

Roland “Max” Erlacher

Masterful Engraving a Lifetime of Art

By Debbie Tarsitano

I first met glass engraver Roland “Max” Erlacher, of Corning New York, in May of 1976. He was demonstrating by engraving a “Minuteman” before a captivated audience attending a Boston glass convention. As I watched, he worked with confidence and deep knowledge. He showed total control over his design as he placed each cut with skill and exquisite precision. His demonstration of talent and ability amazed and inspired me. Max has also inspired the glass art community with his elegant and detailed style of engraving. He has created countless true to life engravings which are now in prestigious public and private collections.

Since meeting Max Erlacher in Boston, it has been my privilege to collaborate with this talented artist and professional many times. I have never heard anyone call him by his given name, Roland; he is just plain “Max” to all. As an artist, Max Erlacher’s lifetime of talent, open-mindedness and selflessness have made him a true master of the glass engraving art. Although he designs most of his own work, Max also uses his technical and artistic mastery to compliment and enhance the visions of other artists and designers he works with. Today Max Erlacher continues to set the gold standard for excellence in the engraved arts.

Max is multi-faceted and a legend in The Crystal City, Corning, New York. An outdoorsman, he respects nature and enjoys horses and skiing. He also likes a good laugh from funny stories he tells now and again. Max is well-liked throughout the Corning glass community with many friends and long-time acquaintances. Our friendship led me to write this article about Max Erlacher. The following is an interview with Roland “Max” Erlacher conducted in person during a visit to his Studio on November 2, 2007.

DT: Tell us about where you came from?

Max: I originally came from Austria and went to glass technical school there. After four years of school, I went to Vienna and worked for Lobemeyer for 4 years. I earned my master engraver certification there in Vienna (Max walked me over to an impressive certificate, hanging on the wall, and translated its German inscription describing his accomplishments.) Then, I came to Steuben in 1957 when I was 23 years old. I worked for Steuben for 20 years and on my own for 28 more years. For the past two years I have been back working at Steuben.

DT: What lead you to engrave glass?

Max: Well, I wanted to be a sculptor so my father took me to see a sculptor in Vienna, but he already had two apprentices picked out for the next three years. I could not wait three years. On the way home we drove through this little town and saw a big sign saying “New Glass Technical School.” The school was founded by people who came in from Czechoslovakia but we were visiting during summer vacation. My father and I went in

and I saw one man engraving glass. Instantly I knew this is what I wanted to do. The man I saw at that school became my teacher, Herman Schiller, and I worked with him for my four years at the school. Mr. Schiller was influential in getting me the job in the prestigious glass company, Lobemeyer where he had worked. Lobemeyer created the chandeliers for the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, and had a world wide reputation for quality.

DT: It is said you are a Master Engraver how did you receive this title?

Max: In 1955 I created "Diana," an engraving for my Master Engravers certificate. I was in my early 20's. We had to design a piece, calculate how many hours it would take to create it, and estimate how much it would sell for. I could only work on the piece on my own time, not during working hours, so it took me about a year to create the piece. Then I submitted it to a committee of four masters, not all engravers, for them to judge the work.

DT: How does your extensive training, compare to instruction today?

Max: When I was learning, it was mandatory for each student to master every existing technique, whether the student liked the technique or not. Today there is a lack of technical proficiency. I am not sure there are very many apprentices for engraving any more. A lot of engraving today is done with the flex shaft tool which cannot get the same effects with the refinement capable through copper wheel engraving. I went back to my old school in Vienna a year ago and they are no longer training students with wheel engraving. The refined effects are lost. Engraving with a wheel is more like carving and sculpting glass.

In school I studied anatomy to understand the human form. We followed a process. First I had to model my engraving in bas relief (a three-D form) convexly in plasticine clay. Then I was allowed to engrave my design in glass. In this way I could envision the depth and scale of the engraving. I am not sure anyone uses this process anymore. But it worked well for a great result.

DT: How did you get your job at Steuben?

Max: I wrote letters to four different companies in Sweden, Germany, Switzerland and to Steuben. I learned about Steuben from advertisements. Steuben answered my enquiry so I came to Corning, New York alone in 1957. I lived in a room on Market Street. Three months later I was drafted into the U.S. Army. When I came home from training, I moved closer to the glass center and served the rest of my time in the Army Reserves while working at Steuben. I met my wife, then Catherine O'Bryan (everyone calls her "Kitty"), a Corning girl. We were married November 21st 1959. My wife has supported my work for nearly 50 years; at the same time she raised our children and ran our shop for 30 years. I often run my ideas by her and she keeps me going. We have a son and a daughter and I have a sister, Edith, living in Austria.

DT: What were your first projects for Steuben?

Max: We engraved Audubon bird plates, Georgia O'Keefe flower plates, and pieces with designs representing the States in America. We would engrave limited editions of each piece. At the time there were ten engravers and each individual worked on his own piece.

Only I and another engraver from that group are still around, the rest are now deceased. I enjoyed the work and we always had new designs. I engraved many one-of-a-kind pieces for Steuben and at least one major presentation piece a year.

My favorite piece is entitled the “Romance of the Rose.” This work is engraved on both sides of the glass on the outside and the inside. It is inspired by a story written by a monk in the 16th century. The monk started the story and then died before finishing it. Another monk picked it up 100 years later and completed it. The story is about a young man falling in love; (surprising since they were both Monks!) The story was written in medieval French and translated into English. Don Pollard designed the piece and hired an outside designer to design the images of the young man’s experiences and his thoughts. It is a very touching work of art.

“The Chinese Pavilion” is another one of my favorite designs. It is all engraved on the inside of each panel. The figures, birds, and animals are all engraved. In addition, I have created many presentation pieces for American presidents. These include, “The Crusader Bowl”, bought by President and Mrs. Reagan as a wedding gift for Lady Diana Spencer and Prince Charles. That piece took 670 hours to create. I also engraved PT109 for President John F. Kennedy and a piece given by President Johnson to Khrushchev. Also for President Johnson, I engraved a long horn steer and cowboy trail rider, called “Trail Rider,” which is now in his presidential library in Houston, Texas.

DT: I imagine the designers work closely with you.

Max: In the early days we had four or five designers who came up from New York, but today they are all located in Corning. I work with designers Peter Drobny and Erik Hilton. We work together to come up with the design that works best for each piece. Recently, I worked with Kiki Smith, an outside designer, for Steuben.

DT: Tell us the process of developing a new engraving.

Max: I receive the initial glass for engraving, either designed by a Steuben designer or an outside designer and the final drawing. We talk about the execution of the design, for instance, what technique we are going to use. I then engrave the design on the glass blank, and if there are questions, I bring these up with the designer and we usually get together and adjust the work. Once the piece is finalized we wait for approval and upon approval the piece is professionally photographed. The photographs of the initial piece become the model we rely on to create the same level of excellence in subsequent pieces. This process works well for all involved.

DT: You left Steuben in 1977, which must have been a different experience for you.

Max: I started my own business with my wife Kitty; we called it “Erlacher Glass.” I began to work on a variety of my own projects such as an engraved window for the Agricultural School at Cornell University. I created an advertising engraving for Heineken and I made fine engraved paperweights for Mr. Paul Jokelson, then president of the Paperweight Collectors Association. I met Charles Lotton, the glass blower, and had him blow Cameo blanks for me from which I created a variety of cameo engravings.

Some of the opportunities I had took my work in new directions, so I have learned to do things differently. I don't always have a name for each piece. In fact everyone asks me the name of the piece (Max points to a large engraving of a reclining woman). I jokingly reply "Max's Memories."

Creating my own designs is interesting. I especially enjoyed engraving "Hercules Wrestling the Bull," and "Egyptian Scarab" representing the circle of eternal life. On one occasion I met a young man, Frank J Regula, having an exhibit of his drawings created from gold leaf and charcoal. I thought his drawings would be ideal subjects for engraving and we collaborated. He came up with a beautiful design based on the human form which integrated the graceful swans' necks as arms. I have the original drawing and the piece, and still enjoy looking at it.

DT: It seems another area of mastery throughout your career is very detailed and realistic portraits of famous people and tender portraits of animals especially horses.

Max: I love horses; I used to ride them and show them. My own horse was called "Just Ben," he was a Holsteiner. I try to convey the majestic beauty of the animal in my work, which I am able to do because of my experiences with my own horse.

As to portraits, thirty years ago I engraved a portrait of Albert Einstein that is now in the Air and Space Museum at the Smithsonian in Washington, DC. It is a large piece of glass. Among many portraits I have engraved are Mother Theresa and Ann Frank.

DT: Since 2005 you have come full circle and are back at Steuben. Tell us about your work today.

Max: Currently I am working on a piece called "Moon Bay." The design is engraved in a 3 dimensional way. I cut and polish it several times, taking away and re-establishing the design. I still start with a drawing, transferring it to the piece, then cut and polish the engraving. I have been working with the same engraving machine for 30 years and have about 120 engraving wheels of all sizes and shapes. I spend many hundreds of hours working in my studio and I have everything I need in reach. I built my studio space to create my work in a professional yet comfortable atmosphere.

DT: Tell us about your most exciting new association with Kiki Smith for Steuben. (Kiki Smith and Max Erlacher have combined talents to create the "Tattoo Vase" for Steuben. The vase stands 16.25 inches tall and is an edition of 5 at \$60,000 each.)

Max: The work with Kiki has been totally different. She really coaxed me into creating a new style which went against the grain a bit for me. She loves coarseness and I am not used to such textures in engraved work. When we had the "Tattoo Vase" finished and cleaned she added diamond stippling and patterns on it by her own hand. We set the vase up in the studio, and darkened the room. It was so dramatic it awed us all. The designers came up to the studio and were amazed at the result.

I would have not tried something new if it were not for her. The technique is fresh and away from most of my disciplined work. I had to let go of my usual style to allow Kiki's style to shine through the design. We started with a drawing and then improvised. (Max walks me over to a very large Steuben vase partially engraved with Kiki Smith's design.) The design was carefully placed on the vase using paper cut outs. The vase will be limited to five pieces.

DT: Where do you think your work is headed in the future?

Max: I have tried a new technique with Kiki Smith and I plan to introduce it into my repertoire and I may continue to combine styles in new work. I am sure there are many other techniques out there to be tried that haven't been seen before. I think there is more room to play with new techniques. It often takes someone else to show a new way. The Smith piece may mark a new era for engraved work. I still love my work and when you are doing something you really love, it is not work.

End