



Glassblowing: A Search for Form

First published in 1971, *Glassblowing: A Search for Form*, written by US glass artist Harvey Littleton (b.1922), remains an important and relevant contemporary work. The selected text below sets the context for *Breath Taking*. Littleton's book, in his own words, is both 'a guide and a revivalist manifesto', and within it, the founder of studio glass offers a view into the future, predicting how the art form and the practice of the artist would develop.

As well as being an influential and successful glass artist, Littleton is known as an outspoken advocate of arts education. He organised the first hot glass course within an American University in 1962 (the University of Wisconsin-Madison), which in turn promoted the idea of hot glass as a valid course of study across university art departments in the Midwest and North Eastern United States.¹ He famously stated that 'Technique is Cheap'², and fuelled debate around the role and importance to the artist of material versus technique and the impact of content in the creation of glass art.

"A search for form is the daily pursuit of the artist. The search until recently somehow overlooked the blowing of molten glass directly from the furnace. There has long been popular confusion about even the term 'glassblowing' which has been used to mean... work with the blowpipe using molten glass from the furnace, as well as the traditional use of rods and tubes of glass manipulated in a flame.

Glass, an endlessly intriguing material, remains virtually undiscovered as a medium of artistic expression... Ours is a small segment of the art worlds, and an even smaller segment of the world of glass, but I believe it to be exciting and important to both. The method used by the contemporary artist is a constant probing and questioning of the standards of the past and the definitions of the present to find an opening for new form statements in the material and process. It is even said that this search is an end in itself.

Although knowledge of chemistry or physics as they apply to glass will broaden the artist's possibilities, it cannot create them. Tools can be made; furnaces and annealing ovens can be built cheaply. But it is through the insatiable, adventurous urge of the artist to discover the essence of glass that his own means of expression will emerge. The artists in glass today have generally come to glass from other arts. They have been sculptors, potters, painters, jewellers, poets or mathematicians. The good ones encounter glass because they want to know what glass is – what they can do with it, and what it can do for them. In glassblowing,



if the necessary risk is taken, the outcome must always be in doubt. Artistic creation must occur in crisis, it cannot be planned or divided up. [The glassblower] must immerse himself in immediate experimentation and study, for the glass will not wait. I have no argument with pleasing form in functional objects. I have no displeasure in using such functionally engineered objects – engineering for production, packaging and distribution. I enjoy pleasant useful objects, but I cannot conceive that any of these aims is in itself art. Unfortunately some of the most experimental work has yet to be seen.

In fact, some exhibitions have rejected pieces because they did not conform to the 'expressive qualities' of our earlier work. I maintain that great things are possible in glass, and will continue to happen if the conditions set forth in this book are maintained".³

Harvey Littleton, 1971

1 Byrd, Joan (1980), Harvey Littleton, Pioneer in American Studio Glass, p.6, American Craft, Vol. 40 No.1, February/March 1980.

2 Spoken in 1972 at the Seventh National Sculpture Conference in Lawrence, Kansas, cited in Warmus, William (1998), Harvey Littleton: Glass Master, p.7, Urbanglass Quarterly, Special Harvey Littleton Issue, 72, Fall 1998.

3 Littleton, Harvey (1971), Glassblowing: A Search for Form, Van Nostrand ReinHold Ltd: New York.