

The Passglas: Drinking Games in the Colony

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A typical weekend night today can be celebrated in a multitude of ways, but there are certain characteristics that hold true for many Americans. At this point work is finished, at least for a few days, and it is time to lay back and take it easy, balancing your strenuous work week with a little fun and games. Whether choosing an action packed night out on the town or a relaxing break at home, most people use this time to enjoy the company of their family and friends, letting the stress of the work week slip away with some good conversation and entertainment.

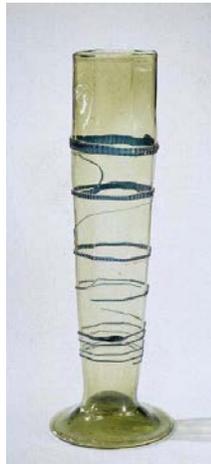
While the concept of a "weekend" may be foreign to our colonial forbearers, when it comes to relaxation, the colonists shared our spirit. They could be found celebrating in a variety of ways, including in taverns, at theatres, and playing games. Social gatherings would often resemble a modern day party. They featured singing, dancing, conversation and, ever the social soother, alcohol. Studies of artifacts found in the first colonies show that as early as the 17th century specific drinking glasses were used for games involving beer, schnapps, wine, or even rum and brandy.ⁱ

A few relics of this tradition have been excavated by archaeologists at St. Mary's City, location of Maryland's first capital. Fragments of drinking glasses recovered from the St. John's site date from the late 1600's to early 1700's, when a structure on the site was used as an inn. Many of these bits evidence drinking vessels that were elaborately decorated and used to serve wine and other alcoholic beverages as entertainment for guests or the elite. One such vessel found among these artifacts is known as the *passglas*.ⁱⁱ

The *passglas* is a tall beaker used as early as the 16th century, and through the 18th century. It can be cylindrical, hexagonal, or octagonal, and is supported by either a pedestal or kick base. Some versions taper downward, and all have very distinct markings.ⁱⁱⁱ Three to seven horizontal bands run around the exterior of the glass, dividing the beaker into distinct portions.^{iv} The name of the *passglas* is derived from its use. In German, "passé" or "passen" means to literally pass something on.

The *passglas* was used to play an ancient drinking game, usually with beer. It is a game of precision, and was popular at banquets, weddings, common parties or gatherings, and other festivities. The glass is passed around, and each person is required to drink to their designated line. If the line is not reached, the person should continue sipping until hitting the mark. However, if the line is overshoot the drinker must take another turn, continuing until he or she stops precisely on the line.^v Joe Kissell examines the *passglas* in his article "Precision Measures for Drinking Games," and he states that "although modern drinking games may be more sophisticated in some ways, they rarely if ever involve a test of how skillfully one can actually drink." Today, many a drinking game can be found at bars, parties, and celebrations, drinking with accuracy and controlling one's consumption in such is unusual.

Along with horizontal bands marking the drinker's targets, other decorations are often found on these vessels. One *passglas* currently located in The British Museum displays the letters "F A R P." Perhaps Frederick Augustus I, celebrated King of Poland in the early 18th century was a fan.^{vi} Other surviving *passglases* are embellished pictures or small prunts or knobs. One town in Germany produced glasses that were adorned with paintings of playing cards.^{vii}



viii



ix

Remnants of the *passglas* have been traced back to Germany, the Netherlands, Denmark, Finland, Estonia, and Sweden. The *passglas* fragments found in St. Mary's City are just a few of the many vessel fragments located here that highly resemble those found in 17th century Dutch colonial sites.^x In most cases, the *passglass* combines aspects of Venetian glassblowing with the decorations and societal uses of people in Northern Europe. This collision results in what are now known as *façon de Venise* creations.^{xi}

Most forming of Venetian glass was originally limited to the island of Murano, where secrets could be guarded, keeping the market in control. The most famous types of Venetian glass were produced in the 15th and 16th centuries. *Cristallo* is a form of clear glass, and *lattimo* is white, resembling porcelain. Ribbed glass, engraving, and other intricate embellishments are all characteristics of early Venetian glass. In the case of the *passglas*, these qualities are combined with Germanic preferences for large volume, trailed glass, specific decorations such as a prunts, and the use of the glasses in their games. According to Anne Grulich, who performed in depth research on the drinking vessel fragments excavated in St. Mary's City, "the *façon de Venise* table glass recovered at St. Mary's City is a delicate blend of whimsy and masterful technique," truly combining the famous Venetian glassmaking with the culture of Northern Europe.^{xii}

One other source of glass used for this particular drinking vessel is known as *waldglas*, or forest glass. *Waldglas* is usually green, yellow, or brown, and was formed from the ashes of burnt beechwood in Germany during the Middle Ages.^{xiii} According to Newman's *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass*, *walglas* was thicker and more primitive than Venetian glass, though it was similarly decorated. *Waldglas* was less popular during the 16th to 18th centuries due to its green color, but there has recently been a resurrection in its use.

Although it is believed that the game was relatively popular, Kissell was unable to find references to the *passglas* in literature. There are, however, various paintings that depict both the game and the object itself. In the mid 1600's artist Adriaen van Ostade portrayed a group of peasant men celebrating in an old barn or basement in his painting "Dancing Couple."^{xiv} As a violinist plays, one man sips from a *passglas* as his friend watches, awaiting his turn to take a draught. It is a scene of friendship, merriment, and relaxation. The glass in the painting is not elaborately decorated, as many of those found in museums. Rather, this depiction links the *passglas* with the customs of peasants and other common townfolk, instead of just the elite.



xv

Dutch painter Jan van de Velde II portrayed the *passglas* in a different light. In 1647 he finished a still life depicting a haphazard table with a *passglas* on it. It is surrounded by, among other things, a rolled up table cloth, a fallen tin can, partially eaten and forgotten food, and a pipe. According to the Rijksmuseum where the painting is displayed, this artwork is a warning against the lower desires of humankind, saying that "all these desires are merely momentary," the *passglas* is representative of man's sinful nature, and is a temptation to be overcome.^{xvi}



xvii

Despite de Velde's commentary, the *passglas* and associated activities remained popular for centuries. When and why this drinking game fell of fashion is a good topic for another study, though historically, in the 18th century lead glass replaced Venetian glass as the preferred choice for artistic objects and crystal.

The *passglas* stands beside puzzle jugs and other drinking vessels that were made exclusively for drinking games and festivities, an important break from the rigors of life on the frontier. After a long day of work, our predecessors enjoyed sitting back and relaxing with a drink and a friend, just as we do today. All fashion is cyclical; perhaps it's time for a revival of the *passglas*. We could take a lesson from our predecessors, deriving new types of challenges in the games played at our modern social gatherings. Centuries later, people are still finding traces of their own lives in the artifacts recovered at historic sites throughout the country.

- i. George Schaun and Virginia Schaun, *Everyday Life in Colonial Pennsylvania* (Annapolis, Maryland: Greenberry Publications, 1970), 102.
- ii. Anne Dowling Grulich, *Façon de Venise Drinking Vessels on the Chesapeake Frontier: Examples From St. Mary's City, Maryland* (Morrison Fund Publication, 2004), 25.
- iii. Hartshorne, Albert, *Old English Glasses, An Account of Glass Drinking Vessels in England, From Early Times Until the End of the Eighteenth Century*, <http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/albert-hartshorne/old-english-glasses-an-account-of-glass-drinking-vessels-in-england-from-early-tra/page-14-old-english-glasses-an-account-of-glass-drinking-vessels-in-england-from-early-tra.shtml> (October 10, 2009).
- iv. Harold Newman, *An Illustrated Dictionary of Glass* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1977), 233.
- v. Newman, 233.
- vi. The British Museum, *Enameled Measuring Glass (passglas)*, http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/e/enamelled_measuring_glass_pas.aspx (October 10, 2009).
- vii. Newman, 233.
- viii. <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/collectie/zoeken/asset.jsp?id=BK-NM-705&lang=en>
- ix. http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/pe_mla/e/enamelled_measuring_glass_pas.aspx
- x. Grulich, 32.
- xi. The Getty, *Goblet (Trichterpokal)*, <http://www.getty.edu/art/gettyguide/artObjectDetails?artobj=1224> (October 10, 2009).
- xii. Grulich, 5.
- xiii. Newman, 334.
- xiv. Rijksmuseum, *Pasglas*, http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria_assets/BK-NM-705?page=3&lang=nl&context_space=&context_id=.
- xv. Rijksmuseum, *P705?page=3&lang=nl&context_space=&context_id=* (October 10, 2009).
- xvi. <http://itotd.com/images/DancingCoupleFull.jpeg>
- xvii. http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/aria/aria_assets/BK-NM
- xviii. <http://www.rijksmuseum.nl/collectie/zoeken/asset.jsp?id=SK-C-611&lang=en>