

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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THIRTY-FIVE CENTURIES OF GLASS ART

AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

Washington, D.C., November 1, 1990 -- An exhibition of artistic and historic works in glass will be presented in the East Building of the National Gallery of Art, December 9, 1990 through March 17, 1991. The Art of Glass: Masterpieces from The Corning Museum comprises 121 outstanding pieces drawn from the most comprehensive collection of glass in the world at The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York. The exhibition surveys nearly thirty-five centuries of constantly evolving glassmaking technology and stylistic trends, from ancient Egyptian, Roman, Islamic, and Asian cultures through contemporary American and European examples.

"Glass, which is one of the most delicate and also one of the hardest of materials, can be fashioned into innumerable forms. Some of the most elaborate glass shapes ever created will be on display," said J. Carter Brown, director, National Gallery of Art.

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The earliest examples of glass, such as the exhibition's oldest object, the Egyptian Core-formed vase from c. 1400-1350 B.C., were very difficult to manufacture and, consequently, exceedingly valuable. Glass vessels were often used for storing precious substances such as perfume. Their varied shapes, hues, and decorative treatments reveal a high level of craftsmanship.

By the first century B.C. the discovery of glassblowing allowed artists and craftsmen to produce glass objects in large numbers and provided them with much more flexibility of form. With examples of glass made to emulate hard stones such as onyx and agate as well as delicate diamond-engraved transparent glass, the exhibition illustrates the almost endless artistic possibilities of this simple material made from sand, ashes, and lime.

Among the most famous pieces in the exhibition is the Disch Kantharos, a fourth-century stemmed cup with an elaborate openwork cage of clear glass, found in Cologne in 1866. Also on exhibit is the well-known Hedwig beaker, one of the fourteen extant eleventh- or twelfth-century beakers associated with Saint Hedwig. From a glass like this one, according to legend, the patron saint of Silesia drank water that turned into wine.

In the following centuries Venice would become the center of European glassmaking, as attested by the refinement of pieces such as the Behaim beaker, in enameled and gilt glass. By the 1500s the entire continent was following Venice's lead.

By the 1800s, in Russia, even sets of furniture were being produced in solid glass. Around 1808, Thomas de Tomon, a French designer working at the Russian court in St. Petersburg, created a table in glass and gilt bronze. This Table will be the only furniture piece in the exhibition.

The development of small furnaces in the early 1960s provided glass artists with an heretofore unknown freedom, allowing them to work on their own, without leaving their studios. Today, unique pieces such as Jay Musler's Cityscape and Dale Chihuly's Macchia Sea-form hint at the possibilities still being uncovered in the creative exploration of glassmaking.

The Art of Glass: Masterpieces from The Corning Museum has been organized by The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, and the National Gallery of Art. The pieces in the exhibition were selected from the museum's collection of more than 24,000 objects by Corning staff members Dwight P. Lanmon, director and curator of European glass; David Whitehouse, curator of ancient and Islamic glass; Jane Shadel Spillman, curator of American glass; and Susanne K. Frantz, curator of twentieth-century glass.

In conjunction with the exhibition, a revised and enlarged edition of Robert J. Charleston's Masterpieces of Glass has been published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., New York.

The Art of Glass: Masterpieces from The Corning Museum was featured at the IBM Gallery, in New York, December 12, 1989 through February 2, 1990.