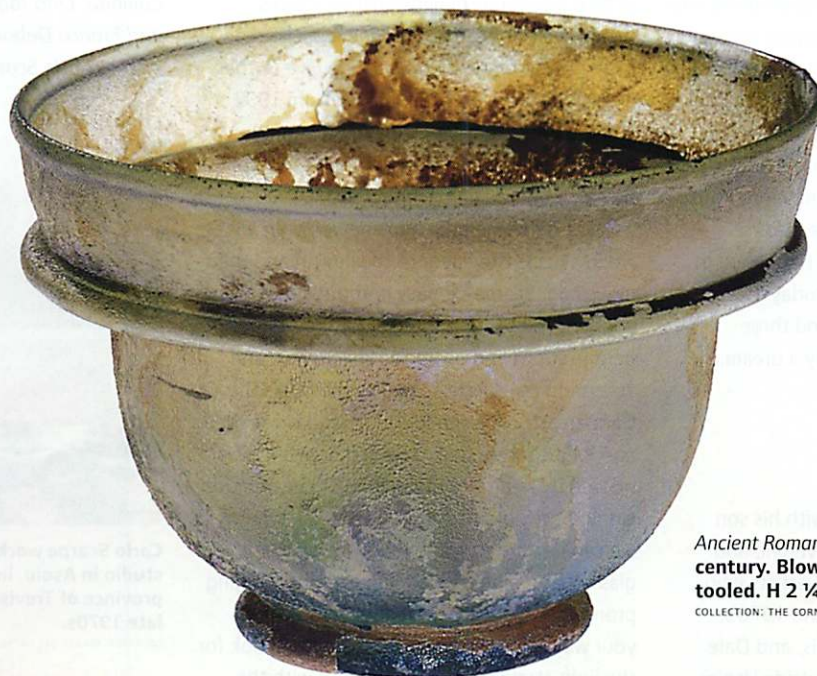


THE NONFUNCTIONAL FUNCTIONAL

Meditations on the glass vessel

BY JAMES YOOD



Ancient Roman Cup, first century. Blown glass, tooled. H 2 ¼, D 3 in.

COLLECTION: THE CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS

Every year there is a 1.3 percent reduction in the number of sculptures made in glass that exhibit a direct or indirect relationship to functionality. I just made that up, but it does suggest what's been going on for quite a while: a kind of slow but certain weaning away of glass sculpture from its roots in vernacular use, mostly identified as the vessel tradition, or, more grandiosely put, glass's ongoing dialogue with functionality. I'm not going to argue whether this is a good thing or a bad thing, just that as we enter what some might call the post-Studio Glass period, it might be interesting to think about how the vessel tradition was already collapsing from within. Even before it began to be sidestepped, it had become a beautiful and luxurious caricature of itself, subjected to lissome and dreamy mutations until, in its final and exquisite death throes, it became, as an Italian might put it, *guasto*, something functional that *non funziona più*.

Let's call the four phases of this the functional, the faux functional, the dysfunctional, and the nonfunctional. While historically they pretty much appear in that order, they also come to exist simultaneously; each phase does not supplant its predecessor, it just sets up a further rumination on the legacies and implications of domestic use. We begin, of course, with functionality itself, with the creation of objects to be employed by people in their daily lives. Ancient Roman glass is a great example, and seems to propose humanism in action: that the objects we use—remember that line from *The Silence of the Lambs*, "We learn to covet what we see every day"—can provide special resonance when they are lovely and interesting and the residue of careful design and craftsmanship. Even though a function may be utilitarian, the experience it provides can be enhanced and ennobled through an object that pleases us. Vases, cups, bowls, glasses, and goblets have poured out endlessly over the centuries, and continue to do so.



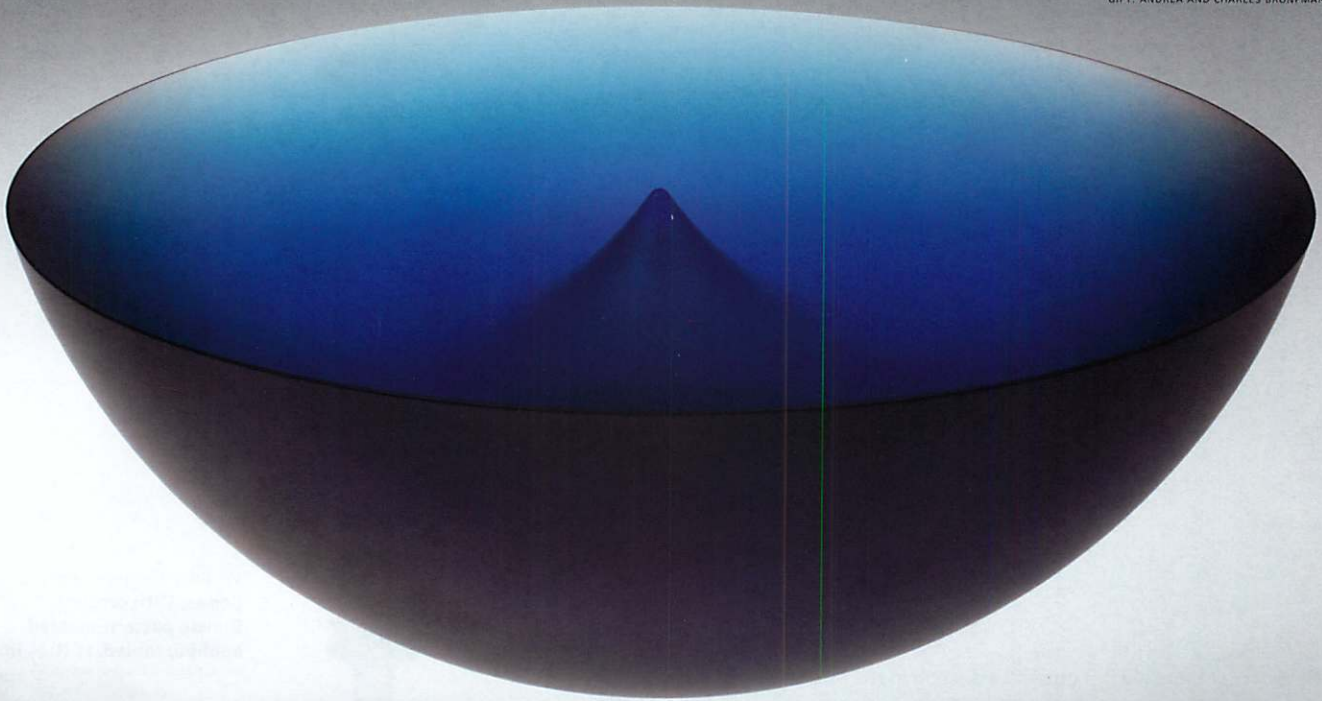
Venetian Dragon-Stem Goblet, 17th century. Blown, pattern-molded, applied, tooled. H 10 ¼ in. COLLECTION: THE CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS

But that experience, the visual delectation that an attractive object can provide—and the satisfaction of owning such a thing—eventually became an end in itself, divorced from utility. In faux functionalism, which particularly took hold of sculpture in glass in the 18th and 19th centuries, a vessel to be held, made for employment in daily use, shifted to becoming a vessel to behold, turned into a sign of comfort and affluence. What was physically functional became, with the complicity of maker and purchaser, only visually functional. A journey was made, seeking to satisfy a voracious high-end market, to move progressive sculpture in glass from the table to

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František Vízner, *Blue Bowl*, 1996. Cast, cut, sandblasted, acid-etched. H 4, D 11 ½ in.

COLLECTION: THE CORNING MUSEUM OF GLASS
GIFT: ANDREA AND CHARLES BRONFMAN



the mantel. (I consider that journey as the worst moment in the history of sculpture in glass, the 19th-century total surrender of our best artists and fabricators to elitist and market-driven concerns that left functionality to lesser hands; no matter how much we exult in the sugary spun-glass confections of much, for example, Muranese work of the 19th century, it is cloyingly mannered, and primarily about status: the declaration of maker and purchaser that such objects were not about utility but about excess, creating what seems like a kind of glass porn.)

The artisanal tradition continued, with some important variations, into the Studio Glass movement and its move of the vessel tradition into a wonderful dysfunctionality. It's worth mentioning the obvious: with few exceptions, almost every object made by, among countless others, Dale Chihuly, Hiroshi Yamano, Lino Tagliapietra, Paul Stankard, Laura de Santillana, Dante Marioni, Marvin Lipofsky, Toots Zynsky, Joel Philip Myers, Laura Donefer, Richard Marquis, Mark Peiser, Giles Bettison, and Stephen Rolfe Powell derives its form from a bowl, vase, cup, plate, paperweight, or teapot. But unlike faux functionalism, where the object is embellished with ruffles and flourishes into a kind of hyper-beauty, the vessel in the last few decades has been cunningly deformed and twisted and mutated into every possible variation that hot glass and breath can evoke. The vessel remains—there is almost always a cavity, a lip, a neck, a base—but it is transformed by the maker's signature style into a vessel of personal creativity rather than domestic use. It is largely dysfunctional

as a vessel but superbly functional as art. This does more than just put the funk into functionality; the morphing of the vessel into a dysfunctional work frees it from the logical constraints of use. The artist is primarily making art, not things, sculpture, not vessels; the balance significantly shifts from object to maker, and a vase by Tagliapietra is more about Tagliapietra than it is about a vase.

While I've never had a desire to put a flower in a vase by Laura de Santillana, or slip a couple of apples onto a Seaform by Chihuly, or drink from a wine glass by Jay Musler, I will acknowledge an ongoing interest in pouring a glass of water or milk over the top of a sculpture by Sidney Hutter, just to watch it splatter about. Because while other artists elude functionality, make the vessel expressive, stretch it beyond its limitations, artists like Hutter make it altogether nonfunctional, deny its cavity, and actually make it no more a vessel than a doorknob is. And yet Hutter's work—and I am thinking as well of the late František Vízner—is almost an homage to what it is not; a vase by Hutter looks much more like a vase than one by, say, Stephen Rolfe Powell, though the latter makes vases and former does not. The exterior shape and contour of a piece by Hutter is so traditional and classic in form that it is instantly identifiable as a vase, though because it is coldworked from a multitude of stacked, thin, horizontal plates of glass, it is solid and can never contain air or liquid, and is filled instead with the several-thousand-year-old tradition of the vase. (The shape is of Hutter's own design,

Vizner and Hutter make ghost vessels, signs of vessels, testimony to an effort already so divorced from use that it makes sense to take the final step and make use itself impossible.

though it seems closest to an amphora without handles.) And while Vizner also teases the vessel shape—in his case, often a bowl form—by having at times just the slightest shallow recession on the surface, it's so contrary to the expectations of a vessel that it seems more of a sliced ovoid, perfect and impassive. Both artists respect their format so much that this becomes enough, the repeated acknowledgement of the ur-shape, the need to return again and again to the core pursuits that define sculpture in glass. They make ghost vessels, signs of vessels, testimony to an effort already so divorced from use that it makes sense to take the final step and make use itself impossible. I wonder what an ancient Roman would have made of a vase by Sidney Hutter.

But even full nonfunctionality cannot end the vessel tradition. Custom and habit, the acknowledgement of many sculptors in glass of the artisanal traditions out of which they came, even the act of glassmaking itself (after all, nothing is more fundamental to the process of glassblowing than that it creates a cavity sheathed by glass, which is pretty much is the definition of a vessel). While the vessel may leave center stage as the dominant embodiment of sculpture in glass, its thousands of years of distinguished accomplishment are too precious a legacy to abandon all at once, or, for that matter, to abandon at all. ■

Contributing editor JAMES YOOD teaches modern and contemporary art history at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, where he directs its New Arts Journalism program.



Sidney Hutter, *Twisted Abstracted Strip Vase*, 2008. Laminated, cut, and polished plate glass. H 16, W 9, D 9 in.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST



Rooted in Questions

FLORA C. MACE and **JOEY KIRKPATRICK**'s multi-decade partnership has been an ongoing exploration of the botanical universe.

BY VICTORIA JOSSLIN



Every Soil Bears Not Everything, 2008.
Mixed media. H 50,
W 27, D 5 in.

PHOTO: SCOTT LEEN
COURTESY: TRAYER GALLERY,
SEATTLE