Edris Eckhardt: Pioneer Glass Sculptor

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Recently I was in New York City when the American Craft Museum had an exhibit titled Glass Installation, and I went to see it. One of the compositions was by a young artist named Steve Tobin and he called it Water Column. It was an astonishing installation, stunning in its effect. It was constructed out of thousands of recycled thin glass medical tubes cascading forty-one feet from the top of several flights of stairs, down through the stairwell to the lowest level of the museum—shimmering all the way. It was wider at the top, narrowing as it descended and at the bottom the glass tubes seemed to explode upward into a chaotic splash. It was an electrifying experience for me, and after I had caught my breath, I said to myself: "Glass Art, you've come a long way, baby." Certainly, part of the reason the exhibit had such an impact on me is the result of my recent study of the glass work of Edris Eckhardt—especially because I knew that Eckhardt herself had a one-woman show of her glass work at the same museum in 1962. At the time of the exhibit in New York, she wrote to a friend in Cleveland and said, "Opening night was a smashing success and I feel like I fell into an automatic washer—all shook up." So there it is. In my own hometown lives the pioneer who moved glass out and away from utilitarian objects produced in factories to glass as a fine art produced in studios.

Eckhardt first made her mark nationally and internationally as a ceramist. Her small storybook sculptures travelled to museums all over the country under the sponsorship of the United States Government. And, in 1937, her Alice In Wonderland series was exhibited at the World's Fair in Paris. In spite of that, she always remained in Cleveland, Ohio where she was born, staunchly a citizen of the midwest region. Beginning in the early 1930s, she taught ceramics at The Cleveland School of Art (now the Cleveland Institute of Art), was this region's Supervisor of Sculpture for the Federal Arts Project and had been a consistent prize winner in the May Shows at the Cleveland Museum of Art.

In spite of the fact that her ceramic pieces have become valued collectors' items, her real importance for today rests in her groundbreaking accomplishments in studio glass. Although her hanging glass shadow boxes might be considered her signature glass work, her true importance for contemporary art lies in her free-standing abstract metal and glass combinations. Paul Perrot, former Director of the Corning Glass Museum, has said, "Eckhardt will be remembered for her pioneering contribution to studio glass."

How did it happen that Eckhardt seemed to leap from ceramics to glass? In fact, she did not quickly abandon a field in which she had already had two decades of success. In a brief autobiographical sketch she wrote, "Every artist must occasionally take stock of himself, his time, his relation to it. He
must constantly change, enlarge, diversify or be left stranded on an island of his own making while the stream of life flows by."

This positive outlook made it possible to progress into uncharted waters. Here is how it happened:

During the war she began to create small ceramic lapel pins which she sold to gift shops and department stores. Most of the pins which I have seen are brightly colored animals with the addition of glints of gold and silver. The luster was laid on and fired in such a manner that the gold appeared to be the real thing. The use of gold glaze is important in this story. Second, in the late 1940s she began to fabricate objects made of enamel. Once again, glints of gold appeared in her work. One must keep in mind that enamel is powdered glass. So now we have two elements on her journey to glass—the attraction to gold and her work with powdered glass. The third step occurred as the result of a trip she took to New York City in 1953. On that trip, she went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art where she saw an exhibition of Ancient Byzantine gold glass. When a curator there told her that the formula for gold glass had been lost and that no one had been able to duplicate it since Byzantine days, Edris typically made up her mind that she would do just that. And it is at that challenging moment that her career in glass was conceived.

However, so complicated a process required endless experimentation, careful documentation, enormous amounts of patience, and of course, a certain amount of luck. It was almost impossible to combine gold leaf and glass if you were working alone in 1953, in your basement, with no previous instruction and no one to offer advice, using a kiln built for clay, and other unsophisticated, even primitive implements. For example, she used an ordinary rolling pin to roll out the gold leaf. The trick was to find the proper temperature for the compatibility of the metal and the glass. Her determination paid off and she did find a formula.

By 1955, she had received the first of two Guggenheim Fellowships, having satisfied the Selection Committee that she had successfully produced gold glass and created art objects in that medium.

With money from her first Guggenheim, she was able to purchase a proper kiln and within a decade she mastered an astonishing array of techniques, including vertical laminations, three-dimensional casting, and mixed fusion. She reached an absolute peak of accomplishment when she found a method for casting glass and bronze and created abstract sculptures combining those materials.

There are two additional and inter-related questions concerning Eckhardt's work—where did the ideas for her narrative images come from and what influences were brought to bear on her style. There are logical answers to those questions. She has always been a voracious reader and obsessive experimenter. Her compositions reflect her interest in both the Old and New Testament, Byzantine and Medieval Sagas, folklore, especially of Native Americans, fables, nursery rhymes, the poems of Emily Dickinson. She was concerned about the hippie movement of the 1960s, as well as the Vietnam War
protests and space age exploration. She was influenced by Art Nouveau, Cubist and Abstract Art. She also had a great regard for Roualt, Archipenko and Picasso.

A chronological look at her glass work clearly demonstrates her progression from simple bas relief to complex free-standing sculptures. They reflect many styles and many narratives. She makes use of a great deal of color and frequently incorporates gold and silver in her work. In 1956, after accepting her second Guggenheim Fellowship, she travelled to the University of Southern California. It was there in the sophisticated laboratory in Berkeley that she discovered the means of combining glass and metal. Paul Hollister, New York art critic, has said that Eckhardt's glass and bronze combinations can be considered her most remarkable achievement. Surely it places her in the category of a true original.

Note

For a full account of Eckhardt's life and art, including an extensive bibliography, and a descriptive chronological catalog of 324 works with 36 illustrations, see Edris Eckhardt, Cleveland Sculptor, by Ruth Dancyger, edited by Roger Welchans, Cleveland Artist Series, John Carroll University, 1990.