

Corning Glass Museum mirrors man's

CORNING, N.Y. — Once upon a time — on June 1, 1980 — an enchanted glass palace opened its doors to reveal a treasure trove. No need to slay dragons to gain admission, \$2 will do.

The palace is the Corning Museum of Glass, an undulating, shimmering ribbon of a building made largely of glass. The treasure within is 3,500 years' worth of 19,177 objects made of glass. Together they comprise a stunning celebration to the magical transformation of ordinary sand into a versatile, useful and beautiful man-made material.

The museum is part of the Corning Glass Center, itself part of the Corning Glass Works in the Finger Lakes region of New York.

The region is famous for lake and stream water sports in summer and skiing in winter; glacier-

Travel

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sculpted gorges, gray rock formations and waterfalls best seen against the colors of fall; car races at Watkins Glen and soaring at Harris Hill; and tours of New York wineries the year around.

But however long your stay and for whatever pursuit, set aside half a day for the Glass Center and its new museum.

IN CORNING town, follow Glass Center signs to the parking lot and into the hands of polite young guides.

Board a double-decker brown bus, one of a fleet imported from Bristol, England, to shuttle visitors to the Glass Center, with an optional detour through downtown.

The guide will point out the massive buildings of the glass works on the banks of the Chemung River. The river literally brought Brooklyn Flint Glass

Works to Corning by river barge more than a century ago. Taking the name of the town, Corning Glass prospered as barges from Pennsylvania mines hauled coal for its furnaces to the door.

And it was the river's doing that the most comprehensive collection of glass objects and related literature now has a new home. In 1972 Hurricane Agnes blew in from the Atlantic. The Chemung overflowed and flooded the inadequate, old museum.

THE REINCARNATED Corning Museum of Glass rests on stilts safely above the flood plain. To contain the growing collection and provide for special exhibits, it is shaped like a giant gift package bow with seven irregular loops radiating from the central "knot," its core, which is the library.

The architect, Gunner Birkert, edged the museum with a sort of sideways periscope. It is an arrangement of two rows of angled mirrors that let in non-damaging indirect daylight while projecting the outdoor landscape to visitors inside.

In this way the museum's glass paneled walls are themselves a giant split screen reflecting the changing patterns of clouds and sky and putting the city that glass built on display alongside its showcase.

Bottles, drinking glasses, phials, amulets, urns, platters, glass flowers, beads, paperweights, musi-

ingenuity

cal instruments and even furniture made of glass; plain glass, opaque and transparent glass; cut glass, etched glass, pressed glass, gilded glass; a molded head of a youthful Egyptian pharaoh no bigger than an apricot and near life-size figures from medieval cathedrals — all are displayed in a rainbow of light and color against a muted background so that you feel you are captive in a prism.

EACH OF FOUR CONCENTRIC exhibit tiers covers the history of glass-making in 12 landmark epochs in as many parts of the world. The innermost corridor is a gallery of 12 masterpieces, each enclosed in a freestanding glass column. The grand gallery contains 10 times as many masterful objects. The third layer displays 10 times the number of the second, and the outermost roughly 10 times that again.

If you have 20 minutes, in theory you have plenty of time for a quick once-over for the 12 masterpiece vitrines. With more leisure, choose your progress through the middle layers, with their dioramas, films and historical interpretive quotations and graphics, to the show-and-tell-all completeness of the outer cabinets.

In practice, it is hard to tear yourself away at any point.

Here in the splendid isolation of its own column is the Red Warrior Vase, an 18th century Chinese-carved scene. It is as exquisitely rich in movement and detail as a feature film.

There, hundreds of colorful glass paperweights glued to an outer cabinet wall make up a dazzling op art composition, yet each demands a closer look at the bright pattern under its own half globe of heavy glass.

HERE A SIMPLE wine glass positively Scandinavian modern in simplicity turns out to be a twin to its contemporaries in 16th century Venetian paintings. There next to a detail of a robust Breughel beer drinker are rows of "Humpen," that is, gaudily and patriotically enameled beakers, three to five quarts in capacity. Etiquette required 16th and 17th century German drinkers to drain them in one giant gulp.

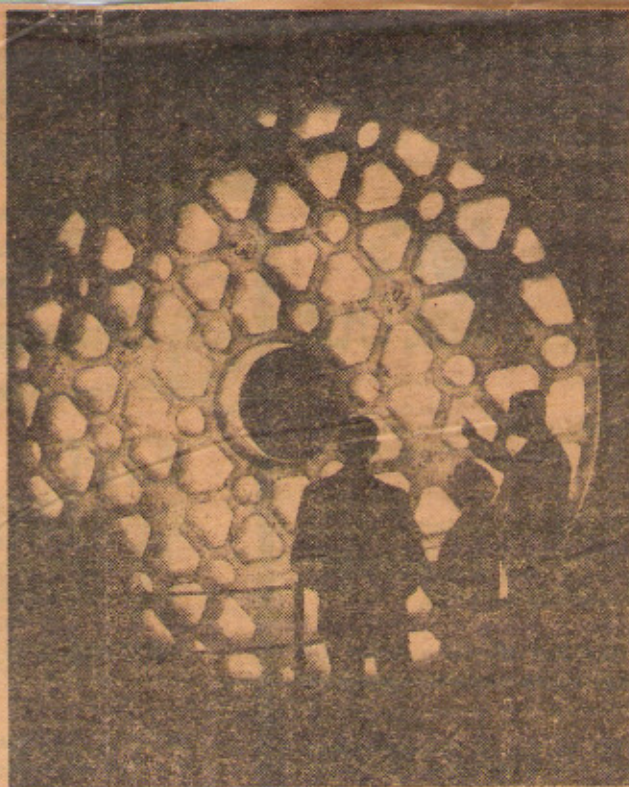
The contemporary English gallant, on the other hand, sipped his ale from long-stemmed cut glass beauties. But, as an excerpt from a 1702 English Brewer's Guide informs us, the beverage was apt to be "Thams Water (with) all the fat and sullage from this great city of London. It will of itself ferment wonderfully (and after) due purgations and three times stinking, it will be so strong that . . . it has often fuddled . . . Murriners."

And so you move on through the flowering of the many forms of cut glass in the 19th century to the fantastic shapes and colors of modern studio art glass but not before wishing you could linger over the artful, sinuous decadence of Art Nouveau masters Galle, Lalique and Tiffany.

The largest working exhibit is the whole Steuben Glass Factory, where you can rest at an amphitheater to watch the production of America's brilliant showpiece glass.

If you can afford it, buy Steuben at a special shop. If not, you might settle for a Pyrex pieplate from a barnlike Corning Ware outlet, another of four shops.

The Center auditorium is the site of summer theater productions. In front, a bus marked "B" stops to take you on a guided tour of Market St., reconstructed to show off Victorian parapets and terra cotta brickwork. Get off for a visit to the Rockwell-Corning Museum of American Western art.



Visitors to the Corning Glass Center are greeted by the original casting of the 200-in. telescope disc of the one at Mount Palomar, Calif.