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## Reflections on a passion

Friday 20 May 2011

People will be surprised by the National Museum of Scotland's latest exhibition **A Passion for Glass**, says curator **Rose Watban**.

They might come along expecting to see some beautiful glass vases and, while they won't be disappointed on that score, they probably won't have bargained on Bruno Romanelli's Hand Held Vase (1996).

A Passion for Glass, which opens today, puts on display for the very first time works from the collection of Alan Poole and the late Dan Klein, a former head of 20th century decorative arts at Christie's and a world authority on studio glass. The couple gifted their highly prestigious collection to NMS before Klein died of cancer two years ago.

Studio glass – individual pieces of glass made in small-scale furnaces as opposed to manufactured in a factory – developed in the mid-20th century and the Klein-Poole collection charts the changes in style and techniques that occurred from the 1960s up until 2009. Individual exhibits will be used to explain glass-making processes, including pâte de verre (using a paste made of glass), blown glass, engraved and cast glass.

The complete collection contains over 250 pieces, and 140 objects from over 100 makers will be on display. Although the artists are of many nationalities, all were living and working in the UK or Ireland when their work was acquired. A great many are internationally renowned and respected.

When we meet, the collection is being prepped at the NMS warehouse in Granton, Edinburgh. The white-washed breeze block corridors give onto silent exhibition store rooms, one of which contains shelves of hugely varied glass objects.

Watban, senior curator of applied art and design at NMS, was "really thrilled" when Klein told her the collection would be coming to Scotland.

"He had built up a relationship with us and had such fondness for Scotland," she says.

"We kept a reasonable collection of modern glass before, but now we have a fantastic collection."

Her enthusiasm is palpable as she picks out some of her personal favourites. They include Rocket Boy and Bug Boy by Edinburgh-based artist Karen Akester, short, cartoonish, rather haunting glass figures in clothes made using pate de glass. She also highlights a decorative plate by Kevin Petrie, using innovative techniques for printing on glass, and another by Steven Newell, from a series representing Japanese courtesans.

One of the most striking objects is an alligator, meticulously carved into the interior surface of a heavy, circular flat-bottomed bowl so that it looks like a cylindrical fossil. In a mischievous touch, the artist, Gareth Noel Williams, has added a hole to the glass, through which a leather "lead" is attached – in case you want to show off your gator to the neighbours.

"Dan and Alan were really eclectic in what they chose," says Watban. "They weren't just buying because



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the name was missing from the collection.”

Alan Poole, who is in Edinburgh for the opening of the exhibition, confirms personal liking was essential and the collection includes works by promising students. “We’ve never been ones to look for specific names, big or small, or to be wowed by names,” he says. “Over and above that, we wanted to support home grown artists, people who were working and studying here.”

Seeing the collection on show in the National Museum would have meant “a tremendous amount” to Klein, says Poole, adding that he and Klein had a strong connection with Scotland due to Klein’s work co-founding North Lands Creative Glass in Caithness. They had liked Watban’s staging of an exhibition of North Lands pieces marking the centre’s 10th anniversary and felt they wanted their own collection to be available to a wider audience.

A lot of the work is decorative rather than functional; even those objects that appear to be functional in many cases are not. “There are things that will make visitors smile and things that will maybe make them surprised that they’re made of glass,” says Watban.

Studio glass is a thriving branch of the decorative arts. A Passion for Glass coincides with Breathtaking, a UK touring exhibition of new wave blown glass work running until July 3 at the Park Gallery, Callendar House, Falkirk. It comprises the work of 22 artists, including intricate replicas of wind instruments and a fragile glass revolver containing glass daisies.

Where the ceramic departments of many art colleges have shut down, the glass departments mostly remain open. However, studio glass is less heavily promoted in the UK than in Canada, the US and Japan.

Dan Klein, a former opera singer who owned his own gallery before joining Christie’s, helped set up North Lands Creative Glass in 1996 in Lybster, Caithness, along with his old friend, the then local MP Robert MacLennan.

North Lands is Scotland’s centre of excellence in glass-making and in the 15 years of its existence has gained international prestige. Glass artists, painters, sculptors and designers come to North Lands to work with glass, either on its own or in combination with other materials.

Robert MacLennan, now Lord MacLennan of Rogart, says that he had originally thought Caithness would be a good place for a museum of glass, because of fame of Caithness Glass, but Klein felt strongly that a creative centre would be better. So a creative centre was established and it has gone from strength to strength.

“We’ve attracted top flight artists from most of the countries where this art is pursued,” he says. “We’re equipped to enable artists to experiment alone or with others in taking the medium in new directions. It is one of Scotland’s jewels.”

Many artists with links to North Lands, including board member Bruno Romanelli, are represented in A Passion for Glass. The organisers hope their work in this exhibition will help bring studio glass to wider public attention in Scotland – and raise a few eyebrows along the way.

A Passion for Glass opens today and runs to September 11 at the National Museum of Scotland, Chambers Street, Edinburgh. Admission free.

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