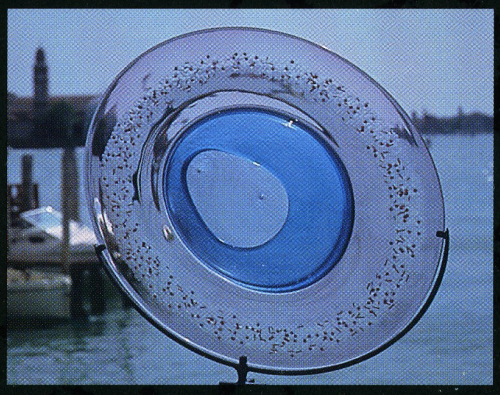
GLASS



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Stanislav Libenský and Jaroslava Brychtová

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The current retrospective exhibition of the work of Czech artists Stanislav Libenský (b. 1921) and Jaroslava Brychtová (b. 1924) at The Corning Museum of Glass marks the first time since the museum opened in 1951 that this prestigious repository of historical glass has mounted an exhibition devoted to a living artist — in this case a pair. The exhibition, subtitled "A 40-Year Collaboration in Glass," was organized by the museum and the Uměleckoprúmyslové Muzeum v Praze (Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague), and is also Corning's largest exhibition to date. But why Libenský and Brychtová? In short, because they are the best sculptors in glass. And the many specific reasons for their selection are evident in the evolving sequence of glasses these two remarkable artists have produced separately and together over half a century.

Today in the United States any handicraftsman who produces non-assembly line glass is considered an artist. But from an early age Libenský and Brychtová were truly immersed in the arts. Brychtová grew up in a family of artists closely associated with the Prague artistic scene. Her mother ran a workshop for hand-woven textiles, her father was a distinguished sculptor and co founder of the vocational glass school at Železný Brod in northern Bohemia, where she was born. Brychtová would later head the Architectural Glass Department at the Železný Brod glass factory. At this crossroads of European culture, Czech vocational and specialized craft schools had been established in the 19th century to emphasize the importance of technology and good design applied to well made objects for everyday use. Following her father, Brychtová decided to become a sculptor and eventually chose glass as her medium. Stanislav Libenský, the son of a blacksmith, showed early artistic promise and considered himself a painter. At the urging of one of his teachers he entered vocational schools at Nový Bor and Železný Brod, where he later taught students how to design glass, ultimately becoming the school's principal. Libenský and Brychtová met there and eventually married. Thereafter, in a country and a time of extraordinary change, the careers of both became fused to glass.

Providing adequate space for this mammoth exhibition required extensive reconstruction of both the upstairs lobby of the new museum and the adjoining old museum. The lobby, well known to all

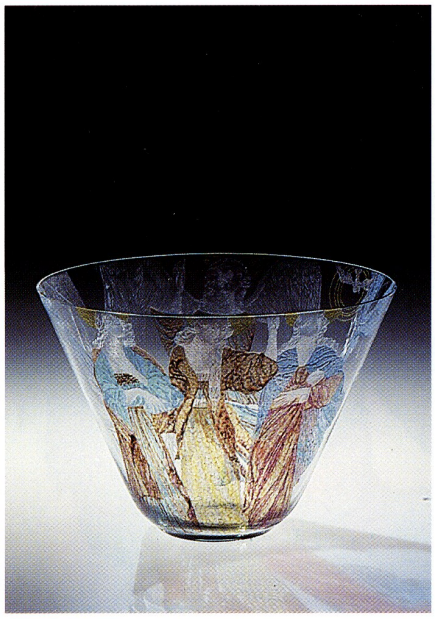
***Milking*, 1941, pâte de verre, 12 x 18 cm. Photo: Miroslav Vojtěchovský**

museum visitors (but now without its disorienting mirrors), features the Libenský/Brychtová 1979–80 *Meteor, Flower, Bird*. The wall between the old and new museums was replaced with glass, affording a view down into a new long gallery where black-and-white photographs of some of the couple's architectural commissions are displayed. In this new daylit gallery are displayed the chronology of early works, beginning with Brychtová's folk-inspired, charmingly rustic pâte de verre reliefs, composed in the mid-1940s at a time when she had absolutely no knowledge of the pâte de verre scenes and vessels that French glass artists Cros, Dammouse, Despret and others had made between 1900 and 1910; in fact she first saw pâte de verre at Corning in 1976. Her carefree reliefs were fused with discarded glass powders and show her considerable artistic talent.
At the same period, as head of the Nový Bor school's department of painted and

***HeadBowl/Miska*, 1955–56, molded glass, 11 x 30 cm. Collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague. Photo: George Erml.**

***Three Maries*, 1947, blown acid-etched enameled glass, 15 x 21.3 cm. Private collection. Photo: Nicholas Williams.**

stained glass, Libenský was creating designs in watercolor, gouache and ink for his students to reproduce on thin glasses of simple shapes. The designs were transferred to the glass using acid-etching techniques and were colored in brushed transparent enamels, a Germanic heritage from early 19th-century Austria. Biblical scenes begun in 1945, and historical subjects, clowns and animals inspired by the Lascaux and Altimira caves envelop the see-through circumference of the glasses in three-dimensional parades, now bold, now of gossamer delicacy, but always showing Libenský's concern with pictorial space. His *Last Supper* (1947) is set at a round table. His *Homage to the Bayeux Tapestry* (1946–1947) revitalizes the long horizontal tapestry, wrapping the imagery around the glass in a colorful, see-through sequence as if set in motion on film. In their different ways Mark Peiser and diamond-stippler Laurence Whistler have also solved this pictorial



space problem, but Libenský's pieces long went unsold.

Just beyond and in surprising contrast to these delicate delineations are Libenský's tall, colorless glass vases (1959–62) in spartan shapes encircled with lustered patterns of bold, cubistic black strokes and swatches in cool pastels and silky gray. Libenský/Brychtová's concern with cubism was deep-seated, never transitory, and increasingly involved not only the circumference of space but its interior, its mass. Their first collaboration began in 1955–56 with a Libenský sketch of a girl's head that Brychtová translated into clay, which was then cast in green glass in a mold. Animal reliefs followed, and in 1957–58 a mold-cast green glass head was made whose interior bears the sculpted features visible through to the outer surface. It was one of the stars of the landmark "Glass 1959" exhibition at The Corning Museum of Glass, demonstrating a revolutionary approach to the concept

***Head*, 1957–58, molded blue-gray glass, height, 35.5 cm. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass. Photo: Nicholas Williams.**

of space in sculpture. In the mid-1950s Brychtová cast her own series of vases in which the inner designs produce optical effects on the outer surfaces.

The exhibition includes a wall of very thick two-foot high panels of tinted and richly colored bubbly glass from the sixties; they are remarkable. The glass was cast in high relief from Libenský's drawings; their abstracted forms are vaguely suggestive of knights, church spires, African primitives, dancers and dungeons. The glass has the texture of hastily troweled but transparent cement. What these works accomplish is a new kind of stained-glass window of sculptural depth in which color and space are not painted but are integral to the glass. They go far beyond the chunky *dalles de verre* set in concrete by Le Corbusier at Ronchamp, and remind one of Frederick Carder's massively thick Pyrex castings in iron molds modeled about 1930 by the late Paul Gardner for the Rockefeller Plaza entrance to the former RCA building. In the Corning exhibition the panels are mounted with back lighting, and they curiously suggest the arcaded statues inside the central portal of Reims cathedral, where the French kings were crowned.

If the dry look of Libenský's tempera and gouache paintings is due to the fact that they only reflect light, the thick glass panels are sometimes two-ply, trapping light. In double-layered *Blue Concretion*, commissioned for Expo 1967 Montreal, one can see in, between the front and back panels — as though peering into the wings backstage — to see what makes the frontal view so mysterious.

In his small sculptures of the 1970s Tom Patti first sphered the cube and later cubed the sphere. In 1980–81 Libenský/Brychtová produced *Cube in a Sphere*, a solid the size of a soccer ball, cast in molds with the cube, actually a square-section bar, at the center. As one moves

around the piece the curve of the sphere distorts the path of the bar, making it appear to widen at the far end in an illusion of reverse perspective. Observe the bar from the other end and the same thing happens. One could never confuse these bold and bubbly geometrical prestidigitations with the flawless Steuben crystal sculpture of Dowler, Aldridge and Hilton.

Some of Libenský/Brychtová's well-known sculptures are here, including *Heart/Red Flower* (1976), a compelling four-foot high replica of the original created for the Czech Embassy in New Delhi. But the big surprise comes when we move on into what used to be the large and unexciting cafeteria. Here the false ceiling has been removed, adding a couple of feet in height to the room and exposing all the ducts and other apparatus, which have been painted black. The effect is something like a Libenský painting waiting for Brychtová to turn it into glass. This great space is arranged with long, low counters on which the massive sculptures of the late 1980s flex and repose like Herculean athletes. Amply separated, each piece can be studied from all angles, something that is not true of most exhibited sculpture.

Empty Throne (1989) suggests a medieval slit-embrasure ripped from its setting. It has overtones of the hanging castle garderobe that, having dumped its contents, stands cold and unoccupied. *Astride* (1987–88) is one of several large, tablelike forms. Fully five feet long, it supports, forces upwards, stretches and strides in a muscular interplay of planes and contours. When viewed at certain angles, northern lights play through its form. Daylight bathes all these pieces and to appreciate their varied optics one should keep moving around, observing them from different angles. The best of these sculptures have the same inevitable authority as Henry Moore's work.

***Paříž* (one of 12 panels), 1962–64, molded colored glass, 61 x 28 cm. Collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague. Photo: Gabriel Urbánek.**

***Silhouettes of the Town III*, 1989, molded "safirin" glass, height, 50 cm. Collection of the artists. Photo: George Goral.**

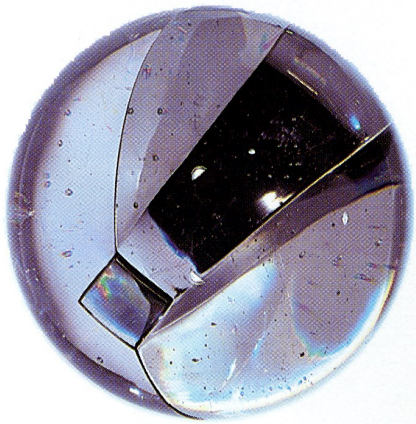
***Prism in a Sphere*, 1978, molded clear glass, diameter, 30 cm. Collection of The Corning Museum of Glass. Photo: Nicholas Williams.**

All photographs courtesy The Corning Museum of Glass.

A group of standing pieces, each titled *Diagonal*, are cleaved at steep angles, opening colored passageways to — where? When one goes to the other side to see, the answer is unexpected, and we have to start over again in reverse. The rich tonal changes of even cast gray glass enhance our exploration of each piece; each work seems alive in its uncertainties. Against the end wall of the exhibition a waist-high shelf supports three *Silhouettes of the Town*, from 1989, the year of Czech liberation. In these three fierce heads — their blue dichroic glass changes color from milky caramel to anger pink to "safirin" (sapphire) blue — we see the anguish of a town. But between us and the silhouette heads stand the *Diagonal Shields*, like troops moving against the people to quell rebellion. The pointed juxtaposition of those two groups may not have been intended; it may simply have worked out that way, but it cries out to me.

Throughout this area, one can explore the visual/psychological journeys through each piece: how it catches the light, what that particular contour suggests, why the rough flange is formed where the glass was squeezed by the jaws of the mold. Each sculpture is intriguing even if one does not understand the political and psychological terrain under which these marvelous presences were produced. Each one stands on its own: baffling, perhaps, yet affirmative of itself by itself. These are sculptures in their own right; barriers melt and the impact of the work is evident in its color and mass. Where currently popular minimalist art strips the image to nakedness, these sculptures grow in meaning before your eyes, because Libenský and Brychtová have reduced them to their most basic, primordial terms.

The exhibition runs from April 23 to October 16, 1994.



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writes frequently on glass from his home in New York.