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The pursuit of exceptional typicality: glass-making in Communist Czechoslovakia

Czech glass caught my very soul around ten years ago and has held it ever since. Historian Verena Wasmuth's phrase 'attempts at structuring transparent mass'¹ captures some of the magic found in these objects, but for me they are attempts at structuring much more than their physical properties. My current PhD research at the V&A and Royal College of Art concerns Czech glass, furniture, film, animation, and interiors, made between the late 1940s and 1960s. It's a far-reaching material breadth that allows me to forge a narrative path through the craft and design of this complex political period. I was delighted to share my research with the Glass Circle on the 17 March 2016, focusing on glass production under Communism in former Czechoslovakia. Here I will touch upon a few of the examples and themes that the talk addressed, focusing on three glass makers.

Czech glass figurines are a good place to start: these small protagonists of the mantelpiece, cabinet, and shelf bring together stories much bigger than their physical selves. Of particular interest are those made in the northern Czech town of Železný Brod, a glass-making region since the sixteenth century. National enterprise Železnobrodské sklo was established here in 1948, the year the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia came to power in the aftermath of Nazi occupation. Production drew upon the cottage industry of creating glass rods or tubes over kerosene or gas-fired blast lamps local to the region. The Communist government built upon this history, not only centralising regional craft and production within a state enterprise but also absorbing the national form of lamp-worked glass into the Communist narrative, commandeering glass as

by
*Rebecca
Bell*

a component that could support socialist history and promote successful state production. Two artists making glass figurines that became part of this weighty narrative were Jaroslav Brychta and Miloslav Klinger.

Brychta, father of the well-

known Jaroslava Brychtová, had been teaching in Železný Brod since 1920 and his work shows how preceding debates around craft and design played out under Communism. His figurines were well-known and loved in the Czech Republic during the



ABOVE: Fig. 1
Jaroslav Brychta
Female Circus Rider,
1935



RIGHT: Fig. 2
Jaroslav Brychta
from the Aquarium
collection, 1933

interwar and postwar periods, connecting to the Symbolist movement, debates around the quality of craftsmanship in objects for the home, and ideas of 'typically Czech' glass. As decorative and collectable objects they also occupy an interesting position in the Czech art and design hierarchy: historian Susanne K. Frantz stated that '...their acclaim should not be mistaken for aesthetic consideration within the Czech Fine Art Academia'². Any lack of acclaim is, I believe, due to the fact that they were (and are still) collected not only by museums but also by individual purchasers of small means. Brychta's designs and those of his students became key players in the success story of Czechoslovakian glass exportation under the Communist government, their figurines featured regularly on the covers and pages of *Czechoslovak Glass Review*. The latter made them important to the post-war Czechoslovak socialist production story, creating a place of discomfort between their having both a Communist affiliation as exported Eastern Bloc 'kitsch' and connections to interwar Czechoslovak art and design activity, of which Czech scholarship is rightly so proud. In some ways, the figurines created an intellectual continuum whereby debates around the roles of applied art, craft and industry were kept active even in their new socialist context.

Amongst this debate was the search for a type of objects that could fulfil both the needs of socialist design in Czechoslovakia while continuing the interests of the designers and theorists within their restricted political circumstances. Central to my research is the use of the phrase 'exceptional typicality', sourced from a 1952 talk at the Czechoslovak Writers' Club by Soviet professor Myasnikov

when trying to explain what the new socialist hero should be: idealised, realistic, or, as the idea of exceptional typicality implies, both?³ This idea recurs in many forms throughout cultural debate in the period under survey and is about the quest for something extraordinary that can be contained within the socialist design requirements. Glass raises its head repeatedly as an example of a medium that can achieve this. Both the maker, the glass worker, and the object become part of a quest for a kind of socialist hero. An early example of this in Communist Czechoslovakia was Brychta's 1948 animation *Inspirace* (Inspiration), made with film-maker Karel Zeman, a stop-motion animation featuring flame-worked glass figures. A feat of inventiveness and detail, each figure had to be heated and re-shaped for every frame. *Inspirace* is a celebration of the maker, of creativity and, most importantly, of Czech glass. In the aftermath of Nazi occupation, filled with

the optimism of a return to a free Republic, this animation can be seen as the heralding of the restoration of the glass industry – and indeed of a Czech identity. The film begins with the dedication: 'This film is dedicated to those who transform hard material glass into the magical poetic images of ideas – Czech glassmakers'. The hero in *Inspirace* is the romantic glass artist, working alone in his studio, looking out into nature. The hero in *Inspirace* is the romantic glass artist, working alone in his studio, looking out into nature. Similar figures to those featuring in the animation can be seen in the Museum of Glass and Jewellery, Jablonec nad Nisou (figs 1 and 2), the collection's glass horses and fish show clear precedent for the *Inspirace* characters.

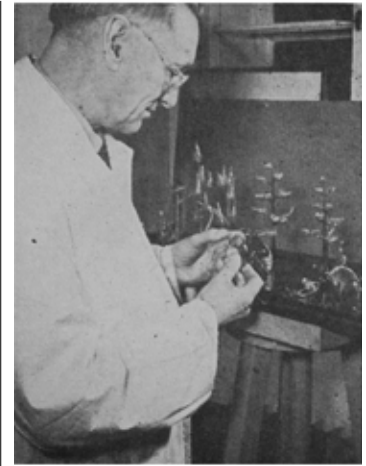
By 1958, we have another portrait which shows the transition of the role of maker under Communism in Czechoslovakia, this time an image of Brychta himself cast as a socialist design hero (fig. 3). A 1958 *Czechoslovak Glass Review* article

BELOW: Fig. 1
Jaroslav Brychta
Female Circus Rider,
1935





LEFT TO RIGHT:
Figs. 4a, b & c
Miloslav Klinger, Ladislav
Ouhrabka and
Jaroslav Brychta
'Brussels Reporting',
Czechoslovak Glass
Review, 1958



entitled 'Brussels Reporting' contains illustrations showing both Brychta and his colleague Miroslav Klinger in white coats working on their glass figurines (figs. 4a, b & c) at the Brussels Expo 58, the international Trade Fair where Czechoslovak glass made its name with great success⁴. The white coat, seen in many depictions of Soviet designers at this time, implies the artist is working in a scientific manner to find solutions to the cultural needs

of their country. It is interesting, then, that the work Brychta is making in the photograph is *Universe*, in collaboration with Jan Černý and Ladislav Ouhrabka, containing figures representing the mystical signs of the zodiac. They continue the legacy of Brychta's earlier figurines in their humorous content; glass curator Karel Hetteš from the Museum of Decorative Arts (UPM), Prague, described the figures as 'grotesque', and in so doing

puts his finger on some of their main attributes: they are comic, exaggerated and whimsical in their forms and expressiveness⁵. Whilst these characteristics make a marked contrast to many of the other glass works at Brussels, they are key to the Czech cannon and show Brychta's satirical heritage, evoking the form and content of Josef Lada's illustrations for *The Good Soldier Švejk* (1923). Scientist and humour make an unlikely marriage in this popular

BELOW: Fig. 5
Cameraman and
Girls in Swimsuits,
after 1957
School of
Železný Brod



© Museum of Glass and Jewellery photos by Ales Kosina



LEFT: Fig. 6 Jaroslav Brychta from the Aquarium collection, 19

Czechoslovak form that becomes incorporated in the official Communist design narrative. (figs 5 & 6)

Another artist making figurines and working on the glass 'type' was the aforementioned Miloslav Klinger, whose impact on the socialist Czech glass story is also significant though he is less remembered in literature in the field. Klinger succeeded Stanislav Libenský as director of the Železný Brod glass school in 1963, increasing flame-worked production and larger-scale innovations. In the late 1940s and early 1950s when the socialist realist style was the dominant ideological form demanded of art and design in Czechoslovakia, Klinger made figurines that fitted into this type whilst developing the Czech form that preceded this doctrine. His figurines, such as *Girl* from 1950 (figs 7, 8 & 9), explored movement and expressiveness whilst depicting idealised life, supporting the notion of a march towards a perfect Communist future, life as it could be rather than as it was⁶. He was the perfect candidate to make commemorative glass gymnast figurines to accompany

BELOW FAR LEFT: Fig. 7 *Girl*, Miloslav Klinger, around 1950

BELOW LEFT: Fig. 8 *Girl with goslings*, Miloslav Klinger, 1950

BELOW: Fig. 9 *Sledger*, Miloslav Klinger, 1946-1947



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ABOVE: Fig. 10
Spartacus,
Miloslav Klinger.
Glassgymnast
figurines created for
the First All-Stage
Spartakiad, Prague.
Images from *Tvar*,
issue 5, 1955

the mass-exercise Spartakiad event in Prague in 1955 (fig. 10). Named after Spartacus, gladiator and leader of the slave uprising, these synchronised gymnastics had taken place in Moscow since 1928 and overlapped with an older form of Czech patriotic gymnastics, Sokol, founded in 1862. The bourgeois associations of Sokol, forged in the Capitalist past, were explicitly rejected in the 1950s despite apparent visual similarities, and Klinger's glass gymnasts mark this transition. Czech writer Vladimir Macura outlines a semiotic reading of the gymnasts that were depicted by Klinger, where 'emblems of work became emblems of beauty, gymnasts became images of flowers, connecting aesthetics to images of labour'⁷. As such their movements aimed to reach perfection, not repressing actions but ultimately, according to writer Marie Majerová's 1955 description,

'cleansing' them of 'unsightly involuntary movements'⁸. Klinger's gymnasts represented an attempt to stabilise power through symbolic action⁹, becoming what writer on gymnastics Petr Roubal calls a 'body language of obedience' to the Socialist mass: doing '...what all its fascist predecessors did with the same problem: it aestheticised politics'¹⁰.

Klinger's glass gymnast figurines brought this ideology to the mantelpiece but were also a means of utilising the medium of glass to convey movement, as much a celebration of material possibility as Brychta's animation *Inspirace*. As well as meeting approval with his socialist realist work, Klinger's figurines increased in scale and won recognition at the Brussels Expo, marking the post-Stalinist 'thaw' transition to an emphasis on the 'socialist modern' style. Housing and hotel interiors became a key site for this

to play out: Klinger's glass bird screen for the Hotel International in Brno, built in 1962 (fig. 11), demonstrates his continuing role in locating a type suitable for the socialist public realm whilst finding spaces of exploration for Czech glass. This time the modern was recontextualised by State-organised initiatives, aiming to demonstrated Czechoslovakia's forward-looking design and production ability in order to create an 'exceptional' and 'typical' design hero, an iconic design object.

As well as forms and methods, individual makers were re-purposed to demonstrate socialist design success and create an aspirational type such as glass artist Emanuel Beránek and his glassworks, Škrdlovice (fig. 12). In 1954 Beránek's full-page image was published in key publication *5,000 Years of Glass-Making*, by Jaroslav R. Vávra, showing the glass maker as working-class man, rough-shod and apparently in a workshop, but making something of great beauty and intricacy. Beránek's story was one of triumph over adversity, using waste glass and limited materials during the 1940s to make innovative objects. Even though his initial success came before the State centralisation of his firm within ÚLUV (the Centre for Folk Art Production), his glassworks were held up as an example of the ways in which glass artists could successfully work with factories to create pioneering objects within a centralised system. Beránek's 1954 portrait shows the transition away from romantic artist to a socialist type.

BELOW: Fig. 11
Hotel International,
Brno, Jaroslava
Brychtová and
Stanislav Libenský's
1962 decorative
glass screen



© Rebecca Bell



Beránek is typical and accessible in his everyman appearance, but exceptional in his ability: a proud Czech glassmaker used as a means of promoting the success of an organisation like ÚLUV and resulting models of industry which aimed to bring together ethnographic research and craft processes to create new forms for the socialist modern interior.

The common thread in writing around this area is that as a medium, glass 'roused less suspicion': craft and industry were 'assumed to be incapable of subversion'¹¹. The latter is also part of a continued debate around the hierarchy of art and design that can be tracked to the assertions of Gottfried Semper in the 19th century, the influence of the British Arts & Crafts Movement, and the Bauhaus: related notions around the role of craft, the decorative, function and relationships between artists, makers, design, and industry were actively engaged with by relevant writers and thinkers in Czechoslovak regions. In terms of glass industry practice post-1948, this is a story of intelligent or conscious assimilation, not just a blind official rhetoric: under Communism. I believe artists and designers brought together

interwar and postwar techniques, theories, and interests and in so doing contributed another strand to this proposed idea of 'exceptional typicality' – using a combination of exploration and accepted socialist types to take forward ongoing design aims. The 'transparent mass' of Czech glass reveals many more structures by which their socio-political context can be understood than may appear at first sight, as well as insights into wider design debates under Communism during this period.

At the end of my talk for the Glass Circle, a small section of which I have attempted to communicate here, the audience contributed personal experiences, historical knowledge, and technical understanding in connection to glass and Czechoslovakia that were deeply helpful to my research. The kind invitations to factories and studios have not been forgotten, I look forward to taking them up in the near future.

The author would like to thank Petr Nový from the Museum of Glass and Jewellery Jablonec nad Nisou for his help with providing images. The co-hosts for the evening were John Newgas and Lawrence Trickey.

ABOVE: Fig. 12
Vladimír Jelinek
and Emanuel
Beránek, *Plate
with Abstract
Decoration*,
Škrdlovice
Glassworks, 1957.

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