

CONICAL BOWL WITH A FLOWER-SHAPED ORNAMENT

Roman, 2nd-1st century B.C.

Glass and gold

Height: 7.5 cm, diameter: 14.5 cm

Reference: 26727



This bowl (or cup) is outstanding not only for its state of preservation, but also for the thick gold leaf ornament attached to its bottom; this special element makes the piece a unique and probably major bowl in this group of Hellenistic vessels.

It is made of thick, solid transparent glass, olive green in color; the wall is thicker at the upper edge than at the bottom. The shape is as simple as it is elegant; the profile is even and conical, with a rounded bottom, covered with a gold ornament decorated with a flower in relief. The flower is composed of two rings of petals with pointed ends and of a circular central part, which gives the vessel a certain balance (there are no handles). It is worth noting that the bottom of the bowl was specifically sized to receive the ornament; rather than simply rounded, as is the norm for this type of bowl, it shows a projection in the outer profile, as if it had been carved or pressed for a better adhesion of the ornament to the glass (other related bowls occasionally feature more elaborate decorative patterns than a few incised lines, as is the case, for example, with a piece in the University of Missouri-Columbia Collection, whose bottom is fashioned to provide a good balance).

On the inside, the decoration is limited to three horizontal, parallel lines, deeply incised and no doubt made with a potter's wheel. The rim is simple, without a lip but slightly rounded. On the outside, about halfway up the wall, a small disk in low relief is probably evidence of ancient repairs, due perhaps to a fusion defect in the glass or to damage.

This piece belongs to a well-attested group of glass vases, certainly used as drinking vessels during symposia. Produced by workshops based on the Syro-Palestinian coast, approximately between the middle of the 2nd and the late 1st century B.C., these bowls (known as Syro-Palestinian grooved cups, because of the inner and/or outer circular engravings) were soon acknowledged in a large part of the Mediterranean world, since they were later uncovered in Greece

(Athens, Delos), in Italy (Etruria, Magna Graecia, Sicily), in Spain and in Egypt. Diverse in size and proportions, they were made of transparent, generally colorless amber or, as is the case here, of yellowish green glass.

These glass bowls, which were certainly already regarded as luxury items in ancient times, can be considered as imitations of the many Hellenistic drinking cups made of precious metals (mostly silver), as evidenced not only by the formal affinities, but also by the presence of the rosette on the bottom, a widespread pattern in the decoration of metal tableware.

The manufacturing technique is unique, based on the principle of the mold, but without the pressing operation. After preparing a glass disk of the desired dimensions, the craftsman places it on a plaster or terracotta cone-shaped mold, pointed upwards, and partially fuses it. Under the action of heat and gravity, the glass melts over the mold, taking its shape and concentrating especially towards the lip of the vessel, which thus becomes thicker (unlike blown glass vessels, in which the bottom of the vase is thicker). This process (known as sagging) is faster and less expensive than the one based on molding in male and female molds; moreover, since only one side of the vessel is in contact with the form, the polishing of the glass can be limited to the inner part only.

CONDITION

Virtually intact bowl, aside from the partially chipped edge; iridescent patina in places and remains of encrustations partly covering the inner bowl. Regular traces of polishing on the inside.

PROVENANCE

From the N. Aboutaam Collection, Geneva, Switzerland.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

On related bowls, see:

GROSE D.F., The Syro-Palestinian Glass Industry in the Later Hellenistic Period, in *Muse*, 13, 1979, pp. 31-33 (technique), pp. 54-67 (p. 58, no. 1 for the bowl with the worked bottom).

GROSE D.F., *The Toledo Museum of Art: Early Ancient Glass*, New York, 1989, pp. 245 ff.

STERN E.M. and SCHLICK-NOLTE B., *Early Glass of the Ancient World, 1600 B.C.-50 A.D.: Ernesto Wolf Collection, Ostfildern*, 1994, pp. 68-71, no. 77 (technique); pp. 284-285, no. 79.

On metal parallels, see:

OLIVER A. and LUCKNER K.T., *Silver for the Gods: 800 Years of Greek and Roman Silver*, Toledo, 1977, pp. 84-85, no. 47.

STRONG D.E., *Greek and Roman Gold and Silver Plate*, London, 1966, pp. 108-109 ff.