

# BOHEMIAN GLASS ART

— WORTH ITS WEIGHT IN GOLD? —

Glass has been made for hundreds of years, but its elevation from a decorative craft to a recognised art form is a more recent phenomenon. And for savvy collectors, glass art is proving an attractive and affordable investment. Journalist Keri Fuller looks at the rise of Bohemian crystal.



Jan Frydrych made this unique yacht chronometer in collaboration with German clockmaker Erwin Sattler.



One of the areas of great investment potential in the world of glass art is Bohemian glass (or Bohemian crystal), which stands out for its colour, sparkle, cut and creativity. It takes its name from the Bohemia area of the Czech Republic, where the glass is created from a mixture of silica-sand (silver sand), potash, colour and lead, the latter giving the material its light-diffracting properties as well as weight.

According to Mark Hill, a leading specialist and dealer in post-war Czechoslovakian glass, the country's enormous contribution to late 20th Century glass design is only now being uncovered after years of obscurity behind the Iron Curtain. Very fine quality cut and cased Bohemian glass was exported during the Communist era but individual glass designers were never given any recognition. Nevertheless, artists such as Stanislav Libensky, Vaclav Cigler and René Roubicek emerged as the 'fathers' of post-war Czech glass design and it is on this legacy that the next generation of Czech glass artists is coming to prominence.

Several of these artists, among them Vlastimil Beránek (the third generation of the Beránek glass-producing family and himself trained by Stanislav

Libensky), Jan Frydrych, Jan Fischer, Jaroslav Prosek and Michaela Smrcek (the last two were students of Beránek), are being championed by Marek Landa, whose company, Crystal Caviar, provides them with materials and space to work, and is involved in promoting and selling the pieces, most recently through the new ARTSIO Gallery, set up for this purpose. ARTSIO also specialises in studying and confirming the authenticity of Bohemian crystal works and also sources rare crystal sculptures for their clients.

'Crystal sculptures are a rare commodity, and that is why they are rising in value steadily,' Marek comments.

There are a few reasons for their rarity. One is that it takes several months to complete each sculpture; raw crystal is heated up to 900 degrees Celsius and then cooled in the mould at a rate of one degree per hour, and thereafter hundreds more hours are required to grind and polish the sculpture. Moreover, some of the colours used are hard to obtain and expensive. As a result, not many masterpieces have been produced over the last 40 years.

Another factor is that private collectors and museums snap them up quickly. 'When there is

potential for investment in art, it is often galleries who smell it first,' Marek comments. 'Many galleries are now quietly shopping in the Czech Republic for art pieces, and they don't just buy one or two. Tel Aviv's Litvak Gallery recently bought more than 10 pieces from Professor Vaclav Cigler and Heller Gallery in New York, among others, have been showing increased activity in buying Bohemian glass sculptures. It is a strong indication that something is "cooking".'

For their part, art buyers are increasingly turning to the private sector with dealer sales making up over 62% of global art sales, while public art auction sales of art, high-end jewellery and decorative arts saw a drop from \$20.8 billion in 2015 to \$16.9 billion in 2016, according to the European Fine Art Foundation (TEFAF) Report, produced in partnership with online platform Artnet. It is perhaps an indication that better-informed buyers are more confident in their transactions with dealers and galleries, and appreciate the greater price transparency than is found on the art auction floor, where transaction fees can be higher than one might expect.

Crystal Caviar is one such company that has benefited from this swing towards private sales,

and has been in a unique position to observe the increasing value of its Bohemian glass art masterpieces. For example, three pieces of a sculptural bowl, similarly sized but each slightly different, have garnered increasingly higher prices over the years; one was sold for €12,000 in 2008, another fetched double that price in 2015, and the third is now being offered for €110,000 by a collector. Another piece, Pyramid in Triangle, was sold by Gallery Rob Van Den Doel in Amsterdam for €8,000 in 2004. Two similar pieces were sold for €45,000 to an American client in 2015, and for €55,000 to an art dealer in 2017.

Of course, there are big investments to be made with the star designers, particularly if they have exhibited internationally and have pieces in public collections. A sculpture by Vlastimil Beránek, valued at \$40,000 in 2000, was evaluated and sold for €600,000 in 2016. Another piece was sold for €700,000 in the same year. Two of Beránek's pieces have, in the meantime, been acquired by Cafesjian Centre for the Arts in Armenia and the Davidson-Gerson Gallery of Glass at The Henry Ford museum in Michigan, USA.

'I see a lot of future in it,' Mark Hill says, 'Simply because Czech glass has been ignored for far too long.' His focus is on post-war pieces at low to mid-end price points, and he regards Czech glass as being where Murano glass was 20 years ago. 'We are seeing extremely high prices being paid for Murano glass, both contemporary and vintage designs, but Czech glass has lagged behind internationally, partly because of the hangover of Communism, and people are now realising that.'

While the post-war Czech glass art masters such as Libensky and Roubicek are well sought after by collectors and museums, and fetch high prices, Mark Hill advises, 'It's always a good thing to look for the next generation, those who studied under the masters, but who also have a very strongly defined look of their own.' He does, however, caution that 'you should only ever buy something because you like it. Never, ever buy a piece of contemporary art for investment alone, as you may have to live with it for many years.'

In truth, many collectors of Bohemian art glass pieces initially bought them because they liked them, rather than as investments. 'Owners have these amazing pieces of art at home and enjoy them,' says Marek Landa, 'and then are surprised when they decide to sell them, for whatever reason, how much more they can get for their pieces.'

An art form on the ascendant, stunning and rare masterpieces which give ongoing aesthetic pleasure, and the strong possibility of their increasing value: time for a sculpture shopping trip to the Czech Republic?



All works by Vlastimil Beránek. Clockwise from bottom left: Waterlily Bronze; Exhibition at ARTSIO Gallery; Open Space and Epicenter.

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