

AMERICAN craft

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Back Cover: Porcelain basket, 1984, ash and salt sprayed over black slip, 12½" high, by Tom Coleman. Story on page 15. Photograph by Erik Borg.

The American Craft Council is a national, nonprofit educational organization founded in 1943 by Aileen Osborn Webb to promote interest in contemporary crafts. In addition to publishing AMERICAN CRAFT magazine, the council maintains the American Craft Museum in New York City and sponsors a library and nationwide audiovisual service. Through its subsidiary, American Craft Enterprises, Inc., craft markets are presented in various parts of the country. Membership in the American Craft Council is open to all.

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GAS in Corning

The 610 participants at the Glass Art Society's 1984 annual conference, hosted by The Corning Museum of Glass, crammed the floor and bleachers of the Corning Glass Center's cavernous auditorium, traded ideas in the corridors, cafeterias and motel rooms, and generally burst the seams of the factory town of Corning, NY. The three-day gathering (May 16-19), whose exhaustive and exhausting agenda included some 77 speakers, was haunted by the specter of craft dressed as art. Speaker after speaker wrestled with craft/art distinctions. The art critic John Perreault, promising to settle the matter once and for all, dismissed the distinction by saying the real difference between craft and art is cost. "Before it is sold, craft is what can be touched by people who don't own it" (laughter). Nevertheless, Perreault felt impelled to dissect the question in 29 separate observations, while bravely taunting art criticism as a "sacred monster." In a milder vein, Bertil Vallien, the Swedish glass designer-artist for Kosta/Boda, observed that "In this society you have to be so dramatic. But good craft, good industrial design, when it is really good, is art."

The critic Clement Greenberg—champion of Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, Robert Motherwell—stated that glass has hardly any fine arts connotations as distinct from decoration and hasn't so far been taken seriously as a medium for fine art; while in point of aesthetic quality, glass objects made in the past have held their own with anything done in other decorative arts, and stained glass has taken its rightful place among the visual arts. Asking how a craft can "graduate" into a fine art, he answered: "By becoming full-fledged sculpture, as has been the case in ceramics since prehistoric times." Greenberg didn't hold out much hope that glass would "graduate" soon. As he went deeper into distinctions between the various arts and crafts—especially between what he termed "organized glass" and "free art," this reviewer became lost among observations expressed with opaque simplicity that chased each other full circle. But the rapt silence of the audience suggested that the listeners believed they were getting the word from on high.

While the status seekers for glass were jousting in their cumbersome armor, lancing here and there to the roar and gasps of the crowd, the real flesh of the conference was on view in a seemingly unending, eye-boggling series of slide presentations by glass "artists." These attractive and frequently articulate glassworkers recited their autobiographies and displayed their glass achievements like Olympic victors recalling their triumphs. The range of glass shown on the screen was more than ample proof of the rude health, incipient illness, and especially the stimulating chaos of the contemporary glass scene.

Though it was almost impossible to view all the slide presentations, a sampling of the more distinctive ones should include that given by Mark Peiser. Observing, "I had the perfect chance to reinvent the wheel," Peiser, who has discovered how to "minimize the element in glassworking that is a record of [his] performance," said he wants "to use color as volume," a challenging concept. Peter Aldridge, who designs one-of-a-kind pieces for Steuben, is using computers and generating new tools to design and machine glass. He spoke of glass

as the fourth dimension and of its affinity to music, sky, water. Dominick Labino, co-founder of the studio glass movement and its scientific guide for the past two decades, cautioned against being "long on art but short on technology." Disregard for chemical ingredients leads to disintegration of glass containing too little lime. A good, durable formula should contain 75% silica, 10% soda, and 15% lime. William Carlson spoke in rapid detail about a large paneled screen he produced for Skidmore, Owings and Merrill's Chicago Board Options Exchange. The screen is composed of many triangular panels in relief, 60 of which were produced each day and put in the annealer for a week together with their molds before being assembled and laminated.

A firsthand account of his long career by Andries Copier, artistic director of Holland's Leerdam factory, was something one is privileged to hear only once. Czech artist Frantisek Vizner's frank and realistic view of his own associations with working glass and his reverence for its potential forms was perhaps the high point of the whole conference. The talk was translated from Czech and read for Vizner by his friend, the great glass engraver Jiří Harcuba. The performance brought down the house.

One could go on and give high marks to many others, but that would leave no room to say what was wrong with this conference. With so many speakers jammed into three nine-hour days, the proceedings became a blur of voices, ideas and slides. Even with the aid of notes made in the dark, it was sometimes impossible to remember who had said what; and at the time, it was certainly not possible to think about it. Sagging of its own weight, the conference droned on without pause, and usually an hour behind schedule, making it difficult to attend discussions and demonstrations being held outside the auditorium. Worse, with one or two exceptions, there was no time for questions: one was simply given the word, even when it was the wrong word. It was largely a one-way conference, with the speakers high on the plat-

form, unable to see their own slides on the screen, and the receivers down in the dark, surrounded by the loud hubbub caused by members perpetually arriving and departing. Little time was left to use the incomparable resources of the museum's glass library, or to observe the glass collection itself and the remarkable Gallé exhibition currently on view.

But every gathering has its rewards. One of these was seeing the generally high quality in the students' exhibition—encouraging for the future of studio glass. Another was hearing Michael and Frances Higgins and Maurice Heaton (see page 50)—who were enameling and slumping glass decades before Littleton/Labino launched the studio glass movement—recount the heartbreaking stories of their struggles to pursue their craft. (An 80-foot colored glass window by the Higginses, commissioned for a bank, disappeared recently when the bank was remodeled.) Most bracing were three simultaneous critiques of slides of work produced by student members of GAS. The speed, deftness and gentleness with which the six critics exposed the flaws in the pieces shown and, while delicately leading the students to confess their various glass sins, reorganized the thinking of these young glassworkers, was inspiring to observe. The whole conference could better have been run along these lines: Show and tell, ask and listen.

—PAUL HOLLISTER

GAS members elected Susan Stinsmuehlen, president, Alice Rooney, secretary, Kate Elliott, treasurer, and Christine Robbins, editor of the *GAS Journal*. Also on the board are: David McFadden, Paul Marioni, Steve Maslach, Joel Myers and William Carlson.

New Orleans, LA, was chosen as the site of the 1985 conference. Two recent publications may be ordered from GAS, Box 1364, Corning, NY 14830: *Glass Art Society Journal* 1983-84, \$9.50 (\$11 outside U.S.) and *Photographic Directory* of members' work, \$8.50 (\$10 outside U.S.).



At the GAS conference, Corning. Top, left to right: John Perreault, Kim Levin, Clement Greenberg, Robert Kehlmann and Thomas Buechner. Bottom, left: Andries Copier holding up the Honorary Life Membership Award from GAS; right: Dominick Labino, glass artist.

PAUL PARKMAN