GREEN-GLAZED WARE: THREE Hellenistic Vases

By Christine Alexander, Associate Curator of Greek and Roman Art

With Notes on the Glazes
By Maude Robinson, Technical Consultant in Ceramics

One of the most striking of the Hellenistic pottery fabrics has not come to the notice of Bulletin readers for some years, although the Museum has a good selection of it. This pottery is decorated, if at all, with reliefs, and has a glaze which is so often bright green that the ware is referred to as “green-glazed,” even though other colors occur. With the recent addition of several pieces, the Museum now has about forty-five examples, which are shown in the northwest corner of the court of Wing K.

One of the newcomers to the collection is illustrated on page 134. It is a ring-handled cup from Syria, grass green in color. On one side is a maenad with a thyrsos in her hand, riding a sea monster—an undulating fish-tailed being, whose forepart is that of a panther. The monster on the other side is a sea goat, and the rider is a satyr, to judge from his features and from the fact that he bears a maenad company. Sea monsters in Greek art go back to remote antiquity, and were numerous among the invaders from the East during the period of oriental influences in the seventh century B.C. Skopas poured new life into the theme with a group of Nereids riding on sea monsters and bearing the armor of Achilles, which is known through Pliny’s description. Hellenistic and Roman artists drew upon this theme and varied it ever more freely. When our green cup was made in Syria, the workshop of Perennius at Arezzo, in Italy, had the type in stock, and it evidently found favor with their clients. The Arretine figures are closer to the tradition, which came down through Skopas, of the Nereid procession. On the green cup this theme has been crossed with another, the Bacchic thiasos, or procession in honor of the wine god, and the wine god’s servants have been mounted on the tumultuous steeds of the Nereids. If we consider, upon the one hand, the occurrence of the sea-monster procession on Roman sarcophagi and, upon the other, that of macabre subjects such as skeletons on wine cups, we may even wonder if whoever used the green cup saw in it a dual allusion, to his present cheer and to his eventual relinquishment of it. A variation of the attitude is expressed in the familiar New Testament colloquy: “Eat, drink, and be merry. . . .” “Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.”

Our cup brings to mind another, lent by Mrs. William H. Moore for the exhibition of Augustan art held at the Museum in 1939. This also is a ring-handled cup, with a rich green glaze and scenes in relief of horsemen in combat, one of them shooting backward as he gallops away from the enemy—the “Parthian shot.” Through a renewal of the owner’s generosity this precious piece is again here on loan, and the two cups can be seen together. Green-glazed cups regularly have vegetal decoration, rarely scenes, and these are the only ones of the kind in this country so far as I know.

Another great rarity among the new acquisitions is a jug, here illustrated, in the form of a head with long curls, crowned with ivy and a fillet. The glaze is yellow. The head is that of a maenad or an effeminate Dionysos. It is from Syria, like the cups, and is said to have been found at Hama.

The green, blue, and yellow glazes of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which gave splendor not only to utensils but to architectural revetments, never gained entree to the potteries of
Green-glazed cup with sea monsters. From Syria, Augustan period

Greece proper. The Greeks in Egypt, at Naukratis in the archaic period and at Alexandria in the Hellenistic, tried them in a limited way, using them on articles not of terracotta but of Egyptian “faience.” But the glazes, however beautifully colored, were viscous, did not lend themselves to figure painting, and on relief ware tended to collect in hollows and distort the modeling. Exactly like glass, which (except when it is worked cold with an engraving tool or lathe) will not precisely obey a master, these glazes remained in abeyance, and then with the rise of Rome came to be manufactured in various classical lands, spreading, probably, from points of origin in Syria or Alexandria.

The application of the ancient colored glazes of Egypt and the East to pottery which was purely Hellenistic in shape and decoration became common in the first century B.C.
Green-glazed cup with horsemen. From Syria. Lent by Mrs. William H. Moore

The finest of the pottery dates from the principate of Augustus (31 B.C.—A.D. 14) and in political terms belongs to the Roman Imperial period. It does not differ radically from other relief wares of the time in the mode of its manufacture. It was turned out on the wheel, some of it from molds which bore the design in incuse, some of it having the reliefs either in appliqué or squeezed out and applied pastry-tube fashion—the latter technique being known as barbotine. The shapes, like other local terra sigillata, show the influence of metalwork; in the cups illustrated above, for example, the handles are obviously imitated from silverware.

The Museum collection is fairly representative. It includes chiefly cups, jugs, and bowls for serving wine or mixing it with water. There are also plates and dishes, several lamps, an inkwell, and terracotta statuettes in
NOTES ON THE GLAZES

The ring-handled cup is earthenware pottery, made of a light buff burning clay. The inside was glazed, by pouring, with a colorless lead glaze, and the outside, by dipping, with a lead glaze in which an alkaline ingredient was added to give the copper and chrome oxide a livelier green color. Only where the glaze is pooled—around the base and in the rings of the handles and some parts of the modeling—does its real character show. The color is further enhanced by the light clay underneath. The dull surface is due to the thin application of the glaze and to the low fire of about 960°C. to 1030°C. to which it was subjected.

The jug in the form of a head is earthenware pottery, made of pinkish buff burning clay and covered, by dipping, with a lead glaze. The iron oxide introduced into the composition gives the glaze its yellow tan color; several spots of unground iron show the color in concentration. There is also a suggestion of manganese oxide on the eyelid and on the pupil.

The jug was thinly glazed so as not to obscure the modeling. This and the low temperature of the firing—about 960°C. to 1030°C.—produced the dull, or matt, surface. Where the glaze is pooled—in the eyes, nostrils, and mouth and in the heavy drips at the bottom—it is transparent and shiny.

The sea-monster cup: acc. no. 42.11.44; h. 2 1/2 in. (6.4 cm.), diam. 3 13/16 in. (9.7 cm.), w. with handles 5 11/16 in. (14.4 cm.). The glaze, which was originally spread thin, has worn off in places. The horseman cup: h. 2 3/8 in. (6 cm.), diam. 3 5/16 in. (8.5 cm.). The jug: acc. no. 42.11.46; h. 5 7/8 in. (14.9 cm).


C. A.

Yellow-glazed jug from Syria. Augustan period

The composition of the glazes is an intricate problem, and it is fortunate that Miss Mande Robinson, the potter, is interested in it. Her observations on the cup and jug are printed herewith.