

treasuresofkhalili

precious beauty

glass from the nasser d khalili
collection of islamic art

The Nasser D Khalili Collection
contains over 300 glass objects,
ranging from Sasanian
antecedents to 19th-century
European imitations,
and covering an area
stretching from North
Africa to the Indian
Subcontinent.



Facing page: Pyriform flask, one of the largest intact pieces of Islamic glass. Probably Iran. Late 12th century. Honey-coloured glass, blown, tooled and trailed. 29 x 17 cm. © The Nour Foundation.

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At the time of the early expansion of Islam during the seventh century, a glassmaking industry was already flourishing in the Middle East. Not only had glass been manufactured in Egypt since Pharaonic times, the technique of glassblowing itself was developed in Syria during the first century AD. The glassmaking industries of Byzantine Syria and Sasanian Iran were of particular importance, providing prototypes and facilitating a degree of continuity into the Islamic period.

An Eye for Detail

A number of techniques were adopted and developed to decorate the surface of glass vessels. Free-blown objects were, of course, produced and were often left undecorated if made for simple everyday use. However, objects requiring a more clearly defined or elaborate shape were formed by blowing the glass into a mould of patterned wood or clay, which also imprinted a decorative pattern on the surface of the object. Some moulds were hinged and enclosed, while others were open; the latter simply impressing the design on the glass before it was removed and blown into its finished

shape on the blowpipe. The use of moulds in glassmaking, pottery and metalwork also allowed for vessels of a favoured shape or form to be easily reproduced in more than one of these three materials. For example, it was not unusual for an object in glass to correspond to the form of an object in pottery, and vice versa.

The surface of a vessel was further decorated in several ways. Simple, pinched decoration was used, as was more

elaborate trailed decoration, in which strands of molten glass were trailed across the surface of an object in various patterns. The addition of applied elements, or the use of tongs with carved designs to impress a repeating pattern onto the surface, is also found. This type of early decoration is well represented in the

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Khalili Collection by such objects as a small ewer from Iran or Afghanistan, and a large pyriform flask from Iran. The latter is also one of the largest pieces of Islamic glass to have survived intact from the early Islamic period.

Other techniques of glass decoration included marvering, in which glass of one colour was dragged through that of a

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contrasting colour using a comb-like tool, giving a distinctive, feathered effect.

Glass was also decorated with faceted and linear-cut designs; the former were typically either wheel- or bevel-cut, while the latter were hollow-cut (where a design was cut or engraved into the surface). By far the most technically demanding of the various types of cut and incised decoration was a process known as relief-cutting, in which the walls of a vessel are carved away to leave the design standing out in high relief. By the 10th/11th century in Egypt and Iran, glass vessels produced using this technique had attained extraordinary levels of skill and refinement. The pieces consciously imitate vessels carved in rock crystal in a less expensive material. However, the degree of workmanship involved in their production would almost certainly have made them nearly as expensive as vessels carved from rock crystal itself. In a variation of relief-cutting known



away to achieve the desired pattern. The walls of such vessels are extremely thin. For example, those of a small, blue cameo bowl in the Khalili Collection, decorated with highly stylised ibexes, are less than one millimetre thick in places. It is remarkable that such a fragile piece has survived for more than 1000 years.

The History of Craftsmanship

The technique of painted lustre decoration was probably developed in Pre-Islamic Egypt. During the Islamic period it was initially applied to glass, although this was later extended to include pottery, most extensively during the Seljuk and Mongol periods (see Canvas Volume 3, Issue 4). A vessel, usually made of pale glass, was first blown to the desired shape, after which designs were painted onto its surface in a variety of metallic pigments. By firing the vessel at a moderate temperature, they fused to the surface of the glass, staining it a particular colour. The metallic pigments used were silver and copper or sometimes both; the former produced yellowish or brownish tones, the latter, reddish tones.



Hemispherical bowl. Egypt or Iran. 10th century. Deep blue glass over a colourless matrix, blown in an open mould, cameo cut, lathe turned and relief cut. 6.9 x 10.3 cm (diameter).
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as the cameo technique, glass was first blown and then dipped in a glass matrix of a different or contrasting colour, which was subsequently carved







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The technique of decorating glass objects in gold and enamel was developed in Syria and Egypt. Examples have survived from the first half of the 12th century and the technique was increasingly refined during the Zangid, Ayyubid and Mamluk periods. A glass object was first gilded and decorated with coloured glass pastes and then heated, causing the decoration to fuse with the surface. The finished effect leaves the enamels prominent in relief against the flat gilding. Since the different enamels fuse to the vessel at different temperatures, the technique requires considerable skill.

The Khalili Collection includes a number of very fine examples of gilded and enamelled glass, among them a superb Mamluk mosque lamp, a set of three stacking beakers from 13th-century Syria or Egypt (actually from a set of four, the second smallest of which is in Kuwait), and a wine flask from 13th-century Syria. The decoration on the wine flask is particularly interesting and includes pelicans (a symbol of Christ and the Eucharist) together with figures drinking wine, or pouring wine from a similarly shaped flask. It was perhaps

commissioned by a Christian patron, as a souvenir from the Holy Land. Gilded and enamelled glass from the Middle East was greatly admired in Christian Europe, where some objects came to be used as liturgical vessels.

The mosque lamp is decorated with heraldic blazons of the Mamluk Sultan Barquq and an inscription, often found on mosque lamps, from the Qur'an, *Surah Al-Nur* (XXIV, 'Light'), verse 35: 'God is the Light of the heavens and the earth. The parable of His Light is as if there were a niche and within it a Lamp: the Lamp enclosed in Glass'.

Previous page: Flask. Iran or Egypt. 10th or 11th century. Deep blue glass, moulded pattern, blown in the half-post technique and tooled. 19.8 x 10.6 cm (diameter). © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Wine flask. Syria. Mid-13th century. Brownish glass, blown, tooled and decorated with polychrome enamels and gilding. 18 x 12.7 cm (rim diameter). © The Nour Foundation.

Above: Stacking beakers. Syria or Egypt. Mid-13th century. Yellowish glass, blown and decorated with thickly applied enamels and gilding. 18 x 12.7 cm (rim diameter); 15.8 x 11.4 cm (rim diameter); 12.5 x 8.4 cm (rim diameter). © The Nour Foundation.



Watermelon-shaped bottle. Iran or Iraq. Fifth to early seventh century. Dark emerald-green glass, blown, tooled, wheel-cut and polished. 35 x 20.2 cm (diameter). © The Nour Foundation.

Facing page: Mosque lamp with suspension-ball. Austria or Bohemia. Late 19th or early 20th century. Clear glass with a grey tinge, mould-blown with enamelled, gilded decoration and a gilded base; applied handles; metal suspension rings attached to silk cord. Height 32.3 cm. Maximum diameter 22 cm (lamp). © The Nour Foundation.

In Egypt the production of enamelled glass attained perhaps its greatest level of refinement under the Mamluks.

The Legacy Continues

The glassmaking industries of Syria and Iran were largely destroyed during the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. Unlike pottery production, which went on to thrive under the Mongols in Iran, the glassmaking industry in Syria never fully recovered. In Egypt the production of enamelled glass attained perhaps its greatest level of refinement under the Mamluks. However, the technique had largely died out by the late Mamluk period, partly due to the increasing imports of Venetian glass. Later, gilded and enamelled glass was also produced in Mughal India.

New forms appeared in glassware during the later Islamic period. Among these was the glass *huqqa* base, which became popular following the introduction of tobacco in the Middle East; and in Safavid and Qajar Iran, glass rosewater-sprinklers with long, curving necks.

During the 19th century, a number of European glassmakers began making objects inspired by medieval Islamic glass; among them Philippe-Joseph Brocard in Paris and the firm of J and L Lobmeyr in Vienna (see Canvas Volume 3 Issue 5). In some cases these objects were imported into the Islamic world, such as the lamps for the royal mosque of Al-Rifa'i in Cairo (1869-1912), which was completed by the German architect Max Herz. Equally, with increasing Western influence in the Middle East during the 19th century, glassmakers there became interested in European glassware, and like other craftsmen from the region, some travelled to, or trained in Europe. 

The glass objects in the Nasser D Khalili Collection is published in a catalogue by Sydney M Goldstein: 'Glass: From Sasanian Antecedents to European Imitations; (The Nasser D Khalili Collection of Islamic Art: Volume XV), London 2005. For further information on the collection, visit www.khalili.org

