

STUDIES
IN
POPULAR CULTURE

XVI:2
APRIL 1994

Published by
the
POPULAR CULTURE ASSOCIATION
AMERICAN CULTURE ASSOCIATION
IN THE SOUTH

Libation Titillation: Wine Goblets and Women's Breasts

Let's drink to the lass
I'll warrant she'll prove an excuse for the glass!
—Sheridan, *School for Scandal*, 1777

Over the rim of the glass . . .
I eye her bosom and consider a pass
—Anthony Hecht, "The Ghost in the Martini," 1975

To "kick off the new art season" of fall 1993 in SoHo, the *New York Times* "Styles" section (19 September 1993) featured photographs of socialites, celebrities, and art patrons attending a series of gallery openings and parties. In the lead photo, Gwendolyn Fisher wears a "cocktail dress with cutouts resembling champagne glasses" on the bodice just under the bust. Her companion, gallery owner Pablo Van Dijk, pretends to hold the stem of one of the cutouts, giving the impression of cupping Fisher's breast in his goblet (Figure 1). The setting is chic, sophisticated, but the image, as well as its conceit, is an updated, elite version of a cliché with roots in both low and high culture.

The art patron's witty cocktail dress with revealing cutouts that appear to support her breasts echoes a well-known photograph of another art-world celebrity taken twenty years earlier by Helmut Newton, renowned for his contrived images of artistic decadence (Figure 2). In the 1973 photo, Paloma Picasso wears a cocktail dress (by designer Karl Lagerfeld) and holds a highball glass strategically over her exposed breast. Picasso appears to be toasting her own bosom in a composition that is remarkably similar to the pose affected by Van Dijk as he pretends to toast the breast of Gwendolyn Fisher (Figure 1). Picasso's glass is tall and cylindrical, but the visual simile conveys the same erotic conceit of a woman's breast suspended in a wineglass. The austere straight-sided



Figure 1. "8 P.M. Pablo Van Dijk, an owner of Gallery Bardamu, with Gwendolyn Fisher, who wore a cocktail dress with cutouts resembling champagne glasses." Photo by Bill Cunningham for the *New York Times*, 19 September 1993.

tumbler complements Picasso's own bold, angular gold and silver jewelry designs. But more significant for our purposes, a straight-sided glass is the opposite of a curvaceous champagne glass, allowing Newton to impart an-drogynous ambiguity to the conventional breast/beaker association.¹ Whereas a stemmed champagne glass would in effect display a breast on a pedestal and its hour-glass shape evokes a womanly form, Newton uses a tall columnar glass to play on this expectation. Indeed, one may discern the ghostly shape of a champagne glass in the chiaroscuro created by viewing Picasso's breast through the glass. The dark nipple appears to float near the surface, giving a subliminal impression of a cherry in a champagne cocktail.

The photograph of Fisher's dress in the September 1993 *New York Times* sent one reader, Larry Vinick, "scurry-ing to [his] ephemera file" for earlier fashion statements that played on the association between breasts and champagne glasses. Vinick credited Broadway costume designer Miles White with a "wittier" version, citing the "champagne glass bra, complete with a red satin cherry and sequin bubbles" worn by the showgirls in the 1949 stage production of "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes" (Vinick 1993: "Gee, That Dress Looks Familiar").

But the association between wineglasses and breasts is even hoarier than Vinick suspected, embodied in language, literature, art, and artifact long before the socially acceptable burlesque "Gentlemen Prefer Blondes," which was based on Anita Loos's 1925 novel of the Jazz Age. Among wine connoisseurs, the origin of the *coupe* (as opposed to the flute or tulip) champagne glass (sometimes called "the inverted ballet-skirt") has been traditionally linked to the famous set of four rose-white S_vres porcelain cups molded from Marie-Antoinette's breast and displayed in the queen's "Dairy Temple" (Forbes 1967).² In the Flapper Era, it was said (in a modern variation on Cinderella's glass slipper theme) that cultured gentlemen preferred a breast whose dimensions perfectly matched those of a cham-

pagne *coupe* (personal communications, Josiah Ober, Ann Arbor, Mich., 1977; Robert Wallace, Chapel Hill, N.C., 1984).

In the 1950s, these sentiments were supplanted by *Playboy's* expanded requirements for bosomy perfection. The magazine's heyday coincided with the preoccupation of the American male with rating a woman's beauty according to her bra cup size (see Stern and Stern 1990, s.v. "breasts, enormous"). Other periodicals in the "men, sophisticated" category are more up front about their fixation; for example, *Gent* (established in 1960, with a circulation of 150,000 in 1993) calls itself the "Home of the D-Cup." "Cup" (from Latin *cuppa* and German *kopp* for drinking vessel) itself is a predictable unit of measurement, in view of the tendency to identify breasts with beverage containers (the word *coupe*, for the saucer-type champagne glass, also derives from *cuppa*). Graduated cup sizing for bras originated in the 1930s, shortly after the late 1920s invention of the brassiere with separate cups created by sewn darts (O'Hara 1986, s.v. "brassiere").

Among the items sold in twentieth-century gag and novelty shops is a "big nipple that fits on the top of beer cans" (Stern and Stern 1991: 136). This crude metaphor is made aesthetically palatable in "sophisticated" settings by associating bosoms with champagne and wine goblets. The appearance of this timeworn image at elite gallery openings, in elegantly shocking photographs, and in debonair Broadway shows could be read as an attempt to appropriate and refine longstanding popular coarse expressions comparing breasts to drinking vessels: "jugs," "cream-jugs," "dairies," "milk bottles," "teacups" (1700s to present, British and U.S. slang, Spears 1981, s.v. "bosom").

Perhaps in an attempt to distance themselves from the vulgar associations of champagne goblets and breasts, one school of elite champagne devotees has long argued that the "tall-stemmed tapering" flute is more "soberly elegant" compared to the *déclassé coupe*, which came into middle-class fashion in the early Victorian era. Reasons for preferring the less mammoth flute usually invoke the physical dynamics of gas bubbles, the bouquet, and other oenological desiderata, but the remarks of the literary critic George Saintsbury, in 1920, are revealing. In discussing the correct glass for wine, Saintsbury especially deplores the tumbler because "there is no stem for the finger tips to play with," and "a wine-glass without a stem is as bad as some other creatures without a waist" (Forbes 1967: 362, 364; Saintsbury 1939: 186-87). Saintsbury's sentiments not only participate in the metaphor of wineglass as woman's body, but they enhance the perversity of the aesthetic message of Helmut Newton's 1973



Figure 2. "Paloma Picasso wearing gold jewelry designed by her and a dress by Karl Lagerfeld. Saint Tropez, 1973." Photograph by Helmut Newton, in *White Women*, 1976.

From its inception in 1953, *Playboy* perpetuated the notion that its readers were worldly connoisseurs of beautiful women and fine wine, which justified advertisements, cartoons, and other images that juxtaposed ideal large-breasted females with oenological glassware. A recurrent example is the miniature busty Brunette in black stockings who often cavorts around and inside a champagne glass on the "Playboy Party Jokes" page.

This synecdochical fetish, in which woman-as-breast becomes the intoxicant that fills the breast-shaped goblet, had long served as an expression of the breast/drinking vessel dynamic in both high and low culture. The painting of a classical Bacchante with bared breast and

photograph of a woman posing with an angular tumbler (Figure 2). Champagnologist Patrick Forbes admitted in 1967 that he was a *coupe* man, despite its bourgeois reputation. His words are suggestive: "Even today, . . . when one walks into a dining-room and notices *coupes* beside the ordinary wine-glasses, one experiences a momentary thrill of expectation. . . . [for] *coupes* have a most romantic ancestry" (Forbes 1967:363). According to modern wine expert Frank Prial, flute aficionados "currently are in the ascendancy": they "daintily associate the coupe glass with tacky weddings, shrimp cocktails, and road companies of Traviata" (personal communication, 4 February 1994).

As Patrick Forbes notes, in the 1950s and 1960s, the "glossy magazine" ads of the great champagne producers consistently featured "the beautiful girl in the beautiful dress" with a wineglass in hand (1967:362).



Figure 3. "Bacchante." Painting by Vester, Musée de Tours. From Ombiaux, 1925.

coupe goblet is a typical Romantic image (Figure 3). A nymph entwined around or posed inside a wineglass was a respectable Art Nouveau and Art Deco theme in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Figure 4), and Lalique crystal stemware featured women's forms. Meanwhile, illustrations of lingerie-clad women suggestively filling, holding, or offering wineglasses were favorite icons in "spicy" pulp magazines since the 1930s (Figure 5), and plastic swizzlesticks in the shape of shapely women allow everyman to have a nymph in his glass (Figure 6).³ The simile lends itself to ironic interpretation in the art world and mass culture alike. Just as Newton's aesthetically erotic photograph (Figure 2) depends for its *frisson* on subtly subverting the expectations of his cultured audience, so the anonymous photograph from an unidentified men's magazine achieves

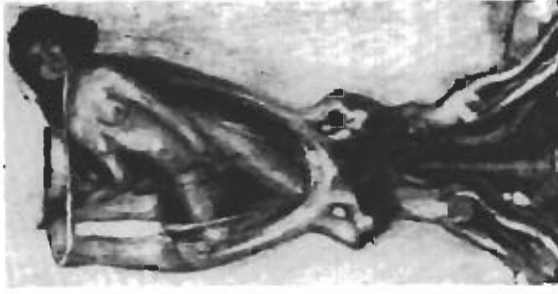


Figure 4. "Woman in a Glass." Painting by Leo Putz, 1897. From Rheims, *The Flowering of Art Nouveau*.



Figure 5. Cover art, *Bedtime Stories* 4, 10 (August 1936) and *Gay Parisienne* 7, 11 (November 1937). Reprinted by Kitchen Sink Press, "Spicy," 1992.

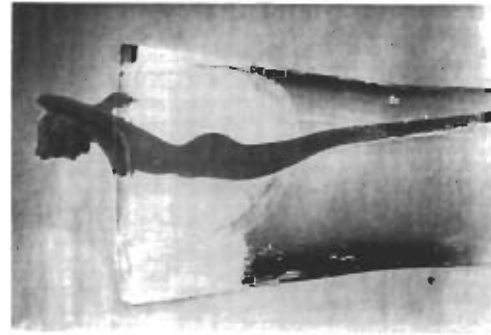


Figure 6. Plastic Swizzlestick in cocktail glass. From Strang 1984.

churlish impact by playing on those same expectations: instead of a genteel champagne glass suggestively placed under the bosom, we see splayed bare breasts under an upended champagne bottle (Figure 7).

"Wine and women, which have besotted myriads, go commonly together," wrote Robert Burton, in *Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621). Renaissance woodcuts of nude women and courting scenes commonly included wine goblets as a prop. Compositions that link women and wine, breasts and drinking vessels, abound in a series of sixteenth-century woodcuts created by the influential engraver Jost Amman. His patrons were "aristocrats and patricians" and affluent burghers who delighted in "playful" themes of "hearty lasciviousness." Amman catered to their "ordinary tastes" for "large-breasted Venuses in suggestive poses," with "dynamic curves" rather than "Gothic angularity and austerity," conditions that resonate with the twentieth-century aesthetic-erotic oppositions that we noted earlier. This elevation of popular images enjoyed by "common

people" of "low rank" into erotic aesthetics for elite connoisseurs corresponds to similar modern appropriations, by fashion designers, art photographers, and swank playboys (Alfred Werner, introduction to Amman 1968:v-viii). Amman, for example, superimposes a generous goblet over a woman's bosom and places a jug under one breast in Figure 8, and in Figure 9 a woman holds a goblet on the same plane as her bared bosom, whose dimensions are visually quoted by the goblet. In Figure 10 a topless woman pours from a jug a stream of wine that arcs across her nipple into a breastplate-like chalice (note how little the women's deliberate dishabille has



Figure 7. Photo from unnamed men's magazine, 1970s. Reprinted in Sternberg 1972.

changed since Amman's day: cf. Figure 7).

Refined gentlemen appear to toast ladies with bumpers of wine in Figure 11; they lift their cups to the level of the women's bustlines. Indeed, traditions about the origins of toasting also pair women's beauty and wine in ways that commingle refinement and vulgarity. Toasting was supposedly inaugurated when a beauty pledged his love to a well-known beauty in the court of Charles II (1630-85) with "a glass of water taken from her bath."¹ The antiquity of the gesture of "toasting" a woman's breast with a wine-cup is suggested by the typical erotic scene painted on a fifth-century B.C. drinking cup from ancient Greece (Figure 12).

In Figure 13, Amman places a large "double bumper" between a courting couple. A bumper is a wine chalice filled to the brim, often decorated with bulging bosses, as in Figures 11 and 13; "bumper" also refers to something unusually large or abundant (1600s on, from *bump*, to bulge, swell out, or be protuberant). By drawing the viewer's eye to the bumper's two bulging globes placed immediately next to the bodice of the elegantly dressed lady, Amman transposes and reveals the woman's bosom in the wine goblet.

We should also note that "breast" is one of the dictionary meanings of "bump," and that "bumpers" is British and U.S. slang for breasts (since the mid-1900s).² The connotations of the word "cocktail" also draw together women and

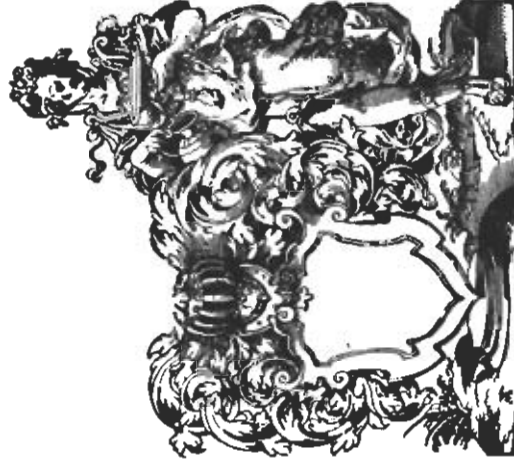


Figure 8. "Blank escutcheon," woman with jug and wine-bowl, woodcut by Jost Amman, 1539-91.



Figure 9. Woodcut, bare-breasted woman with goblet. Amman.



Figure 10. Woodcut, bare-breasted woman pouring from jug to chalice. Amman.

bubble." Critics railed against the innovation, calling the cocktail a titillating "titivation" that makes "respectable and palatable" what should remain the vulgar "province of the worn-out spark." They likened the drink to "a decadent Picasso" and decried "elite" ladies who disguised themselves as bar-maids to serve cocktails (Bevis 1968, pp. 56-68). According to the arch *Savoy Cocktail Book*, 1930, "cocktail" was supposed to have derived



Figure 11. Woodcuts, men toast ladies with bumpers. Amman.

liquor, so it is particularly fitting that champagne-glass images should appear on the bodices of modern *cocktail* dresses, as in the photographs by Newton and the *Times* (Figures 1 and 2). The cocktail dress was invented in the 1920s, along with cocktails and cocktail parties (Edmunds 1981:30-31).

Champagne cocktails are one of many effervescent aperitifs served before dinner as a social lubricant, and the typical cocktail dress was (and still is) informal, up-to-the-minute, and cleverly revealing (O'Hara 1986, s.v. "cocktail dress,")

in keeping with the era's "hectic frivolity" and naughty "fizz and bubble." Critics railed against the innovation, calling the cocktail a titillating "titivation" that makes "respectable and palatable" what should remain the vulgar "province of the worn-out spark." They likened the drink to "a decadent Picasso" and decried "elite" ladies who disguised themselves as bar-maids to serve cocktails (Bevis 1968, pp. 56-68). According to the arch *Savoy Cocktail Book*, 1930, "cocktail" was supposed to have derived



Figure 12. Satyr toasting maenad with drinking horn. Painted *rhyton*, 430 B.C.

in earlier times as the inventor of the "cocktail," since in Homer's *Odyssey* she originated the idea of serving wine as an aperitif before the meal. Helen, the classical embodiment of ideal feminine beauty, was also famed for shamelessly exposing her splendid breast to save her life at a crucial moment (Homer *Od.* 4.220; Pliny the Elder *Nat. Hist.* 23.23; *Little Iliad* in literature, art, and legend since antiquity.

If the compelling logic of equating perfectly proportioned bosoms and wine goblets is as unavoidable and pervasive as this brief review of the history of the cliché suggests, it should come as no surprise to discover the comparison explicitly expressed in yet another Helen legend. According to Pliny the Elder, writing during the reign of Nero in the first century A.D., tourists visiting the island of Rhodes could admire an exquisite electrum *calix* (chalice or wine-cup) in the local temple of Athena. This celebrated silver and gold cup was said to have

from "Princess Cocktel, daughter of King Axolotl VIII of Mexico" (quoted by Bevis 1968, pp. 63-64); other versions mention "an Aztec princess Xochitl, who is supposed to have given a drink to the king with romantic results" (Evans 1981, s.v. "cocktail"). On the other hand, "cocktail" was also nineteenth-century slang for a harlot (Spears, 1981, s.v. "cocktail"). Once again, popular culture nurtures high culture's tastes.

Notably, the notorious knockout Helen of Troy was celebrated in Homer's *Odyssey* since in Homer's *Odyssey* she originated the idea of serving wine as an aperitif before the meal. Helen, the classical embodiment of ideal feminine beauty, was also famed for shamelessly exposing her splendid breast to save her life at a crucial moment (Homer *Od.* 4.220; Pliny the Elder *Nat. Hist.* 23.23; *Little Iliad* in literature, art, and legend since antiquity.

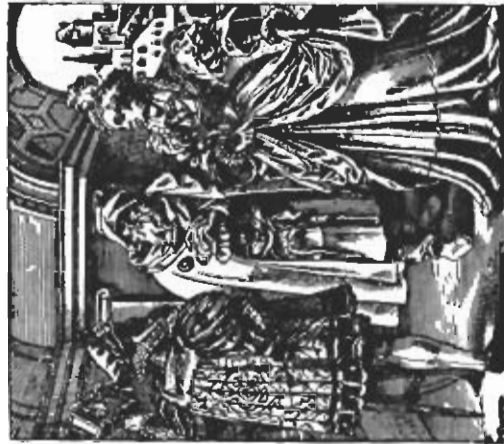


Figure 13. Woodcut, "Gentleman and lady and man with double bumper." Amman.

been a gift from Helen herself. The vessel's real claim to fame, however, was not its precious metal or its antiquity, but the popular belief that the goblet had been fashioned to perfectly represent Helen's fabled breast (Pliny 23.81).

In the 1920s, Maurice des Ombiaux, the prolific French wine enthusiast, elaborated on this legend in "Le Sein d'Hélène" (The Breast of Helen). In his sensual and risqué narrative, Dionysus, Apollo, and Venus "decided to associate Helen with the enchanted juice of the grape . . . by raising to their lips a chalice molded from her breast." They summoned Helen's lover Paris to take a wax impression of her unveiled breast (pink as the dawn, white as milk, with a nipple like a berry, and glowing like an alabaster vase). "As soon the *coupe* had been fashioned" from the wax form, it was raised to the lips of Helen's suitors, each of whom "experienced the divine illusion that he was drinking from the breast of" the most beautiful woman in the world (translated in Forbes 1967:363).

**55 Aiken Avenue
Princeton, New Jersey 08540**

Notes

¹ See Edmunds 1981 for a structuralist analysis of the ambivalent meanings of the martini and other popular drinks. A bold, masculine drink like the martini demands a nonsense straight-sided glass, hence the traditional con-shaped martini glass (pp. 21, 26, 79, 105-107). Edmunds discusses the sexual symbolism of cocktails in literature from Scott Fitzgerald to James Bond, including the poem used in the second epigraph. Conversations with Robert Wallace and Josh Ober first brought the popular associations between champagne glasses and breasts to my attention. I thank Josh Ober for helpful comments.

² Where, presumably, the queen liked to dress in the costume of a milkmaid. One of these cups still exists, in the hands of the Antique Company of New York, Inc.: a color photo of it appears on the dust-jacket of the third edition (1977) of Forbes's 1967 book *Champagne*. I am grateful to Frank Prial for this information and referring me to Forbes's book.

³ See Strang's *Working Women: An Appealing Look at the Appalling Uses and Abuses of the Feminine Form* (1984) for examples of plastic drink accessories in the shapes of curvaceous women and fine crystal glasses in feminine forms, esp. pp. 13, 20, 61. I thank Marcia Mogelonsky for bringing Strang's book to my attention.

⁴ Reported in *Tatler*, no. 24, quoted in Evans 1981, s.v. "Toast." Cf. the vulgar twentieth-century expression, "I'd drink her bath water."

⁵ Whether or not "bumpers" for breasts is related directly to brim-filled toasting cups, or inspired by the automotive term, the same root is involved: "bump," something that protrudes. See Spears 1981; *Webster's 3rd*; *Random House Dictionary*; *ODE*, s.vv. "bump," "bumpers."

Works Cited

- Amman, Jost. 1968. *Pictorial Archive of Decorative Renaissance Woodcuts*. Mineola, N.Y.: Dover.
- Edmunds, Lowell. 1981. *The Silber Bullet: The Martini in American Civilization*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press.
- Evans, Ivor H., ed. 1981. *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*. New York: Harper & Row.
- "Evening Hours: A Chock-Full Block Full of Art." Photos by Bill Cunningham. *New York Times*, 19 September 1993, Styles section, p. 8.
- Forbes, Patrick. 1967. *Champagne: The Wine, the Land and the People*. London: Victor Gollancz.
- Hillier, Bevis. 1968. *Art Deco of the 20s and 30s*. New York: Dutton.
- Newton, Helmut. 1976. *White Women*. New York: Stonehill.
- O'Hara, G. 1986. *The Encyclopedia of Fashion*. New York: Abrams.
- Ombiaux, Maurice des. 1925. *Le Gotha des Vins de France*. Paris: Payot.
- Rheims, Maurice. N.d. [ca. 1973]. *The Flowering of Art Nouveau*. New York: Abrams.
- Saintsbury, George. [1920] 1939. *Notes on a Cellar-Book*. London: Macmillan.
- Spears, Richard. 1981. *Slang and Euphemism*. Middle Village, N.Y.: Jonathan David.
- "Spicy: Naughty '30s Pulp Covers." 1992. Princeton, Wisc.: Kitchen Sink Press.
- Stern, Jane, and Michael Stern. 1990. *The Encyclopedia of Bad Taste*. New York: Harper Collins.
- Sternberg, Jacques. 1972. *Kitsch*. New York: St. Martin's Press.
- Strang, Jessica. 1984. *Working Women: An Appealing Look at the Appalling Uses and Abuses of the Feminine Form*. New York: Abrams.
- Vinick, Larry. "Gee, That Dress Looks Familiar." Letter to the Styles Editor. *New York Times*. 26 September 1993.