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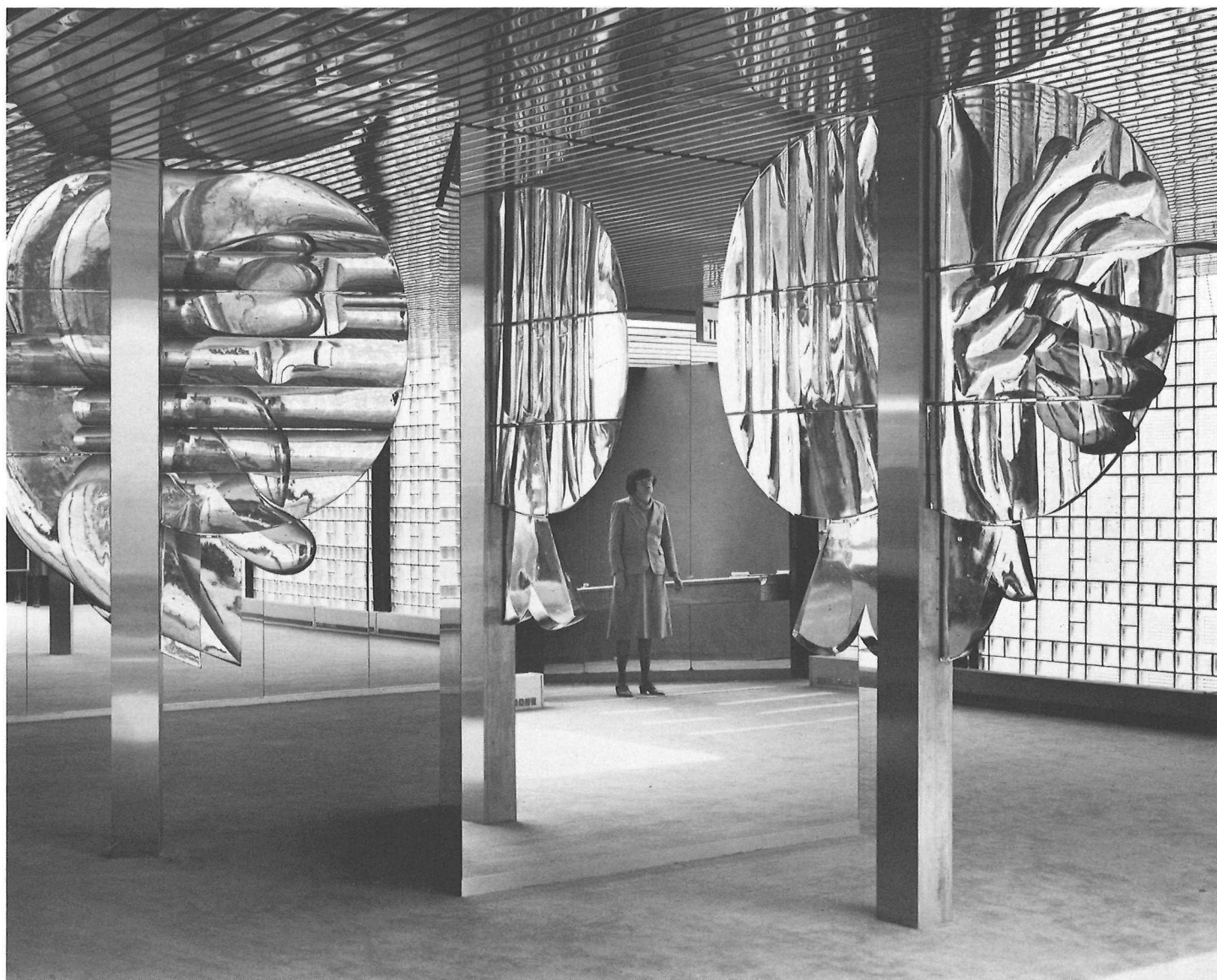
GLASS CLUB

BULLETIN

of The National Early American Glass Club

NUMBER ONE HUNDRED THIRTY

BOSTON, MASS., SUMMER 1980



The stainless steel and glass entrance lobby to the new Corning Museum of Glass building is dominated by a large glass sculpture made especially for the new museum by two of the world's great glass artists, Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova of Czechoslovakia. The symbolic sculpture has three parts: a meteor, a bird and a flower. The Corning Museum of Glass.

THE NEW CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS, A PERSONAL VIEW

By Paul Hollister

The gathering together at long last under one roof of some 20,000 pieces of glass and an equal number of published works on glass makes the new Corning Museum of Glass the most comprehensive and preeminent center in the world for the study of the art, history, and technology of glassmaking. This treasury opened to the public on June 1.

The undulating or floriform shape of the new museum emerges from the smaller rectangle of the old museum like a flower bursting from its seed pod, or, as its architect Gunnar Birkerts conceived it, like molten glass flowing from the tank. (Fig. 1). Yet from ground level the supposedly radical design of the new building — with its faceted sheathing of vertical glass panels treated to a stainless steel finish above the periscopic visor of its windows — resembles the bridge of a battleship: very businesslike and slightly sinister. This appearance is mitigated by the play of daylight on the paneled facets of the exterior, by a neat green line that runs around the building like the green edge of a sheet of plate glass, and by the fact that the museum spreads

out over a ground floor core of administrative and curatorial offices like a giant water lily.

The museum is entered by a long, gently inclined ramp whose only decoration is a small rose window by Dominick Labino. (Paul Gardner suggested that the circular center panel of the window ought to revolve — a fine idea.) The ramp rises to a visually busy lobby featuring a large, attractive, clear glass, tripartite sculpture by Stanislav Libensky and Jaroslava Brychtova of Czechoslovakia (cover photo), ingeniously arranged about a triangular mirror that played tricks with your correspondent's sense of direction. The boldly reeded texture of the sculpture is cleverly echoed in the striped metal ceiling, which manages at the same time to reflect the pleasantly oriental pattern of 1950's glass brick used in the old museum and Glass Center. Another gentle ramp leads into the new museum. Once inside, we are in for a treat.

Installation of the museum interior has been dramatically achieved by industrial designer Paul Seiz (Fig. 2). The central disk of the big museum flower is, quite

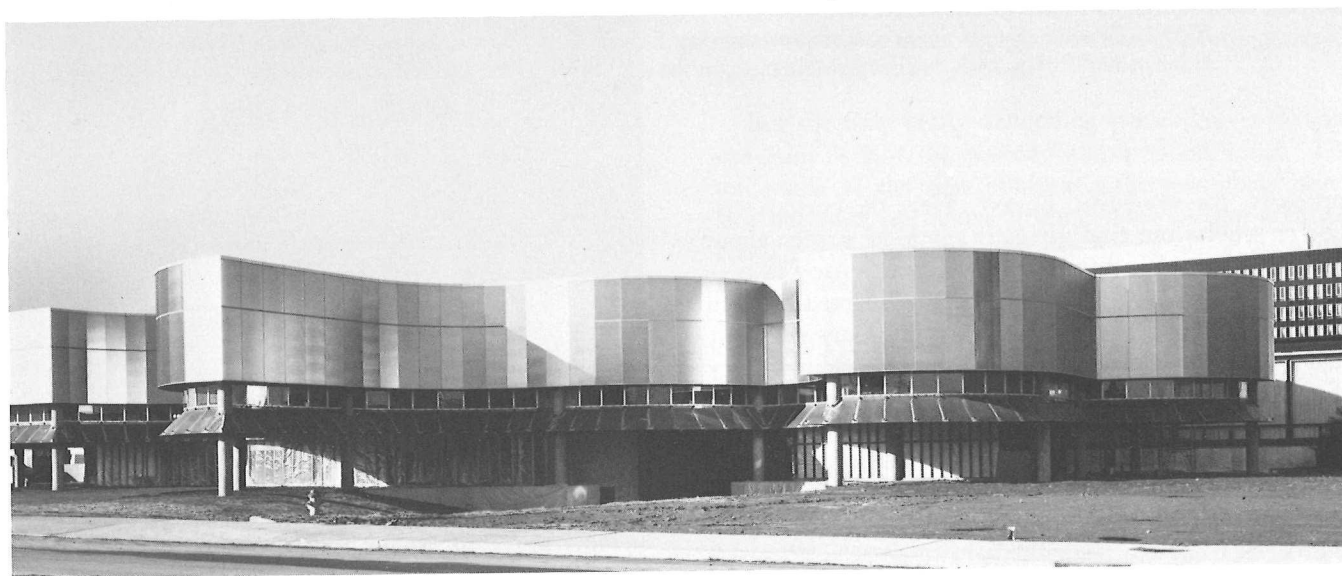


Fig. 1. The new Corning Museum of Glass, which opened to the Public June 1.
Photo Kellogg Studio

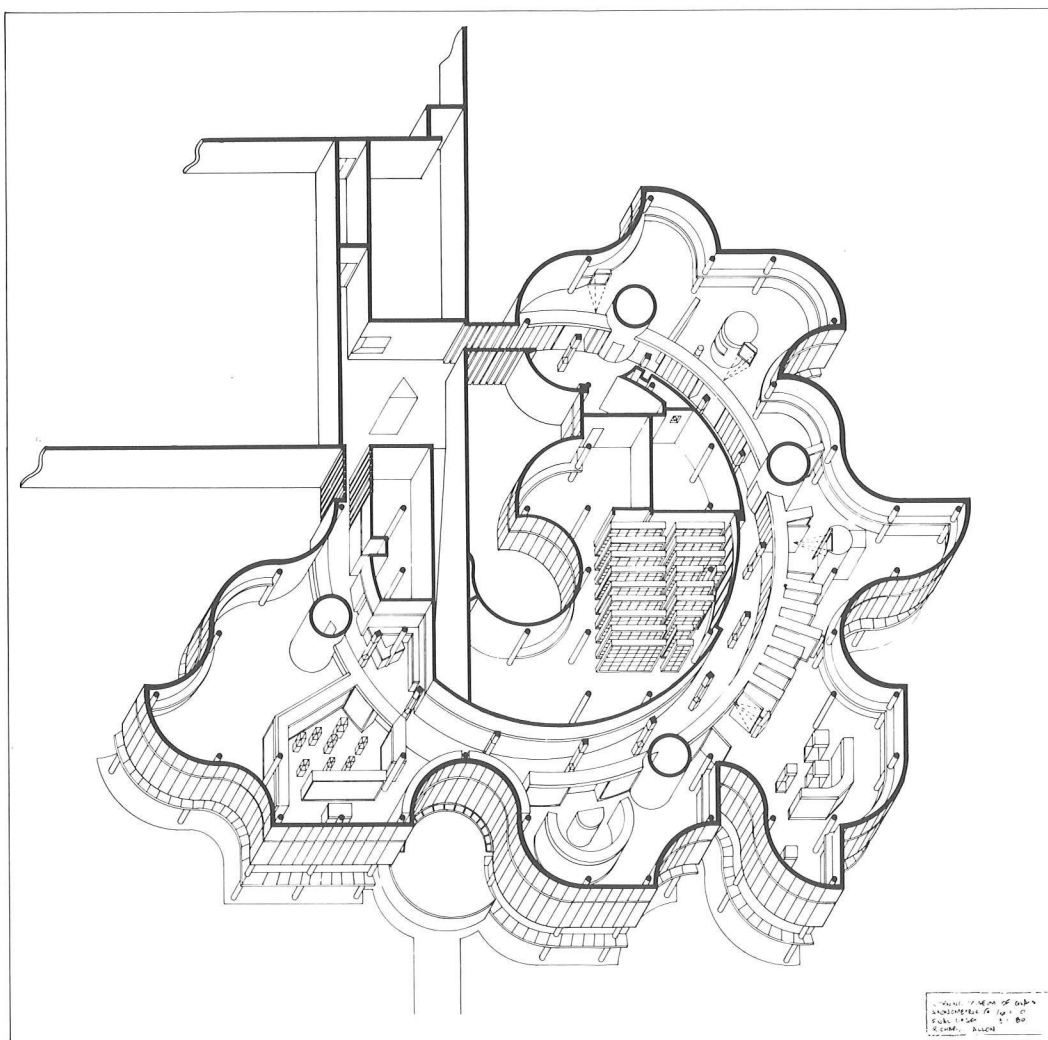


Fig. 2. Ground plan of the new museum, showing library with stacks in center, surrounded by corridor of highlights, with detailed exhibit areas on the outside. The Corning Museum of Glass.

properly, the wonderful library. Here the curious visitor or scholar can find virtually anything written about glass and peruse it unmolested. The glass itself is presented in a variety of ways superbly adapted to each museum visitor's potential interest in, knowledge of, and time to see glass. A broad circular corridor gallery that surrounds the library is punctuated with twelve columns, each exhibiting a single "masterpiece" of glass. The first column contains the tiny cast glass Head of Amenhotep II, dating from 1400 B.C., while the last column features Erwin Eisch's 1976 glass portrait of Harvey Littleton. These twelve objects can be given the once-over in a matter of minutes. The outer perimeter of this long gallery contains some 130 major glass objects supplementing those in the columns over

the same time span. These luscious, spectacular glasses — one could hardly see such a knock-out collection anywhere else — are worth the trip. On and on they march like the illustrated pages of a fabulous book. The inner wall of the gallery is lined with a continuous padded bench where one may rest at any point in history and gaze across at the exhibits. These exhibits, by the way, are comfortably spaced on paper-thin shelves magnetized to the fabric-coated metal back wall and appear to float in space.

Outside this inner circle gallery are the bays of exploration and comparison that are the real fun and the visual education of the museum. Here displayed in vertical stacks and horizontal cases that follow the looping perimeter of the building are every type of flask,

bracelet, candlestick, bottle, goblet, bauble — you name it. (I would have preferred to see the stained glass shown against daylight, as it was one hundred and twenty-nine years ago in London's Crystal Palace.) These gallery oases contain the encyclopedia of glass objects and forms, standards and whimsies, which were formerly held in storage or stuffed pell-mell in the skyscraper study gallery of the old museum, but are now set out neatly by category. This is no longer the tip of the iceberg we see in most museums, this is the whole iceberg. And for this, though it leaves little room for the inevitable expansion, Corning is to be roundly cheered. Displays of every kind of glass you ever dreamed of — a glass 'armonica', glass church, glass table, yard-high emerald glass pokals, glass trade beads — are exhilarating, breathtaking, and finally overwhelming. A week is needed for recuperative familiarity. The secrets of glassmaking are here, locked in their cases.

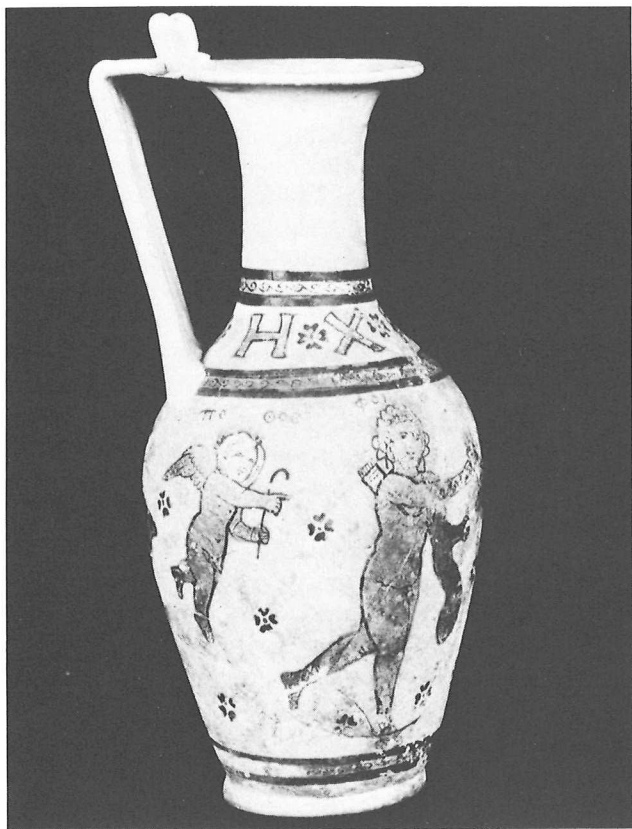


Fig. 3. The Daphne Ewer is a Roman glass pitcher decorated with a scene depicting the myth of the nymph Daphne. The scene shows the lovesick god Apollo pursuing Daphne through the woods. In answer to her prayers to be saved, Daphne was transformed into a laurel tree by her father, a river god. Height: 22 cm. Collection: The Corning Museum of Glass.

Centered within each bay or oasis is a superbly con-fected diorama appropriate to the period: an Egyptian tomb with a sarcophagus whose tenant is a skeleton x-ray that appears and disappears; a primitive glass furnace from Afghanistan; a banquet scene with related Venetian glass; a Maharaja's 'crystal' table; a working model of the Owens bottle machine. Each scene is surmounted by a film of the glassmaking process involved. The pressing machine film shows a presser opening a waffle-iron press, flipping the hot pressed plate in the air as if it were a pancake, and catching it. To top all this, computer terminals are located in the galleries. To obtain on the spot information about any piece, all you need do is punch out the accession number appearing on the label and presto! the sources of information appear on the screen. You can't ask for more than that.

At the time of viewing not all 2400 drinking glasses of the recently acquired Jerome Strauss Collection were on view, but the special exhibition "Tiffany's Tiffany" was, including surviving pieces from Tiffany's own Laurelton Hall and his home in New York City. For lovers of Tiffany it was mecca.

A good deal of conceptual publicity and hoopla went into the design of this museum, and continues in its celebration and in the interpretation of it to the public and to the Press. The exterior meanderings of the building were conceived and are described as a "continuous linear periscope." This refers to a periscopic arrangement of mirrors visible both inside the museum and outside, an ingenious and self-defeating Rube Goldberg exercise that brings before the gallery visitor a view of Corning that would be visible through any ordinary window, but is nevertheless distorted by the mirrors, then darkened by mesh curtains. The effect of this hokey is to make the glass and labels in the window cases difficult to see and read.

But the only really disturbing possibility is that the museum is not, as touted, above flood level. The underside of the new museum gallery is about seven and one half feet above ground level — the architect could not provide me with the figure — or about the level of the flood waters of 1972. Not a comfortable margin of safety for the world's most prestigious concentration of glass objects and books, and certain inundation for the museum offices, should there be another flood like that of Hurricane Agnes.

All in all the new museum is a resounding success: imaginatively conceived, beautifully laid out for smooth circulation, plush in its appointments and details, and blessedly absorbent of distracting sounds. One almost floats around the galleries in the silence that enhances contemplation. It is a treasure house for civilization. It just needs to be higher up.