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VENICE OR *FAÇON DE VENISE*? TWO ENAMELLED
GLASSES IN THE BRITISH MUSEUM

The British Museum holds one of the world's finest collections of Venetian glass¹. Most of the collection was bequeathed by Felix Slade (1788-1868), whose estate also founded the Slade Professorships in the History of Art at Oxford, Cambridge and London Universities². Slade was particularly proud of his “fragile Venetian beauties”, and the enamelled Venetian and *façon de Venise* glass of the 16th to the early 17th Century is one of the highpoints of the Slade collection, allowing us to trace the diaspora of Venetian craftsmen from Murano to glassmaking centres all over Europe and to document the high regard for Venetian culture and fashion in Europe around 1600.

I recently curated an exhibition, *Shakespeare: staging the world*, at the British Museum for the Cultural Olympiad in 2012³. One section of the exhibition looked at Venice as the city of dreams for Shakespeare and his audiences; the city of luxury and excess, famous for its fair women and for its sex trade. Venice was renowned for its openness to “strangers” or immigrants and aliens, and admired as a trading city and as a bulwark against the Ottoman Turk. Londoners saw in Venice something to admire and criticise at the same time.

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¹ Glass discussed here can be studied on the British Museum's collections online database under http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_search_results.aspx.

² Griffiths 1996: 113-33 for Slade and his print donations; Tait 1979: 7-8 for his glass collection and bequest.

³ Bate and Thornton 2012.

Venice was the proxy setting for London on the stage of the London playhouse. In the British Museum exhibition, we explored the world of *The Merchant of Venice* and of *Othello*, and in doing we displayed two examples of enamelled glass from the British Museum's collection which gave new insights into the way in which Venice was regarded and viewed by contemporary Europeans⁴.

The first glass is a large goblet with a deep, wide bowl, a hollow baluster stem and a folded foot⁵ (Fig. 1). The body of the goblet is enamelled on one side with the figure of a well-dressed woman in Venetian dress. Her hair, which has been dyed blond, is teased into a distinctively Venetian style of horned headdress of the 1580s and 90s, which helps to date the glass⁶. She leans back on her hips as she is wearing high platform shoes under her voluminous blue and white silk dress: they can be seen peeping out at the base of the bowl⁷. Her delicate white undershirt is visible beneath the lacing of her corseted bodice and puffs out where her sleeves are laced at her shoulders. She holds a black ostrich feather fan as a luxury accessory in one hand and a large white linen handkerchief – reminiscent of Shakespeare's Desdemona – in the other⁸.

The glass presents the stereotypical view of the kind of Venetian blond beauty for which the city was famous in the 1590s and into the first decade of the 1600s. The image has long been thought to have been copied from a woodcut showing a Venetian noblewoman in Lent, which appears in Cesare Vecellio's famous costume book, *Degli habiti antichi et moderni di diverse parti del mondo*, printed in Venice in 1590⁹. Vecellio's book is probably the source for the image of a lady which is enamelled on one of a pair of stangengläser in the British Museum¹⁰. The other glass in the pair is enamelled with a male figure, in German dress, and both glasses bear the paired arms of the Praun and Roming families and the inscription

⁴ Ibid.: 147-69.

⁵ Slade 853; Tait 1979: Fig. 2, no. 40.

⁶ Rosenthal and Jones 2008: 182.

⁷ Semmelhack 2009: 56.

⁸ Bate and Thornton 2012: 155-56.

⁹ Rosenthal and Jones 2008: facing fol.133.

¹⁰ Ibid.: facing fol.135.

JACOB PRAVN in gold. It is thought that the figures are intended to be read as generic “portraits” of the Nuremberg couple, Jacob Praun and Clara von Romig, who married in 1589¹¹. Tait thought in 1979 that the dependence on Vecellio for the image of Clara Roming argued in favour of Schmidt’s hypothesis, put forward in 1911: that Venetian glasshouses might still, at this date, have been making glasses for German clients in what was by then an unfashionable style in Venice¹². Lanmon and Whitehouse did not openly contradict Tait’s view in publishing the glass in 1993, but it now seems that the glass could not be Venetian given its heavy and ponderous form. Shakespeare’s Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* decoys an unwelcome German marriage candidate with “A deep glass of Rhenish wine”; one wonders if this is the kind of oversized glass to which she is referring, associated in the minds of Shakespeare’s London audiences with German glass and drinking habits¹³. The greyish tint of the metal is also uncharacteristic of Venetian products. The use of full-length figures, as well as the sketchy style and fairly crude nature of the enamelling on the arms, would in addition argue for an origin outside Venice. Finally, the stangenglas form itself indicates a Southern German or Austrian origin.

The blue lady on the goblet in the British Museum may not be based on Vecellio’s print. An alternative source is provided by a very similar image in an interactive print by Pietro Bertelli, printed in Venice around 1588¹⁴. This shows a demure Venetian noblewoman in a watery lagoon. Or so she appears at first sight. However the viewer can lift the flap of her skirt to show her

¹¹ Slade 845-846. Tait 1979: 42-43, no. 39; Lanmon and Whitehouse 1993: 66-67, Fig. 21.2. Compare the glass of same type in Coburg with portrait of Jacob’s brother, Hans Praun as a young man, with his name and arms; see Theuerkauff-Liederwald 1994: no. 171. Two similarly enamelled glasses were sold at Sotheby’s, London, 26 June 1978, which commemorate the marriage of Hans Praun with Magdalena Gammersfelder, 1598. These are now in the Franco Deboni collection.

¹² Schmidt 1911: 249; Lanmon and Whitehouse: 67.

¹³ MacGregor 2012: 170.

¹⁴ Lawner 1987: 20-21; Bayer A., ed. 2008: cat.103; Bate and Thornton 2012: 155-56, Fig.14.

breeches and platform shoes underneath, revealing her identity as one of the famous courtesans of Venice. Bertelli's print, like Vecellio's depictions of Venetian noblewomen and courtesans, was frequently copied in the miniatures in friendship albums produced for German-speaking merchant and noble travellers in the late 1500s¹⁵. These albums – a large number of which are preserved in the British Library-- provide an image bank for the way in which Italian, and specifically Venetian, culture appeared to Northern European strangers and travellers; a source which should be much more widely used by historians¹⁶. Given the popularity of these images, we may never be able to identify a precise source for the blue lady on the British Museum glass. But the Bertelli image is telling nevertheless. As we handle the goblet and turn it in our hand to drink from it, are we meant to enjoy the witty conceit of the Venetian courtesan who specialises in what Shakespeare's Iago calls "a seeming": the notorious ability of the Venetian prostitute to emulate the ways and manners of "respectable" women?¹⁷ It was this very Shakespearean aspect of the glass which was brought out by Neil MacGregor, Director of the British Museum, in his examination of the glass for his radio series, *Shakespeare's Restless World*¹⁸.

On the back of the British Museum glass (Fig. 2) is a Germanic coat of arms which has not been identified. Scientific analysis by Dr Andrew Meek of the British Museum indicated that the cobalt blue used so liberally in the enamelled decoration is likely to have been derived from the Erzgebirge region on the border of Germany and the Czech Republic¹⁹.

The form, and the gilt and enamelled scale decoration on the rim, has been compared by Lanmon and Whitehouse to a glass in

¹⁵ Bertelli's print was copied into the album of Sir Michael Balfour, c1596-9; National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, ms 16000, fol.128r. Bate and Thornton 2012: 156, Fig.15 and 290.

¹⁶ Rosenthal and Jones 2008: 19-20; Schlueter 2011.

¹⁷ Bate and Thornton 2012: 155.

¹⁸ MacGregor 2012: 160-73.

¹⁹ See Andrew Meek, Qualitative compositional analysis of a late sixteenth century enamelled glass goblet in this volume as part of the same conference papers.

the Lehman Collection in New York. The Lehman glass is dated 1592 and is enamelled with the arms of Welsperg and Madrutz of Tyrol, both of which are Southern Tyrolean families. Lanmon and Whitehouse attributed the glass to Southern Germany or Tyrol, perhaps to the Hofglassshutte at Innsbruck²⁰. During the discussion at the conference, Erwin Baumgartner pointed out to me that fragmentary baluster stems of very similar form have turned up in excavations at Hall. It is to be hoped that further research will clarify the exact origins of this fine glass with its delightfully witty enamelled decoration.

The second British Museum glass is of conical form on a low, spreading foot²¹. It is vividly enamelled all the way round, almost like a strip cartoon, with three male figures in masquerade; three of the Masks of the Italian popular theatre known as the *Commedia dell'arte*, including Pantaloon in Fig. 3 and Zanni in Fig. 4²². It represents a very early depiction of this theme on any object, despite the popularity of the *Commedia* throughout Europe in the late 1500s²³. Magnifico [later known as Pantaloon] is shown as Shakespeare describes him in *As You Like It* as “the lean and slippered Pantaloon”, an aged and decayed figure representing the sixth of the seven ages of man²⁴. Magnifico duels with the servant figure, Zanni, in his distinctive loose white garments and red hat with a feather. The duelling pair are watched by the Doctor. All three figures wear black masks. The enamelled figures on this glass may be copied from contemporary prints, like those in *Gli Inganni*, printed in Venice in 1592, which includes small woodcuts of the principal masks – Pantaloon, dottore, Zanni and Tedesco – in different combinations. Independent prints also feature these figures. However, no precise source for the three figures interacting as they do on the glass has not as yet been identified. Venetian print-makers seem to have regarded these as a kind of advertising

²⁰ Lanmon and Whitehouse 1993: 66.

²¹ Slade 852.

²² Harden *et al.* 1968: no. 213; Tait 1963; Tait 1979: no. 38; Ciappi 2006: no. 27; Bate and Thornton 2012: 167.

²³ Katritzky 2006: plate 339.

²⁴ Bate and Thornton 2012: 167.

for the culture of their city, although prints by Northern European artists such as Julius Goltzius's print, dated 1581 in the plate, show just how popular a theme the *Commedia* was throughout Europe²⁵.

The glass has long been identified as belonging to a group of seven glasses in the British Museum: three goblets (including the lady in blue described above); and four Stangengläser, of which all but one are enamelled with German, Austrian or Swiss arms and full-length figures of men and women²⁶. This is the only one of the group to lack arms, which suggests it is not a special commission. Tait argued for the Venetian origin of this glass, commenting that the choice of a *Commedia dell'arte* subject would seem to him to be "a curious subject for a German patron to commission from a local South German glasshouse or, indeed, for such a glasshouse to produce for general sale"²⁷. During the discussion at the conference, Paolo Zecchin and Rosa Barovier argued for the Venetian origin of this glass, dating it several decades earlier than I have, to the 1560s or 70s. They kindly drew my attention to the postmortem inventory of Giovanni Antonio Zanchi, dated 22 January 1577. Zanchi was the head of a glasshouse in Murano at the sign of the castle, and his inventory, preserved in the State archives in Murano and published by Paolo Zecchin, lists the contents of his workshop. Among the products are unidentified glasses described as "Goti da cil overo canoncini chiari", which Rosa Barovier suggests may have been glasses of the same form as German Stangengläser. Later in the same inventory one of these glasses is described as a "Goto de acil smaltado a magnifichi" which Barovier interprets as being a possible reference to a stangenglas enamelled with a *Commedia* subject featuring il Magnificho, Pantaloon²⁸. I am extremely grateful to Rosa Barovier and Paolo Zecchin for this fascinating suggestion, though it is as yet unproven and it is to be hoped that further research will clarify the meaning of inventory terms used for

²⁵ See for example the anonymous print of Pantalone, Innamorata, and Zanni, printed in Venice c1580-90, in the British Museum: PD1880,0710.854. Katritzky 2006: Fig. 248 for Goltzius.

²⁶ Tait 1979: 42-46, nos. 38-39 and 41-44.

²⁷ Tait 1979: 27-8; Schmidt 1911: 249.

²⁸ Zecchin 2009: 27-34, esp. 34.

glass and how they may or may not be matched with surviving glass types. This is one of the declared aims of the *Glass in Venice Project* and it is one which is particularly to be welcomed and supported by all students of Venetian glass.

An alternative possibility for the origins of this British Museum glass, and the group to which it belongs, is that it was made in Southern Germany or Tyrol. Two beakers of very similar form, but with a slightly more spreading foot, are in Coburg. They are enamelled with the arms of the couple, Matheus Spennesberger and Ursula Müllerin, and Theuerkauff-Liedewald has attributed them tentatively to Hall [?] c1570-80²⁹. She has situated the two Coburg glasses within a large group of similar form, enamelled with Germanic arms. Two of these, in Prague and Ecouen, are closer in form to the British Museum *Commedia* glass: they are enamelled with the arms of Philip Oyrlls von Herzogenbosch, and dated 1590 and 1591 respectively³⁰. The enamelled decoration of the *Commedia* need not be necessarily Venetian or Italian in origin, for the *Commedia* was, by the 1590s, a pan-European artform with a high reputation in the German-speaking countries. Northern European artists loved to depict the travelling players and their audiences, and prints of the kind mentioned above circulated widely. German glasshouses, especially those employing Venetian glassworkers, might well have chosen to illustrate such an appealing subject on their wares given the familiarity of the *Commedia*. A possible source for the enamelled decoration might again be the painted miniatures in friendship albums³¹. Many of these albums, such as that of an anonymous German owner in Bamberg compiled around 1600, contain picture postcard-type views of the *Commedia* masks in action as part of mountebank performances on makeshift stages³². The setting for the miniature in the Bamberg album is Venice itself, judging by the dress of the spectators, but miniatures

²⁹ Theuerkauff-Liederwald 1994: cats. 167-68.

³⁰ Ibid.: 183.

³¹ Katritzky 2006: Figs. 248-60.

³² Schlueter 2011, frontispiece and 109-110, 111, Fig. 49. From the album of an unidentified owner, Bamberg Staatsbibliothek, I QC 75 [unnumbered], circa 1600. Katritzky 1998: 104-25 discusses and reproduces the Bamberg and similar images.

in other albums set the scene in Northern European cities where travelling troupes of Italian players are known to have performed. The only comparison in terms of the *Commedia dell'arte* decoration on the British Museum glass, as Rosa Barovier kindly reminded me during the discussion at the conference, is a stangenglas in Hannover, which appears not only to include the same figures as the British Museum glass, but to have been painted by the same enameller after the same source³³. The form of the Hanover glass would surely argue for a Southern German or Austrian origin for the British Museum glass, too, if they were indeed made by the same craftsman in the same glasshouse.

Wherever they were made, the two glasses reveal the role of Venice and Venetian culture in the European imagination in the years around 1600. Art objects of this quality and interest have an intellectual context which is worth exploring. We need to consider not only the technical finesse of Venetian and *façon de Venise* glasses, but their contemporary status and significance for the men and women who first owned and handled them.

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³³ Harden *et al.* 1968: no. 213.

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Fig. 1 - Late 16th century enamelled glass goblet. London, British Museum, Prehistory and Europe, width of rim is 11.5 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 2 - Late 16th century enamelled glass goblet. London, British Museum, Prehistory and Europe, width of rim is 11.5 cm (© Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 3 - Late 16th century enamelled glass goblet. London, British Museum, Prehistory and Europe (© Trustees of the British Museum).



Fig. 4 - Late 16th century enamelled glass goblet. London, British Museum, Prehistory and Europe: Zanni (© Trustees of the British Museum).

