

Erwin Eisch Remembered

(b. 18.04.1927 in Frauenau, Germany, d. 25.01.2022 in Zwiesel, Germany)

Katharine Coleman

"I would like to lead glass out of the so-called sphere of 'good form', to liberate it once again and to regard it as a material that can hold an entire world of poetic possibilities."
Erwin Eisch (1962, *Glass of our Time*¹).

While not the father of the 1970s Studio Glass Movement – that accolade must surely go to American Harvey Littleton – Erwin Eisch was its essential catalyst. Neither of them invented contemporary, non-functional glass art: that came from Scandinavia and the Czech Republic in the 1950s. Erwin's oeuvre is well documented online and therefore does not require extensive listing here.

The oldest of glass engraver Valentin Eisch's six children, Erwin was born in 1927 in Frauenau, deep in the Bavarian Forest. Valentin worked at the Gistl glass factory, now the site of the Bild-Werk Summer Academy. Unusually, between the two World Wars, Frauenau was a thriving glass community, extending its parish church to accommodate its increasing population. In 1944 Erwin was 18 and drafted into the Wehrmacht, serving in Denmark until interned by the British. Returning home in 1946, he was sent to Zwiesel to train as a glass engraver, which he detested and for which he was totally unsuited.

Erwin moved quickly on to the Munich Academy of Fine Arts in 1949, returning home from Munich in 1952 to help his family set up their own glassworks in Frauenau. Within a few years the Eisch Glashütte was employing some 200 workers. This commercial world was of little interest to Erwin, soon financially free enough to return to Munich to further study painting and sculpture in 1956. *Erwin*



Fig. 1
Erwin Eisch standing outside "Himmel and die Hölle", Bild-Werk Frauenau, 2013

*Eisch: Clouds Have Been My Foothold All Along*², catalogues all his work and his second time in Munich, his formation of the artist groups SPUR in 1960/1 and then RADAMA, using glass as his medium for sculpture. He exhibited his work alongside that of his devoted partner Gretel Stadler (later his wife) and an invented friend, Bolus Krim.

For Erwin, there never was a borderline between comedy and serious art. The concepts of the fine line and fine art at Munich were total

anathemas to him. He focused on wax casting and bronze while exploring the yet unknown possibilities of sculpture in glass. Art interested him for its content, not the material it was created in. Much of Erwin's deep-rooted anti-design attitude came from his contempt for the decorative, functional glass made by his family. His heroes were Rene Roubiček (CZ), Andries Dirk Copier (NL), and Fulvia Branconi in Murano. Throughout his artistic life, Erwin also remained a serious

Fig. 2 Harvey Littleton and Erwin Eisch
© Corning Museum of Glass



painter and printmaker. He might be remembered as much for this as for his contribution to the world of glass.

June 1962 saw Erwin and Gretel's first exhibition of freeblown glass artwork, *Glas unserer Zeit (Glass of Our Time)*, at the Tritschler gallery in Stuttgart. The owner, Rupert Mayer, was expecting work for display on tables and in cabinets and was not prepared for the massive shipment of some 200 pieces enamelled and decorated by Gretel, representing their latest conceptual art installation: a complicated fairy story featuring 'Edward III and his 228 Theses'. They left Munich in 1962, married and settled back in Frauenau, where Erwin could use the family glassworks to make their artwork. Their first child, Katharina, was born in 1962³ and that same year Erwin met Harvey Littleton, whereupon his life was changed forever.

There is an apocryphal story at Bild-Werk of how Harvey Littleton, son of a Corning Inc scientist, was driving back home from Austria in late summer 1962 through the Bavarian Forest, fruitlessly searching for the means of making glass in a studio, away from the factory. They tell how Harvey accidentally stopped his car in Frauenau's main street to ask directions from a young man, who thrilled him by being able not only to help but also to speak a bit of English

and who, within hours, was able to explain all that Harvey required as well as an understanding of the possibilities of modern glass art. This is one of the great accidents of Fate for which we shall ever rejoice. Many see that planetary alignment as the moment of the birth of Studio Glass.

A more likely story, however, is recorded in Wikipedia, which notes that Littleton saw some of Erwin's work in a Zwiesel glass showroom and tracked Erwin down to Frauenau, Fig.2. "Meeting Erwin," wrote Harvey, "confirmed my belief that glass could be a medium for direct expression by an individual."⁴ The planetary alignment was just as eventful. In

1964 Erwin went back with Harvey to the States, helped set up a studio glass furnace, teaching a summer school at the University of Wisconsin.

Returning home, Erwin set up a small furnace of his own, melting his own batch. Between 1965 and 1975 he blew all his own sculptures, returning to the States in 1967 to experiment with fuming and enamelling the inside of his works, also using engraving and decoration on them. Littleton conversely came back to Germany to work with Erwin. In 1969, they exhibited their work together in Munich and Cologne, Littleton's tubular forms contrasting with Erwin's more functional forms - buckets, bottles and vases - though Erwin was not interested in their usefulness. That they were blown was more significant: "...a talent for innovating, creating animatedly, and the breath to blow are requisites. Without blowing, nothing happens!"⁵

By 1972, Erwin was making mould blown heads, which were then coloured, enamelled and engraved, mostly by Gretel and the Eisch factory workers to Erwin's designs, Fig.3. The most famous heads are those of Littleton, Tom Buechner

Fig. 3
Erwin's Heads in the Bavarian State Glass
Museum Frauenau





Fig. 4
Katharine Coleman walking to the Gas Works with
Erwin Eisch, Frauenau 2013. photo: W. Vernim

and Picasso, almost identical heads turned into unique pieces by the colour of the glass, painting and cutting. These are possibly Erwin's most famous works, inspiring glass artists and makers worldwide.

Thereafter Erwin spent more of his time and energy painting and drawing, printmaking and vitreography (printing from glass plates). The latter he developed mostly at the Littleton Studios, producing some 64 prints over 26 years. He drew and painted daily in his studio at Bild-Werk Frauenau, which he founded in 1988. His studio was on the first floor of one of the old Gistl Factory outbuildings and known by all as "Himmel" (Heaven). The studio on the ground floor below was rumoured to have been the old drinking den of the Gistl Factory workers but was subsequently the engraving studio and fittingly – for Erwin – given the name "Die Hölle" (Hell).

Famous throughout the international world of contemporary glass, the Bild-Werk Summer Academies have annually attracted scores of international glass artists and students, musicians and fine artists. Even in his 90s, Erwin would be on site, encouraging, inspiring, and amusing, a mentor and guide to so very many glass artists from all over the world. He often told

me how much he had hated glass engraving, admitting that he had begun to change his mind, Fig.4.

This admission came sadly too late. As with so many revolutions, there are casualties of dogma. With the progress of the Studio Glass Movement, this happened to glass engraving. "There shall be no surface decoration" was the cry of the movement's early proponents - though Erwin didn't always follow his own rules, especially since he felt that rules were there to be broken - followed slavishly by American, British and French glass departments, hastily throwing out their lathes and the teaching of all such skills, racing to follow and copy each other. This dogma has lasted some fifty critical years and the blow for glass engraving may prove fatal.

To describe him, Erwin was small, wiry, very handsome, with a twinkling eye, a soft voice, kindly and amusing. Most mornings, in the many summers I have taught at Bild-Werk, he would stroll into the engraving studio on his way up to 'Heaven' for a chat and we would laugh before he stomped off upstairs. In later life, he became tolerant of a wider range of artistic goals while gently prodding us all to question and consider the content of our work more seriously. Gretel has always stepped carefully away from the limelight, the unsung hero of

Erwin's work and a generous host to so many of us each year at their beautiful house near the old Gistl factory.

The V&A has recently acquired one of Erwin Eisch's most significant early blown artworks, *Narcissus*, prominently displayed in the extension of the Glass Gallery – a fitting monument to the great giant of the European Studio Glass movement. His legacy, alongside Harvey Littleton's, will endure as one of the greatest contributions to the 20th Century applied arts.

THE AUTHOR

Katharine Coleman MBE, enrolled into a Glass Engraving course at Morley College, Lambeth, in London 1984 -7 and was tutored by Peter Dreiser - Katharine then progressed into the internationally well-known glass engraver we know today. Committed to the art of glass engraving, she has taught and demonstrated her skills at Bilde-Werk Frauenau over the last 15 years – building a friendship with Erwin and Gretel Eisch.

REFERENCES

1. Helmut Ricke, *It was All There to Start With*, essay in Katharine Eisch-Angus, Ines Kohl, Karin Schrott: *Erwin Eisch*, 2012, Hitmer Verlag ISBN 978-3-7774-5191-6, pp.235, p.30
2. *Ibid*, pp.8-69
3. Five children were born to Gretel and Erwin Eisch: Katharina (1962), Valentin (1964), Veronika (1965), Susanne (1968) and Sabine (1969). Katharina is instrumental in keeping BildWerk Summer Academy going into the future.
4. Littleton, Harvey K., "Glassblowing: A Search for Form", Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, New York 1980, page 10 ISBN 978-0-442-24341-8 OCLC 9505541
5. Grover, Ray & Lee, "Contemporary Art Glass", Crown Publishers, Inc. New York, p. 185