

## PAINTED GLASS BOTTLE

Roman, Second half of the 1st-early 2nd century A.D.

Painted glass

Height: 13 cm

Reference: 26729



The shape is simple, of a type that was widespread between the 1st and the 4th century A.D., with many variations in the proportions, in the form and in the size. The body is globular, with a flat, though slightly concave base, which gives the vessel a good balance; the neck, slightly narrower on reaching the shoulder, is cylindrical and tall, without a lip; the top edge is cut straight. Such vessels were probably used as containers for precious liquids (essences, perfume oils).

The painted decoration, which is certainly the most interesting and most beautiful element of the vessel, is composed thus: a) on the shoulder, there is a series of large, irregular yellow dots followed by a frieze adorned with a continuous garland of green stems and alternating green, yellow and red flowers, assorted with undulating polychromatic lines; b) after a series of several incised lines, the miniaturized main frieze presents an elaborate exotic area, where three animal fights or chases unfold in the midst of a lush vegetation of bushes painted between the animals; the first scene features a lion painted dark brown attacking a bull, the second one shows a tiger painted beige, white and gray with black stripes attacking a deer, while the third has an animal looking like a canid (a wolf?) pursuing another deer; disconnected from the three life-and-death struggles between the quadrupeds, several birds fill the decorative area in a somewhat irregular manner; there is a crane (or a heron), between the bull and the tiger, and there are smaller birds resembling quails, ducks and even sparrows; c) the base is decorated with a large rosette (or a star) whose alternating yellow and red petals are preceded towards the bottom by a series of yellow dots, just as on the shoulder.

The style is quite unique and recalls a mural fresco. Rather than presenting an accentuated realism, the artist has emphasized the liveliness of the scene by using a broad, varied and sometimes bold palette of colors (the body of the wolf is almost yellow, grayish blue for the nuanced coat of the deer, gray for that of the tiger, gray for the bird

feathers) and an almost naive draughtsmanship reminiscent of Impressionism, where the silhouettes of the animals and many anatomical details are first outlined in black. The presence of birds and shrubs helps in making the image full of life.

Painted glass – a class of rare objects, which still raises problems of classification and chronology – appeared in the Roman world as of the 1st century A.D. In his *Natural History*, Pliny the Elder mentions glass as a material particularly suitable for decoration, by adding an enamel to the surface (*Nat. Hist.*, LXVII, 36). Indeed, after the manufacturing of the vessel (blown, molded, etc.), the decoration was made by applying polychromatic enamels with a brush directly on to the glass; the vessel was then heated in the furnace (a delicate operation, because of possible glass breakage or deformation) in order to better fix the colors and ensure a more durable decoration.

The production of painted glass vases is generally linked with the innovative spirit of Eastern artistic tradition. In the early Imperial period, the spread of this class of vessels was extremely important, reaching as it did virtually the entire world as known at the time, from Western Europe (Great Britain, continental Western Europe with particular prevalence in the central Alpine region), to the Mediterranean world (Italy, North Africa, Greece), the Black Sea, the Near East, Egypt and up to ancient Bactria (goblets from the Bagram treasure).

The forms concerned are rare: the most common (with a greater concentration between northern Italy and the central-western Alps) are the small, colored blown glass cups, usually decorated with garlands of leaves and birds depicted with varying degrees of sophistication; these are followed by the amphoriskoi (small types of amphora), with two published examples; furthermore, there are the many tall and narrow goblets, attested by a number of pieces found in Germany (now lost) and especially in the Bagram treasure; among the bottles, two other

examples are known, one housed in the Corning Museum of Glass, in New York, with a rich mythological scene telling the story of Marsyas and Apollo, but chronologically more recent, and the other formerly in the Gawain McKinley Collection, made of green glass, representing a scene of marine creatures, the latter being a closer parallel.

Stylistically, one may note, on our bottle, the presence of two elements that can be considered as leitmotifs of this group of vessels: the rosette surrounded by a dotted circle under the base (cf. especially the bottoms of the cups mentioned) and the frieze of polychromatic flowers on the shoulder (cf. their regular appearance on the goblets from Bagram); both patterns also appear on the bottle with the scene of marine creatures. The very hectic subject of the main frieze does not seem to have precise parallels (except perhaps on a vessel from Bagram, on which, among other figures in a rocky landscape, a tiger is seen chasing an oryx), although wild animals were painted on many glass cups and vases.

The problem of the localization of the workshop(s) has still not been definitively resolved; the latest studies favor either a Near Eastern origin (Syro-Palestinian coastal city) or an Egyptian origin (Alexandria) for this class of materials; but there is also a case for the existence of a workshop located in northern Italy (directed by an immigrant oriental master?), responsible for product distribution in Western Europe. The chronology points to somewhere between the Tiberian and the Flavian period for the cups, while the Bagram goblets (whose dating was recently reviewed) would be slightly more recent (their production lasted until the early 2nd century A.D.).

## CONDITION

Complete bottle, virtually intact; cracks on the base; paint slightly faded in places. Thin, clear blown glass; series of incised lines decorating the maximum body diameter, the shoulder and the neck of the vessel.

## PROVENANCE

Ex-Elie Bustros Collection, Beirut, Lebanon, 1950-1960's

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On the cups, see:

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