

Glass of the Maharajahs

By LAURINDA KEYS LONG

An American museum showcases a turning point in the history of furniture design, when European artisans crafted objects to please the Eastern taste, instead of the other way around.



F. & C. Osler of Birmingham, England, is one of two companies that set up showrooms in India and provided most of the glass furniture to royal palaces. This armchair, made by Osler around 1895, is now owned by Ann and Gordon Getty of San Francisco, California, who loaned it for the exhibition.



Left: Three shades of green glass were used in this chandelier, made by F. & C. Osler between 1860 and 1880. It is in the permanent collection of the Corning Museum of Glass. Osler made two of the largest chandeliers in existence, weighing three tons each. They can be seen in the Jai Vilas Palace in Gwalior.

Above right: This oblong whatnot with three mirrored shelves was a popular F. & C. Osler design in the 1880s. Several are in the Gwalior and Udaipur palaces. The piece shown is in the collection of the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

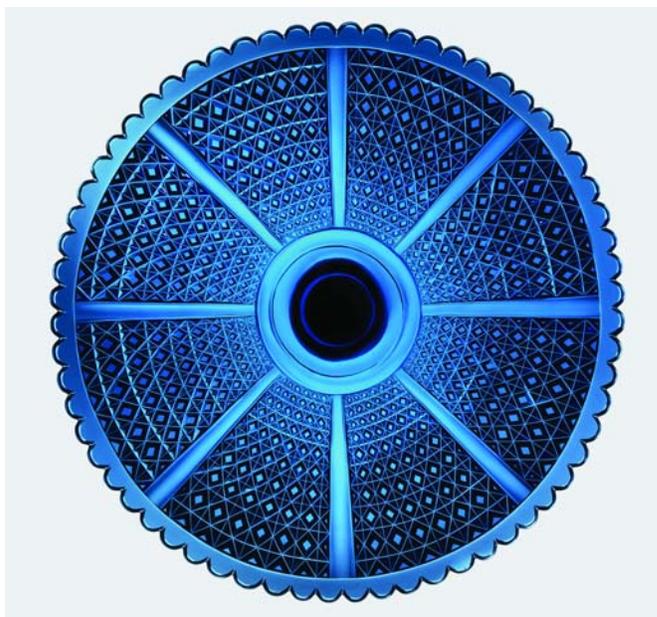
Below right: This blue glass table, shown from the side and the top, was made by F. & C. Osler between 1880 and 1885 and is in the permanent collection of the Corning Museum of Glass. The table is 75 centimeters tall and the diameter of the top is 43.6 centimeters.

Shimmering glass chandeliers, cabinets, wall shelves and tables reflecting the light will catch the eye, but will seldom astound, when they are encountered in a home nowadays. But there was a time when such glass furnishings did not exist: first, because no one knew how to make them in large scale, and second, because no one had commissioned them to be made.

That changed, however, in the last half of the 19th century, a unique and little-known era in the history of furniture design, when European artisans custom-designed glass household objects such as sofas, chairs, cabinets and huge chandeliers to suit the tastes of the Indian elite. It was a reversal of a longtime marketing pattern in which the craftsmen of the East had designed their products to suit rich Europeans.

This unique era of furniture design is being celebrated through an exhibit, “Glass of the Maharajahs: European Cut Glass Furnishings for Indian Royalty,” on display through November 30 at a unique American museum, the Corning Museum of Glass in northwestern New York, 210 kilometers east of Niagara Falls. The 56-year-old nonprofit, educational museum—which claims to have the world’s best collection of art and historical glass—is not only drawing visitors to its showrooms through the exhibit, but has organized a 15-day trip to India for its contributing members. From October 20 to November 4, they will see the Indian palaces which became home to the dazzling new designs in glass furniture: Jai Vilas Palace in Gwalior, which has two of the world’s largest chandeliers; the City Palace in Udaipur with its Crystal Gallery and glass bed; and the Moti Bagh Palace at Patiala, which displays a spectacular glass fountain. And the itinerary includes a visit to factories in Firozabad, Uttar Pradesh, where Indian artisans use the techniques of annealing, etching, blowing, modeling and painting to produce chandeliers, perfume bottles, bangles, bowls and jars, as they have for centuries.

Glass has been used either for windows, decorations, table utensils or lighting for some 3,500 years. This history is told through the museum’s 45,000 objects, drawings and records. There are also seminars,



American Glass

The Studio Glass movement, the last and most energetic art glass movement of the 20th century, had its birth at the Toledo Museum of Art in Ohio, where Harvey K. Littleton, formerly an art teacher and ceramist, held two historic glassblowing workshops in March and June of 1962. As studio ceramics and other crafts gained popularity in the United States, artists interested in glass were looking for new paths and outlets, exploring sculptural forms and functionality. Littleton worked with glass research scientist Dominick Labino, who devised a small, inexpensive furnace in which glass could be melted and worked. This made it affordable and possible for artists to blow glass in independent studios.

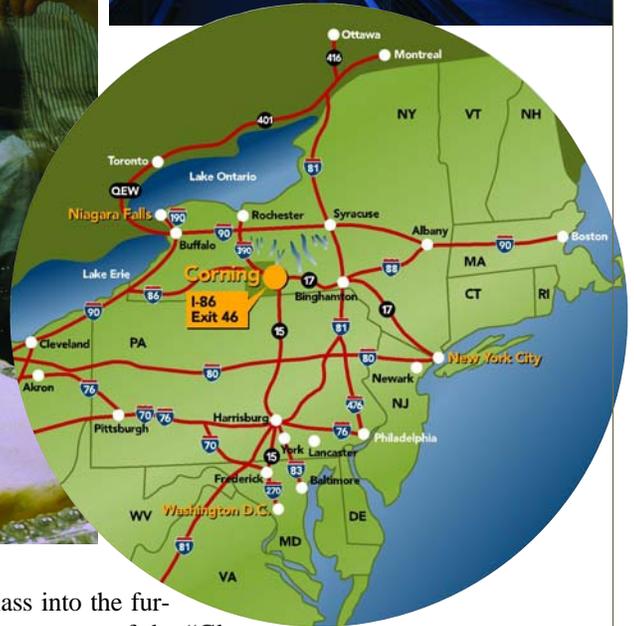
Littleton later started a glass program in the ceramics department at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, where the piece shown below, "Vessel," was made by him in 1965. Edris Eckhardt's "Archangel Uriel," at far right, is kiln-formed glass, produced in Cleveland, Ohio in 1968. Both pieces are part of the Corning Museum of Glass' permanent collection and are on display in New York City through January 6, 2007 as part of the "Decades in Glass: The '60s" exhibition at The Corning Gallery at Steuben on Madison Avenue.



An older American glass tradition is represented above by the four wineglasses crafted by T.G. Hawkes & Co. in Corning, New York, in the 1850s. The glass is blown, cut and cased, that is, made in two or more layers of different colors. This difficult process makes such objects rare finds. The Corning Museum of Glass is displaying some of the most beautiful examples from the last two centuries as part of its "Splitting the Rainbow" exhibition through November 1. □

Adapted from material provided by the Corning Museum of Glass. <http://www.cmog.org>





Above: On display in Paris during the 1900 World's Fair was a sculpture of a boat, designed by Charles Vital Cornu and created in glass and bronze by Compagnie des Verreries et Cristalleries de Baccarat, one of the two firms that specialized in providing glass furnishings to India's palaces. The sculpture was purchased in 1930 by Ganga Singhji Bahadur, the maharajah of Bikaner, and is still at the Lallgarh Palace in Bikaner. Another boat remained at the factory for years before being sold to an unknown customer. It turned up, along with a glass and marble table designed by Baccarat in 1889, at a Parisian auction in 1979. Both pieces are in the collection of the Corning Museum of Glass.

Right: The 56-year-old Corning Museum of Glass was redesigned in 1978 and in 2001 to provide a flowing series of glass-walled galleries and light-filled, windowed ramps to convey the beauty and elegance of the art form within. The museum is in the Fingerlakes Wine Country of New York state, where there is a long tradition of glass making. The city of Corning, midway between New York City and Niagara Falls, is the home of CorningWare Inc., which makes baking, cooking and tableware, and founded the museum.

glass-blowing demonstrations, mockups of old glass furnaces and factories, and fun, walk-in workshops for visitors to make their own glass objects. At hands-on exhibits one can learn about the technological discoveries that enabled new ways to use glass. One of these new technologies was annealing, which allowed manufacturers to fashion large

sheets of glass into the furnishings that are part of the "Glass of the Maharajahs" exhibition.

"The very idea that a chair could glitter like a diamond, catch light like a colored gemstone, and still function as seating must have astounded those who first encountered glass furniture in the mid to late 19th century. The Corning Museum of Glass aims to recapture that sense of bedazzlement," says Jane Shadel Spillman, a curator for the museum. A highlight of the exhibit is a 3.3-meter tall mirrored and intricately faceted glass wall cabinet on public view in the United States for the first time, she says. The exhibit also includes a seemingly mundane fly whisk, except that its handle is made of crystal. Also, there is a glass table designed by Cristalleries de Baccarat of France. Its clear crystal legs are shaped to resemble the carved, turned legs of an antique wooden table. Only three were made, and two of them are held by the Corning Museum of Glass. Sitting atop the table is a cut glass and bronze sculpture of a boat, created by Baccarat for the 1900 World's Fair in Paris. There is only one other like it, in the Lallgarh Palace in Bikaner, says Spillman.

Even now, the sight of a glass chair or sofa is remarkable. At the time these pieces were made for the Indian maharajahs, and samples were displayed at expositions in Paris and London, commentators were flabbergasted. One suggested the glass furniture was intended for the dweller in the proverbial "glass house." □