GLASS

FROM ANCIENT CRAFT TO CONTEMPORARY ART: 1962—1992 AND BEYOND

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Fred Jones Jr. Museum of Art
University of Oklahoma
A combination of factors helped to foster the growth of what has become known as the Studio Glass Movement: Dominick Labino's development of a glass with a lower melting point that could be easily melted in a small furnace; Littleton's commitment as a teacher, spreading information about the possibilities of glass, and the support of universities and art schools across the country; and a nationwide interest in crafts in general.

Like every new material, the first practitioners struggled to master its technical demands. The primary concern of the first artist/glassworkers was to acquire the skills needed to successfully manipulate the medium. Techniques such as casting and laminating were employed by only a very few as the aura of romance around glass blowing made it the most seductive technique. Its allure was enhanced by the centuries' old tradition of keeping the process a jealously guarded secret, handed down from master to apprentice. The majority of students enrolled in the ever-growing number of glass classes was intent upon learning how to replicate the glories of the ancient craft of glass blowing. The first works shown in exhibitions sponsored by the Toledo Museum of Art and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, were awkward explorations of the blown form. By the mid-1970s, however, the technical difficulties had been resolved and the first expressions of mature work were being made by American artists such as Labino, Littleton and his students Marvin Lipofsky and Dale Chihuly, Joel
Philip Myers, Mark Peiser, and others.

While in the United States, the university system supported the exploration of glass as an artistic medium in Europe the situation was different. In the U.S., it had been Littleton’s goal to liberate glass from the factory and for artists to begin to manipulate the material directly, executing their own ideas rather than handing a design to a skilled workman. However, in Europe, the leading glass artists took advantage of the talents of the factory worker and of the superb glass available in industry. Without exception all of the leading European glass artists are or have been commercially linked to the glass industry at some point.

Europeans who have been influential in the evolution of glass from a craft material to a fine arts medium include Erwin Eisch, who learned to blow glass in his family’s factory in Frauenau, Germany; Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova, husband and wife who collaborate on large-scale cast-glass sculptures, and Pavel Hlava in Czechoslovakia; Ann Wolff and Bertil Vallien of Sweden; and Livio Seguso and Luciano Vistosi in Italy, all of whom created independent work during this period. In Japan, which has a limited glass tradition, Toshichi Iwata founded a glass factory and acted as head designer as well as making his own work. The best known Japanese glass artist is Kyoheiji Fujita, who has worked with glass masters in Japan, Italy, and Sweden.

THE PRESENT; 1982-1992

By the early 1980s, as the American artists who had begun working with glass in the 1960s matured and younger university and art school-trained artists began to use glass in their work, there was shift in emphasis. Artists became more concerned with content than with technique and began to use glass as a vehicle for their concepts. Techniques other than glass blowing started to be explored, including cold working methods such as cutting, grinding, polishing, sand-blasting, and laminating, and various types of casting, fusing, and slump- ing. Scale, which had been restricted by the inherent size limitations of the glass blowing technique, was able to be increased because of these other techniques and the incorporation of other materials such as wood and metal. Glass artists also turned to commercially produced glass such as plate glass, glass block, and Vitrolite, an opaque glass much used for architectural projects in the 1920s and 1940s, to expand the size of their sculptures.

In the last decade artists such as Lynda Benglis, Nicholas Africano, Dennis Oppenheim, Donald Lipski, and Sherrie Levine have begun to incorporate glass in their aesthetic repertoire. although not trained as glass blowers or competent as glass technicians, these artists have become interested in the aesthetic properties of the material and have relied on skilled glassworkers to execute their ideas. They are following the European model and, in a sense, returning to the tradi-
tional way of working with this technically demanding, yet rewarding material.

The developments of the first generation of glass artists in the U.S. and abroad as well as works by so-called “non-glass artists” will be advances and changes in technology, enlargement of scale, introduction of mixed mediums, and the increased emphasis on content.

THE FUTURE: 1992 AND BEYOND

It is impossible to predict the future with any certainty. However, in an attempt to address this issue, five artists will be commissioned to create works specifically for this exhibition. In addition, working drawings and models of sculptures planned by other artists will also be shown. The artists to be invited to participate in this section will include leaders of the Studio glass movement and well-known artists who normally work with other materials.

This exhibition, curated by Karen S. Chambers and Ferdinand Hampson, surveys the development of glass as a medium for aesthetic expression on the occasion of the 30th anniversary of the Studio Glass Movement.

In addition to Chambers’ activities as a writer, she has also held curatorial positions at the Dayton Art Institute and The Contemporary Arts Center, Cincinnati. She is currently the director of the Michel Bittan Gallery in New York. Hampson is the founder of the Habatat Galleries, one of the first commercial galleries to focus on glass art. In addition to the original location in the Detroit suburbs, Habatat is now also located in Boca Raton, Florida. Hampson was instrumental in organizing the now annual Glass Month in Michigan and has compiled several books surveying the current state of the glass arts.