

# Czech Glass or Bohemian Crystal? The Nationality of Design in the Czech Context

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## Czech Glass or Bohemian Crystal?

### *The Nationality of Design in the Czech Context*

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MARTA FILIPOVÁ

For over a century, ‘Czech’ and ‘Bohemian’ have been attributes ascribed to various glass objects which come from today’s Czech Republic. These terms have often been used as synonyms to describe the same geographical, historical or national origins of utility or decorative glass. Yet they are not identical because they carry significance provided mainly by the political context in which they have appeared. Glass can in this sense be seen as a pertinent example of how academic, popular and consumer awareness of design has relied on the understanding that design and its interpretations are framed and influenced by the geopolitical circumstances in which the very objects or theories were created.

Many design exhibitions and publications have explicitly addressed specific historic moments. One of the latest volumes on Czech glass, *New Formations, Czech Avant-Garde Art and Modern Glass from the Roy and Mary Cullen Collection*, maintains that exhibitions are witnesses of their times, as they highlight previously unknown or inaccessible works as well as novel political, historical and geographical areas to new audiences (Srp et al. 2011: 9). At the heart of this exhibition’s catalogue is the Cullen Collection which features not only the works of now more or less well known avant-garde artists from Czechoslovakia, like Karel Teige, Jindřich Štýrský or Toyen (aka Marie Čermínová), but also a collection of Czech modern glass, consisting of moulded and blown vases and other glass objects. Focusing on the period between 1900 and the 1930s, it contains ‘more than three hundred superb pieces, mostly of ornamental glass, and documents the stylistic development of Czech glass during this critical period’ (Mergl 2011: 266).

This period, i.e. the beginning of the twentieth century, is often identified in art and design literature as the height of Central European modernism, in which local responses to the international modern movement took different national forms (Mansbach 2001; Wilk 2008; Benson 2002). In this context, the contributors to *New Formations* discuss Czech glass as an established category alongside those of the Czech avant-garde and Czech modernism. However, Czech glass, and Czech design, are misleading concepts with serious limitations. They suggest that there is an inherent and permanent quality and character to the works, which is related to the national or cultural identity of the Czechs. This understanding of Czech art and design and Czech national identity is static; it disregards the historical and political complexities that affected the notion of a cultural and national consciousness in Bohemia.

While it has now been acknowledged that the Czechness of Czech modernist art and avant-garde is flawed – for it is impossible, as well as redundant, to discriminate specially national features – the concept of Czech design seems to be more resilient. One important factor is commercial, as Czech design can be used as a brand name, yet there are also historical, political and cultural reasons for retaining the notion of national specificity in design.

This chapter examines Czech glass and the construction of a political identity in design, whether national, cultural or ethnic. Glass is here understood as indicative of more general trends in the interpretation of local, regional and national design in the global context, and as a concrete example of the impact of the specific geopolitical circumstances on our understanding of the authenticity of this phenomenon. I focus on theoretical and historical aspects rather than stylistic and aesthetic developments in Czech and Bohemian glass and design. The culturally and nationally specific features of glass and design in the contemporary context require examination of the convoluted and contested history, interpretations and institutions of what is today the Czech Republic. A careful study of such politically charged narratives of glass aims to unpack the myth behind Czech, Bohemian and even Czechoslovak glass and point to the continued importance of national contexts in which design appears. At the same time, the case study of glass from Bohemia points to the legacy of international modernity, which is largely responsible for establishing the nationality of design. The text therefore aims to highlight the existence of the globally accepted narratives in which nationally specific items have become a successful commodity as well as a subject unchallenged for a long time.

## **Designing Czech Identity**

Regular references to ‘Czech design’ and ‘Czech glass’ by designers, scholars and traders alike assume an inherently Czech aspect to design and glass. Design therefore becomes a form of tradition that can be preserved, revived and

even invented (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984). It is a complex of collective values which have either survived from the past or have been recreated in the present with a particular significance (Hobsbawm 1984; Eyerman and Jamison 1998: 26–44). This tradition is an invention of nineteenth-century national and ethnic recoveries of various groups, in this case of the Czech national revival movement. Such traditions of art and design can contribute to a sense of unity and connectedness among groups of people by reminding them of their common heritage. Glass, which has been produced in Bohemia for centuries, has been identified with such a heritage. Its long history and national and international recognition meant that manufacturers, traders, designers and scholars have accepted it as embedded in local traditions and have, therefore, ascribed to it qualities fitting economic, cultural and political goals in different periods. The ‘Czechness’ of Czech glass has thus become a constant in the



**Figure 8.1** Vratislav Hugo Brunner, A glass with Prague motives, 1922, The Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague, inv. no. 86.506. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague.

ever-changing historical and political circumstances that the geographical area, from which it is believed to have originated, experienced. Czech glass has appeared in a number of diverse ideological contexts such as the national revival, democratic systems and communism.

Moreover, close connections between the notion of design, constructed as a modernist concept, and the modernist interpretation of nations and nationalism become apparent. Eric Hobsbawm, Benedict Anderson and Anthony Smith have shown that nations are inventions of modernity which mobilize popular consciousness in order to cope with modern conditions and political imperatives (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1984; Anderson 1991; Smith 1998: 224). Arts and crafts formed part of a shared cultural heritage and were an important vehicle in such modern myth-making.

Simultaneously, the idea of design underwent a conceptual transformation as a result of industrialization and the creation of new states during the second half of the nineteenth and first half of the twentieth century. Design is often understood as a product of modernity, or modernist ideology, and can be linked with the historical period of rapid industrial development, technological innovation, rejection of the old and desire for creating novel forms.

To understand the codification of nationally, historically or regionally specific design in relation to Czech and Bohemian glass, I need to review some oft-used terminological, historical and geographical references (Agnew 2004; Sayer 1998; Pánek and Tůma 2009). 'Bohemia', or the lands of the Bohemian crown, frequently refers to a region in Central Europe dating back to the mediaeval kingdom of Bohemia which survived as a legal entity, in modified form, until 1918. The first Slavic groups, to which the Czechs belonged, arrived in the area of Bohemia in the sixth and seventh century, but they were far from the only ethnic group in the region. A substantial German minority shared the territories of Bohemia with the Czechs in various political entities for centuries: medieval kingdoms, the Habsburg monarchy, of which Bohemia was part from the sixteenth century, and the interwar republic of Czechoslovakia.

Mobilization of national consciousness amongst many ethnic groups across Europe in the nineteenth century significantly changed the cohabitation of the two ethnicities. Small nations that were often part of multi-ethnic and multi-national states were especially active in defining and redefining their identities in order to gain political recognition and, in many cases, autonomy. Finns, Norwegians, Romanians and Scots sought to define their national geographical boundaries as well as their cultural traits (Facos and Hirsch 2003). In the Habsburg monarchy, Hungarians and Poles started recovering their respective histories and cultures in order to emphasize their position within the Empire (Crowley 1992; Muthesius 1994; Schneider 2006). Hungarian efforts successfully led to the Austrian compromise of 1867 in which Hungary was given a number of privileges, including an autonomous parliament and various ministries.

In Bohemia, too, Czech political, cultural and intellectual leaders started reassessing local history for evidence of authentically Czech language, art and heritage in order to secure greater independence from the Austrian authorities. Institutions including theatres, public offices, academic and educational societies and institutes started using the Czech language, and new journals, newspapers and books promoted a wider use of the language at all levels of society.

This language-based nationalism influenced many aspects of subsequent interpretations of the history and geography of the Czech nation and of art and design. ‘Czech lands’ is sometimes used as a synonym for Bohemia but it is, in fact, an even less fixed concept referring to the territories inhabited by Czech speakers. The status of the Czech language as a mother tongue was both mythicized and sanctified through its resurrection and codification during the national revival of the nineteenth century, and through emphasis on its historical pedigree (Sayer 1998: 107).

Other forms of tradition, especially the arts, became markers of the historical and cultural independence of the Czechs in the nineteenth century. The political, ethnic and cultural competition of the nineteenth and early twentieth century between the Czechs and Germans in the Czech lands therefore impacted the way art and design was interpreted. The notion of authentic Czech art and applied arts (and later design) became increasingly important, as it contributed to the sense of historicity and long-lasting legacy of the Czech nation in the geographical area of Bohemia. The origins of the regionally and culturally specific references to glass as Czech or Bohemian can therefore be traced back to this potent period of the Czech national revival of the nineteenth century.

## **Czech, Bohemian, or Czechoslovak: The Histories and Geographies of Glass**

Even today, publications and exhibitions use the notion of Czech glass as a historical, cultural, economic and geographical category, which is often replaced or mixed with Bohemian and even Czechoslovak attributes. *Czech Glass 1945–1980: Design in an Age of Adversity* is a pertinent example (Ricke 2005). Otherwise critically aware of the political and historical influences on glass in this region, the author of the introduction refers to Bohemian glass, Czechoslovak glass and Czech glass almost interchangeably and without acknowledgement of the subtle, yet important differences. Readers are left to infer underlying distinctions between Bohemian glass (glass from the geographical region of Bohemia, inhabited by both Czechs and Germans), Czech glass (produced by Czech nationals or speakers), and Czechoslovak glass (a concept that appeared after World War I, used to refer to a politically affected notion that glass received both in the interwar republic and the post-World War II communist state).



**Figure 8.2** Vase, manufactured by Johann Lötzwitwe, Klášterský Mlýn, 1908. Roy and Mary Cullen Collection. Photo courtesy of The Museum of Fine Art, Houston.

The geographically denominated glass, deemed as Czech, is often referred to as coming from the ‘heart of Europe’, at the ‘cross-roads of European trade routes’ (Petrová and Olivie 1990: 12). It is not a coincidence, however, that the main glassworks were concentrated in the border regions of Bohemia, which had a substantial German population (Fig. 8.2). Geographical notions are supplemented, therefore, by history. Until the radical expulsion of the Germans after World War II, glass factories in, for instance, Karlovy Vary (or Karlsbad in German) in eastern Bohemia, and Jablonec, Harrachov and Kamenický Šenov in the north of Bohemia, were mostly owned by Germans who controlled the economy in these border areas (Ricke 2005: 27; Newhall 2008: 13–28). Czechs were often employed as factory workers until 1938 when they were pushed inland after the annexation of Sudetenland by Germany. The term ‘Bohemian’ thus contains not only a geographical reference but also an acknowledgment of German ethnicity in the territory.

Between World War I and II, during the era of the democratic Czechoslovak state which officially united the Czechs and Slovaks, glass – just like art, language

or the concept of a nation – adopted a new political dimension when it was linked with the adjective ‘Czechoslovak’. The artificial Czechoslovak identity referred to the new composition of the political state, aimed at promoting the joint interests of the two Slavic groups and creating a single majority to outnumber the substantial Germans and Hungarian minorities. The joint Czechoslovak identity was based on the belief that the Czechs and Slovaks had lived together in a particular location and were connected not only by the redrawn political boundaries but also by the idea of a shared and geographically-determined history and culture (Smith 1991: 117).

Predominantly Czech politicians, linguists, historians and art historians looked for proofs that the Czechs and Slovaks had been in close contact during the centuries leading up to the events of 1918 or that, indeed, they were members of a single ethnic group. Yet despite the frequent use of Czechoslovakism in various political and cultural contexts, especially in the 1920s, the concept was synonymous with Czech identity, and marginalized the Slovak one. Period discussions of Czechoslovak history or language overwhelmingly referred to the Czech context, while histories of Czechoslovak culture were often limited to the Czech-speaking territories. This emphasis on the Czech element in the new Czechoslovak identity, which included prioritizing Czech art and design, was a part of the construction of the Czechoslovak myth which consisted in the promotion of a vision of Czechoslovakia to international audiences as a modern, democratic state of a single nation (Orzoff 2009). Although initially accepted by few Slovak politicians, such a view represented a Czech position and benefitted from the lack of equivalent resources in Slovak. Eventually, it led to a dissatisfaction on the part of the Slovaks and to an increase in nationalistic sentiments calling for Slovak autonomy.

Similarly, the category of Czechoslovak glass, used by historians, journalists and art critics, was predominantly limited to the glass production of Bohemia, even though there were many glassworks in Slovakia. Czechoslovak glass can therefore be understood as a purely artificial and politically motivated concept. According to Susanne K. Frantz in *Czech Glass*, ‘after hundreds of years of foreign domination it is understandable that a population seeks to be identified as a national group’, which translated into the need to create a sense of Czech (Czechoslovak, or even Bohemian) glass (Frantz 2005: 15). Such an approach was in fact part of a more general trend in Czech historiography and echoed an established belief that the Czech nation suffered for hundreds of years under oppression of external powers, whether Austrian, German or Soviet. The idea that the Czech nation was victimized, strongly promoted in the Czech national revival of the nineteenth century, was also defended during the interwar period by, for instance, President Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk, as well as in post-World War II communist rhetoric (Pynsent 1994). This justified an emphasis upon those aspects of the Czech character (and art and design), which may be interpreted as uniquely Czech, to prove that the Czechs, despite the external



adversities, managed to retain an independent identity that constituted their nationhood.

National traits of design had therefore already been established during the interwar period and the ‘Czechness’ of Czech and Czechoslovak glass had long been emphasized as one of the constituents of national identity. In 1933, Alois Metelák, an architect and glass designer, described the national qualities of glass, in which ‘each nation imprinted some of its soul and its sentiments. Italians [imprinted] their lightness, French their elegance, Swedes their seriousness, Germans their technical perfection’. For him, Czech glass was typical of the sense of colour, harmony of shapes, liveliness and, like all glassmaking, it grew out of local traditions and the homeland (Metelák 1933: 5). Thus national stereotypes were projected into analyses of contemporary and historic artefacts which were compared, as much as nations, for their originality and timeless features.

## **The Postwar Political Mosaic**

After World War II, changes in the political and economic system of Czechoslovakia affected the construction of the notion of Czech (and Czechoslovak) glass. Czechoslovak manufacturing was turned to heavy industry, which impacted the production of consumer goods, including glass. A number of glassworks in the border regions of Bohemia were closed down and many workshops and factories faced decline. This began immediately after the war primarily because of the forced expatriation of ethnic Germans from the Sudetenland and the nationalization of the glasswork trade. Moreover, a centralized monopoly for foreign trade, Skloexport, was created in 1947 to facilitate the export of glass (Franz 2005: 30).

The almost exclusive identification of glass as craft, prevalent in the nineteenth century, underwent a transformation: glass objects, especially monumental sculptural and architectural pieces, were increasingly classified as products of design and fine art rather than craft. Accomplished glass sculptures had already begun to appear between the wars when the split in glassmaking started becoming prominent. At the same time, craft making carried with it connotations of the production, however skilled, of pre-industrial society, and the nineteenth century industrialization of the factories in Bohemia gave birth to a new category of utility glass. In the twentieth century, it was produced en masse and became highly commercial, yet, a number of artists, designers and theorists in the interwar period tried to introduce aesthetic values into everyday objects. The commercial orientation continued in the 1950s, when glass industry manufacture grew even more conservative, hand production decreased and a number of specialized schools in the border regions closed down (Ricke 2005: 31).

National and international institutions, especially museums and exhibitions such as world's fairs and expos, played a key role in promoting glass as having authentic Czech qualities, and establishing Czech glass as a distinguished and sought after design category. Czech and Bohemian glass had been displayed and sold to the world at international art and trade exhibitions since the nineteenth century. The Great Exhibition of 1851 in London featured an extensive and influential collection of glasswork from Bohemia; the Parisian expositions universelles of 1879, 1889 and 1900 displayed Moser glass from Karlovy Vary, while a 'tastefully arranged and beautiful exhibit' of glass from Bohemia was shown as far as at the International Exhibition in Launceston, Tasmania in 1891 (Tallis 2011: 202; Anon. 1891: 3).

The prominence and importance of glass displays continued into the twentieth century with Bohemian and Czechoslovakian participation at the Louisiana Purchase Exhibition of 1904, Paris (1925 and 1937), Brussels (1935) and others. Glass contributed to the promotion of the small emergent nation at these important international events, it represented 'the most important tradition of national creative production' and informed 'the wider public about Czech glass and its benefits' (Langhamer 1992: 112).

The political role of glass exhibitions became especially prominent after World War II and the communist coup of 1948 that strengthened Soviet influence over Czechoslovakia. Postwar expos became crucial places where encounters between so-called east and west took place. They provided opportunities for states on both sides of the Iron Curtain to showcase their achievements and to learn about other countries' production. The politically tense 1950s were a particularly important decade for the formulation of a concept of Czech and Czechoslovak glass which still persists today. On the one hand, glass further developed into a successful commercial and exported product, while on the other, it became a more liberal and artistic medium. As the latter, it was not meant for mass production or consumption and after Stalin's death in 1956, a certain degree of free artistic input was allowed, and some artists and designers travelled abroad to encounter the work of others (Wasmuth 2005: 86).

Understood as both utilitarian and studio/art glass, Czechoslovak glass appeared internationally for the first time since World War II at the 11<sup>th</sup> Triennial in Milan in 1957. This was a carefully orchestrated presentation, prepared by the communist authorities and a small selection of coordinators, of how modern Czechoslovak glass should be marketed to international audiences (Havránek et al. 2008). The display emphasized artistic quality and won several prizes (Nováková 2012). The exhibition category of so-called industrial products, under which design was most often classified, was given not just an economic or material role but also an aesthetic and cultural one.

Design thus became a part of the socialist myth and a tool of political and cultural propaganda during the Cold War (Crowley 2000; McDonald 2010; Castillo 2010). Czech or Czechoslovak glass served as an expression

of the communists' soft power, used to attract and entice audiences (Nye 1990). International exhibitions therefore provided a great opportunity for propaganda and the subtler politicized agendas contained in art and design objects. Together with other articles of industrial design, glass was assigned a 'special political promise', because it was seen as having the potential to improve living standards at home and to bring back hard currency as a successful export item (Giustino 2012: 189). It also served as proof of the high quality of local design and workmanship which was still affordable for the ordinary people of Czechoslovakia. According to a contemporary commentator in a Czechoslovak communist journal that echoed the official position, the high quality of the objects of everyday use, including utility glass, influenced and demonstrated how demanding and educated the common, working-class folk of Czechoslovakia were (Spurný 1958: 3).

At post-World War II exhibitions, 'Czechoslovak glass' was developed into a recognized brand that was presented internationally as a successful achievement of the communist state and its workers. Manufactured from local resources and embedded in a long national tradition, glass was presented as 'the most truly Czechoslovak of all artistic media' (Wasmuth 2005: 87). This agenda became apparent at the Brussels Expo of 1958 and at the Czechoslovak Glass Exhibition in Moscow the following year. In Brussels, especially, Czechoslovak glass received much appreciation and recognition. Apart from the obligatory showcases of industries and trade, the Czechoslovak entry consisted of displays of design directly recalling the legacy of interwar modernism. This so-called Thaw Modernism of the Khrushchev era was, nevertheless, marked by a contradiction in that it tried to create a modern civilization that differed from Western capitalism, while also accepting models and standards from global Western modernity (Crowley 2000: 145; Péteri 2004: 114). In the context of an international world's fair, the Czechoslovak state apparatus adopted a Western, modern exhibition model to promote the products of its socialist manufactures and studios.

The Czechoslovak artistic exhibit at the 1958 Expo therefore conformed to this marriage of the so-called Western and Eastern. By reconnecting with international modernism in, for example, the architecture of the Czechoslovak pavilion, the exhibition also presented new cinematic and performance techniques, including 'The Magic Lantern' and the 'Polycran'. Small-scale glass objects and utility glass, such as vases, plates and crystal, were for sale or available to order from the Czechoslovak export office. Collective achievements in socialist glassmaking and production were emphasized more than the designers of these objects (Wasmuth 2005: 90–91). This was a result of the previously mentioned post-World War II reorganization of the glass workshops, the establishment of artists' societies and the creation of a trade monopoly, which stressed the collective input into glass making.

Subsequent expos and international exhibitions mostly repeated or refined the narratives of Czechoslovak glass that were established so strongly in the



**Figure 8.3** Stanislav Libenský – Jaroslava Brychtová, *A composition in grey*, 1965. The Museum of North Bohemia, Liberec. S3331. Photo courtesy of The North Bohemian Museum, Liberec.

1950s and glass continued to be influenced by politics. Yet, a certain stagnation occurred in the 1960s; utility glass designers ceased experimentation in order to meet the state production quota (Ricke 2005: 127). Studio artists, on the other hand, continued working with monumental art and combinations of materials and abstraction. Participation at expos and world's fairs therefore remained crucial for artistic confrontation, the exchange of ideas and the establishment of contacts.

The brief attempt at the democratization of communism in the mid-1960s, the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 also influenced the way in which Czech and Czechoslovak glass was presented. At the 1970 Expo in Osaka several monumental glass pieces contained a direct political message. The now established artistic duo Libenský – Brychtová displayed a glass relief, 'The River of Life', featuring people being carried away by a stream of water which bore footprints of Soviet military boots (Petrová 2007: 337; Langhamer 1992: 187). This piece evoked sympathy and international

recognition for the couple, and persecution from the Czechoslovak communist authorities.

The normalization that followed the few liberal years of the late 1960s meant that participation at international exhibitions was limited and carefully orchestrated. However, the representative feature of glass remained to dominate both international and domestic markets. In Czechoslovakia, artists and designers often worked on apolitical commissions for state-paid public buildings, such as hotels, factories or theatres (Petrová 2007: 845).

Although the political events of the second half of the twentieth century impacted the presentation and content of Czechoslovak exhibits abroad, the notion of Czechoslovak and Czech glass remained largely unaffected. Following the Velvet Revolution of 1989 and the creation of the Czech Republic and Slovakia in 1992, however, glass manufacturers in Bohemia underwent another substantial transformation. The large national companies and the communist era monopoly were terminated and factories were privatized or returned to their original owners. Yet, some of the large share-holding companies created in the Czech Republic in the early 1990s fell victim to the post-1989 volatile economic climate. Simultaneously, small and large producers of 'Czech glass' re-emerged. Utility glass once again became an important export product, as well as a popular tourist purchase.

## Conclusion

The making of Czech, Czechoslovak and Bohemian glass as both an object and a notion has for a long time been linked to the domestic national tradition, established in the period of modernity and national revivals in Central Europe at the end of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century. Narratives concerning glass produced in interwar Czechoslovakia, deemed as a modern and democratic state, were reinforced for political and export purposes after World War II when glass, both studio and utility, became an export commodity and thus a political tool. The geopolitical, historical and cultural circumstances that helped to form the idea of Czech glass have been closely linked to the attempts to consolidate a strong sense of national identity for both domestic and foreign audiences for more than a century. Even today Czech and Bohemian glass function as important domestic brands and popular tourist souvenirs.

Contemporary exhibitions of glass, usually in Prague, contribute to the popularity of Czech glass among general and specialized audiences. In 2012 and 2013 alone, the Museum of Decorative Arts held seven exhibitions in Prague that upheld the concepts of Bohemian and Czech glass, understood as cut glass produced in the geographical territory of Bohemia and the artistic and studio production of Czech artists in the post-World War II period respectively



**Figure 8.4** Glass as a touristic attraction in Prague, photograph, 2014. Author's collection.

(exhibitions). While the complex history and the political background of the concepts' development may not seem important in the current context of the globalized design market, both the adjectives Czech and Bohemian carry significance that contributes, perhaps unconsciously, to the aura of uniqueness and authenticity of such glass. This case study has revealed how ideologically charged national design histories can be and how careful attention to the particular political and cultural context in which they have been construed is needed. As such, the concepts of Czech and Bohemian glass serve as pertinent examples of the continuous importance that design history as well as the commercial sphere place on the construction of specificity, authenticity and permanent features of design, which are so closely intertwined with the political history.

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