



TOPIC: BEER CATEGORY

PART 3: HOW BEER ART TELLS THE STORY OF HUMANKIND

🕒 8 min read

In the grand tapestry of human history, few foods and beverages have woven themselves as intricately into the fabric of society as beer. In the last of a three-part series on the multifaceted world of beer's influence on humanity, we look at how beer art provides clear evidence to beer's central role within society and how it can help tell the very story of humankind.

It's hard to tell how long beer has been known to humankind. Scientists regularly uncover new evidence of earlier beer making and consumption across the globe. In 2018, a multinational team reported on the earliest archaeological evidence for cereal-based beer brewing by a semi-sedentary, foraging civilization in Israel which dates back some 13 millennia. Two years ago, another paper claimed that China's rice beer brewing is at least 9,000 years old at Qiaotou, in the south of the country. "The beer at Qiaotou was likely served in rituals to commemorate the burial of the dead," the paper reads, continuing, "Ritualized drinking probably played an integrative role in maintaining social relationships, paving the way for the rise of complex farming societies four millennia later."

Beer has indeed been playing a central role within society since its earliest appearances. This is proven by archaeological evidence such as food residue and utensils, but artwork too. A wealth of beer-inspired art such as statuettes and wall paintings, for instance, allows archaeologists to define the degree to which beer was key to ancient Egyptian culture.

Prof. Theodore Godlanski of the University of Kentucky explains that: "It was beer as the daily and democratic food for lowborn and high alike – liquid bread to sustain the workings of an increasingly complex society. It was a domestic beverage to nourish and gladden humankind. It was a benevolent gift of the god that bound society together, fuelling the works that brought great benefit to its members."

One of the most remarkable representations of beer making in ancient Egypt is currently housed at the British Museum in London. Dating from ca. 2050-2000 BCE, it is comprised of: nine (originally 13) figures sifting; an overseer; three figures sieving mash; and three (originally four) crouched before ovens.

Meanwhile, this statuette above (ca. 2494-2345 BCE, Egyptian Museum, Cairo) portrays a female brewer pressing out fermented bread in a basket, in the act of making beer, kneading dough in a strainer over a large jar.

Beer and bread were indeed essentially connected, as confirmed by a multitude of offering formulae/ritual formulae/funerary formulae mentioning the two grain-based foods alongside one another.

The modern practice of making bouza, a sort of rudimentary bread-based beer still produced by some populations in modern Egypt, is a late reminiscence of that kinship.

This "liquid bread" was an essential part of the daily nutrition for all in ancient Egyptian culture, regardless of status. Its role as staple food carried on in the afterlife, making beer one of the most common features of ritual offerings – as depicted below.

This wall painting (ca. 2118-1980 BCE, Museo Egizio, Turin) was recovered from a burial site. It shows bread and beer making, and a deceased couple receiving offerings.

Not only did beer feature in funerary contexts, included among the offerings made to the deceased and regularly depicted in funerary iconography to insure the figuratively provide the deceased with a steady supply in the afterlife. Its strong spiritual significance meant that it also played a central role in religious festivals and celebrations and represented a common offering to the gods themselves. Such was beer's spiritual value that it was believed to have been gifted to humankind by the god Osiris himself. The so-called Stela of King Intef II Wahankh, dated ca. 2108-2059 BCE and housed at New York's Metropolitan Museum, portrays the king in the act of offering beer to the god Re.

Everyday life and still life

While in later, more secular civilizations beer lost some of its spiritual significance, it maintained its strong societal value and prominent position as a food staple, which made it a particularly popular feature in the work of some of the greatest Flemish painters throughout the Dutch Golden Age (ca. 16th-17th century).

Masters such as Bruegel and Ruben often portrayed beer both as part of everyday life scenes as well as in evocative still lifes.

In his *Young Man Smoking and A Woman Pouring Beer* (1650s, Leiden Collection) by Gabriel Metsu, a waitress and her guest stare endearingly at each other. Beer – poured from an earthenware jug into a glass – is placed at the intersection of their gazes.

Plenty of similar clay jars are depicted in the bottom left corner of Bruegel's renowned Peasant Wedding (1568) – a testimony to the central role that beer played in such celebrations.

Some of the Dutch masters' still lifes provide further insights into beer's functional value within pre-contemporary societies. Jan Jansz van de Velde's Still Life with a Tall Beer Glass (1647, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), for instance, describes means of interaction and entertainment in informal contexts. The painting's main subject is a tall "trick" beer glass known as *passglas*, widely employed in drinking games during the 17th century.

People would take turns drinking down to the next ring in one swig, and those who could not manage to reach the ring had to keep on going until they succeeded. As in all drinking games, inebriation would make the task increasingly challenging, and amusing to watch.

The 17th century was undoubtedly a real golden age for beer-centric still lifes, but later artists tackled the subject too. A series of oils on canvas by 19th-century American painter Andrew John Henry Way depict frothy beer surrounded by oysters and lemon wedges. Their Flemish influence is almost reactionary in nature. Meanwhile, French artist Fernand Léger's Still Life with Beer Mug (Tate Modern, 1921-1922) offers a more unusual cubist interpretation. While embracing a popular contemporary aesthetic, Léger's depiction of a beer mug symbolises society's return to normality after the tragedy of WWI.

Such a simple, everyday life image – wherein beer is the protagonist – is meant to represent the real, unassuming beauty of life. "There are no categories or hierarchies of Beauty – this is the worst possible error," wrote Léger in his 1924 essay published in modernist magazine, *Bulletin de l'Effort Moderne*, "perhaps more in the arrangement of your saucepans on the white walls of your kitchen than in your eighteenth-century living room or in the official museums."

An increasingly consumerist society

As society developed further as a result of technological and scientific advances, the relationship between beer and art widened and diversified accordingly.

In Edouard Manet's *A Bar at the Folies-Bergère* (1882, Courtauld Gallery), a bottle of Bass Ale, with its iconic red triangle logo, is depicted alongside a number of other indistinguishable brands of Champagne and liqueurs.

The painting's subject isn't really the drink. It's rather the barmaid who, with her enigmatic expression, some argue could have been a prostitute. Yet, by replacing anonymous mugs and containers with branded beer bottles, beer helps the painting define an increasingly consumerist society (Bass' iconic red triangle was, in fact, the UK's first registered trademark). The commoditisation of beer also serves to deliver one of the painting's central messages: Like the bottles of Bass ale, the barmaid herself might well have been a commodity for sale behind the counter. Art historians have also suggested that the beer's British origin was meant to showcase the Folies-Bergère's cosmopolitan environment of the time, while others argue that the integration of an easily recognisable British beer brand made a clear political point of anti-German sentiment in France in the decades after the Franco-Prussian War.

Decades after Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain* (1917), yet two years earlier than Andy Warhol's celebrated *Campbell's Soup Cans* (1962), American artist Jasper Johns brought beer into the world of readymade art, wherein an ordinary, mass-produced object is removed from its functional role and declared to be art. To produce his *Painted Bronze* (1960, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York), Johns bronzed and mounted on a base two 12-ounce cans of Ballantine Ale. The ale cans became one of Johns' most recognizable motifs and ended up appearing throughout his work in a variety of media, such as a lithograph (1964) now housed at the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

In today's increasingly crowded marketplace, a brand new relationship between beer and art is once again central to defining our society and its needs. As beers fight for shelf space and to attract consumers' attention, beer-centred art has been fully commoditised, moving from the canvas onto the bottle and can itself.

To society's increasing thirst for more immersive eating and drinking experiences, the brewing industry responds with a proliferation of exceptional craft beer labels, which at times manage to claim their rightful status as artworks. Northern Illinois University held an exhibition entitled *Brewing identity: The art of craft beer*, aimed at communicating how "the use of labels today is more than a means of advertising, it is a preferred way to communicate and establish brand identity". More recently, London's Tate Modern has been holding a series of "Tap Takeovers" which involve breweries developing a new beer and label artwork to be showcased at the museum.

Exquisite beer label design is just the latest iteration of a kinship that's as old as brewing itself. Not only does beer art provide clear evidence to its central role within society; humanity's rich heritage of beer-centric pictorial and sculptural artwork, developed throughout history and across a multitude of cultures, tells the very story of humankind.

By Dr. Jacopo Mazzeo

Additional sources

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1094/ASBCJ-54-0003?journalCode=ujbc20>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07409710.1993.9962007?src=recsys>

Kenneth Bendiner, *Food In Painting: From The Renaissance To The Present*, Reaktion Books, 2004

Related Insights



Part 2: Beer's Contributions to Humanity: A Catalyst for Scientific and Technological Development



Part 1: Beer and Human Societies: An Inextricable Marriage



Wither the Seasonal Beer?

A commentary on the evolution of seasonal beer releases versus the coveted special releases.

[Read More](#)