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NatSCA News

Title: Endangered Species in Glass: The Blaschka Models

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Source: Sigwart, J. (2006). Endangered Species in Glass: The Blaschka Models. *NatSCA News, Issue 8*, 10 - 11.

URL: <http://www.natsca.org/article/261>

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Endangered Species in glass: the Blaschka models **- Julia Sigwart**

An essential part of any 19th Century natural history collection, the scientific models made by Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka froze the delicate features of organisms in time, to represent specimens that were difficult to preserve for display. These sculptures famously include anatomically detailed, scientifically correct models of hundreds of species of marine invertebrates and greatly magnified microscopic organisms. However, with the rise of underwater photography and less expensive modelling techniques, these models fell out of fashion and have in most cases been relegated to distant storage. Only recently have the models been recalled from obscurity and recognised as fascinating treasures in collections.

Leopold completed his first glass replica commission, 100 glass orchids for a local aristocrat in 1857- the same year his son Rudolf was born. Over their lifetimes the Blaschkas supplied museums, universities and institutes across Europe and North America with precise glass models of invertebrates from their catalogue of over 700 (predominantly Atlantic and European) species. Every model was hand made and painted to order. As scientific models grew to dominate a trade founded on laboratory glass and taxidermy eyes, the team sought out better “sitters” for their art, and installed large aquaria to keep live molluscs and anemones in their inland studio. In the last phase of their collective career they signed an exclusive which resulted in more than 4,000 models still held by the Botanical Museum in Harvard University. Rudolf completed the Harvard commission three years before his death in 1939, leaving no heir to the family trade.

Modern glass artists have been unable to recreate these stunning, intricate sculptures, and the father and son team never recorded their techniques. (But the American Museum of Natural History, New York, hired their own German glass artist to independently make very similar models of protozoa.) The Blaschka workshop where all the models were created in Dresden, Germany, was destroyed during bombing in World War II, as was a major collection of models held in the local natural history museum. Although some of their archives are preserved in the Corning Institute of Glass (Ithaca, USA), there is very little information about how they worked their glass magic. Although a charming mystery, this has led to growing concern among glass conservators, who are struggling to preserve and repair neglected models. Even the simplest forms of cleaning, to remove more than 100 years' worth of dust, is a complicated job on these delicate works of art.

Over their long career, the Blaschkas clearly employed techniques that often involved using whatever was near at hand. Experimental work by some glass conservators quickly revealed that models of different ages and different species use completely different kinds of pigments, and different chemical compositions of glass (inconvenient for choosing a standardised cleaning technique!). Some models use pigmented glass, and others are surface painted, and others (such as naturally transparent jellyfish) use powdering techniques that look deceptively like glass decay.

September 2006 will see the first-ever international meeting focussed on the work of glass artists Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka. These 19th Century artists produced a fusion of science and art, which has never been equalled. Art and science museums worldwide hold Blaschka sculptures, which are increasingly recognised for their historical, technical, and artistic importance. Bridging the gap between science and art puts the Blaschka's work in a unique position, which is long overdue for serious study.

The Dublin Blaschka Congress will be hosted in Ireland by the partnership linking University College Dublin and the National Museum of Ireland (Natural History), in collaboration with the Natural History Museum (London). Conference proceedings will include major contributions from some of the worlds leading glass scholars: David Whitehouse (Corning Institute of Glass, USA), Susan Rossi-Wilcox (Harvard University, USA), renowned Blaschka scholar Henri Reiling, and Chris Meecham (National Museum and Galleries of Wales).

‘There is growing interest in Blaschka works, because these are the earliest modern objects that directly connect science and art. Scientists call them “models”, artists call them “sculptures”, but they clearly have a huge value to both,’ says Nigel Monaghan, Keeper of Natural History in Dublin. ‘This congress is very timely for our collection, and for many scholars.’ In their own era, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka described themselves as ‘natural history artisans.’ Their work has since been described as ‘an artistic marvel in the field of science and a scientific marvel in the field of art.’

Like an endangered species, it is not clear how Blaschka specimens in total exist, or where they are all held. Particularly among conservators and collections managers, where science and aesthetics often conflict over issues of storage, study, and display, these models have an interesting role. These scientifically accurate models, looking ready to crawl away, are beautiful. The 21st Century tradition of exhibition can perhaps take a lesson from this 19th Century innovation.

The Dublin Blaschka Congress will take place 28 - 30 September. The main aim of the congress is to network the growing number of people with interest in the Blaschka glass models, their history, and their conservation. The congress will include keynote addresses as well as submitted papers from areas as diverse as scientific illustration, conservation, exhibition, invertebrate anatomy and lampworking. A public exhibition of Blaschka models never before seen on display will be held in the National Museum of Ireland (Natural History), Dublin from September through December 2006.

For further details including congress registration, see www.ucd.ie/blaschka or contact Catherine McGuinness at blaschka2006@ucd.ie or telephone +353 (0)1 6486396.

Working Group On The Art Of Taxidermy
And Its Cultural Heritage Importance
- Adrian Norris

This Working Group was established at the ICOM NatHist Meeting held in Jakobstad, Finland June 2005

The working group was formed to

- develop a series of actions through which we could highlight (at least some of) the more important examples of taxidermy held in museums throughout the world
- establish the factors which make them culturally important, to the local community and to try to establish their importance to the wider international and scientific community.

This has resulted in the publication of a “**Code of Conduct**” for the long-term care and storage of Taxidermy.

A series of papers have now been published and these are available on the ICOM NatHist Web Site

<http://www.icom-nathist.de/icom/>

If you, or your museum, would like to be involved or kept up to date with forthcoming events and papers please contact:

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