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Art & Glass at Norfolk's Chrysler Museum

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The Chrysler Glass Collection

PAUL HOLLISTER

It just might be the best in the United States.

The pride of the Chrysler Museum is its collection – large by any standard – of over 8000 pieces of glass, produced over a time span extending from the remote third century B.C. to the mid-twentieth. Over 5000 examples are on permanent view, displayed chronologically in room after room of well lit, attractively simple cases.

Walter P. Chrysler, Jr. began collecting old Sandwich glass before 1958; then late nineteenth century Art Glass, turn of the century Art Nouveau, and Art Deco glass. It was all cheaper then, of course, but not necessarily more accessible, because public demand had not yet brought it out of the attics and into the light. I remember buying a nice Tiffany vase for $25 and was delighted to double my money when I sold it.

Around 1960, according to the well known Art Glass dealer, Minna Rosenblatt, a Tiffany *wistaria* lamp could be had for $1500. That was eighteen years ago. The same lamp today might cost $50,000. The Chrysler Museum has a room full of Tiffany lamps. Prices for glass made by the French glass artist Emile Gallé – in which the Chrysler abounds – have likewise risen steeply. A good Gallé vase that cost $300 in 1960 would run $2000 today. The best blown-molded Gallé vases, which then fetched $400 to $500, are $3500 and up today. A pair of *elephant* vases like that shown in Chrysler Fig. 1 – that might have cost $7500 in 1960 – today bring from $12,000 to as high as $18,000. This elegantly massive vase is 15 inches high and is signed Gallé vertically down the dark band below the elephants. Across the glass spectrum, it is safe to say that prices today are four times what they were in 1960. So much for prices: museums are loathe to reveal what they paid for this piece and that, and I did not ask. See your favorite Art Glass dealer.

As one cruises through the glass history revealed in the procession of rooms at the Chrysler Museum, the message is clear: every imaginable manipulative and decorative technique has been applied to glass; and much of it has been tried again, often centuries later. "Imitation is the sincerest flattery", and reapplication of old ideas to new times and forms is a sign of artistic development. For, if history repeats itself, it does so with variations that fingerprint each epoch and show us the old in a new context.

Fig. 1

Frederick Carder's unsigned, experimental *Blue Aurene* vase (Fig. 2; H. 8½ inches) – Carder introduced *Blue Aurene* at Steuben about 1905 and continued making it until 1933 – shows pincered nodules that also appear on third century Syrian and tenth to twelfth century Islamic vessels. But the vase's fanciful handles and casually rumpled shape are typical of Art Nouveau, particularly of experimental pieces designed by Louis Comfort Tiffany (1848-1933), whose hollow glass Chrysler also has plenty of. Carder's eclecticism permitted him to borrow from any source, ancient or contemporary, without the slightest twinge of regret; for whatever he borrowed he transformed to his own. In the century-long span of his life (1863-1963), an exciting period for glassmaking, Frederick Carder stands alone for his variety of form, fondness for color, and limitless invention.

Fig. 2

Manipulation of the hot glass in the Tiffany *Lava* bowl and vase (Fig. 3) shows how free-wheeling that master designer (Tiffany never blew the glass himself) could be when he was not turning out mass produced sets of commercial tableware. Tiffany is said to have derived his gold irridescences – the result of vaporized metallic oxides applied to the surface while the glass was still hot – from the irridescent decay (actually devitrification) cherished in exhumed examples of ancient glass; and Tiffany once sued Car-

Fig. 3

der for producing the same effects in his *Aurene*. Exotic irridescence in ancient glass used to be considered an enhancement rather than a disease. But a few years ago the Toledo Museum of Art reinstalled its great ancient glass with backlighting designed to obliterate the irridescence and reveal instead the silhouette shapes of the vessels. The gold of Tiffany's lava pieces, slap-dash splattered, daubed, and trailed in high relief on the rich, black glass, looks fresher today than the Abstract Expressionist painting of a mere generation ago.

Tiffany was in turn influenced by the carved, cameo glass of his French contemporary, Emile Gallé, which he saw at the Paris Exposition of 1889. Gallé (1846-1904), along with Auguste Daum (born 1853), and several others, were careful students and artistic interpreters of botany, insects, and other fauna. In much of the work after 1880 flora and fauna were let to grow and roam the exterior and often the interior surfaces of multi-layered, intricately-textured designs and colors that could be breathtakingly beautiful, cloyingly luxuriant, or orgiastically blatant. All of it was lumped together under the catch phrase, Art Nouveau. But Art Nouveau had its writhing roots in the Great Exhibition of 1851, and did not reach its relaxed apotheosis until the 1890's, when there was nothing suggested in glass that was not going on in "real life". We must remember that the glass surface of vessels, like nature itself, is three-dimensional; and studied up close – as these artists observed it – vines, thorns, opening and closing blossoms can be pretty terrifying.

Fig. 5

Fig. 4

Fig. 6

Tiffany's stained glass panel of a sunset at sea (Fig. 4) shows another of his obsessions with flowing color. The leading necessary to support the fragmented designs of the old stained glass window is gone, and we have instead a single swath of glass, 23¾ inches high by 45 inches wide, composed of four overlaped layers of glass, supported only by the containing frame, and as contiguous in appearance as an oil painting by Innes or Courbet – Tiffany was nineteenth century in his painting taste. To set off this romantic expanse of glass, the frame itself is composed of small, rough, light-catching glass blobs locked in close and tight like medieval stained glass window *quarries*, forming a just right contrast. The piece is signed "Tiffany Studios, New York", which places its creation between 1900 and 1920.

If Carder "borrowed" from Tiffany,

Fig. 5 shows a Gallé sunflower vase 15½ inches high, whose severe silhouette and precisely cut yet undulating forms recall the discipline of Japanese Ukiyo-E woodblock prints that so influenced the fine and decorative arts of the last quarter of the nineteenth century. The blooms here are given extra luster by an inner layer of shattered silver foil. As with most fine cameo work, many exacting processes were combined to produce this piece. Gallé's earlier work (Fig. 6), represented here by this small (5½ inch) scent bottle of the 1880's from the Outland Collection at Chrysler, shows the Islamic-Persian influence of enamelled glass made centuries earlier. As with cameo glass, here also the inner gathers of glass were textured to produce a variety of subtle effects suggesting perhaps veils of distance, perhaps even the medieval grisaille

Fig. 7

work of subtly modulated English cathedral glass.

Crab and starfish bask and probe among the feathery seaweed fronds of this superbly free, large, naturalistic Gallé dish (Fig. 7; D. 14¾ inches). In contrast to Gallé's tactile, high relief

treatments, everything is aquatically submerged, subtly and closely layered inside the glass as in a microscopic slide. Yet here again we see the Japanese influence: the sky reflected on the surface of the pond; even the ripples created by the shaping of the foot for this shallow bowl or dish.

Gallé's friendly rival, Auguste Daum, once again in cameo technique

Fig. 8

Fig. 9

subtly entwined two squashlike forms with delicately tinted vines and blossoms that may in fact be squash blossoms (Fig. 8). Both are turn of the century and both have Daum signatures including the Cross of Lorraine, with which both Daum and Gallé patriotically signed their pieces after the Franco-Prussian War ceded that former French province to Germany. Notice how the two vase forms complement each other by inversion. There is a veiled translucency in these lovely pieces that suggests alabaster.

The Daum chandelier (Fig. 9), manages with total assurance to combine bronze, elaborate leaded glass hydrangea panels, and translucent, speckled bulb shades, each signed Daum, Nancy, in the best Art Nouveau style. Note the repetition of the delicious floral pattern beneath the lights to soften their glare and scent the room with color. The diameter of this remarkable piece is 28 inches and it hangs 31½ inches high.

Daum could do Art Deco too, as we can see in this ruthlessly cut, perhaps sandblasted vase c. 1925-1930 (Fig. 10; H. 11 inches), which seems as much inspired by the Navaho as by cubism. A greenish tinge near the base suggests that it may have been made from plate glass. If anything typifies today's collector's idea of Art Deco, it might be this almost *kitsch*, 6-inch high vase in black, gray, and white, done in cameo and acid cut back and signed Argy-Rousseau, France (Fig. 11). The contrast of the limpid white figure with the severe geometrics of the rest of the vase was undoubtedly meant to startle. It says to the viewer that this girl with her bobbed hair is *modern*, or should we say moderne?

The severe, machine-age precision of much Art Deco glass is softened by the graceful curves in Frederick Carker's 15¾ inch high jade green peacock vase from Steuben (Fig. 12). Sometimes advertised as "sculptured" or "carved", these designs were actually achieved through acid etching of

Fig. 10

the interstices of the design, which was protected by a "wax ink" resist.

For me the best essence of Art Deco is obvious from the first glance at this clear glass Lalique vase (Fig 13; H. 7⅞ inches), said to have been made for the famous Paris Exposition of 1925. The vase is titled "Tourbillons", which can be translated as cyclone, tornado, or maelstrom. The black enamelled vortices of its design suggest to me the turning propellors of the French Line ships of the 1930's, which were themselves palaces of Art Deco design that included literally tons of etched glass panels and mirrors, glass lighting fixtures, glass ceilings, glass dance floors. Significantly, this vase recasts in three real dimensions the cubism that in painting was two-dimensional and illusionary, even if it is usually credited with being an inspiration for Art Deco. Another example of this

Fig. 11

Fig. 12

Fig. 13

marvelous vase is in the collections of the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, New York.

Many, though by no means all of the technical processes employed in the glass of the partially overlapping Art Nouveau and Art Deco periods (1880-1930) are being attempted by today's legion of mostly young Studio Glassmakers. But a good look at the Chrysler Collections should be enough to convince anyone that, with few exceptions, the Art Brand-Nouveau of today is a pale, stale apeing of what was once crammed with imagination and technical knowhow that characterizes the real thing. One can borrow from any source of any period, but an artist is impelled to transform what has been appropriated. Most of today's Studio Glassmaking has a long way to go, and in truly new directions if it is to satisfy tomorrow's collector. •