

Press Release

from 18th July 2023

Masterpieces in Glass

20th July 2023 – 17th March 2024

Glass can be flawlessly transparent, intensely coloured or iridescent, shimmering in all the colours of the rainbow. For thousands of years, people have been captivated by this fragile material. From Thursday 23 July 2023, a dazzling special exhibition of around 100 items is showcasing the versatility of glass and the numerous ways it can be worked.

The selection ranges from antiquity to the present day, and all the exhibits come from the Germanisches Nationalmuseum's own holdings. In addition to prestigious drinking vessels and carafes with ornate decoration, the exhibition features simple everyday items that demonstrate the ubiquity of glass and its suitability for daily use.

The vast time span is apparent at the very start of the exhibition, with ancient ointment vessels from the 1st to 3rd centuries standing alongside glass vessels from the 21st century. All served or serve the same purpose, namely the packaging and transportation of products. The ancient receptacles once contained oils and tinctures, the modern vessels were used to hold the constituents needed for glass production: the main ingredient in glass, making up over 50%, is quartz sand, to which further components like soda, potash, red lead for shine and hardness, borax and sodium nitrate are added.

Heated, it can be formed into practically any shape, and retains that shape when hardened.

Drinking glass and table glass as prestigious objects

Most of the approximately 2000-year-old ointment vessels were designed to be used once only. Used in huge quantities in everyday life in antiquity, few of these disposal products have survived undamaged. The story is different for valuable drinking glass and table glass, which the rich used to demonstrate their wealth and impress their guests.

One cabinet contains "trick goblets" from the 17th and 18th centuries, all of which have a surprising effect. These unusual glasses and imaginative

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drinking games would be brought out for celebrations and parties and further add to the merriment of the occasion. One drinking glass in the form of a boot has a very wide glass “upper”, which makes it impossible to drain without spillage, and a “gurgling bottle” made of four hollow spheres one on top of the other makes a throaty gurgle sound when its contents are poured. The effect of a “*Hansel im Keller*” [Hansel in the cellar] cup is more subtle: A float with a small gold figure sits on the base, and as the cup is filled the figure slowly rises to surprise the viewer. Vessels like this appear to have been used to announce a birth and toast the health of mother and child.

In Italy, table fountains were known as “Trionfi da Tavola”, or triumph of the table. Very few examples of these fragile glass structures remain today. The exhibition contains the probably best-preserved three-tier example made of transparent and green glass from the 17th century. When around a quarter of a litre of liquid is poured into the top-most dish, it cascades through side tubes into the dish below, before coming to a stop at the bottom. The liquid could be drunk through an elegantly curved glass tube attached to the bottom dish. A video on the screen next to the fountain shows it in action.

Glass migration

Between brightly coloured Art Nouveau vessels, one cabinet illustrates the steps involved in producing a glass goblet, from the glass raw material to the blown end product: first, a plug of transparent glass mass is colour-coated, heated and blown into a type of spherical form. Then, the sphere is cut open and a second glass ball is inserted and the whole thing is reheated and blown further. After the stem has been attached, the top part of the double sphere, which serves merely to be held, is cut off. A glass cutter then finishes the drinking vessel by grinding away the outer colour layer, thereby producing contrasts.

Knowledge about the production, decoration and shapes of glass was acquired through travel and migration. Everything relating to glass - the raw materials, producers, finishers and the products themselves - was in constant motion. For centuries, glass blowers and cutters moved around Europe, learning about production methods and new finishing techniques and bringing the information back home. This knowledge was precious. In the late

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middle ages, for example, glass blowers from Murano, an island off Venice, were forbidden to travel or move away. At that time, Murano was the most valuable of all glass, and every effort was made to ensure its exclusivity.

If glass products, often receptacles themselves, needed to be transported, they in turn required their own containers. Boxes and crates with fabric-lined, made-to-measure recesses bear witness to the efforts made when transporting glass objects.

The surprising and curious: the versatility of glass

Glass is not only used to make containers and drinking vessels, and is found in many different contexts. One cabinet in the exhibition contains glass jewellery from antiquity to the present day – from coloured glass beads or micro-mosaic medallions consisting of glass stones measuring less than one millimetre through to rhinestones cut to mimic the bright gleam of diamonds. Polished glass in spectacles and as lenses in microscopes and telescopes give us a sharper and more detailed view of the micro- and macrocosm.

Medicine uses test tubes and urine glasses, anatomy uses glass eyes as replacements for lost eyes as well as for teaching purposes. Music is represented by a glass flute, children's toys by a "Puss in Boots" wearing a jacket adorned with glass beads. Time also exists in glass – in hourglasses or an oil lamp clock from the 18th or 19th century that simultaneously provides the time and light: a hollow glass body is filled with oil, the level of which drops after the wick has been lit. On the outside of the glass, a vertical tin strip has been attached, on which the time is read off. The flame provides the light needed to tell the time. The small oil lamp clock in the exhibition contained enough fuel for around one night.

A world without glass is difficult for us to imagine today. At the end of the exhibition, small cards are provided on which visitors are invited to write down any turns of phrase, fairy tales or song lyrics they can think of featuring glass. Snow White's coffin, Cinderella's slipper or the Blondie song "Heart of Glass" are further examples of the material's huge variety and ubiquity.

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Curator

Dr. Sabine Tiedtke, Scientific Employee
Decorative Arts up to 1800 and History of Crafts

Catalogue

A catalogue to accompany the exhibition is available
(in German language only), price € 16,50.

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The Germanische Nationalmuseum (GNM) is the largest museum of cultural history in the German-speaking region. Since its foundation in 1852 it has been bringing together people and cultures across national boundaries. With holdings of 1.4 million objects, the GNM conducts research and disseminates information on a significant body of the material cultural heritage of Central Europe. Today, it is one of the eight research museums of the Leibniz Association.

