

Glassmaking Traditions in Lauscha

BY REGINE WOSNITZA

To 36 year old art historian Helena Horn there is no doubt about it: "Glass is the prima donna among materials, not only because of the way it is produced but also because you can work it in more ways than most other materials." Because Germany has only four museums of glass art (besides Lauscha, there are museums in the western towns of Rheinbach, Immenhausen, and Frauenau) and the odds were against Horn getting full time work with her favorite hobby, she muses, "I always expected I would have to do something else professionally, but I would devote myself to glass after retirement."

Fate proved to be more kindhearted.

In 1992 Horn was appointed director of the Museum for Glass Art in the Thuringian town of Lauscha, a first class address among aficionados of the fragile ware.

Part of an industry that had been active already for centuries, Lauschan glassblowers invented Christmas tree ornaments in the mid 19th century, born from the idea of presenting friends and family with glass renditions of apples, nuts, fruits, olives, and bulbs that traditionally adorned Christmas trees.

The response was great. By 1860 salesmen Ernst and Carl Dressel, responsible for marketing Lauscha glassware out of nearby Sonneberg, were advertising 28 Christmas tree balls and various colored ornaments in their catalogues. Over the next 50 years glassblowers in Lauscha created an estimated 5,000 molds, including trumpets, bells, Santa Clauses, angels, suns, and stars.

Americans found out about Lauschan glass articles in 1880 when F. W. Woolworth started selling them for \$25 each in his shop in Pennsylvania. By the turn of the century Woolworth was importing 200,000 pieces, and many of the glittering balls decorated ballrooms and festive halls year round.

But Lauscha had more to offer than Christmas tree ornaments. In 1897, for the city's 300 year anniversary, Lauscha's citizens presented their first art show, which resulted in a museum whose collection has since expanded considerably. Today the gallery space of the two story Museum for Glass Art allows for the exhibit of only about 10 percent of its current 10,000 piece collection.

The museum did not have a full time director until 1953 when authorities of the German Democratic Republic (GDR) commissioned Rudolf Hoffmann who remained in office until 1992. In an English language brochure still available at the museum shop today, Hoffmann revealed his allegiance to the regime's socialist principles when he described the museum's two fold purpose: to present the artistic capabilities of Lauscha's artists and remember the miserable living conditions they faced in a home industry "controlled by the capitalist sales agent system."

Although Helena Horn, Hoffmann's successor, would likely phrase it differently, she has also been sensitive to the tension between artistic creativity and the need to make a living. Hailing from West Berlin, Horn, the young newcomer, has had to tread lightly, no matter how small the changes being introduced.

This past summer Horn sponsored a symposium of ten internationally renowned artists involved in studio glass, a movement which developed independently in both the GDR and the United States in the early 1960s.

Although the event was to celebrate the founding of Lauscha by the two glassblowers Hans Greiner and Christoff Mueller 400 years ago, Horn refrained from emphasizing traditional craftsmanship, a decision which Lauscha citizens in the end accepted.

Today nearly 50 percent of the working population, most of whom proudly claim to be directly descended from either Mueller or Greiner, is related to the glass industry somehow, and an atmosphere of living tradition, inner determination, and genuine pride permeates the town. The majority of the 4,500 strong community was so deeply rooted in the soil that most remained in their slate tiled homes in this narrow valley in the Thuringian mountains even after unification triggered considerable lay offs in the area's glass manufactories.

The region's industry goes back at least 700 years. In the 12th century Glashütten (glass "huts") were run by nuns and monks because they could read and understand Latin, the language used for the antique and Roman smelting recipes. With the spread of knowledge, other glassmakers rented wooded grounds from landlords to cut trees for firewood and build their own ovens. After three months, when the oven and the forest's resources in that spot were exploited they would move on.

In the early 15th century their nomadic lifestyle gave way to the establishment of villages in which the profession was handed down from father to son. Once he had acquired the necessary knowledge, the son would relocate, thus quickly spreading settlements throughout the Thuringian forest.

In 1597 Christoff Mueller and Hans Greiner left their parent's village of Langenbach and settled on the Lauscha River where they had been licensed to live by the Duke of Saxony Coburg.

Soon after Greiner and Mueller had built a glassworks, they were joined by other professionals. Each day glassmakers, blowers, painters, and cutters assembled to produce glass goblets, beakers, and other luxury vessels mainly used by the aristocracy and monks.

By the late 18th century the glassworks' capacity had become too small, and glassblowers increasingly processed prefabricated glass tubes at their homes. The subsequent introduction first of oil lamps and then gas blowtorches introduced new techniques and allowed the production of far more intricate and creative designs. Especially when working without a mold, the glassblower has to envision clearly the final product before he holds the prefabricated glass tube in the flame. Once the material has turned into a moldable, thick liquid, each swing of the hand and each blow of the breath is an ir retrievable step toward the end and determines the glassblower's individual style.

Originally glassmakers had been privileged professionals, neither subject to serfdom nor dependent on a landowner, but the home industry, increasing competition, and dependency on sales agents caused such poverty among glassblowers that even young children had to fill in ten hour shifts to provide for the family. In addition, work at the torch often resulted in nearsightedness and hearing problems, and the exposure to chemicals could easily cause serious skin diseases. In part, to confront these and similar difficulties, new techniques and products were constantly being developed.

In the 19th century Lauscha glassblowers started creating animals, riders, doll kitchen utensils, and fruit plates. Thus the town achieved a central role in glass artistry and especially the making of glass pearls, toys, figurines, and containers, while production in Ilmenau to the north, for example, concentrated on the production of technical glass.

In 1871 a vocational school for glassblowers opened in Lauscha that offered training in drawing, designing, technique, and art history; the new opportunity spurred an immense development among Lauscha artists. As a result, their delicate and colorful designs of flowers, animals, and vases received lavish attention at a Berlin Fair in 1896.

But nationwide economic hardship and the ensuing inflation caused demand for glassware to drop so dramatically that in 1932, Lauscha was declared a depressed area.

Thus it was not until the 40 years of the Socialist government of the GDR that Lauscha's artists enjoyed their longest period of financial safety at least after they had passed a test of dubious merit and the Union of Visual Artists had declared them artists. Willi Greiner Mai, one of the artists to have achieved official recognition, was allowed to experiment with studio glass and exhibit his abstract objects in the GDR and abroad. Following

German unification, when most of Lauscha's glass artists were left to fend for themselves, Greiner Mai returned to a sixth generation family business that his father abandoned in 1972 rather than join the socialist cooperative being formed.

Greiner Mai and his father managed to retrieve some 500 antique molds for Christmas tree ornaments the family had stored in attics and cellars. Turning to family connections in western Germany and abroad, Greiner Mai's shop "Der (the Christmas Tree) developed into one of the area's largest firms. In contrast to other shops this artist turned business man chooses to stick to originals and use nothing but antique molds.

"The only person who deserves to be called an artist, a creative person, is the one who had the idea in the first place," Greiner Mai persists. "When you blow a Mickey Mouse, you simply imitate and follow a trend."

Greiner Mai is not the only Lauscha citizen who shakes his head in disbelief upon learning that people in America hang Santa Claus in a bath tub, potatoes, inline skates, or frog ornaments on their Christmas trees. Nevertheless, many producers do integrate new ideas into their collection not only to make a living but also to save Lauscha's traditional glassblowing industry.

When artistry in Lauscha had come to a near standstill during the Third Reich, many glassblowers left Lauscha in the late 1940s to settle in West Germany after the war. Others successfully reestablished their worldwide contacts and got back into business. In 1972, however, all private enterprises, including Greiner Mai's, were subsumed into the cooperative VEB Thüringer Glasschmuck. A third of the 100 million bulbs and ornaments produced each year continued to be exported to the west, which produced a welcome source of hard currency. The festive products did, sometimes, prove to be too taxing for the state export agents.

"Our foreign clients were not only professionals but always had special requirements," Gerd Ross, former sales manager at Thüringer Glasschmuck, recalled. "As the export agents were hardly ever able to provide answers, we were among the few in the GDR who dealt directly with our foreign customers."

Today Ross is sales director at Lauscha Glass Creation, the new name given to the cooperative in 1991 when it was purchased by the Krebs family from the Bavarian town of Rosenheim. In the production halls it's Christmas all year round but a year in advance. Thus the 1998 collection, which includes larger shapes, more cartoon characters, a concentration on deep colors, as well as Mrs. Claus as soft pastels, is currently underway. Meantime, outside on the streets it will remain 1997, and Lauscha will be decorated with nothing but traditional Christmas tree ornaments for the holiday season.

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