

# Body Arts Scent

## Roman Egypt



Glass bottle, Egypt, 1968.22.2

In the Museum's collections, there are a number of hand-blown Egyptian glass bottles, one of which is pictured here. These were found in tombs. Early scholars called them 'tear bottles' because they thought they were used to hold the tears of the bereaved. However, chemical tests have disproved this theory, revealing traces of oil and perfume.

The Ancient Egyptians are renowned for their use of perfumes. Fragrant extracts of plants such as rose, henna, and lily were produced by steeping the plant in oil or fat to produce unguents that were then rubbed on the skin. Perfumed unguents and resins were also used in embalming and funeral rituals.



Perfume was extremely difficult to produce, requiring a large quantity of different ingredients to produce a very small essence. This made perfume very expensive. These glass bottles reflected the value of their contents: in Ancient Egypt, glass was difficult to make and therefore expensive.

## Europe



Perfume bottle,  
United Kingdom,  
2001.38.1

The clear glass perfume bottle pictured here was used to contain Chanel No. 5. In 1921 the fashion designer Gabrielle Chanel launched her own brand of perfume created by a perfumer called Ernest Beaux. It was called Chanel No. 5 because it was the fifth of several fragrances Ernest Beaux made for her to choose from.

The pink perfume bottle in the shape of a woman's torso was created by the fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier. Said to have



Perfume Bottle, United  
Kingdom, 2001.18.1

been inspired by the appearance of the pop star Madonna, it is a modern version of a 1930s bottle created for Schiaparelli's 'Shocking' perfume which was modelled on the actress Mae West.

## Venice

This small scent bottle is made of a type of glass called aventurine. Flecked throughout with sparkling metallic particles, aventurine was the speciality of Venetian glass makers.



Glass bottle, Venice,  
1941.8.071

Coloured glass was used for perfume bottles not only because it was decorative, but also because it protected the perfume from deterioration through exposure to light.



## Turkey

This long, thin, clear glass bottle from Turkey originally contained 'attar', the essential oil extracted from roses. Attar of roses was one of the most precious ingredients for perfumiers. The main centres of production included Turkey and the South of France, where flowers were gathered at dawn for optimum fragrance. The manufacturing process was costly and labour intensive: it takes two-and-a-half tons of rose petals to yield a half a pound of essential oil.



Glass bottle, Turkey,  
1931.29.14

## Further Reading

Further information can be found in the Body Arts Gallery and on our Body Arts website: <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/bodyarts>

MARSH, MADELAINE, *Perfume Bottles: A Collector's Guide*, London: Miller's (1999).

**Objects featured in this fact sheet can be found in the following cases:**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L50A for bottles from Venice, Turkey, and  
Roman Egypt**

**First Floor (Lower Gallery) L50B for modern European bottles**

Fact Sheet compiled by:  
Jennifer Peck, Project Assistant  
DCF Redisplay Project  
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Revised by:  
Bryony Reid, Senior Project Assistant (Interpretation)  
DCF What's Upstairs?  
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