

# Curator's Choice

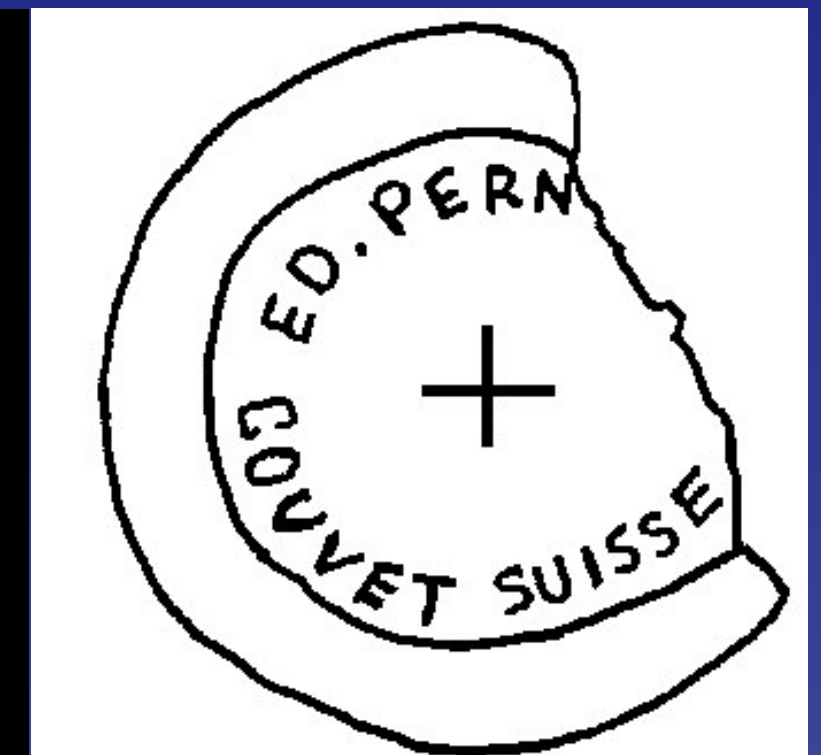
## The Rise and Fall of the Green Fairy

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An intriguing bit of glass was found by an amateur archaeologist near the Liberty Reservoir in Baltimore County, MD. The bright green bottle glass fragment features a partial seal “ED. Pern, Couvet Suisse” around a central cross. (Figures 1 and 2) Rather than wine, this bottle held absinthe, a powerful, emerald green, anise flavored beverage featuring wormwood as one of its principle elements. This bottle was produced by the Edouard Pernod Distillery in Couvet, Switzerland and probably dates from between 1835 and 1897, when the company moved to France.



Figure 1: Absinthe bottle fragment found in Baltimore County, MD.



Maryland Archaeological Conservation Lab  
Drawing by John Gregory  
Figure 2: Detail of absinthe bottle seal.

Wormwood preparations are recorded as being used by the ancient Egyptians and Greeks for medicinal purposes. The origins of modern absinthe are somewhat murky. A French doctor, Pierre Ordinaire, began the first commercial production of the elixir, hailing it as a cure for anemia, epilepsy, gout, worms, and all ills between. Upon the death of Ordinaire, the recipe reputed to be his came into the possession of a Major Dubied, who began a larger scale production of the beverage, now touted as an aperitif, with his son-in-law Henri Louis Pernod around 1797. Henri became the father of the Pernod brand, and his sons Edouard and Louis opened their own distilleries in Couvet, Switzerland and Pontarlier, France. Eventually Edouard moved his distillery to Pontarlier as well.

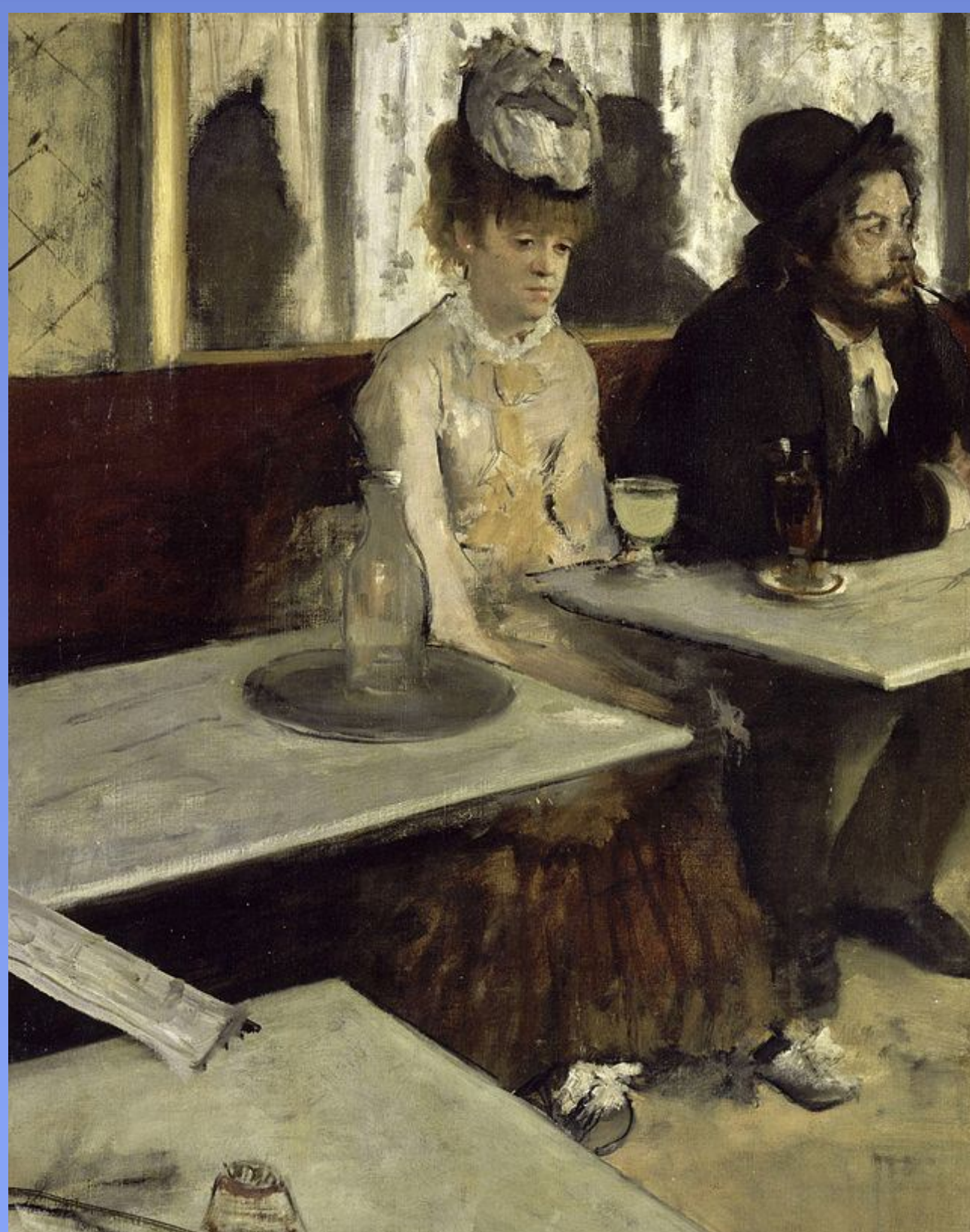


Figure 3: L'Absinthe, by Edgar Degas, 1876. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/L'Absinthe>

French soldiers in the 1840s were given absinthe as an anti-malarial, and upon returning home, continued to seek out the beverage. Further fueling absinthe's rise in popularity was the Europe-wide “wine blight” of the late 19th century, which caused wine production to plummet and prices to skyrocket. Although considered by some as a beverage for

the elite, absinthe gained a following amongst the bourgeoisie, as well as the Bohemian crowd of artists and intellectuals. Artists such as Van Gogh and Gauguin, and poets including Oscar Wilde, embraced “The Green Fairy,” as their preferred beverage. Absinthe drinking, particularly in France, became so prevalent that the period between 5 and 7 pm was referred to as the Green Hour. Many artworks from this period include depictions of absinthe drinking (Figure 3). Visitors to France and Switzerland carried absinthe's popularity back to their home countries, including the United States.



Figure 4: Traditional absinthe preparation. <http://www.absinthe101.com/index.html>

Though absinthe was used in a variety of concoctions, the most popular way to serve it was with a single sugar cube on a special absinthe spoon placed over the top of the glass and ice cold water was poured over the sugar cube (Figure 4). Experts recommend an ultimate mix of 1 part absinthe to 3 parts water. Water is thought to release the drink's herbaceous notes, as well as to dilute its famously high alcohol content. Most absinthes range between 110 and 144 proof. A potent brew indeed!

Later in the 19th century, concern began to grow about the popularity of absinthe. Cheaper imitations of recognized brands began to be produced, with varying levels of quality and of thujone, the chemical from wormwood which some blame for the drink's supposed hallucinogenic effects. Rumors of the ill effects of absinthe began to circulate, though such effects were probably due to general alcohol abuse. Once hailed as a cure, the beverage was now blamed for causing illness and madness

amongst its users. At this time, wine production also began to stabilize, and winemakers, in an effort to win back customers, began to join temperance leaders in discrediting absinthe. Even artist's depictions of absinthe use began to be negative. (Figure 5). By the turn of the 20th century the Green Fairy was becoming the Green Curse.



Figure 5: Albert Maignan's "Green Muse" (1895), a decidedly more sinister depiction of absinthe usage. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert\\_Maignan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Albert_Maignan)

Most bans on absinthe have been lifted. The Swiss ban was lifted in 2005, and the U.S. in 2007. In some countries, including the U.S., strict limits remain as to how much thujone absinthe may contain. Only time will tell if the Green Fairy will ever rise to its pre-ban level of popularity.

### References

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Absinthe History, Laws and Preparations

<http://www.absinthe101.com/index.html>; <http://www.wormwoodsociety.org/>; <https://www.pernodabsinthe.com/>



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Jefferson Patterson Park and Museum is part of the Maryland Historical Trust, and agency of the Maryland Department of Planning, Baltimore.

