



Collector Adrian Bridge (standing) and dealer James Ede at Bridge's The Yeatman Hotel, Porto, drinking from 4th-century AD Roman goblets, with Greek, Roman and Sassanian vessels on the table, ranging from 340 BC to the 5th century AD

antique drinking vessels

A dealer's dinner-party challenge set a collector on the path to accumulating glasses and carafes from throughout the ages. Rima Suqi reports. Photographs by Augusto Brazio

Adrian Bridge pours a 159-year-old port into a 4th-century AD glass and hands it to James Ede, who accepts it with the ease of one who is surrounded by such precious objects day in and day out. Ede, who is chairman of Charles Ede Ltd Antiquities in London, and jokes that anything made after the 6th century AD is "modern art" in his world, is clearly in his comfort zone. It was he who originally suggested that Bridge, CEO of The Fladgate Partnership (the company that makes Croft, Fonseca

and Taylor Fladgate ports), consider collecting antique drinking vessels (from glasses to carafes), beginning with those from the Roman era. "He said, 'Let's see if we can find you enough glasses for a dinner party – 12 pieces,'" recalls Bridge. "The gauntlet was thrown down, and I accepted."

In the 10 years since then, Bridge has amassed a collection of more than 80 drinking vessels, dating from about 2400 BC to 1820 AD, over 30 per cent of which are from the Roman era. He has yet to obtain a dozen usable Roman glasses, but many other items have been acquired, with the ultimate goal of

collecting vessels throughout the ages. Many are proudly displayed at The Yeatman, the hotel in Porto of which Bridge is an owner.

Bridge, who lives in Porto and London, is an avid collector who attends fairs the world over, including TEFAF Maastricht in the Netherlands, the Armory Show in New York and the Olympia International Art & Antiques Fair and Masterpiece, both in London. Auction catalogues are frequently found on his desk, and he is regularly in touch with dealers such as Ede about new acquisitions.

Ede's passion is similar. He describes collecting as "a bit of an illness – and I

have it in spades". At the young age of 12, he bought his first piece of black-glazed Greek pottery from his father Charles (whose business he now owns and runs).

Part of the appeal of collecting drinking vessels was the availability of good pieces at relatively low prices. Also, while it might seem counterintuitive, glass is more resilient than most would believe. "In chemical terms, it was the strongest man-made material prior to the advent of plastic," says Ede. "There was a dramatic increase in the amount of cast glass in the later Hellenistic period – the 1st century BC – and at the end of the 1st century came the discovery of glass-blowing, so it became the material of choice for small vessels. It was produced in very large quantities, because it was cheap, and by 25 AD most people were using it." People were also often buried with it, which is one reason why so much survived in good condition.

When Bridge bought his first pieces from Ede – a moss-green Roman goblet from the 4th century AD (pictured overleaf) and a pinched beaker from the

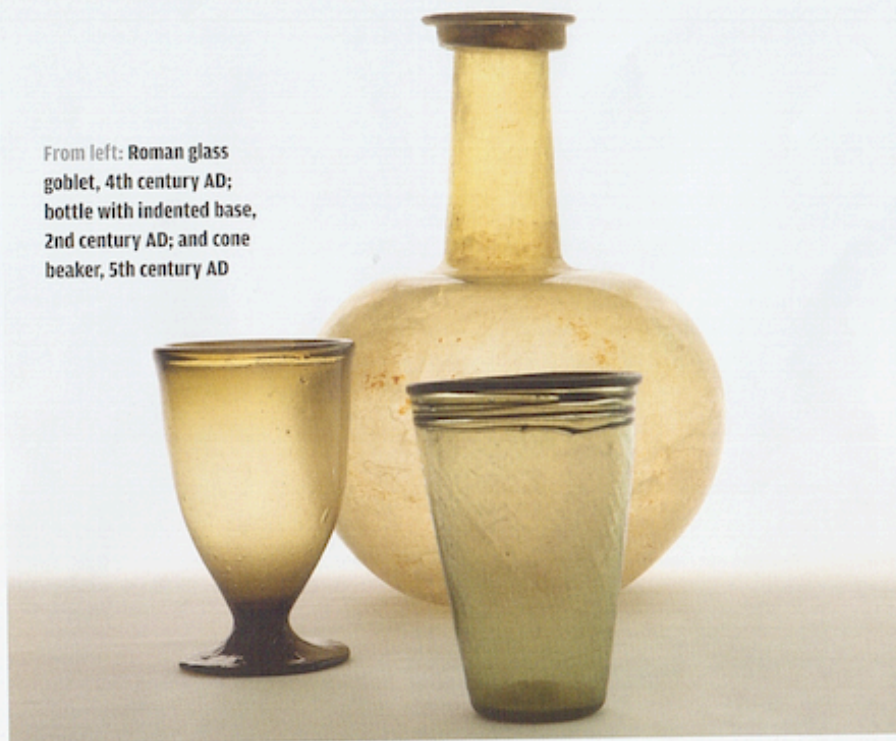
2nd or 3rd century AD – prices were fairly reasonable. “At the time, you could buy nice pieces for £700 or £800, and very nice pieces for low four figures,” explains Ede. “Even today, £3,000 will buy you a wonderful glass vessel, which is reasonable compared to many other areas of collecting.”

There are exceptions, of course. Ten years ago, the Constable-Maxwell cage-cup, a glass bowl dating from the 3rd century AD, sold at auction for £2,545,650. Bridge hasn't paid anywhere near that to acquire a piece – one of the most expensive was £14,000 for a rare German glass called a *Krautstrunk*, in perfect condition, dating from 1475, while the least was a 7th-century BC Cypriot clay drinking bowl for £300.

The convivial aspect of the pieces themselves appealed as well. “Roman dinner parties would not be demonstrably different to today's, I would think,” hypothesises Bridge. “Politics are different. Outfits might be different. Ways of disposing of one's enemies might be different. But you look at that glass made 1,600 or 1,700 years ago and know that somebody bought it for the purpose of drinking from it, or serving wine to a friend. That same glass can be filled and enjoyed today.”

Bridge has used the glasses in his collection to varying degrees of social success. He was encouraged to by Ede, whose advice was to treat the glass “like

From left: Roman glass goblet, 4th century AD; bottle with indented base, 2nd century AD; and cone beaker, 5th century AD



a baby – hold it properly, but don't get paranoid”. Bridge tried, but found that “they're not very good at dinner parties. If you tell people, they're terrified to use them; but if you don't, you won't have quite so many left at the end of the evening – bit of a dichotomy there.”

And so the glass pieces, as well as a couple of clay counterparts, remain at The Yeatman Hotel, perfectly lit behind protective glass. Guests passing through the bar can ogle a large moss-green 2nd-century AD Roman bottle (pictured above), a small 1st-century AD bronze

pitcher called a duck askos, a Sassanian faceted-glass cup from the 3rd or 4th century AD, a 4th-century BC Greek clay kantharos wine cup depicting Eros, and a 1st-century AD Roman jug with brilliant iridescence (the result of centuries spent resting in sand; all pictured on table on previous page) – and on and on.

“The advantage of having the collection here is that I get to look at it often and can see where the gaps are – the period between 700 and 1600 AD – where it is difficult to find pieces, let alone ones that are undamaged,” says Bridge. Filling those

gaps provides a renewed opportunity for collecting, albeit a more challenging one. “This is where it becomes very dangerous, as the gaps will be in those things that are rare and therefore expensive,” cautions Ede. “Collecting always gets more expensive as you go on, and collectors, over time, become connoisseurs.”

Ede describes Bridge as an “old-fashioned collector with a refreshingly academic approach – he's interested in the progression of glass, as well as learning about the pieces themselves”. Yet Bridge admits that he's at a stage where he needs to learn more, and is doing so via online forums, as well as studying books dedicated to the subject and making special trips to museums with particularly good collections. He's recently acquired some pre-Roman pieces, several from the Middle Ages, and a rummer (large drinking vessel) from 1805, which commemorates the great admirals of England. He's also been flirting with the idea of acquiring a drinking horn – a rhyton – or perhaps some coloured-glass pieces, which, depending on the era, can be very rare.

The hunt, it seems, never ends. “It is a bit of a compulsion,” admits Bridge. “You put a collection together, and the next thing you do is improve it – it's fun, and keeps one interested in learning.” ♦ Charles Ede Ltd Antiquities, 1 Three Kings' Yard, London W1 (020-7493 4944; www.charlesede.com).