

GLASS MENAGERIE

The Blaschkas' models of fragile sea creatures were a gift to natural history, says Wolf Reiser

May 1853. Thirty-one-year-old Leopold Blaschka is on board a ship bound for North America. His father and wife have died recently, in quick succession. On the high seas, the days between oblivion and a new beginning drift by, as in a trance. Lost in thought, Blaschka stares into the depths of the Atlantic and, quite by chance, witnesses the surreal nocturnal ballet of a colony of *pelagia noctiluca* – jellyfish that glow in the dark. The next day he notes in his logbook: “Then a tiny creature appears, right in front of us, in a garish, greenish light, growing bigger and bigger. All the while a dark speck, probably a fish, is darting about among the luminous creatures. It is as if they wanted to entice the enchanted onlooker into a magical world.” Without knowing precisely why, Leopold begins to follow the enchantment, filling his sketchbook with pictures of the exotic marine creatures.

For generations, Blaschka had been a leading name among the glassblowers of Northern Bohemia (now included in the Czech Republic), whose forest huts had been as much a part of the traditional scenery as the watermills and charcoal burners' huts had been since the twelfth century. Every one of the dynasties there had its

Father and son model-makers Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka created sea creatures from glass. The models were used to fill empty aquaria in the days before these delicate animals could be kept alive in captivity. The Blaschkas also made educational models of microscopic organisms such as radiolarian (above). Among the Blaschkas' subjects were squid and octopus including *Octopus vulgaris* (right); *Tremoctopus velifer* (following page) and (page 25, clockwise from top left) *Argonauta argo*, octopus; *Histioteuthis bonelliana*, squid; *Onychia platyptera*, squid; *Sepia officinalis*, squid



own particular way of using wood, pebbles, quartz, and lead oxide to produce a range of functional items, cheap everyday decorations, or exquisite ornaments. And these family recipes were guarded like precious treasures. The Blaschkas quickly became established among the glassmaking elite, the opulent crystal chandeliers, exquisitely cut glasses, and gilded, colored goblets finding their way into the palatial residences of aristocratic society. From an early age, Leopold – who also trained as a goldsmith and gemcutter after school – had a strong urge to break new ground. He went for endless walks, sketching ferns, plants, and flowers that he transformed at home into elegantly shimmering glass ornaments. In 1857, the year his son Rudolf was born, he began making life-size, and astonishingly lifelike, glass models of orchids, amazing academic experts and private collectors. Dresden's natural history museum gave his work the ultimate accolade when it invited him to move to the area, providing him with a villa and a new studio in a village on the Elbe.

With his precise, naturalistic synthesis of solid craftsmanship and avant-garde art, Blaschka anticipated the spirit of the late nineteenth century. This was a period obsessed with researching and measuring – activities that were undertaken with an almost colonial fervor; science faculties and museums were springing up across the world's major cities. The Blaschkas, with their lifelike, hyper-precise glass objects, were ideally suited to the moment. Around 1870, Rudolf began working with his father, and the pair soon achieved widespread fame, with clients in Japan, India, and the U.S.A.

Although he was mainly occupied with various plant models, Leopold suddenly recalled the magical marine world, the spectacular submarine light show, the dancing polka of cuttlefish, squid, and octopus. A huge marine aquarium was constructed so that the Blaschkas could replicate the world of marine invertebrates with microscopic precision. The glassmaking duo returned the favor by creating phenomenal glass objects, breathtakingly lifelike sea anemones, sea snails, marine annelids, polyps, diatoms, sponges – and, of course, again and again, those mysterious dancing jellyfish.

On the one hand they provided researchers and scientists with objects more minutely lifelike than anything seen before; at the same time they gave humanity a glimpse of life as it must have been in our original oceanic home. For romantics they made the transitory eternal, and for collectors they furnished fascinating unique pieces of the highest artistic quality. To put it simply, the Blaschkas revolutionized art, craft, and science simultaneously, with a light touch, incredible elegance, and a talent bordering on the divine. Leopold responded politely to experts who voiced suspicions: “Many people believe that we possess some kind of mysterious

apparatus. This is not the case. We possess only the requisite skill – of which my son possesses more, because he is my son.”

During their heyday the pair were producing with intuitive ease, plying their craft with the practiced, unthinking efficiency of a Swiss clock mechanism. While Leopold worked with the larger pieces of glass, focusing from the start on the assembly of the overall composition, Rudolf took care of the intricate details, the tiny decorative elements, the surface finish, and the final, magical design effects.

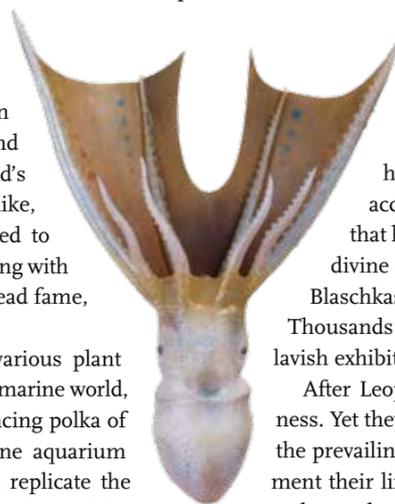
When George Lincoln Goodale, the director of the legendary Harvard Botanical Museum, visited the Blaschkas in 1886, he could not in any way connect what he saw happening before him with the finished objects he knew. He stood there, stupefied, in a dark hut full of glass tube fragments, crude worktables, spools of copper wire, saltpetre, cups of salt and pigment, ancient bellows, tubs of cooling water, tin pots full of poisonous oxides, pans of potash, and blazing crucible furnaces. Speechless, he observed the incredible skill with which the two masters kept control of the process amid

the sweltering chaos of the workshop: heating, blowing, shaping, fusing – timed to the second, mixing countless colors with meticulous care, combining layers of different thickness to create a textured surface, and handling the finest copper wires with minute accuracy to create fins, gills, eyes. Goodale felt that he was witnessing something like the process of divine creation. From 1890 onward he contracted the Blaschkas to work exclusively for Harvard University. Thousands of plant and animal models were made, and lavish exhibition catalogs document the pair's productivity.

After Leopold died in 1895, his son took over the business. Yet they had never hired or trained apprentices, and in the prevailing culture of secrecy they simply forgot to document their life's work and all their private discussions. The result was that when Rudolf Blaschka died, childless, in 1939, the dynasty's accumulated expertise was buried with him in the family grave near Dresden. Many of the original drawings were destroyed, too, during the subsequent bombardments. The glittering cultural heritage of the Bohemian magicians is irretrievably lost. To date, not even Harvard's high-tech experts have been able to achieve anything approaching the quality and beauty of the Blaschka creatures of the deep. All this is a great shame – yet on the other hand it also reminds us of the uniqueness and finiteness of great art. Today we can only hope that universities and museums in London, Vienna, Pisa, and Tübingen will open a side wing occasionally to grant us a fleeting glimpse of this magical realm. ♦

Translated by Susan Mackervoy

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