

# “In Vino Veritas”

## A Stoneware Jug and the Contradictions of Temperance

A LARGE, STONEWARE JUG in the collection of the Bennington Museum bears poignant witness to the contradictions in mid-nineteenth-century American attitudes toward alcohol consumption. High on the jug's shoulder, between its two prominent handles, is an applied clay roundel impressed and inscribed with the following: “LUMAN P. NORTON/12 gals/1859/IN VINO VERITAS.” The jug was manufactured at a time when the temperance movement was actively railing against bibulous delights in a nation that historically had a great love for drink.

The jug's large size and elaborate cobalt decoration make it exceptional. This stoneware vessel was presented to Luman Preston Norton, a scion of the Bennington, Vermont, Norton family, one of America's leading manufacturers of utilitarian ceramics throughout the nineteenth century. The Norton wares ranged from cake crocks and molasses pitchers to butter churns and liquor jugs like this one, which Luman Preston received on graduating from Union College and joining the family business. The Nortons' stoneware vessels were rarely larger than six gallons and were typically decorated with no more than a single stylized flower, leaf, or bird in cobalt. However, on this jug the applied roundel, indicating the vessel's capacity of twelve gallons, is entirely surrounded by a bold cobalt wreath. Below this wreath, also in a glassy cobalt blue, is a fluted compote overflowing with fruit—pears, an apple, cherries, and bunches of grapes. The compote is supported by a base composed of two intertwined snakes whose heads rest above the jug's spout. These serpents return us to the last line of the roundel at the top of the jug: “IN VINO VERITAS.”

It is difficult to comprehend just how fraught the meaning of the Latin phrase *in vino veritas* (“in wine there is truth”) was when the jug was manufactured in 1859, near the height of the temperance craze. Although during the early decades of our republic spirituous beverages had been drunk in massive quantities<sup>1</sup>—at riotous barn raisings and high-spirited apple-bees as well as at seemingly more respectable church meetings and political gatherings—by

the mid-nineteenth century overindulgence in spirituous beverages was looked upon by many as immoral, with the power to destroy families and corrupt our nation's social order. Yet, many of the people who supported the temperance movement, including the Nortons, were nevertheless making, consuming, and aiding in the distribution of alcohol (stoneware was the plastic of the nineteenth century).

As early as 1784, William Rush, a renowned Philadelphia physician and a signer of the Declaration of Independence, had spoken out against the abuse of “ardent spirits” in *An Inquiry into the Effects of Ardent Spirits on the Human Mind and Body*. Yet beer, hard cider, and wine were still considered healthful for both body and mind when taken in appropriate quantities.<sup>2</sup> The growing interest in temperance during the post-Revolutionary period can be partly attributed to the dramatic shift to a more individualistic way of thinking as promoted by the ideals of the new republic. In order to maintain an orderly and effective nation, temperance and self-control were seen as requisite. Moderate views pertaining to both alcohol consumption and civic duty remained widespread until the 1830s and 1840s, when social reform movements began to take hold throughout the United States. As temperance societies in the Northeast increasingly vilified alcohol, their efforts led to stricter and more ubiquitous laws regulating its distribution and consumption. Such regulations culminated in the Maine Law of 1851, which completely prohibited the sale of beverage alcohol in the state of Maine; other states soon adopted similar laws, with Vermont passing its own Prohibition Law in 1852.

Many people, including Luman Preston Norton, tried to find a middle road, and the era's opposing beliefs and practices regarding alcohol visibly come together in the Norton jug's conflicting symbolism. At first glance the jug seems to celebrate alcoholic consumption, especially if one overlooks the two serpents amid the baroque display of fruit pouring forth from the central compote. But, ultimately, its constellation of symbols and sayings leads to a much



more complicated reading, with the impressed motto “IN VINO VERITAS” at its heart. During the temperance era this saying was often interpreted as a direct warning against alcohol’s ability to reveal man’s inherently sinful nature. In this context, the meaning of the serpents at the jug’s base, placed in direct relationship to the bung-hole from which the beverage issues forth, becomes clear: The snakes are the Devil, tempting all to indulge; or, at the very least, they serve as a reminder to remain prudent when imbibing. In this reading, the fruits in the basket take on more sinister meaning as well. No longer do they celebrate abundance; they can now be read as the forbidden fruit from the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. Thus the snakes and the fruit represent original tempter and original temptation.

Above: “*In Vino Veritas*” jug. J&E Norton.

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In the face of this highly wrought, moralizing reading of the jug’s symbolism we must remember one thing: the jug was made to serve alcohol! This paradox plays itself out in the actions and words of the Norton family. Though Luman Preston and the rest of the Norton clan were active in the temperance movement, they tended toward moderation as opposed to abstinence. Typical of rural New Englanders, Capt. John Norton, Luman Preston’s great-grandfather and founder of the family’s ceramic dynasty, had been a jack-of-all-trades. In addition to making pots he was a farmer, raising livestock and cultivating

apple orchards. A note in the October 29, 1822 issue of the *Vermont Gazette* records that Capt. John Norton and Sons were expected to produce 100 hogsheads (large barrels or casks holding between 63 and 140 gallons each) of cider brandy from their annual harvest, to be sold on the open market. Many of the stoneware articles manufactured by the Nortons were intended to aid in the storage and service of spirituous beverages. A jug made by Luman Norton, Luman Preston's grandfather, dated 1829, is one of the few pieces of stoneware that explicitly indicates what it was intended to hold: it is stamped with small capital letters on the inside of the handle with the word "RUM."<sup>3</sup>

While these bits of evidence date back to more than a decade before Luman Preston was born, the Nortons' bibulous behavior continued through the generations. Another large, double-handled jug of similar size to the *In Vino Veritas* vessel was made in 1864, after Luman Preston had taken charge of the stoneware manufactory. This second jug was given to Calvin Park, related to the Nortons through marriage, upon his election to the Vermont State Legislature. Park's present bears the following inscription:

Hic Jacet [Here Lies]

The animating spirit  
And divine afflatus  
Of the owner

Were it the last drop in the jug  
And you gasped upon the spout  
Ere your fainting spirit fell  
I'd advise—to draw it out

This verse, with its image of a man literally sucking the last bit of "spirit" from the jug, expresses an attitude toward alcoholic consumption that couldn't be further from the grave warning implied by the symbolism of Luman Preston's jug. It also confirms that these large jugs were indeed intended to serve spirits as opposed to water, which was the beverage of choice among many temperance supporters.

Complicating the Nortons' seemingly unabashed production, consumption, and aid in the distribution of alcohol is their active involvement in the temperance movement. In a lengthy letter to the editor of the *Bennington Banner*, published on December 24, 1874, at a time when he was serving in the Vermont State Legislature, Luman Preston Norton defended his introduction of a Liquor License Law intended to override Vermont's Prohibition Law, which he felt was ineffective. He argued, "No man, living or dead, was ever legislated from drunkenness to sobriety or from moderate drinking to total abstinence." Railing against prohibition, Norton felt that licensing restrictions could better diminish "drunkenness with its attendant evils." Ultimately, he believed in man's ability to self-govern, a conservative idea harking back to ideals espoused by the Revolutionary generation. While he agreed that the abuse of alcohol can lead to "degradation, misery, and horror," he also hinted at its virtues, noting "a theory of prohibition aiming to banish by pains and penalties an article of diet which a large body of the people believe to be legitimate, and has held its place among the necessities or the luxuries of a society, is absurdly weak."

Indeed, the pleasures of alcohol are rich and many, even as its dangers are grave. The varied interpretations of *in vino veritas* and multivalent symbolism of the Norton jug's imagery demonstrate the laden nineteenth-century conflict between these two extremes. ❶

#### NOTES

1. During the first few decades of the nineteenth century, the annual consumption of absolute alcohol per capita among the drinking-age population hovered around seven gallons, compared to two and a half to three gallons of absolute alcohol during the last half of the twentieth century. Absolute alcohol is the actual amount of alcohol consumed, presuming that spirits contained 43 to 45 percent alcohol, and beer and cider 10 percent alcohol during the early nineteenth century, and 5 percent during the late twentieth century. Wine consumption is not considered here. See Mark Edward Lender and James Kirby Martin, *Drinking in America: A History*, revised and expanded edition (New York: The Free Press, 1987), 205–206.
2. Thomas R. Pegram, *Battling Demon Rum: The Struggle for a Dry America, 1800–1933* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1998), 13–15.
3. The jug is owned by Michael E. Sargent of Shaftsbury, Vermont. Dates on nineteenth-century American stoneware are uncommon. The inscribed date, 1829, combined with the unique stamp indicating the jug's contents, was likely intended to indicate the rum's vintage.