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A Personal View of the Development of Studio Glass in the UK.

The Beginning

I discovered the existence of studio glass making quite by accident when I came across The Glasshouse in Covent Garden in London in the early 1970's. It was the first glass studio in this country set up in 1969 by Sam Herman initially as a place for RCA students to continue working after completing their college course. I immediately enrolled on an evening glassmaking course at the Glasshouse and then went on to study glass full time at Stourbridge College of Art.

Glass blowing facilities and Learning

At the time glass making facilities outside the industry were to be found almost entirely in colleges such as the Royal College of Art, Stourbridge, Farnham, Leicester, and Staffordshire, but the technical expertise initially came from the factories. Orrefors in Sweden was a very important international learning centre for some of the leading early studio glassmakers such as Pauline Solven, Ray Flavell, David Taylor and David Kaplan. Orrefors experimental and modern approach to design, and attitude to women in the factory, aided this. The same could have been said, in design terms, of Royal Brierley Crystal up to the first World War, and briefly in the 1930's with Keith Murray designs, after which they became mainly pre-occupied with traditional clear cut glass.
In the 1970's Stourbridge College of Art although it was one of the first BA courses in glass had an open experimental approach that was not too tightly structured. As students we benefited from the broad range of knowledge and pragmatic experimental approach of lecturers such as Keith Cummings, George Elliot and John Smith, and the sound technical input of industry. On visits to the Brierley Hill Glass School (which had originally been set up as day release for glass factory apprentices, before it became the International Glass Centre) we were instructed in glassblowing by Colin Gill, and cold working and glass technology.

Royal Brierley Crystal

As a furnace in the early 70's was basically a box of bricks with a burner in the side glass quality varied enormously. (See Ray Flavell's 1974 book 'Studio Glassmaking'.) For the cutting, enamelling and electro-plating that I was experimenting with on my blown forms this was not entirely helpful, so Keith arranged for me to use a spare bench at Royal Brierley when they did an over- time shift from 6 till 9 on Saturday mornings. This lead to a fascinating two year stint at the factory as an artist in residence after finishing college and enabled me to witness both positive and negative aspects of the industry. The factory had an amazing history going back to the mid 18th century, for much of which it
had been at the forefront of innovation in design and technology. This could be seen in their wonderful on site museum, sadly sold by Sotheby's in 1998, and an amazing archive of design drawings, moulds, tools and photographs. Also being a family firm a number of older 'retired' makers were still around with great knowledge to impart. On the negative side design meetings were no longer about innovation but distributing work among the various teams of makers. Glass making itself had almost become a 'time and motion study' and was not fully exploiting or extending the skill of their workers.

Image 1. – Black and Red line Range.

This is an early loosely repeated range that I continued to make with variations in form and decoration for many years.

The Glasshouse

In 1980 I was invited to join the Glasshouse as a maker. With still very few hot glass studios in existence this was a wonderful opportunity for me. The Glasshouse also had its own gallery so one was able to learn about the sale and promotion of one's work, with the support of the experienced Glasshouse members - Annette Meech, David Taylor, Steven Newell, Fleur Tookey and Christopher Williams.
The Glasshouse had for the time a very well equipped studio for both hot and cold glass working . David Taylor had introduced the first open pot furnace in the mid 70's, which also used waste heat from the furnace to heat the lehr. As there was very little choice Dartington cullet and Kugler colour were used by nearly everyone at the time.
The association with the great Whitefriars glassmaker Ronnie Wilkinson with the Glasshouse had a huge impact on the passing on of skills to studio makers such as Simon Moore, Bob Crooks, and James Watts. Ronnie worked there fulltime after Whitefriars closed down – the first major factory to do so.
The 2008 CAA catalogue for the exhibition 'The Glasshouse and Its Tree' graphically illustrates the huge extent of this influence.

Image 2. – Cut Round Bottle (Diameter 6-7cm.)

In the early 1980's I made this blown and cut spherical bottle. It was to be the first of many pieces on this theme.
In 1985 Simon Moore, Steven Newell and I set up Glass-Works where we worked together for the next few years. Technology was improving all the time with better furnace insulation, more sophisticated burners and temperature controls, larger gloryholes, top loading kilns for warming colour, better annealing, torches for cane work, security alarms for if the furnace went out. This broadened the scope and quality of our work but meant studios cost a great deal more to set up and run.
The availability of cold working equipment had always been a bit sparse outside college departments which usually had at least a lathe, flat bed grinder, linisher, diamond saw, and sandblaster. As is often the case my individual style really developed when I was able to set up the equipment I needed myself. Later the development of diamond technology transformed coldworking in both factories and studios, but in many cases enhanced rather than replaced traditional techniques.

Image 3. – Flight.

This piece represents a continuous series of large scale non functional asymmetrical carved, blown glass sculptural forms.
Growth of Studios and Marketing.
The Glasshouse had its own gallery with the workshop behind which was very valuable in helping the public to appreciate what went into our work. But they, as did the rest of us who did not have a gallery, still had to work hard at marketing our glass. Most selling had to be done in person by sending slides, and making appointments to visit and show work to a gallery owner. The British Craft Centre (later renamed Contemporary Applied Arts), Crafts Council Gallery and V&A Shop, and the Crafts Council list of recommended galleries were the outlets we targeted. There were a small number of international exhibitions, most notably the Coberg Glass Prize in Germany in 1977 where Steven Newell gained recognition. The US, Sweden, Holland, and later Japan were also good markets.

As studio glass became more recognized in the early 80's there were areas in large trade shows that became suitable for us to show our work. The Crafts Council took mixed groups of makers to shows such as the New York Gift Fair (Home Made and Accent on Design) and the huge Frankfurt Fair in Germany. The US customers particularly liked British studio glass, it having a distinctive practical style that differed from their own. Trade shows such as Top Drawer and 100% Design in London and shows at the NEC in Birmingham and Harrogate were also available to us. Prestigious stores like Liberty, the Conran Shop and Heals in London, and Barneys in New York and Tokyo began stocking our work too, reflecting growing recognition of studio production.
The Crafts Council created a major direct selling event with the Chelsea Craft Fair, (now Origin) and many others have followed. More recently direct selling and internet communication have had a huge influence on the way we promote our work.

Through the 80's and 90's growth continued in the number of studios, college courses, assistant jobs in studios and CC grants to help graduates get started. The skills transfer from the factories to the studios, particularly through Ronnie Wilkinson, had continued. While the studios went from strength to strength by the late 90's the glass industry in this country had more or less vanished.

Meanwhile skills in factories had been moving further and further eastward from Czechoslovakia and Poland to Thailand and China. Imported glass became ridiculously cheap and increased in range to include complex colour techniques that had previously been almost entirely the preserve of the studios. With the ever rising costs for studio makers the difference in selling prices were huge, and very confusing to the buying public. Unless a gallery person was very knowledgeable about glass it was difficult for them to explain this confusion and justify the price differences to customers. For studio makers to create something unique in style and technique, and economically viable is an ever increasing challenge.

Image 4. – Spherical Form 6 on Black Base.
(Diameter of Sphere 25cm.)

With this fairly recent series of work I revisited the sphere as a much larger hollow form that is carved through to reveal the interior. The sphere has no fixed base so it can be placed at any angle in a hollow carved into the base.

The many challenges of the new millennium.
The pressure of ever rising costs of gas, rents, raw materials, etc. etc. make it increasingly difficult to balance the cost of making orders and devoting time to experimentation to develop new work and maintain creativity. This of course is exacerbated by shrinking markets and cheap imports.
The picture in colleges is also grim with battles against course closures, glass courses becoming part of general craft courses thus severely reducing the time spent working on glass, and both full and part time staff numbers being severely reduced. Compared with the days when Stourbridge had Keith Cummings, George Elliot and John Smith full time and Stan Gill or another master glassblower from the local industry one day a week in the glass department, or Farnham who had Ray Flavel and Stephen Proctor full time and Annette Meech and Chris Williams part time, it is difficult to see how standards are to be maintained.
Added to this tightly structured courses and the requirement for supervision when using equipment mean less experimentation and furnace time for students. This appears to undermine the value of skill and personal experimentation in the creative process.

Students hampered by huge debts when leaving college, and a decline in the number of studios able to offer jobs for assistants, leaves students with fewer options to start a career as a maker.

Image 5. – Which Way To Go?

This is part of a new series of pieces using sandblasted imagery enabling me to express my interest in wildlife and photography, and environmental concerns. Which Way To Go? highlights the difficult choices to be made between sustainable green energy sources, nuclear fuel and the protection of wildlife. Hopefully the answers to this question will not make glass makers an endangered species!

Conclusions

We certainly face huge challenges in terms of changing markets, education cuts and sustainable energy use.

Group workshops such as Peter Layton's London Glassblowing, which has provided opportunities for a diverse range of makers, on a model similar to that of The Glasshouse with workshop and gallery together, is an excellent way forward.

Research such as that by Ian Hankey to simplify furnace technology and radically reduce fuel consumption is also vital.

I feel extremely fortunate that I became involved with glass when I did. Since leaving college I have worked continuously as a designer maker creating work based on free blown glass forms which are then transformed through the use of a wide range of cold working techniques. An essential element of this journey has always been to learn, adapt and evolve according to my own circumstances and aspirations, and the ever changing environment in which we live. I do however believe we all have a duty to keep alive the skills we have inherited by using them in new and innovative ways, and passing them on to others.