

Following in the steps of Roger Dumbrell, Phil Culhane, the well known Canadian bottle collector and publisher of their magazine for many years, has a new and surprising passion.

Coming to grips with the overlooked

Understanding Antique Persian Saddle Flasks



I've collected bottles for about 40 years, published books and a magazine, run an auction house, and collected most of the major categories of glass and stoneware. Living in Canada, most of them have been based around Canadian bottles and bottlers.



Being a sparsely populated colony, Canada has relatively little to offer in the way of bottles prior to 1860. By that time, English and continental black glass had become as boring as paint, and much of the interesting American glass had come and gone. So, wanting to go beyond mould-blown bottles, I started collecting English and European black glass. Under the tutelage of good friend and long-time early glass collector Al Simard, and with a copy of Dumbrell's Understanding Antique Wine Bottles by my side, I started buying but it was not easy with less than a millionaire's wages!

Like the band U2 I still hadn't found what I was looking for. I wanted to collect a glass type that would really challenge me to learn – something overlooked, poorly understood or completely misunderstood, and to save my pocketbook, something no one else really wanted.

Then, as such things usually happen, a chance encounter changed my collecting life and direction. Marlena Fairbourne, a Canadian collector living on the other side of the country, had been a subscriber to my Canadian bottle magazine for years, and an occasional buyer of our auction items. For many reasons, I never really knew what she collected.

When I decided in 2012 to take another swing at black glass, I sent Marlena a note asking whether she had anything to sell. She had no English or European glass that was of interest to me, so we traded a couple emails, just chatting. She mentioned that she had been trying to sell her collection of Persian glass, and that a deal had recently fallen through with someone in New Zealand. For fun, and knowing nothing about Persian glass, I asked her if she would send me some photos of her collection. She sent me 250 photos, filled with bottles the likes of which I'd never seen before, and before the conversation was over, I'd purchased Marlena's collection. I was now a collector of late Persian antique bottles!

Looking for facts...

If there's a more maligned, misunderstood, overlooked category of glass I've not met it. It's a category of bottle prone to urban legends and old wives tales, epitomized by the ever-present and totally misunderstood 'saddle flask'. When I asked the greatest of the greats in antique glass to

tell me everything they knew about late Persian bottles, they honestly admitted they knew damned near nothing about them. Which was fascinating in it's own right. Blokes who had bought and sold easily a million dollars worth of bottles (and a



Above: An image of Phil's Scottish stipple collection (BBR 91, p22).



Left: A good spread of later bottles from Phil's collection. The much maligned 'saddle flask' is on the extreme right but the range of Persian glass, for wine, rose water and preserves, is as you can see much wider.

couple auctioneers who've probably sold tens of millions worth) admitted there was an entire sub-continent of bottles they knew nothing about.

I turned to museum curators: the British, the V & A, the Metropolitan, the Corning Museum of Glass, the Museum of Islamic Art in Qatar... with very much the same results. Curators were fascinated by the photos, and a very few had seen a couple bottles similar to some of the images I was sharing. But nobody understood late Persian glass, no one could date it, or provide information about the place of manufacture. Many were fascinated with images I sent, and all were curious to know more.



Above: Three of the so-called saddle flask shapes. The stringing on the neck probably helped cane covering from moving or the bottle slipping. The one on the far right is one of the few bottles that can be traced as far back as 1708. The next BBR will tell its royal tale.



Above - the fakes range: These bottles undoubtedly do not have any great age. The glass is too thick - the bottles were not intended to hold contents. There is no age to them, no patina on the glass. There is no inner ledge on the lip - almost every saddle flask I own that is genuine has one of these inner ledges - to help seal the bottle.

I have canvassed the collecting community broadly. Here again, most of what I heard was repetition of guesswork and wives' tales. I've found one collector in Germany, a second in America, and a third in India. But most of the stories voiced throughout the hobby about these bottles are patently untrue. Some of the tales I've been told include: "They were made in [insert any country/ region producing cheap/ knock off goods]. Variousy Austria, North Africa, Mexico, and Eastern

Europe were claimed but, while there are MANY fakes on the market, there are many "real" ones as well."

"They were produced in the 1940's/ 50's/ 60's, 20th century knock-offs, and imported by the truckload!"

"The glass stringing around the neck was meant to symbolize a snake, and derived from earlier Chinese bottle decorations."

"They were used for water, not wine."

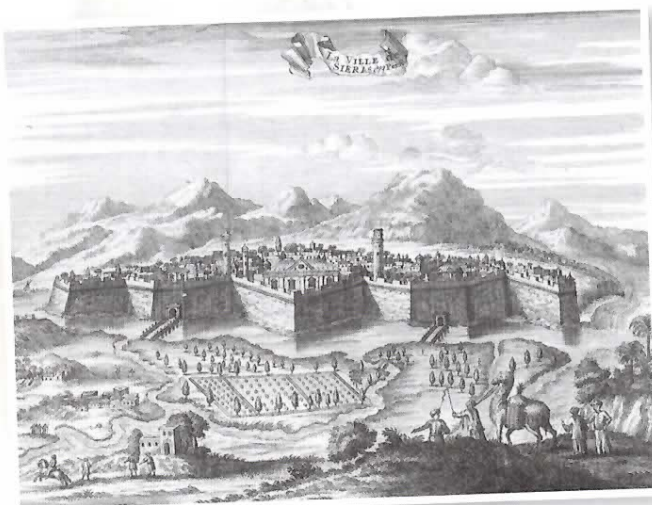
Where were they made?

The actual history of late Persian glass and the industries it supported is starting to appear and I expect to spend a decade, or so, figuring out a story worthy of a book on the subject. It appears late Persian glass was primarily manufactured in a couple of centres: Shiraz, Isfahan and Qumm, all located in modern-day Iran. Were there other glass manufactories in Persia? Probably. Much digging (archaeologically) still remains to be done (at some future time when it is safer to be an archaeologist in that part of the world). Written records by contemporary travelers in the 17th - 20th centuries repeatedly point to, and speak in detail about, the glass making industries in each of these three cities, so we have a start, at least.

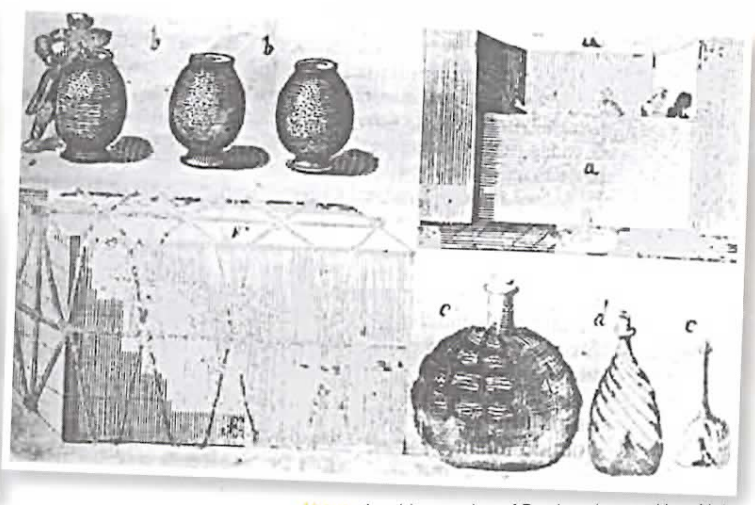
When were they made?

Persian, sometimes otherwise known as Islamic, glass went

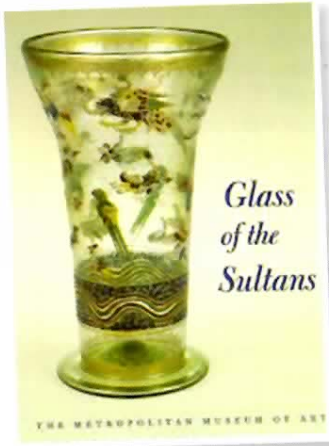
through three periods: an early, mid and a late period. Roughly speaking, the late Persian period runs from around 1600 to 1900, the same evolution period of commercial glass container production in England and Europe. After the Mongol invasions, when Persia picked itself up off the ground to refocus on industry and commerce, late period containers held produce exported and shipped from that region.



Above: Engraved image of the City of Shiraz - with vineyards in the foreground.



Above: An old engraving of Persian glass making. Note the shapes analogous with Phil's, and the reed covering.



Glass of the Sultans

Above: Glass of the Sultans book.



Above L to R: Phil Culhane believes these exceptionally long necked bottles are the earliest wine form - some may date as early as the 1600's.

onion (but carries the contents of 5 to 6 onions or saddles), and went by the name 'karaba' - more familiar to us nowadays by the derivative name 'carboy', the largest quantity which wine was typically shipped in.

Glass historians typically give short shrift to the last period. A large volume on Persian Art and Industry I purchased had an entire chapter on Persian glass manufacture, but only two sentences covering late Persian bottles. Other volumes were similar. The oldest historical items are the most sought after, the most romantic, the most evocative and the first to be written about. Details become scant as we get ever closer to the current year. This era is poorly understood and requires more research.

The dating of individual types and specimens of late Persian glass will come with time, but bottles appearing in paintings, in architecture, in traveller's logs and elsewhere have helped in creating a general application of dates already.

They are described and appear in art of the 1600's and, from my understanding of Persian art, the earliest forms were bottles with very long necks and pronounced globular, bulbous bodied bottles. These seem to have the thinnest, purest glass, a glass produced by artisans for wealthy clients. In a similar way to the developing shaft and globe decanter forms in Europe and the UK. There are two different styles of long necked bottles; the 'banjo' shape turned into what is now called a saddle flask by most collectors, and a much sturdier, larger form with an oval base, relatively straight sides and a neck that went on forever.

By the late 1600's, the banjo shaped bottles apparently assumed a more compact form generally like the later 'saddle flask' but these are clearly earlier forms with many minor differences. They have thinner bodies, lighter coloured glass and thin stringing making multiple turns around the neck. By the late 1600's, larger bottles were being blown in more utilitarian black glass, for storage and transport. They came in at least two large sizes, including a demijohn sized bottle looking for all the world like a large



Above: Enamelled Persian porcelain bottle.

In the next BBR I'll try and convince doubters that Persian wine and Persian bottles were every bit as well known as the European. Queen Anne drank it and the French and the Germans, the Spanish and indeed Australians, have Persian grapes to thank for their success!



Above: Two large globular wines. The bottle on the left has a seal impressed to the base of the neck.



Above: Seven gloriously coloured Karaba - the name being the origin of 'carboy'. Probably dating to the mid to late 1700's and around 30H x 20D cms.