Raise a Glass!

Alcoholic beverages have been part of the human diet since prehistoric times. It is unsurprising, then, that so much art has been created that depicts or even aids in the drinking of beer, wine, and liquor.

*Disclaimer: This tour is meant as a glimpse into the social history and artistic impact of drinking and is not intended to promote potent potables.

A Classic Court
Greek, The Creusa Painter, Volute Krater (Mixing Vessel), about 400–380 BCE
The Greek god Dionysos, shown here with his wife Ariadne and his devoted entourage of worshipers, gave the gift of the grape vine and its cultivation to the ancient Greeks, making him the god of wine (among other things). This ceramic krater was used to mix strong wine with water, an appropriate vessel for depicting the god.

B Classic Court
Seleucid Empire, Rhyton (Drinking Vessel) with the Forepart of a Zebu, about 200–100 BCE
This luxurious silver drinking horn (called a rhyton) was based on vessels made from actual animal horns. It was meant for pouring wine (and aerating it) through the spout on the bull’s chest or for communal drinking—it would be passed around until the wine was gone, so it could be set down without risk of spilling.

C Gallery 10
Japanese, Netsuke: Shōjō Beside an Empty Wine Jar, early 19th century
In Japanese mythology, a shōjō is a merry sea spirit with a particular love of alcohol. In this humorous miniature sculpture called a netsuke, a shōjō slumps against an empty wine jar, suffering from overindulgence.

D Gallery 16
Flemish (Tournai), Pair of Tapestries: Winemaking, about 1480
This pair of tapestries illustrates various activities related to winemaking, including transporting grapes (via donkey), filling the barrels, tapping wine casks, and pouring the new vintage into a bowl. Look for the merchant counting out coins to purchase the wine. The man accepting the money was repaired at some point in the past using part of a figure from another tapestry, so he now appears to have four hands!

“In wine there is wisdom, in beer there is Freedom, and in water there is bacteria.”
—Benjamin Franklin

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Please note: Some works of art in this guide may have been moved to a different gallery, be on loan to another museum, or be temporarily off view for other reasons. We regret any inconvenience.

**German, Trick Glass in the Form of a Stag, late 17th–early 18th century**
Think drinking games were invented by frat boys in the 1950s? Think again—they’ve been around for thousands of years! This unusual glass includes a siphon—an elaborate glass straw—in the form of a stag. The drinker had to figure out which holes to cover in the siphon in order to drink from it and avoid paying for another round.

**Attributed to Diego Velázquez, Man with a Wine Glass, about 1630**
Clearly, this man is the life of the party. He engages us directly, raising his glass in a toast and grinning. A teeth-baring smile is unusual in paintings of the period, except in images of the lower classes or of undignified revelry. He may represent one of the jesters or entertainers at the Spanish court, who would sometimes drink to inebriation for the amusement of the courtiers.

**John Lewis Krimmel, Village Tavern, 1813–14**
In the early 1800s, Americans drank a shocking amount: the equivalent of about 8½ gallons of 80-proof liquor a year! Alcohol was consumed at every meal, including breakfast. Whiskey was especially inexpensive and plentiful. It appears to be the drink of choice of the seated worker wearing a white shirt and beige apron who is being beseeched to come home by his wife and small child.

**René Jules Lalique, Liqueur Cabinet, 1928**
While the United States was mired in Prohibition in the 1920s, Paris was awash in cocktails. René Lalique designed this Art Deco cabinet with cast glass insets referring to god of wine Bacchus (Roman equivalent to Dionysos; see A. on this tour) to display a wealthy Parisian’s collection of liqueurs. As long as you’re here, take a look around for more art that would fit in this tour—the Glass Pavilion galleries are full of objects related to the consumption of wine, beer, and cocktails. Cheers!