

THE "GLASS FLOWERS" AT THE HARVARD MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

No visit to New England is complete without exploring the remarkable collection of "glass flowers" at the Harvard Museum of Natural History in Cambridge, Massachusetts, USA (see Triple Point, this issue). The Ware Collection of Glass Models of plants represents 847 plant species painstakingly and accurately crafted in glass by Leopold and Rudolph Blaschka. The father and son glassmakers in Hosterwitz, near Dresden, Germany, were last in a line of family jewelers and glassmakers going back to 15th-century Venice. Originally charged with the creation of just a few models, the Blaschkas later signed an exclusive contract with Harvard to make a collection of over 3000 glass models, a task accomplished over five decades from 1886 through 1936. In addition to being highly skilled craftsmen, the Blaschkas had a remarkable understanding of botany and were able to create specimens that were scientifically accurate.

The unique chemical and physical properties of glass lent themselves particularly well to making models of botanical specimens. Glass was the perfect medium with which to visually capture the translucence of a petal or the brittle strength of a cactus spine. The parts were shaped after the glass was softened by heat. Some models were blown. Colored glass was used for many; others were painted with a thin wash of colored ground glass or metal oxide(s) and heated until the material fused to the model. The Blaschkas continually experimented with new techniques to perfect colors and to incorporate other materials into the models, such as internal wire supports, glue, and enamels. They used many different minerals to make colored glass: lapis lazuli for blue, iron oxides for reds, manganese dioxide for purple, malachite for green, cinnabar for another red vermilion, and others.

Adapted from text provided by
the Harvard Museum



Some of the "glass flowers" on display at the Harvard Museum of Natural History; www.hmn.harvard.edu
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