

# Curator's Choice

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## Venetian Glass in Colonial Maryland, More Likely Than You'd Think

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The Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory (MAC Lab) curates over 10 million artifacts, but I am still surprised by the unique artifacts that are in our collections. When our staff visited the Doepkens family farm in 2024 to evaluate the Middle Plantation (18AN46) collection, I saw stunning fragments of amber glass with light blue marbling (Figure 1). I was immediately intrigued. Upon returning to the Lab and investigating our type collections, I discovered that kind of glass was not represented. While we do have a fragment of black glass with a white trailed pattern from the Angelica Knoll (18CV60) collection, the design is not the same nor is the color of the glass (Maryland Archaeological Conservation Laboratory, 2002).

The fragments come from an intricate type of glasswork known as *façon de Venise*, French for “in the Venetian style.” Venetian artisans originated this technique during the Renaissance. However, glassworkers in other locations replicated the style so exactly that it is difficult to know whether the glass originated in Venice or elsewhere in Europe. Hence why archaeologists use the term *façon de Venise* to encompass that uncertainty (Grulich 2004, 4). *Façon de Venise* was imported to the Colonies from Europe.

William Doepkens identified these as bottle fragments, but he did not specify the type of bottle (Doepkens 1991, 149). MAC Lab staff believe the fragments may be from an oblong bottle, such as a snuff bottle (Figure 2). The thicker piece from 5NN is a base fragment. The glass is so thin and delicate in the fragments from 5E, much thinner than typical bottle glass and characteristic of *façon de Venise*. As is often the case in archaeology, we may never know definitively the sort of vessel these fragments were once a part of.

*Façon de Venise* is known for its detailed decorations that require great technical skill to execute. The Middle Plantation fragments show a decorative

### References Cited

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Figure 1: Fragments of amber glass with blue combed decoration from 18AN46. The bottom right piece from 5NN is a base fragment. The other fragments come from 5E.

technique called *vetro a penna*, Italian for “feathered glass”. Artisans created the combed pattern by applying a colored glass (in this case blue) onto the blown glass object while it was still hot. Then, they smoothed the glass to adhere the two colors together. The object was then placed in a mold that produced the combing (Grulich 2004, 37-38). *A penna* became popular in the 17th and 18th centuries, which aligns with the period when Middle Plantation was active (Tait 1979, 50).

The *a penna* fragments in the MAC Lab's collections are not the only ones found in the region. Historic St. Mary's City (HSMC) found similar pieces during their excavations. The HSMC glass fragments are black glass with a blueish white combed design similar to the Middle Plantation examples. Archaeologists discovered the fragments at the sites of two public drinking establishments owned by a Dutchman, Garret Vansweringen. Given that black table glass was only created in the Netherlands, England, and Venice at the time, it seems likely that since Vansweringen was from the Netherlands, he may have had connections to a Dutch glassmaker who could supply him with this black *façon de Venise* glass (Grulich 2004, 19). Smith's Ordinary (18ST1-13) was an inn built in 1667, and it burned down in 1678 (Ibid, 5). One of the fragments from the Ordinary appears to be a similar shape and thickness to the base fragment from Middle Plantation. The other fragments came from the Vansweringen site (18ST1-19). He used the site as his home and “the most elegant inn in early Maryland” in the late 1670s (Ibid). Patrons of Vansweringen likely included the government officials as St. Mary's City was the capital until 1695 when it moved to Annapolis (Ibid, 22). They enjoyed the use of *façon de Venise* vessels, even in a relatively remote place such as St. Mary's City.



Figure 2: Complete 17th century snuff bottle with a silver stopper. Black glass with white combed decoration.

<https://www.anticstore.art/106839P>



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