Famed Glass Museum, Hit By Flood, Tries To Pick Up the Pieces

Continued From First Page

14,000 exhibits and the museum's records destroyed, "it's not going to be easy relying on memory," says Ray Errett, the museum's restorer.

Mr. Errett's method is straightforward. He tapes the pieces together, molding the object into shape. Then he glues each tiny fragment with epoxy resin cement. Raymond Oliver, the authority on glass at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, says he prefers to use a Scandinavian glue that softens in hot water. The object can then be molded back into shape by occasionally dunking it in water. Using this method, he once repaired a bowl about the size of a large coffee cup that was in 250 pieces. "It takes much time and a lot of patience," he says.

Some of the exhibits may have to be rebuilt with a liquid polyester that resembles glass when it dries.

Many Curious Ways

The flood caused destruction in many curious ways.

The 3,000-year-old Persian vase simply fell apart under the water. It was found to consist of two-thirds plaster, the result of some ancient restoration.

Priceless documents had been filed away in brown folders made from special acid-free paper. There was no acid to harm the documents, but underwater the brown ink ran out of the folders causing dark stains.

The museum's famous Paris Plate, made in the third century in Antioch and decorated with water paint, wasn't broken. But the plate is covered with mud, and Mr. Perrot admits he's afraid to clean it for fear he'll find that the paint has been washed off.

Many of the rare books became so swollen with water that they couldn't be dislodged from their shelves. With a pained expression, Mr. Perrot recalls how he was forced to pry some books out of the shelves with a crowbar, destroying their antique bindings.

Money, it's felt, isn't going to be the chief problem in the museum's recovery. Its main support comes from the Corning Glass Works Foundation, which has given the museum as much as $400,000 in one year. The museum also had flood insurance.

The Ethics of Acquisition

The biggest problem, says Mr. Perrot, is going to be the finding of new pieces that are available for acquisition. When the museum was opened in 1951, he says, few questions were asked when rare pieces of glass were put up for sale on the international market. In recent years, however, "international agreements have established certain ethics to prevent the selling off of national treasures. So now it's simply not possible to rebuild the collection."

Along with money, the musuem also has an ample supply of labor. At Corning Community College, three miles away, the museum's cataloguer, Mrs. Virginia Wright, has a small army of teen-age volunteers rescuing the museum's collection of 1,500 photographic slides of glass in museums around the world. Each slide has to be removed from its mounting, washed and hung up to dry, turning the college's library into a small laundry.

Mrs. Wright herself is considering doing a little pioneering of her own. Frustrated that many documents are taking so long to dry out, she's planning to take some home to dry in her microwave oven. "Who knows," she says, "We may develop a whole new method."

New Techniques May Result

On the positive side, says Mr. Perrot, it's possible that new techniques will be developed for restoring the exhibits, since this is probably the first time a major U.S. museum has suffered such extensive damage. And already, he says, the museum is making use of techniques developed after the disastrous 1966 floods in Florence.

About 7,000 books were soaked in the Corning flood, and all of these have been placed in a deep freezer in a nearby meat packing plant. Mrs. Carolyn Horton, a book restoration expert who was a consultant in Florence and is now advising the Corning museum, explains that unless the water-damaged books are frozen immediately, mold will develop and begin to digest paper fibers. "Conditions are very similar to those in Florence," she says.

Later, each book will be air-dried very slowly. Some books, such as the first book ever published on glassmaking, printed in Florence in 1612, were also badly doused with mud. These will have to be washed page by page and then interleaved with blotting paper.

Air-drying, however, may not work for the early 19th-century books in the collection. Mr. Perrot says that much of the paper made then was extremely acidic, and water causes the acid to break up the paper. These books may be restored by freeze-drying, a technique commonly used for processing food. The frozen books would be put in a vacuum and gently heated, and the ice would be drawn off as a vapor.

Many modern books are an even greater problem because of their glossy pages. Water reduces the gloss to a sticky gelatinous substance that sticks the pages together as it hardens. The museum now has a multivolume set of McGraw Hill's "History of Art" that resembles a set of rocks. Mr. Perrot shrugs: "They can always be replaced."

But the most complex job will be restoring the glass. The first problem is sorting out the fragments into their respective pieces. With

Please Turn to Page 13, Column 6

HOLIDAY NOTICE

The Wall Street Journal will not be published tomorrow, Independence Day.

31 in 1970, the Mo... America reports.

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Experts Sift Ooozing Mud, Seek Bits of Shattered Treasures, But Much Is Lost Forever

By DAVID BRAND
Staff Reporter of THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

CORNING, N.Y.—A Corning Glass works o... ficial looks forlornly at the costly damage to ... large piece of glassmaking equipment batter... by the floods that poured through this sma... town last weekend.

"Awful, isn't it," says his companion.

"I suppose so," says the official. "But wh... you come to think of it, not nearly so awful ... the Beilby goblet. Machinery can be repair... But the Beilby has gone forever."

The Beilby goblet, a rare and exquisite 1... century drinking glass, was a prize exhi... among the world-famous collection at the Co... ing Museum of Glass. Now it lies in fragmen... picked from the mud that still oozes throu... the museum's exhibit rooms. With it lie ... splinters from numerous other rare piec... vases from ancient Persia, an Islamic ... quoise bottle and a centuries-old Germ... drinking glass.

The Beads Survived

The Corning museum probably had the m... comprehensive collection of glass and of lit... ture on glass in the Western world, exp... say. It's thought that the only other muse... anywhere devoted entirely to glass and its ... tory is the one operated in England by Pilk... ton Bros. Ltd., the big British glassma... Among the items in the Corning collection ... a set of Egyptian glass beads dating bac... 1350 B.C. Its most famous piece possibly ... 16th century Venetian dragon-stem goblet. ... tunately, the beads survived the flood and ... goblet sustained only a broken lid.

But of the museum's collection of 1... books on glass, some 7,000 got soaked.

"There's been nothing like this since W... War II—or at least since the floods in ... ence," says an obviously fatigued Paul Pe... the museum's director for 20 years. For ... past few days, he has been using a fine-... window screen to sift the glass in the to... mud left behind in the museum by the ram... ing Chemung River.

The museum lies only a few hundred ... from the river, and it was among the ... buildings hit when the river rose over its ... as tropical storm Agnes deluged the ... Coast. The water came in, says Mr. Perr... a level of about six feet. Cases of glass ex... "were lifted up like boats." The case co... ing a collection of pre-Christian Persian ... ware toppled over, spilling its contents in... water, and rare first editions of books on ... bobbed in the muddy water.

In all, Mr. Perrot estimates, "About 2... our best pieces have been smashed." ... about 55% of the museum's collection of ... and manuscripts on glass have been ... damaged by mud and water. Most of the ... probably can be restored. But much ... glass was swept away when the river re... and many of the fragments that were l... hind may be too small to piece back to... again.