

ON HER MAJESTY'S SERVICE

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WIZARD IN GLASS

by NORMAN PHILLIPS

With a few tubes, a gas jet, some tweezers and a knife, he gives a new twist to the oldest invention

IT WAS IN VIENNA that fifty-seven year old Fritz Lampl with the high-domed, white-fringed cranium first took to glassblowing. His skill brought him mention in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* and, later, sanctuary in England when Hitler forced him to escape from his native Austria.

His powers of persuasion brought him permission from the British Museum to copy in glass Greek coins of 2,500 years ago. His business acumen prompted him to sell the copies to famous West End fashion houses who used them to brighten up elegant garments.

Now, with British workmen, he is dividing his talents between the creation of gay glass jewellery and the production of sophisticated glass tableware. His workshop is one of the few remaining places in the world where fine glass is blown free-hand.

His reputation is founded on reviving, after 400 years, the traditions and craftsmanship of the Venetian glassblowers. Lampl creates miracles in glass with little more than a gas jet, a pair of tweezers and a knife—the same array of tools with which the glassblowers of Venice cornered the world market in the Middle Ages.

"Kings used to send their ambassadors to Venice to bring back just one vessel," he says. "So fragile was some of the Venetian work that the ambassadors had to take it to their kings by hand. The more fragile the glass, the more it was valued."

How The Pattern Is Put In

The fine tableware from the Lampl workshop in Oxford is less fragile, but it has the elegance of the Venetian school. One distinctive pattern is a blue spiral design of clear glass.

The colour, which appears as a fine thread winding its way round and round the stemmed glasses, is actually a solid glass rod which has been melted into the clear glass base. Fritz Lampl has been able to find only two craftsmen in England skilled enough to do the work.

It takes as long as two hours to make one wine-glass—longer if the design includes a minute swan in the stem. The swan is a lone survivor from the days when the Lampl workshop in Vienna was promoting a craze for tiny animal caricatures in glass. This fad became international—everybody wanted his giraffes with looks of mild surprise, ponderous elephants and innocent-looking baby monkeys all in glass.

Miniature animals with droll expressions decorated countless mantelpieces, and still do, but Lampl no longer makes them—not since the Japanese displayed the sincerity of their flattery by imitating them and flooding the market.

When, recently, the English producers of Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*, a play dealing with a collector of these animal caricatures, appealed to Lampl for some examples, he had to



Fritz Lampl studies one of his own glasses. "It's really like blowing imaginary bubbles"

decline. Although he was the creator of the original glass menagerie, he hasn't even one left for his own mantelpiece.

The glass menagerie period represented Lampl's whimsical contribution to glass design. Before he came on the scene, decorative glass was mainly chosen for its colour value. Lampl introduced animals, flowers and figures.

One of his finest pieces is an interpretation in glass of a Mozart scherzo, a title he gives to a group of three violin-playing nymphs. The Mozart scherzo was a product of the Bimini workshop in Vienna.

Bimini is a name which some critics decided was an example of the Italian influence on Lampl. Actually, it is the legendary island in the Bahamas where a miraculous fountain confers eternal youth on all who drink its waters. It comes from a poem by Heine.

Today, Lampl designs are marketed under the name Orplid, borrowed from another poet, the nineteenth-century German writer, Moerike. Orplid was the name Moerike invented for an imaginary land dreamed up by a small boy who used to play under a huge dining-room table.

"Orplid is a good name for glass objects," Lampl says, "because it means something that does not exist. The craft of the glassblower is, to a large extent, just blowing imaginary bubbles."

Ship-in-the-bottle Trick

As an example of what he means by this, Lampl produces a small glass perfume bottle. On the outside of it is a golden heart. Inside, and much bigger than the neck of the bottle, is a miniature Cupid aiming his bow and arrow at the heart.

The trick recalls the old sailor's full-rigged vessel inside a whisky bottle. Fritz Lampl's Cupid in the bottle is more complicated than the ship-in-the-bottle trick and has baffled many a would-be imitator. The secret is not to be revealed, although Lampl will, if pressed, admit that Cupid enters the bottle, not by the neck, but by the base.

There remains the problem of keeping Cupid upright with his aim centred on the heart while the

bottom of the bottle is sealed up. That is still Fritz Lampl's secret.

"I only do things I like," Lampl says. Doing what he liked in prewar Vienna meant writing poetry and passing the time of day in Viennese coffee houses with such distinguished contemporaries as Alfred Adler, the psychiatrist, Gustav Mahler, the composer, and Franz Werfel, the novelist.

"Franz Werfel," Lampl recalls, "was a partner with me in a unique publishing house. It was owned entirely by authors. It was a wonderful idea and we published some fine books. But, of course, it was a failure."

It Began At A Country Fair

The philosophic attitude towards the failure of the publishing house was followed by Fritz Lampl's decision that one of the most sensible things to do is to make something with your hands and finish it.

For the fun of it, Lampl went to a country fair. Remembering the enjoyment he had as a boy from watching itinerant glassblowers at a rural carnival, he searched until he found a booth where an old man was making glass stags. Lampl decided this was the craft for him.

"I had always been fascinated by glass," he says, "so the next thing was to find a man who made scientific glassware like test tubes. We worked together and ruined a lot of good glass, but I learned because I was full of enthusiasm. Neither of us knew anything about making beautiful glassware. You might say we were not hindered by knowledge. After all, an expert is only a narrow-minded fellow who knows how to say, 'It can't be done.'"

That was in 1923. In the next fifteen years, Lampl learned all the secrets of creating with glass. He made more fantastic animals, costumed figures and tableware than he cares to remember.

His work went round Europe and won him gold medals. Other pieces went to America. Back from there came his strangest request—to create giant bacilli and microbes in glass.

"I found some white opal glass which really looked slimy, and, with one eye looking

John Bull photograph by Arthur Whittington

through a microscope and the other concentrating on the blow lamp, I tried to copy the real tint of the different germs. The finished models went to the Rockefeller Foundation."

Even more fun than making microbes came from an experiment at the Burg Theatre, the Old Vic of Vienna, where Fritz Lampl was commissioned to make a glass background for the stage. The problem was solved by creating a picture in blown glass—a landscape complete with trees, leaves and flowers—and then projecting it on the rear wall of the theatre.

Instead of a painted backdrop, the effect of the projected glass image was a glowing design. Its shimmering beauty was so attractive that the audience paid more attention to the setting than to the actors.

In 1938 Fritz Lampl had reached the eminence of what a leading German art journal was pleased to call "a great German artist." Three months later, he had to fly from Vienna.

"I went to the British Embassy in Vienna to get a visa," he recalls. "They asked me what my profession was and I said that I was a poet. My application for a visa was turned down. Then I showed them some samples of my glass and they said they would be delighted to have me."

Samples Went In Raid

Hitler caught up with him three years later and the samples which had gained Fritz Lampl a new home in England disappeared during a raid on London which destroyed his workshop in Great Chapel Street.

The workers with whom Lampl rebuilt his reputation—and incidentally contributed to Britain's dollar exports—were an odd assortment of exiles and disabled soldiers. Among the former were an ex-member of the Prussian Reichstag, an internationally known Viennese potter, and a nephew of Picasso.

Making Greek coins in glass kept them together and kept them busy. Lampl had spotted the rare coins in the British Museum. "They fascinated me," he says, "because they had such clarity of design."

The coins were reproduced by Lampl and his workers, and used for buttons, ear-rings, fobs, clasps, necklaces and bracelets. The technique, compared with glassblowing, was simple and could be mastered by the mixed staff. Not until after the war was Lampl able to find skilled glassblowers who could execute his own intricate designs.

Discovery of his most talented glassblower—a diminutive, dark, curly-haired Welshman named Ben George—was accomplished through a fashion column extolling the beauties of the Greek coins in glass. George, who had encountered Lampl briefly before the war and then lost track of him, telegraphed the fashion writer and a reunion between the two glassblowers was arranged. They have been working together ever since.

Ben George spent ten years blowing retorts and other items of scientific apparatus in the Clarendon Laboratories at Oxford. Instead of being satisfied with mastering what is the most difficult of crafts—free-hand glassblowing—he yearned to produce

something of greater intrinsic beauty than a test tube.

Now George, under Lampl's expert guidance, fashions wineglasses so skilfully that the finished products—although he himself never measures them—do not vary more than a fraction of an inch in size. The work demands so much concentration that he apologizes for not being able to explain what he is doing while he twirls and blows the glass tubing in a 1,000 deg. centigrade gas flame.

"Bubble" Becomes A Glass

The raw materials are glass tubes about half an inch in diameter and solid glass rods somewhat thinner than a lead pencil. A small egg-sized bubble is blown in one of the tubes.

On this—using the coloured glass rod as a crayon—eight perfectly straight vertical lines are drawn free-hand. These thick parallel stripes eventually become narrow threads arranged in a spiral design. It's all a matter of how you twist the wrist.

"Twist the glass one way," Fritz Lampl explains, "and the glass rods will stand proud and give a heavy ridged effect. Twist it another way, and these strips melt into the base."

One wineglass consists of four or more separate parts which must be fused together. Here the secret is in keeping the parts to be fused at an equal, and very hot, temperature.

"Watch the colour of the flame," Lampel says, but the exact moment to bring the two pieces together can only be judged after long practice and bins full of shattered glass.

One Lampl masterpiece is a candlestick for five candles consisting of eleven separate pieces fused into one whole. It required two or three days' work to complete and even when finished there was always the risk of its exploding as it cooled. "Tension develops. Then, as the glass cools, there comes a snap and a day's work is lost."

Mental tension is another factor. Ben George says he once completed forty-eight wineglasses one after another but he'll never try it again. The concentration left him limp. Now he alternates between glassware and blowing bits of feminine frippery like glass hat pins and perfume bottles.

Britons Have The Knack

"There have never been such gifted workers as the British," Lampl declares after watching Ben George in the Lampl Oxford workshop. "All people tell me that the British have lost their craft but it is not so. It is only buried. Though there is nothing so difficult as free-hand glassblowing, I have never had such skilled workers as I find in England."

The Oxford workshop is Fritz Lampl's pride. The Kilburn shop, where buttons and ornaments are made is what he calls his bread and butter headquarters. Both involve finding new shapes for glass—the first artificial product invented by man.

"Imagine life without glass," Lampl declares. "It has been incredibly important to man and yet it's so familiar it arouses little interest. After all, what is glass but some sand and ashes mixed together? And look at the fun you can have with it."

The trickiest job in the world. Glassblower Ben George at work