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Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, NY: Glass Art, History and Hands-On Learning

Prosthetic Eyes? Glass Floors? Witches Balls? Glass Sponges?

By **Christine Tetreault**

For you bull-in-a-china-closet, anti-shopping, no-fine-art-please gals and guys along for this Single Mom Westward Ho! virtual travel tour, believe me when I say that the Corning Museum of Glass (CMOG) in Corning, New York is sooo much more than pretty glass 'things' on shelves and no-touching-please art displays. CMOG invites visitors to "discover how glass has changed the world." One of those important creations so taken for granted, through some 35 centuries. Think total glass experience, full sensory immersion in the world of glass, through science, history, hand's-on workshops, and inventive multimedia displays.

Ever wonder how that tinted windshield in your fancy car came to be, so clear and strong, and so exactly curved? Or how prosthetic eyes are made? Could you distinguish Burmese glass from a Bull's-eye pane or Aurene from Aventurine from Amberina? Ever seen a bear jar or wondered how Edouard Benedictus came to discover laminated glass? Climbed glass stairs or stood on a laminated glass bridge and floor, two-stories up?

In today's Corning Museum of Glass (CMOG) demonstration, our glass expert shows off both old and new glassmaking, comparing tools and techniques that speak of history and amazing invention, innovation, and artistic talent. Gaffers is the traditional name for glass masters -- often male and less than dainty -- who heat glass as hot as molten lava into delicately shaped flowers, animals, and a *mélange* of other fine creations.

I am captivated to watch this man, with his large hands, so gently and attentively mold these crystal delicacies. Does that sound sexist? I don't mean it to be. For me, it is merely a reminder that art and passion and fragility can also encompass strength and boldness, that beauty and creativity are universal. Perhaps it was the furnaces of fire that kept women away from this beautiful trade in years past?

The CMOG opened to the public in 1951, as a non-profit educational institution created by Corning Incorporated to preserve and expand the understanding and appreciation of glass. The original glass-walled building, designed by Harrison and Abramowitz included a windowed viewing wall to the Steuben glass factory at work. The museum found itself under water from Hurricane Agnes in June, 1972. Growth and expansion led to a complete transformation and renovation by Smith-Miller and Hawkinson in 2001, including a visitor's center, Sculpture Gallery, Hot Glass Show area, hand's-on Innovation Center, and the 18,000 square-foot Glass Market, one of the largest museum shops in the country. CMOG is home to the world's largest collection of glass. The contemporary glass buildings that make up the CMOG 'campus,' blend design from three generations of architects. CMOG was voted among America's 150 favorite buildings by The American Institute of Architects.

My list of favorite, must-see CMOG exhibits follows:

The audio-visual theatre in the Vessels gallery will wow you with the behind the scenes making of light bulbs and cathode ray tubes - displayed from inside a giant laminated glass 'egg' suspended from the gallery ceiling by steel cables and designed to 'contain 50 people.' Stunning visually, the glass structure also maintains the well-distributed sound inside of the 'egg' and unheard by visitors at nearby exhibits. The very cool ellipsoid, as its called, is opaque from the outside but transparent from the inside.

If you're a fan of more esoteric contemporary art (and I am!), be sure to take in the Sculpture Gallery, which showcases a surprising range of smaller glass objects and non-functional vessels, formed through blowing, forming, flame-working, laminating, beading, and assemblage. The artists represented are international and the breadth and intermingling of mediums is really breathtaking. Larry Bell, from New Mexico, works with sheet glass and 'vaporized' metals to create colorful, illusionary three-dimensional boxes and other pieces. It's Raining Knives, by Argentinean Silvia Levenson, suspends artificial glass knives and scissors, dangling from nylon string. It gave me a chill, with its suggestion of hidden treachery and violence lurking in perceptions of beauty and safety. Susan Plum, from Mexico, creates Woven Heaven, Tangled Earth, inspired by the Mayan weaver Ixchel and the weaver's loom as a metaphor for the universe. Plum describes the woven glass ball of strands as 'light entangled around the Earth,' waiting for the Mayan shamans to 'untangle the discord.'

Do not miss Curiosities of Glassmaking. The collection of 'odd and mysterious' objects includes 'trick' drinking glasses (got you wondering, now?) and apotropaic glass, used to deflect evil, from modern eye beads and Japanese amulets to witch balls filled

Takeaways

➤ Even bull-in-a-china-closet, anti-shopping, no-fine-art travelers will enjoy the CMOG adventure

➤ Could you distinguish Burmese glass from a Bull's-eye pane or Aurene from Aventurine from Amberina?

➤ Think total glass experience, full sensory immersion in the world of glass

with string. One portion of Curiosities aims to rid the mystery of many glasses that occur naturally in nature, from fulgurites (made when lightning strikes sand) and tektites (made from meteorite impacts).

Scientists tell us that glass is a state of matter rather than a single material, reads one CMOG item. It is formed when a molten material cools so rapidly that there is not enough time for the material's crystalline structure to re-form. That 19th century glass multi-cellular animal sponge and the non-volcanic terrestrial or extraterrestrial Libyan Desert glass still seem mighty magical and mystical to me.

Visit www.cmog.org for prices, exhibit hours and listings, and directions. Well-worth the artistic journey! (Next! Onto Cleveland's Rock and Roll Hall of Fame!)

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