

# Spectacles in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

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Although the principles of magnification were well known to Roman scholars such as Seneca, who read books by peering through a globe of water, the idea that a pair of ground glass or crystal lenses could be made for a person seems to have eluded them. The earliest record of eye glasses comes from a manuscript called *Traité de conduite de la famille*, by Sandro di Popozo. In it he wrote "I am so debilitated by age that without the glasses known as spectacles, I would no longer be able to read or write. These have recently been invented for the benefit of poor old people whose sight has become weak." It is suspected that the actual invention of glasses came about somewhere in Italy in the later half of the 1280's. This date has been reached based on the previous record in conjunction with a sermon given in 1305 or 1306 by Fra Giordano Di Rivalto. In his sermon he mentions meeting the inventor and states "It is not yet twenty years since the art of making spectacles, one of the most useful arts on earth, was discovered."

Early spectacles were designed only to aid in reading. They were essentially pairs of magnifying glasses. They had no mechanism for staying on the face and were generally held up to the wearer's eyes by hand. Because they were not made for those who were near-sighted they were not intended to be worn continuously as glasses are today. Therefore it is not surprising that until concave lenses came about in the mid-15th century that methods of securing them to the face were not invented. The earliest means of "wearing" glasses were rather clumsy and primitive by today's standards. Early glasses for the near-sighted were attached to the brims of hats or provided with hooks to fit over the top of the wearer's head.<sup>14</sup>

The vast majority of glasses in the fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were either held up to the eyes or simply rested on the wearer's nose. In the sixteenth century glasses were beginning to be worn with the aid of straps which tied at the back of the head or of strings which went around the ears.

Lenses for glasses were commonly made from beryl in the 14th century. In the fifteenth century crystal and glass were favored. The first mention of tinted lenses is in an English book dated 1586, entitled *A briefe Treatise touching the Preseruation of the Eiesight, consisting partly in Good Order of Diet and partly in Use of Medicines*. Fourteenth and fifteenth century lenses were always round. However, oval lenses began to be used in about 1510 in order to allow the wearer to look over them more easily for clear distance vision.

Spectacle frames were made of virtually any material imaginable; surviving examples are made from iron, brass, bronze, ivory, bone, horn and even leather. Literary references add the use of gold, silver, lead and wood to the list.

Finally, it may be worthwhile to note that while spectacles were in common use from the fourteenth century onwards, their use was not endorsed by all "medical professionals". In 1377 for example a physician named John of Arden wrote down a cure for poor vision in his book *De Cura Oculorum*.

use a basin of brass, well greased with fresh butter and let it stand overnight; in the morning let the basin be inverted upon a pot or dish in which is the sour urine of a man, warmed that it may

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<sup>14</sup>Richard Corson, *Fashions in Eyeglasses* (London: Peter Owen, 1967) p.23

receive the most urine; let the butter be melted and when cool take down the basin and thus let it stand for a whole day; afterward let the butter be scraped out (it will appear green) and mix it with a little fat of capon liquified by the sun's heat or a fire and store it up in a waxed vessel. Let the eyelid be well anointed. Do not let it run down in to the eyes; the eyes should be bandaged, and thus let him lie all night. Of a surety it be dissolved in the morning, but not washed, then it will be healthy.

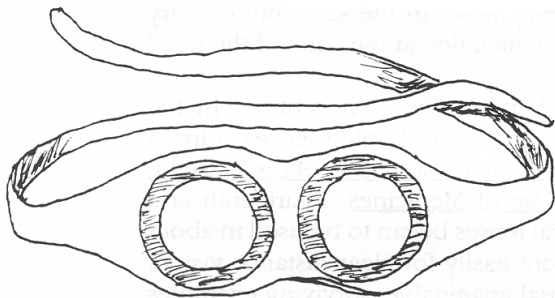
However effective this remedy may be I think I will stick with glasses! But remember as the inscription on a coin of 1589 reads *Was hilft dem Alten Licht und Brill. Der sich selbst nicht und kennen will.*

**Of what avail is lens and light,  
to him who lacks in mind and might.**

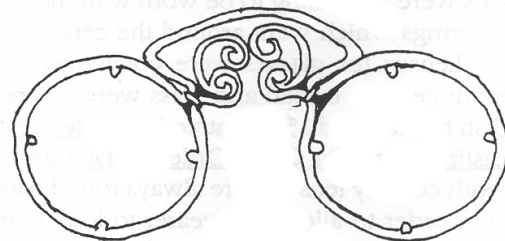
### Bibliography

Corson, Richard. *Fashions in Eyeglasses* London: Peter Owen, 1967.

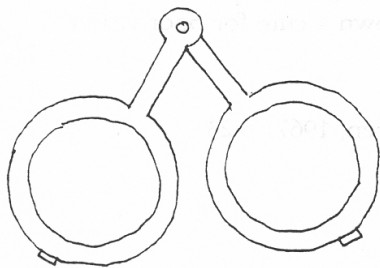
Winkler, Wolf ed. *Spectacle of Spectacles* Leipzig: Edition Leipzig, 1988.



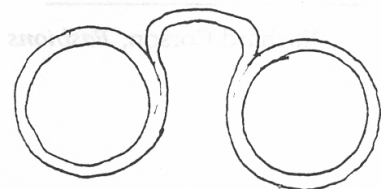
Glasses of leather and horn c.1583, Dresden.



Brass glasses with lenses intact. 1500-1600.



Spectacle frames of horn c.1352, Italian.



French spectacle frames c.1403.

