The Fragile Choreography Behind “Shattering Notions”

by Trish Beatty

“Glass: Shattering Notions” is on permanent display in The Hillman Gallery, fourth floor of the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center.

They say the devil’s in the details, and for a major exhibit exploring the historic terrain of Western Pennsylvania’s oldest continuous industry, handling the actual product artifacts proved devilish indeed. “Glass: Shattering Notions,” the newest attraction in The Hillman Gallery at the Senator John Heinz Pittsburgh Regional History Center, is the dazzling result of diligent research, dedicated effort, and inspired teamwork. As the beguiled visitor moves through the 4,600-square-foot installation, he sees little evidence of the protracted and sometimes painful process of bringing clarity to a bewildering range of objects and the complex ideas they represent. Like a prima ballerina and her corps de ballet, “Glass” curator Anne Madarasz and the History Center’s museum staff make it look easy.

For Madarasz, the path from conception to realization of her magnum opus was, for the first few years, a solitary one. Shortly after she joined the staff of the Historical Society of Western Pennsylvania in 1992, Anne was asked to begin the groundwork for an exhibit which would feature the Society’s celebrated collection of regional glass. Still on the drawing board were plans for the History Center, which would open four years later in April, 1996. Creation of “Points In Time,” the comprehensive core exhibit for the History Center, would occupy the entire staff, including Madarasz, especially during the accelerated workload in the months prior to the opening. Research for the glass exhibit would sometimes infringe on her personal time, or occur piecemeal during lulls in the “Points In Time” installation schedule.

As a material culturist, Anne was interested in providing a broader view of glass than might be possible from the traditional decorative arts perspective. She explains: “Material culture suggests that objects representative of everyday life have as much importance — as much right to be saved — as fine decorative objects or singular objects, and I think that’s part of what our mission is in this glass exhibit or in any of our exhibits. We’re interested in telling the story of today as well as the story of 200 years ago, telling the story of the worker on the factory floor as well as the story of the owner or manager.”

It also means that a soda bottle, of which millions may be made, is comparable to a priceless presentation object in that they are both sources of information about the world in which they were produced. “The object becomes your historical source,” says Madarasz, “just as a document or letter is a source for a traditional historian. In this sense, the object is where you start asking questions. Who made it? When was it made? How was it made? What was it made of? How was it designed? Who used it? How was it sold? How did it get to market? How was it marketed? These are all questions that tell you about the culture that produced the object: what it means, what it meant to people in the past, what it means today.”

A thorough examination of the Historical Society’s glass artifacts indicated that Madarasz would need to expand the scope of the collection to include the 20th century. “We were looking for industrial objects,” she remembers, “because we didn’t have many. Things like traffic signals and insulators, everyday objects like bottles, furniture coasters, all sorts of things glass was used for in other ways.” To Madarasz, an airport runway signal is just as exciting as a $5,000 one-of-a-kind object: “It is a more democratic view of the past and of objects. We have a certain value system that we invest them with: they are both pieces of glass,
made from the same materials, many times in the exact same way, in the same kind of factories. To one object we give a value that is not intrinsic — it’s much greater than the cost of what went into making it because it’s rare or beautiful; the other, we tend to take for granted because it’s cheap, it’s plentiful and it’s all around us. Yet both are, essentially, the same sand, the same elements that went into them, the same procedures, the same amount of time.”

Her search for artifacts took Madarasz into the world of glass collectors, from rummaging through cardboard boxes filled with dusty bottles to visiting auction houses filled with well-heeled competition for rare examples of Western Pennsylvania glass. Helpful leads poured in from glass enthusiasts eager to help bring the exhibit into being. “Local glass clubs were invaluable,” says Madarasz, “not only in helping to locate needed objects, but in lending expertise and advice, not to mention funding assistance.”

Prior to beginning her work on the exhibit, Madarasz had almost no practical experience with glass history and substance, so she’s grateful for those who helped with her crash course in Western Pennsylvania glass. Paul Sailer, for example, proved an abundant source for both artifacts and historical information from his many years of working in the marketing division of the McKee Glass Co. in Jeannette. Madarasz says, “He called to offer an amazing collection of McKee-made objects, some 80 items, to which he has since added more. As a result, McKee is the best-represented company in our collection. Beyond that, he and his father worked a combined 91 years at the company, and Paul was most generous in his oral history, providing critical details for our exhibit section about glass marketing.” Sailer has his own place in McKee history: during the 1940s, he contrived a much-touted glass birdhouse which, because of glass’ penchant for heat retention, was an abysmal failure. At one point, the company actually offered a reward for a photograph of a wren residing in the thing, or “Sailer’s Folly,” as it came to be known in those circles.

As the collection grew, so did the workload for Historical Society Registrar Kathleen Wendell. In fact, responsibility for the care and conservation of the entire HSWP artifact collection rests on her shoulders. For each new glass artifact, all available data attached to its individual history had to be entered into REGIS, the catalogue database developed by Museum Research Associates in Hollowell, Maine, and used by HSWP since 1989. “REGIS has greatly enhanced our ability to respond quickly and accurately to inquiries about the collection,” says Wendell. “If someone wants to know if we have any cut glass tumblers from a particular manufacturer from a period of say, 1890 to 1910, REGIS can come up with the answer.” All told, some 1,200 glass objects would be added to the original 3,500 over the five-year period.

Meanwhile, Anne Madarasz continued her research, acquiring the depth of knowledge needed to begin organizing the material into manageable categories. It was during a seminar on high-end art glass that she had a defining moment that thereafter would propel her thinking. “I was looking at slide after slide of exquisite objects that have never been affordable to most people, and then I realized what made the Pittsburgh story so unique,” recalls Madarasz. “Our mass-produced glass was inexpensive and within reach of working people. The conditions existed here for large scale industrial production. We had the money, we had the know-how, and we had the industrial milieu to make it work. And dozens and dozens of
innovations came out of the Western Pennsylvania machine shops and mechanics here in Pittsburgh.”

Glass, in all its varieties and uses, would become as ubiquitous as wood or plastic. It is nearly impossible to imagine what our lives would be like without it, even today when other materials have taken the lead in packaging and manufacturing. What happened in Western Pennsylvania was a complete transformation in glass manufacture from a costly artisan’s craft to cheap, well-made mass-produced products. “Even if innovation happened elsewhere first,” Madarasz says, “it usually happened here biggest, and it happened here longest.”

Material culturists rarely speak in linear terms, and that’s how Madarasz sees the story of Western Pennsylvania’s glass industry — as the weaving together of hundreds of stories about businessmen, artists, chemists, supply and demand, raw materials, transportation, labor and management, marketing, technology, science. The exhibit began to take shape in thematic piles of information, and when it was time to bring in some experts and float a few trial balloons, Madarasz drew up a descriptive document to get the exhibit on the table. She and HSWP Chief Curator Ellen Rosenthal invited leading historians in the fields of industrial history, material culture, Pittsburgh history, and glass to review the ideas and make recommendations. By 1995, it was time to search for a designer to help the historians streamline their thinking, clarify the message, develop concepts, and sort out the nuts and bolts of an exhibit.
Christopher Chadbourne and Associates of Cambridge, Mass., had designed children's museums and public aquariums, and was beginning work on another Western Pennsylvania project, the Railroaders' Museum in Altoona (which opened, coincidentally, on the same day as the glass exhibit!). Anne Madarasz remembers being bowled over by Chadbourne from the start: "Chris could see what we were after so clearly, his thinking was so close to ours, and he zeroed right in on the audience we wanted to reach." The design company joined the exhibit team in January 1996, and Antonino Treu was appointed project designer. The next few months would involve a considerable exchange of ideas, dozens of phone conferences, and many hundreds of pages faxed and Fed-exed. By the summer of '96, Madarasz was rethinking some of her ideas for interpreting the historical data and the exhibit's details were beginning to emerge.

The Historical Society wanted to put the exhibit on the schedule for 1998, but two major unknowns had to be solved before the plan could proceed: how much would the glass exhibit cost, and who would help pay for it? A pre-bid on the fabrication and graphics production in the fall of 1997 helped to answer the former, and a major grant from The Hillman Foundation afforded a firm base on which to build additional financial support. From PPG Industries came funding to produce the exhibit's illustrated catalog, written by Madarasz and edited by Paul Roberts, HSWP's editor of publications. By November '97, a fabricator/installer (EXPLUS, Inc., of Dulles, Va.) had been selected and the exhibit team shifted into high gear.

At about the same time, six months prior to the scheduled April 1998 opening, Registrar Kathleen Wendell and her assistants began to transfer (very carefully) 700 glass objects to the History Center. The items ranged in size from tiny salt cellars and drawer knobs to an automobile windshield and stained glass windows. The task of moving all these highly breakable objects over any distance is governed by a strict protocol, which unlike that in which members of a royal family travel separately. According to Wendell, a single vehicle-load of artifacts will never contain an entire genre of objects. "Should the unthinkable happen, you wouldn't want to risk losing all of a particular family of items." Duplicate objects are never packed in the same container and, unlike nearly every other kind of artifact, glass objects are never handled with cotton gloves. "Most glass is unique in that it does not interact chemically with the oils and perspiration of ungloved hands," adds Wendell, "and of course, it is much safer to handle a glass object with bare hands or plastic gloves."

Moving the artifacts is only one step in the meticulous preparation of objects for the exhibit. Each object is assigned a number in the REGIS database. The number corresponds to all the documents and resources that detail the history of the piece and information about who made it, who owned it and so forth. "One of the reasons this process is so intense," says Wendell, "is that even if an object could be easily replaced, the duplicate would not share the same provenance [i.e., history] as the original."

The registration number is discreetly applied to the object in an inconspicuous place in tiny, semi-permanent numerals. A small object, such as a goblet, is then cradled in the secure embrace of a "snake," a soft surgical stocking loosely filled with polypropylene beads, and sits quietly in the "clean room" until the next step in the process occurs. For larger objects, including rare stained glass windows, a padded wooden crate provides a protective shell.

In early March, Bruce Christman, a conservator from the Cleveland Museum of Art, arrived at the History Center to examine each artifact. His job was to note the condition of the individual objects and make recommendations for any cleaning or repair (conservation) he deemed necessary. "Glass artifacts are never submerged," explains Wendell. "We wipe most objects with the solution that Bruce suggests, and then we wipe it dry."

Before the objects can be placed in the prepared exhibit cases, each must be fitted for a custom mount which immobilizes the object and protects it from bumps and vibrations. EXPLUS, Inc., actually made the individual mounts on-site at the History Center. This meant that each artifact would go through a few more sets of hands before final installation during the last days before the exhibit opened. The mount itself is made with a brass rod, shaped to fit, and covered with an appropriate barrier material such as polyolefin heat-shrink tubing. Pliable "quake" wax, developed by the Getty Museum, is sometimes employed for increased stability.

A word here on the essentials of handling fragile, frequently priceless (or very high-priced) glass objects: holding one of only two known objects created by a 19th-century master craftsman is not for the faint-hearted. The museum staff must cultivate a Zen-like blend of caution and confidence. Like tightrope walkers, they must be mindful of every detail yet possessed of an instinctive aplomb that
allows a graceful balance that is at once deliberate and circum-
spect.

In the first weeks of 1998, a number of final decisions regard-
ing the overall design were made. A color scheme was chosen
while object positioning, text and picture panels, and construction
materials were nailed down. Special Project Associate Tracy
Walther was designated the construction coordinator, serving as a
liaison among the designer, the fabricator, and the HSWP exhibit
team to ensure that the work was done as specified by the
designer. She and Museum Director Bill Keyes traveled to Dulles,
Va., in early March to review the fabrication. Walther says, "I was
very impressed. It was reassuring to see that they were doing such
a good job, and what made all the difference was that the exhibit
had been so well-planned by Tony Treu. I don’t recall any
significant changes to his design."

EXPLUS, Inc., shipped five loads of finished exhibit com-
ponents over a two-week period in March and installed the exhibit
with occasional supervision by Treu. After a majority of artifacts
had been placed in their cases, Treu returned in mid-April to
adjust the gallery lighting. In the last days, a flurry of activity
placed object labels for every single artifact, gave volunteer
docents their final "dress rehearsal," and saw final preparations for
the unveiling of the History Center’s star exhibit for 1998.

Incredibly, throughout the year leading up to the exhibit’s
opening, Anne Madarasz was preparing to launch another major
project: her first child, born in January. Needless to say, her
subsequent maternity leave was anything but seamless. She
dandled new daughter Mary Elizabeth on one knee and myriad
11th-hour decisions on the other. Fortunately, there was one
individual whose familiarity with every facet of the exhibit rivaled
that of Madarasz. "Lauren Uhl was with the project from the very
beginning," says Madarasz, "and she was responsible for thou-
ousands of details, time-consuming things like doing the
research for the maps that show the location of all the
glass factories. If I was the exhibit’s ‘front person,’ it was Lauren
who was in the trenches getting the job done.” Uhl, special
projects associate, was indispensable during the maternity leave,
and was a reliable source for any information about the glass
exhibit’s evolving status.

Space does not permit equal time for so many other key
players in the “Glass: Shattering Notions” story. From the
hardworking fund raisers and the publications personnel who
labored mightily in the production of the handsome exhibit
catalogue to the administrative and Business Division staff and all
the specialists in the Museum Division whose expertise was vital
to a thousand decisions, the diverse cast of this masterwork is
testament to the project’s scope and purpose. For the epic story of
glass in Western Pennsylvania, it has been an epic undertaking.

Conservator Bruce
Christman of the
Cleveland Museum of Art
repaired and cleaned
some of the glass
pieces. He also
trained staff in
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