully studying each glass, the company recognised that the smell and taste of a beverage are affected by the size and shape of the vessel from which it’s consumed.”

In 1986, Riedel introduced the Vinum series, the first machine-made varietal-specific fine crystal glasses. This year also marks the launch of the company’s VERITAS series, which uses technology to create very thin and light machine-made glasses.

And what may the next stage of evolution hold for the wine glass? Maskrey says: “Hopefully a throwback to traditionally crafted handmade ware created by artisans. There is a real buzz about artisan everything at the moment, craft beers, artisan breads, making good foods by hand using both traditional and contemporary skills. I’m hoping this will forge a resurgence of the desire for the handmade.” ■



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