

World Cups

A Cross-Cultural Look at Drinking Vessels

From water to palm wine, chocolate to chicha, beverages form an integral part of ritual, refreshment, and revelry across cultures. The vessels that contain these liquid volumes are themselves voluble: each goblet or glass, beaker or barrel speaks of distinct religious, social, and aesthetic values. Featuring a range of art from Africa, the Americas, east Asia, and Europe, this exhibition sets drinking vessels in cross-cultural and cross-temporal conversation, drawing from across the Mead's collection of antiquities and decorative arts, and spanning over two millennia.

Organized by Amy Halliday, acting curator of academic programs, and Keely Sarr, assistant museum educator.

Kero

Lambayeque Valley, Late Intermediate period (1100–1539 CE)
Peru, North Coast
Gold

Museum Purchase
AC 1964.145

The celebrated ruler Naymlap, mythical founder of the Sican culture in the Lambayeque Valley, stands in a bold, frontal pose on this gold beaker. Even after the Chimú overtook the Sican during their conquest of the area, Naymlap's prosperous rule lived on in the arts. A border of crashing waves surrounding the vessel's rim and a pair of rainbows arching from Naymlap's headdress pay tribute to the natural phenomena of the Peruvian north coast.

Wood, ceramic, or metallic *kero* were integral to ceremonial and social events throughout the Andes. Such vessels often held *chicha*, a term that traditionally encompassed a wide variety of beverages. This kero likely contained a chicha brewed from fermented maize, a corn beer still produced in contemporary Peru.



Drinking by Design

Ornate vessels crafted from precious materials often serve as containers for equally valuable liquids. Beverages like coffee, tea, and drinking chocolate—carried in their raw forms on trade routes between Africa, Asia, the Americas, and Europe—were themselves prized commodities, drinks that suggested decadence with every sip. These four objects showcase the imaginative splendor of luxury cup design.

Red glass beaker

Chinese, ca. 1820–1850
Red glass

Gift of Mr. Robert L. Leeds, Jr. (Class of 1951)
AC 1982.115



Goblet

Viennese in the Venetian style, 19th century
Vienna, Austria
Colored glass

Gift of Preston Bassett, Class of 1913
AC 1975.91

Twisted rods of red and white glass form the stem of this elaborate goblet; two deep-blue serpentine figures with fins, beaks, and crowns complete the extravagant design. As glassmakers in Venice, Italy, became renowned for their masterful craftsmanship, *façon de Venise* works (meaning “in the Venetian style”) grew popular in Germany, Austria, France, and Spain, where artists aspired to create objects almost indistinguishable from their Italian counterparts.



Chocolate cup and saucer of Royal Vienna

Austrian, ca. 1890s
Vienna, Austria
Porcelain

Gift of Mrs. Richard A. Robinson, III
AC 1955.229 a, b



The painted scene on this chocolate cup features three classically beautiful figures against a softly lit landscape. Holding miniature vessels and cups, they indulge in liquid refreshments of their own, embodying the lives of luxury and leisure led by chocolate's primary consumers in nineteenth-century Europe.

The word "chocolate" comes from the Nahuatl word *xocolātl*. Nahuatl is an Uto-Aztecan language spoken in Mexico. The derivation of the English word therefore connects the coveted substance to its place of origin, in precolonial Mesoamerica, where the drink brewed from cacao was a symbol of social and divine power. Chocolate kept these associations when colonizers brought the exotic beverage back to Europe.

Silver egg forming two vodka cups (or small goblets)

Antip Ivanovich Kuzmichev (probably by)

Russian, 19th century
Russian Empire
Silver, vermeil

Gift of Miss Susan D. Bliss
AC 1955.400 a, b



This duo of engraved goblets offers libations for two when opened and forms a portable, discreet egg when closed. Ingeniously manufactured, European "double cups" frequently featured complex designs and striking ornamentation. When not used for drinking, such elaborate cups could be kept on the mantelpiece or carefully locked in a collector's cabinet.

Social Drinking

Across cultures, cups are raised in social encounters and communal gatherings. Through the consumption of beverages, friends, families and acquaintances share convivial refreshment, establish social hierarchies and affiliations, and bear witness to major life transitions. The choice of drink often serves symbolically to define the nature of the event, the relationship between drinkers, and expectations of social etiquette.

The vessels in this case embody social values. Some are made in matching multiples for sharing, some are specially designed for communal circulation, and others are inscribed with signs of status and affiliation.

Two Funaki sake cups

Japanese, 20th century
Ceramic

Gift of Lakenan Barnes (Class of 1928)
AC 1996.375.1 and AC 1996.375.2

These glazed stoneware *choko* (sake cups) are displayed in a pair as a visual reminder of the social etiquette of sake drinking: if drinking with company, one should pour the other's sake, and vice versa (with the younger person usually pouring for the older first). Sake's main ingredients are fermented rice, *kōji* (a rice-derived yeast), and water.

The Funaki family-based kilns from which these cups originate have been in operation for five generations, and are part of a rich rural craft tradition in Fujina, near Matsue City in Shimane Prefecture. From the late 1920s, the Funaki workshop—along with newly opened kilns and cooperative pottery studios—were at the heart of the *mingei* (*min*, "people," *gei*, "craft") movement led by scholar-critic Yanagi Sōetsu. One of its stylistic tenets was a preference for simple, natural forms over intricate or excessive decoration, as echoed in the bamboo shape and rough texture of these *choko*.



Two-handed cup (kantharos)

Greek, Late Geometric period, 725–700 BCE
Wheelmade ceramic

Museum purchase through the Adela Wood Smith Trust in Memory
of Harry deForest Smith
AC 1979.90



This wine cup was made about the time the epic poet Homer may have lived—it could have belonged to a Greek warrior or someone of a similar social class. The distinctive high strap handles echo similar forms found on more costly vessels crafted from bronze, silver, or even gold. Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, frequently appears holding a kantharos in ancient vase paintings and other works of art.

Cann, 18th century

John Andrew

American, 18th century

Silver

Gift of Albert L. Sylvester (Class of 1924) and Mrs. Sylvester
AC 1964.97



Cann, ca. 1775

Joseph Edwards

American, ca. 1775

Silver

Bequest of Herbert L. Pratt
AC 1945.179



In eighteenth-century American homes, those who could afford fine silver drank beer or ale from tankards and canss—tulip-shaped vessels on a circular foot. These canss, which have molded lips and leaf-capped, double-scrolled handles, were struck by Massachusetts silversmiths. Canss were often personalized with initials or other decoration, reflections of social status and family continuity, as silver objects were passed down from one generation to the next. Two sets of initials are visible on the larger cann (one on the handle, the other on the front). Families sharing ale thus also shared in broader social histories, circulated in the vessels that held their drink.

Covered thumb-beaker (Daumenglas)

German or Dutch, 19th century
Free blown glass

Gift of Mr. Preston Bassett (Class of 1913)
AC 1981.2

It's hard to resist reaching forward and grasping this large drinking glass: its circular indentations (or "cups") are perfectly shaped for thumbs and fingers. Called a *Daumenglas* or *Daumenhumpen*, most drinking barrels of this type were used for beer, and were likely passed around in a communal fashion. The green hue of the vessel suggests that it is made of *Waldglas* (forest glass), derived from rural glasshouses in the Germanic region or the Netherlands, where the sand from which it was made contains iron impurities that result in the greenish color seen here.



Celadon ewer with lid and two cups (12th–13th century)

Korean, Goryeo Dynasty
Ceramic

Gift from the heirs of the Estate of Alice J. Dowling
AC 2013.72.1a,b-3

Vertical striations and the signature pale green of celadon glaze give this ewer the appearance of a melon, a popular shape for vessels at this time. Etched floral motifs—some decorating the body of the ewer and others filled with black and white glaze on the accompanying cups—complete this celebration of natural imagery.

Celadon ware dominated ceramic production in Korea during the height of the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392). Inspired by Chinese celadon techniques, Goryeo artists created a uniquely Korean ceramic style notable for its inlaid glaze designs. Though celadon objects traveled to the "West" from China, Japan, and Korea, the English word used to describe them offers a distinctly European reference: *Céladon*, the romantic lead of a seventeenth-century French pastoral novel known for his vibrant green clothes, now shares his name with a material history in which he played no part.



Drinking and the Divine

Holding a libation vessel aloft, the central figure of the Assyrian reliefs lining this gallery is poised to offer a drink to the deities. Specific beverages, and the vessels that contain them, are part of myriad religious rituals, and often present a material means of communing with the divine or deceased. Indeed, many drinks are considered transformative: they may induce altered states of consciousness, allowing imbibers themselves to become vessels for the gods.

The cups in this case variously depict sacred beings, play a part in the enactment of religious and ceremonial rites, or hold beverages believed to facilitate aspects of human-divine relations.

Cephalomorphic cup

Pende, Democratic Republic of Congo
Wood

The Barry D. Maurer (Class of 1959) Collection of African art purchased with Amherst College Discretionary Fund and funds from H. Axel Schupf (Class of 1957)
AC 1999.74

Cephalomorphic (head-shaped) cups were common wooden drinking vessels among the Pende people, but double-headed vessels like this are significantly more rare. Designed to hold palm wine, a mild intoxicant made from the fermented sap of the raffia palm, cephalomorphic cups are always of an intimate scale. The facial features on these cups reflect the formal stylization of Pende masks, as well as the miniature carved faces often appended to divination objects: a sharply upturned nose, angular eyebrows, downcast eyes, and an exaggerated forehead.



Double-chambered vessel with humanoid monkey

Chimu, Late Intermediate period (1100–1539)
Peru, north coast
Burnished ceramic

Gift of Mr. Donald Finberg, Class of 1953
AC 1991.50



Joined at the side by a ring of clay, these connected vessels are nearly identical—only the small monkey figure curving over the closed second spout sets them apart visually. Peruvian double-chambered vessels were never intended to remain stationary; human intervention alone could activate such objects in a ritualistic context. Known as “whistling jars,” these vessels are “performed” ceremonially as liquid pours through the open spout and into the first chamber. Tipping the vessel fills the second chamber, sending gusts of air rushing through a small hole in the monkey-topped spout to create a whistling sound.

Bowl

Roman, 1st century BCE
East Mediterranean, Eastern Sigillata A ware
Ceramic (mold made)

Collection of Mead Art Museum, Amherst College
AC 1979.21



On this hemispherical bowl, meant for drinking wine, Olympian gods fight the primeval Giants, monstrous creatures born from Mother Earth, named Gaia in Greek mythology. The story of their battle was well-known, and is retold on many ancient Greek and Roman bowls, vases, and cups. Some of the same pairs of figures, locked in battle, appear more than once on this bowl, clearly duplicated from the same pattern.

Vessel with Anthropomorphic Mythical Being

Nasca, 325–440 CE
Peru
Earthenware with slip

Gift of Mrs. George D. Pratt
AC C.1940.2



Two wide eyes set into burgundy skin gaze out from between this figure's whiskered mouth-mask and matching forehead ornament—attributes that identify the vessel's subject as the "Anthropomorphic Mythical Being."

Perhaps the most popular supernatural creature depicted in Nasca iconography, the Anthropomorphic Mythical Being often wraps around a vessel horizontally, its face framed by chunks of thick hair decorated with spherical bangles. The heavy black outlines encasing the geometric forms on this beaker mimic the focus on linear designs embodied by the most famous Nasca artistic accomplishment: monumental line drawings created by carefully arranging stones on the broad canvas of the Peruvian desert.
