

Reviews

HOTSHOP HITS

Though glass museums are reopening, the medium is still at risk, says *Emma Park*

Stourbridge Glass Museum, West Midlands
stourbridgeglassmuseum.org.uk

Musée du Verre Conches, France • museeduverre.fr/en



AQUARIUM: PHOTO CHRISTOPH LEHMANN

Glassmakers are struggling – despite the craft’s evident popularity, demonstrated by the success of the Netflix competition series *Blown Away*. Not least among the challenges are rising energy prices across Europe, which have a grave impact on the cost of producing hot-sculpted or kiln-cast glass. Yet, this year also marks the reopening of two significant European glass museums.

In the UK, the Stourbridge Glass Museum in the West Midlands is the new incarnation of the Broadfield House Glass Museum, which Dudley Council closed in 2015. Its 10,000-piece collection ‘represents one of the finest bodies of work that Stourbridge has produced in the last 400 years’, according to Graham Fisher, a trustee of the British Glass Foundation, which spearheaded the 12-year-long project to reopen the museum. It stands on the site of the White House Cone, a former glassblowing furnace that was part of the Stuart Crystal glassworks, which once made glassware for the White Star Line shipping company (1845-1934), possibly supplying the *Titanic*. The tunnels underneath that lead to Stourbridge Canal, connecting the town’s historic Glass Quarter to commercial centres like Birmingham, are still accessible and filled with ash and coal from its working days.

Inside, there is a shop, a ground floor dedicated to historic glass, and a light, airy upper gallery for contemporary

exhibitions. The collection largely comprises British glass produced over the past 400 years in the quarter, as well as contemporary glass art from the UK and beyond.

Over in France, the Conches Glass Museum in Normandy was founded in 1996 as a municipal museum, whose collection included the sculptures and stained glass of three local *pâte-de-verre* artists. From 2005, its new director, Éric Louet, decided to focus solely on French and international glass of the 19th and 21st centuries; today, the collection comprises around 500 pieces of decorative and industrial glass, stained glass and contemporary sculpture. After a three-year, €5 million renovation project, it reopened in June on a larger site in a 19th-century hospice in the medieval town of Conches-en-Ouche. The building’s long galleries and high ceilings make it the perfect space

LEFT: detail of *Aquarium*, 2022, an installation by Philip Baldwin & Monica Guggisberg at Musée du Verre
 BELOW: Nailsea jug, c.1830, Stourbridge Glass Museum



JUG: PHOTO DAVE ROWAN

to display glass, and Louet hopes the greater size will increase the scope for exhibitions and improve visitor numbers.

Both museums aim to support contemporary glass artists on a national and international level, as well as commemorating their respective region’s glassmaking history. The Stourbridge Glass Museum has a purpose-built hotshop, from which resident artist Allister Malcolm has run his glass art and design business for the past seven years, allowing visitors to see first-hand how glass is made. The intention, says curator Harrison Davies, is to inspire young people to work in glass by bringing the collections to life. A similar model – of a museum accompanied by a working hotshop – has been successfully run at the Ebeltoft Glass Museum in Denmark.

The presence of artists like Malcolm at Stourbridge also represents a continuation of the long-standing position of glassmaking as part of the local landscape. As well as recording the community’s history, the museum is striving to make its collection accessible to the public in what has become a deprived area of the Midlands, by keeping the cost of entrance tickets down and encouraging school visits.

Alongside producing industrial glassware, Stourbridge was a centre for experimentation by independent artists in the studio glass movement of the latter 20th century. This continues today, but the constant threat of closure of places like Broadfield House, and the lack of public funding for glass artists, demonstrates the effort required to sustain the craft in Britain.

In other countries such as France and Sweden, state and regional bodies recognise the value of glassmaking as a cultural heritage. The Conches museum receives funding from the local town, as well as from the Ministry of Culture and the *département*. This is evident in the design of the museum’s spacious premises and its impressive exhibition programme: between 2005 and 2020,

it put on 30 shows, 16 of contemporary glass art and the rest ranging from stained glass to art nouveau and art deco.

Public funding allows the Conches museum to give a platform to artists who otherwise may not gain exposure, and introduce new audiences to the art form. It tries to purchase one work from each exhibition, to support artists and build its collection. Recent acquisitions include pieces by British sculptor David Reekie and French sculptor Etienne Leperlier.

In Britain, in the drive to cut public spending, governments seem to abandon the arts first. Glass is struggling across the board: this year, amid a flurry of other closures, the Wolverhampton School of Art announced it was suspending enrolment for its glass and ceramics department, which previously hosted the oldest glass course in the country.

The next best route to technical mastery for up-and-coming makers is to train with established practitioners, which gives resident artists added significance. The Stourbridge museum is, so far, a success story, thanks to funding from the European Regional Development Fund, a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund, support from Dudley Council and private donations. Its long-term success will depend on whether those with political, financial and cultural power in Britain think it worthwhile to ensure the future of glass skills, a question inextricably linked to the public perception of the discipline’s worth.

Conches, with its public funding and more traditional format, can concentrate on presenting glass as an art form, educating the public and connecting makers with galleries and collectors. Stourbridge is more closely linked to local history, although with ambitions to be recognised internationally. There is no doubt that the role of such specialist museums in keeping the art of glass alive is more vital than ever.

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