

CONTEXTS FOR
CONTEMPORARY
AUSTRALIAN GLASS:

*Strategies for public collections
and curatorship*

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ABSTRACT

In just 25 years, 'studio' glass practice in Australia has developed from virtual non-existence into an art form of great diversity and importance. It now operates within a well supported network of social, technical, educational and professional systems, and has an established international profile. Its significance can be measured to some degree by its presence in the collections of major public galleries and representation in major curated exhibitions.

Australia does not currently have a public gallery or museum solely dedicated to the exhibition and collection of glass, so the medium has been assimilated into galleries and museums with wider interests. This arrangement offers the glass medium contexts that can contribute to certain perceptions and interpretation, but may also restrict its complete expression and appreciation.

Examining the glass collections of public galleries and museums is revealing of glass practice, but to then consider the histories and policies of the collections and the curatorial investment behind them is also revealing. This paper is an investigation of the glass collections of four Australian institutions, chosen for their commitment to collecting contemporary Australian glass. They are:

- . National Gallery of Victoria**
- . Art Gallery of Western Australia**
- . Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (The Powerhouse)**
- . Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery**

Clearly, each institution operates with a different set of resources, combined with a different agenda. This paper will explore the inherent biases and the differences between them. It will identify areas of glass practice that are excluded or misrepresented and propose strategies for future curatorial attention.

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1.0 Introduction

After completing the Graduate Diploma of Gallery Management at the College of Fine Arts in 1990, I directed my attention to Australian contemporary glass in all its diversity: conferences; exhibitions; discussions with artists, curators and collectors; reviews; publications; media coverage; industry coverage; education; opportunities; sponsorship; public perception and critical interpretation. It has lead me to involvement with many individuals and organisations who in some way have contributed to the processes by which contemporary glass "exists" in this country, and occasionally, overseas.

For my internship, I spent four weeks at the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA), with Robert Bell, Curator of Craft and Design, being exposed to an institution that was at the forefront of advancing the profile of craft. Bell had a reputation for curating serious and considered exhibitions of craft and design, mostly contemporary, though occasionally with historic reflection. He was actively involved in the development and direction of AGWA's craft collection, and was a distinguished member of the international craft community. My brief time in his professional ambit provided insight to the general processes of curatorship and the specific concerns that applied to craft. During that time, Bell was also preparing the 2nd International Perth Crafts Triennial which featured four exhibitions; one of these was *International Directions in Glass Art* (IDGA), a nationally significant exhibition of contemporary glass, and a sequel to *International Directions in Glass* (IDG) that toured Australia in 1981/82, itself a landmark exhibition.

Subsequently, I worked briefly as a volunteer at the Powerhouse Museum with the curators of Australian Decorative Arts and Design, which offered an expanded context for glass. There, glass was collected for reasons of scientific, technological and social history. Following that, I worked at the Glass Artists' Gallery (GAG), Sydney, a commercial gallery that exclusively exhibited contemporary glass from Australia and New Zealand. It is still the only commercial gallery on a national basis with sole coverage of contemporary glass. While there, I had regular contact with glass artists, arts professionals, collectors and the public and first encountered the complex interface between the maker and the public. It also gave me an understanding of the real dynamics of the glass community, and lead to involvement with Ausglass, the volunteer, artist-run national association of glass artists.

In 1994, I was able to use and consolidate my knowledge of glass by cataloguing the National Glass Collection at Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, and became well acquainted with that collection, the Gallery and their histories.

In 1994-97 I developed an exhibition for the Gippsland Regional Art Gallery, in Morwell, Victoria, looking at the evolution of a group of glass artists who had worked in that region. It allowed me to research the background, aesthetic and attitudes of ten pioneer glass artists in close detail. As the work of these artists is held in various collections around the country, I was introduced to further collections of glass, including:

<i>Victoria</i>	Gippsland Regional Art Gallery Meat Market Craft Centre National Gallery of Victoria
<i>New South Wales</i>	Powerhouse Museum Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery
<i>Australian Capital Territory</i>	National Gallery of Australia
<i>South Australia</i>	Art Gallery of South Australia
<i>Queensland</i>	Queensland Art Gallery

For one year in 1996, I was appointed Craft Curator for a partnership of five organisations¹, funded through the Australia Council's Contemporary Craft Curator Program. I followed Daniel Brine, and completed a specific program of innovative craft curatorship and writing.

Since late 1996, I have been with the Crafts Council of Queensland (CCQ) as Exhibitions and Public Programs Officer. I soon recognised that contemporary glass practice was underdeveloped in Queensland compared with other States. To address this, the State Government's Arts Office funded an Industry Analysis Report to develop a strategy to advance contemporary glass. Through involvement with that project, and have come to understand more closely the infrastructure and the mechanisms needed to develop glass practice and its appreciation.

In 1997 I was one of three judges of the Resource Finance Corporation (RFC) Glass Prize, having keenly watched the progress of the Prize since its inception in 1995. This provided further insight into the interpretation and appreciation of Australian glass, and demonstrated a commitment from the corporate sector to provide new challenges and audiences for the medium.

For my research paper, I draw on all the experiences above, as one conglomerated internship to explore the curatorial contexts for Australian glass.

¹ The five organisations were the Centre for Contemporary Craft, Wollongong City Gallery, University of Wollongong, Regional Galleries Association of New South Wales and subsequently, College of Fine Arts University of New South Wales

2.0 Contemporary Australian glass

2.1 An historical overview

The Australian 'studio glass movement' is a relatively recent phenomenon, being in existence for only about 25 years. The term is consistent with the American movement that preceded it by a decade, a movement that has come to signify a revolution for glass practice and its aesthetic. To give the movement a context, I will present a brief historical overview of glass practice in Australia.

Stained glass has the longest history as a glass-based craft in Australia, being introduced by the architect Edmund Blackett in the 1840s². Early work was made in Victorian gothic style, in keeping with the conservative British traditions that the colony inherited. Stained glass was initially made only for churches, but with time and increasing wealth, the stained glass also found its way into public and private application, with an accompanying liberation in content. The general technique of stained glass however remained unbroken for many decades.

Since the 1940s, there have been a handful of designers, artists and sculptors who used glass, such as Douglas Annand, Leonard French and Les Kossatz, but while there was a level of activity, it was not unified or certainly did not constitute a 'movement'. In the early 1960s Bill Gleeson taught stained and experimental glass at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology and introduced glass to emigre artist Klaus Zimmer, who subsequently established the first tertiary course for 'flat' glass at Monash University in 1974³. Zimmer proceeded to progress the stained glass aesthetic to the autonomous glass panel and experimented with the possibilities of architectural glass design⁴.

Until the 1970s, there was little activity of 'hot' or hand-blown glass in Australia because there was no tradition, technology materials or market for experimentation and local production of specialty glass⁵. 'Hot' glass however began to be made after certain advances were made in 1962 in Toledo, USA, that changed the way hot glass could be made.

²Sherry, B. 1991 *Australia's Historic Stained Glass*, Murray Child, Sydney, pp. 13- 14.

³Ioannou, N. 1995 *Australian Studio Glass: The Movement, the Makers and their Art*, Craftsman House in association with G+B Arts International, p. 141.

⁴Prest, C. 1979 'Glass and its development' in *Craft Australia*, Spring 1979/3 pp. 13- 17 : condensed from the address given at the first national Glass Conference held in Sydney 1978

⁵Zimmer, J. 1990 'Glass - Gaffers, Gatherers and Gravers, The early history of hand-blown and decorated glass in Australia', in *Designink*, No.3, Dec 1990, p. 38.

Americans Harvey Littleton and Dominic Labino developed a prototype furnace and a glass formula suitable for a small pot that, for the first time enabled hot glass to be blown independently of a factory system⁶. This technological advance liberated glass from its industrial and production associations. It happened at a time and in a country where social and artistic experimentation was at its maximum. The inspiration and the technology for making glass in this way was introduced to Australia in the early 1970s by Adelaide-based Stephen Skillitzi, who studied in the US between 1967-70.

Around this time, there was an overall absence of glass practice in the Australian cultural landscape. The National Crafts Inquiry of 1973/74, conducted by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, revealed that only 1% of the 1,205 craftspeople who responded to the questionnaire, amounting to 12 individuals, worked in glass⁷. While the actual number cannot be conclusive, it certainly indicated the low activity, both in scale and also in comparison with other crafts.

The Crafts Board subsequently invested a considerable amount of resources to stimulate glass practice in Australia, (about \$200,000 by 1978⁸) and invited overseas artists to demonstrate and take up residencies; it also assisted in bringing exhibitions of glass from overseas and helped establish glass workshop facilities. It included bringing Americans Bill Boysen and Richard Marquis, both students of Littleton, to travel to art colleges around the country, and demonstrate glass blowing with the aid of a mobile glass furnace.

In the same year, American Sam Herman was invited to set up a production glass workshop at the Jam Factory, a government funded crafts complex in Adelaide, and set up a program that formed the basis of future glass courses. The Jam Factory continues today as an important facility for graduates to fine tune skills and provide an introduction to the routine business components of practice before establishing their own studios.

The pioneers created glass in an environment with no formal teaching and furthermore, no infrastructure. Not only were they busy establishing the technical foundations for making glass, they were also developing an aesthetic with little or no critical guidance.

⁶ Layton, P. 1996 *Glass Art*, G+B Arts International, by arrangement with A & C Black Publishers, London. p.26.

⁷ Australian Council for the Arts 1975 *The Crafts in Australia - Report of the Committee of Enquiry into the Crafts in Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service Canberra, p. 20.

⁸ Zimmer, J. 1979 'New Glass in Born', *Craft Australia*, Spring 1979/3, pp.17-23.

The first tertiary glass course for 'hot' glass was established in 1976 by Stephen Skillitzi in Adelaide, soon followed by Maureen Cahill who instigated the Sydney College of the Arts course in 1978. At that time, there were enough interested practitioners to form a national association, which came to be called Ausglass. Established as a volunteer artist-run membership organisation, its aim was to disseminate information and bring glass workers together every two years for a national conference from their isolated practices. It is among a small and select group of media based artists' and craftspeople's organisations who operate outside the more formalised Crafts Council network.⁹

Glass practice became influenced by contact with the aesthetics of foreign cultures achieved by international exchanges, but there was also a strong desire to develop an Australian aesthetic. Cedar Prest, former Chairman of the Craft Board of the Australia Council for the Arts, and stained glass pioneer, articulated this at the first Ausglass conference in 1979:

I want to see Australia produce a glass movement of originality, vitality and quality, not a duplication of overseas trends.¹⁰

In 1980, Klaus Zimmer initiated the first international workshop on architectural glass design in Australia. Kiln applications had been explored for 'flat' glass and for sculptural use, but a significant contribution was made by Klaus Moje, who arrived from Germany in 1982, to established the glass workshop at the Canberra School of Art. Moje had developed a unique style of working with fused glass that has left a lasting aesthetic for the school and its graduates. In 1988 Moje convened the *International Master workshop of Kiln-formed Glass* - a world first, which offered valuable expertise to local artists.

While the US glass movement, and its Australian off-shoot were primarily centred on 'hot' glass (blown glass), historian Noris Ioannou proposed in 1995 that kiln-formed glass had become an Australian trait¹¹, taking over from 'hot' glass in the mid 1980s. The kiln-forming technique certainly offers economy, technical control and further

⁹ Keighery, Victoria 1997 'Value Systems and Ausglass: Artists' organisations in a climate of industry restructuring and management change', Paper delivered at 1997 Ausglass Conference, (unpub).

¹⁰ Prest, C. 1979 'Glass and its Development in *Craft Australia*, Spring 1979/3, pp. 13-16; from the address given at the first National Glass Conference held in Sydney, 1979

¹¹ Ioannou, Noris *Australian Studio Glass: The Movement, Its Makers and their Art*, Craftsman House, 1995, pp. 81-114.

independence as it can be operated alone and has many proponents. The dominance of a technique/s in the evolution of a glass practice certainly bears a relationship to the work that is made. Technology is a big component of glass making and makes particular practices possible: the invention of the small-scale furnace in 1962 is a testament of that.

While some techniques dominate, others can be overlooked. Glass engraving has not been especially popular or appreciated, yet Anne Dybka, a dedicated practitioner of nearly 30 years, was accorded formal national distinction, with an Emeritus Award from the Australia Council in 1996. It was surprising to find that the first ever group exhibition of Australian contemporary engravers was held as recently as 1987, and could certainly gain from more stimulus and attention.

Lamp working has its own small and growing following. Three generations of the Minson family from New South Wales have maintained the practice, with James Minson currently working in America. Others, such as Richard Clements and Giselle Courtney, have established strong careers with training gained from overseas.

Until the late 1980s, there were no comprehensive texts covering Australian glass, and information was discontinuous, scattered and inconsistent. Occasional reviews and critiques were published in craft journals, Ausglass magazines and conference proceedings, and few sustained debates were published. These fragmented accounts denied many glass artists and the community in general the recognition and identity they needed.

Art historian, Jenny Zimmer had closely observed the glass scene from its beginnings and documented it in various publications. Her important book *Australian Stained Glass*¹², was published in 1987, and provided insight into the development of the flat' (stained) glass aesthetic.

Art theorist Nola Anderson received funding from the Australia Council in 1989 to investigate the development of Australian contemporary glass history, and identified a predisposition to the American models of interpretation¹³. She and others (Geoffrey Edwards, Grace Cochrane and Sylvia Kleinert) have offered constructive critiques to the glass community, typically presented at Ausglass conferences.

The first ever comprehensive treatise on the overall Australian crafts movement was

¹² Zimmer, J. 1984 *Stained Glass in Australia*, Oxford University Press.

¹³ Anderson, N. 1992 'Glass Roots - Australian Studio Glass History as Contemporary Narrative', in *Craft in Society*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, pp. 100 - 115.

released in 1992, written by curator Grace Cochrane. It placed glass in the wider context of Australian craft history¹⁴, and was followed in 1995 by historian Noris Ioannou's detailed and analytical account of the Australian glass movement¹⁵. These books have given the glass community credible references and serve as tools for better accessibility, visibility and appreciation.

Greater communication networks and international exchanges are more common now, and make any semblance of a national aesthetic hard to define. While many artists maintain a strong reference to things Australian through palette or content, others address universal themes, which is increasingly the way of glass and art communities everywhere.

Much of the teaching and technical expertise of glass making has been imported, or local teachers have sought training overseas themselves. Outside the tertiary system, there are few glass studios offering training opportunities, and include the Meat Market Craft Centre, a craft complex in Melbourne, and the Jam Factory in Adelaide. The workshop program of the Ausglass conference traditionally engages overseas tutors, providing a short-lived glass mecca for local artists for whom overseas training is not possible.

2.2 Exhibitions and Exposure

Exhibitions of international glass were shown in Australia prior to the stirrings of the contemporary movement of the 1970s, but they were largely promotional events for the large industrial glass houses such as Kosta Boda, Bohemia Crystal and Waterford Crystal among others.

Among the first exhibitions to tour Australia of the 'studio' glass aesthetic was *American Glass Now* in 1975, representing ten contemporary US glass artists. The exhibits were purchased by the Craft Board and given to the National Gallery of Australia; a component of which remains on long term loan at Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery. The catalogue statement by Denis Colsey, member of the Crafts Board that assisted with the tour, expressed the following expectations:

It is hoped that this exhibition will assist those craftsman already at work to define standards of design and workmanship. It may also encourage others to begin to learn a new craft and

¹⁴ Cochrane, G. 1992 *The Craft Movement in Australia: a history*, New South Wales University Press.

¹⁵ Ioannou, N. 1995 *Australian Studio Glass: The Movement, Its Makers and their Art*, Craftsman House.

acquire a new and exciting skill.¹⁶

Such was the power of exhibitions. They provided exemplars for the local community.

Exhibitions of Australian glass evolved with the development of the movement itself, and the Ausglass Conferences were an obvious occasion to show members' work, which were any one of a range of formats, including unselected, selected by theme or technique, student and prize categories.

Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery, a regional public gallery in New South Wales, provided an important curatorial platform for the emerging movement. Established in 1975, the Gallery developed a collecting policy for glass in 1979 after Judy Le Lievre was appointed director in 1979. Under her directorship, the Gallery organised several national biennial (and later triennial) surveys of contemporary glass, the last of which was held in 1994. The Gallery also generated exhibitions that explored the potential of limited edition production work, and several exhibitions that toured USA and Europe. The Gallery currently holds the largest collection of Australian contemporary glass held by any public institution. Formally called the *National Art Glass Collection*, it includes work by many significant local artists from emergence to the present, as well as work by overseas artists made while visiting Australia. The importance of the gallery has waned in more recent times as more attractive opportunities for artists have surfaced. There are major plans to relocate the gallery nearby in 1999 into a new civic precinct, that will be accompanied by new opportunities for glass, including the 1999 Ausglass conference which has never before been held outside a capital city.

In 1978, in a rare and unprecedented gesture, the Art Gallery of Western Australia created a position for a Curator of Craft and Design following great community support. The position was filled by Robert Bell, who still maintains it. The position enabled quality exhibitions of craft to be mounted, that have been evidenced many times. One of the first was the 1981/82 *International Directions in Glass Art*¹⁷, the first major international touring glass exhibition curated in Australia, with major support from the Crafts Board. It presented an impressive display of glass, though the absence of Australian work greatly disappointed local emerging artists. Ten years

¹⁶ Crafts Board of the Australia Council 1975 *Glass* (also known as *Americans in Glass*), catalogue

¹⁷ Art Gallery of Western Australia 1982 *International Directions in Glass Art*, Ed. Robert Bell, Published by Art Gallery of Western Australia & Australian Consolidated Industries Limited

later, *International Directions in Glass*¹⁸ of 1992, the sequel exhibition, presented eight Australians out of a field of forty-four international participants, restoring the community's confidence.

In 1982, the Glass Artists' Gallery opened in Sydney as the first specialist gallery for glass nationally, a position which it still exclusively holds. Initially an artist-run co-operative, one of its founding members, Maureen Cahill is currently sole director. The Gallery always aimed to "challenge the traditional notion of glass...".¹⁹ With support from the Australia Council and the Crafts Council of Australia (now Craft Australia), the Gallery was the first to participate in the Chicago International New Art Forms Exposition (CINAFE) in 1991 in a project to develop links with foreign audiences and markets for Australian glass.²⁰ The Gallery has attended many international fairs since, and has facilitated the sale of many significant works to individuals and institutions. It has also established a collector's group to meet artists and view work, helping develop an appreciation of the aesthetic further.

Cahill was also instrumental in the formation of the annual Resource Finance Corporation Glass Prize, for Australian and New Zealand artists. Inaugurated in 1995, the acquisitive Prize provides a highly selective mechanism for the establishment of a corporate glass collection.

International recognition has been an important rite of passage, and Australian debuts in prestigious exhibitions such as the *World Glass Now* series, were always celebrated. Brian Hirst's win of the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art Prize in the last exhibition of the series in 1994, was no exception. Nola Anderson appreciated the impact, both to the artist and the Australian community:

....the prize is the only one of its kind on a world scale. The fact that it was won by an Australian practitioner early in his career signals both a maturity in Brian's work and a shift in the perception of Australian glass.²¹

With the Australian glass movement nearly 25 years old, the opportunity to present retrospective views and reflect on the achievements of the pioneers are certain to increase. The first retrospective of a glass artist based in Australia by a State gallery

¹⁸Art Gallery of Western Australia 1992 *Design Visions* ('International Directions in Glass' was part of 'the Second Perth International Crafts Triennial', for which this is the catalogue)

¹⁹ The Glass Artists' Gallery logo

²⁰ Jirasek, I. 1996 'Glass Artists' Gallery Off-Shore' in *Object* 3/96, pp. 30 - 33.

²¹ Anderson, N. 1994 'Hokkaido Prize to Hirst', in *Object* 1.94, p. 1.

was *Klaus Moje Glass : a retrospective exhibition* in 1995²². Curated by Geoffrey Edwards, Curator of Sculpture and Glass at the National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), it toured to the Powerhouse Museum, the Canberra School of Art where Moje established the glass school and to Hamburg's Museum fur Kunst and Gewerbe, his city of birth. With the largest public collection of glass in the country, the NGV has generated several glass specific exhibitions of importance, and the future holds more.

Independently curated exhibitions are providing new opportunities for challenging views and from positions that are not necessarily collection based. Several such exhibitions have recently toured, that have included contemporary glass: *Symmetry*, *A matter of weight*, and *Objects of ideas* are some of these.



ill. 1 The exhibition *A matter of weight* at Wollongong City Gallery, 1995

Developed as part of an Australia Council funded Contemporary Craft Curator Program, the exhibition explored 'the physical and metaphoric approaches to craft practice', and included glass with other craft media.

B Jane Cowie's glass installation is on the right.

²² National Galley of Victoria 1995 *Klaus Moje Glass : a Retrospective exhibition*, National Galley of Victoria

2.3 Collections of glass in Australia

While there are specialist glass museums overseas, such as the Ebeltoft Glass Museum in Denmark and the Corning Museum of Glass in the USA, there has not been enough local interest matched with resources to establish one in Australia. Public collections of glass do exist at most State galleries and a few regional galleries²³ that have usually acquired them out of specific opportunities (donations or local glass activity) or the specific interests of individuals in a position of influence. There, glass becomes part of a larger collection of cultural material and unless it receives curatorial attention, may be easily overlooked, misunderstood or neglected. Glass is also collected by private individuals and corporations, both locally and more commonly, internationally.

The reasons that glass is collected are many. The Powerhouse Museum for instance has collected glass for a range of social and technological criteria, and lists over 12,000 glass items in its data base. This would include objects such as marmite jars, glass slides²⁴ along with contemporary 'studio' glass work that demonstrates innovation in design or use of materials and a range of other criteria.

It is important to remember that collecting glass brings its own responsibilities. The demands for exhibiting and storing glass are great, and not every gallery is in a position to satisfy them. Exhibiting a piece to its best height, spacial arrangement and lighting requires skill and resources (plinths, light boxes etc.) and security will generally always be a concern. Freighting glass may seem problematic, but professional packing will dispel that fear, as demonstrated by the safe tour of fifty works from Wagga Wagga's *National Art Glass Collection* recently.

Glass is generally an expensive and demanding material to work with and equally an expensive medium to invest in curatorially; it is also associated with a common fears of breakage that may hinder its wider acceptance.

2.4 Australian Contemporary Glass Practice Now

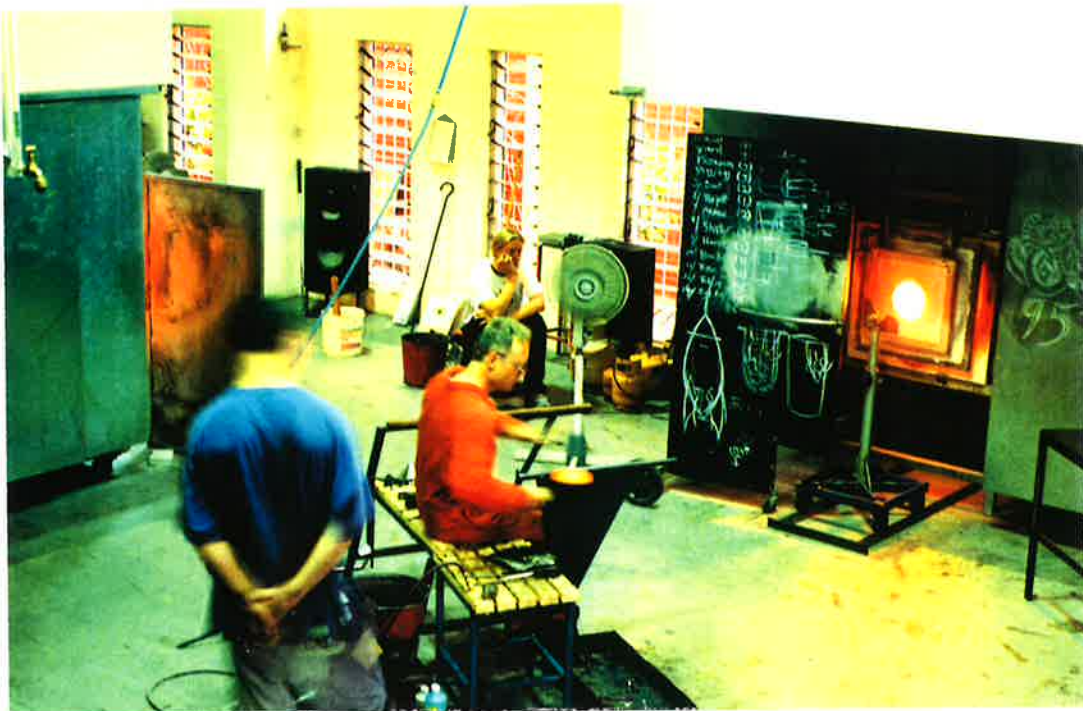
At the 1993 Ausglass Conference, Sue Rowley presented a portrait of the glass community based on the findings of the 1989 Prosser Report.²⁵ It estimated there

²³ Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery 1986 *Glass Collections in Museums and Galleries of Australia*, the Wagga Daily Advertiser, Wagga Wagga

²⁴ Correspondence with Grace Cochrane, Curator of Decorative Arts and Design, Powerhouse Museum, 23 October 1997

²⁵ Rowley, S. 1993 'Throwing Stones at Glass Houses: Craft Criticism Looks at Glass', *Origins and Originality: AUSGLASS Conference and International Summer School*, Canberra School of Art Press

were about 700 practitioners; that it was the most likely of all the art forms to be engaged in full-time practice; that glass artists had a higher than average income (though balanced by high overheads); that 70% of the community has formal qualifications, of which 29% were gained overseas; and that it appeared to be an area with little cross over with other art forms. This was tangible progress from National Craft Inquiry figures 15 years earlier. They were aptly described at the same conference as "a reasonably small and elite group of practitioners with a highly developed and articulated sense of peer group identity".²⁶



iii. 2 Nick Mount, former Head of the Jam Factory Craft and Design Centre, Adelaide, during the 1993 Ausglass Conference Workshops.

²⁶McNeill, D. 1993 'An Ausglass Alchemy' in *Object* Autumn, 1993

2.5 A Curatorial Enigma

For the uninitiated, there is much confusion that surrounds the recent glass movement. Even for the initiated, there are enigmas. UK glass pioneer and teacher, Peter Layton described the changing context for the 'studio glass movement' and its origins:

Originally it described objects that were mainly blown, designed and made individually by an artist-craftperson. Later the term was used to describe the worldwide phenomenon known as the 'Studio Glass Movement'. While never truly a movement in any stylistic sense, it has played an essential part in the extraordinary revival of an art and craft activity that began in the late 1950s. Studio glassmaking developed as an outgrowth of the revolutionary ceramics that were produced in California during the early 1960s; they in turn were inspired by the works of Picasso, Miro and the Abstract Expressionist School of Painting emanating from New York.²⁷

Contemporary studio glass has a well developed support system that Grace Cochrane described as going "far beyond the level of support given to any artform other than painting....that might be encouraging a 'superniche' or 'artificial' product".²⁸ She expressed concerns similar to those presented by Susanne Frantz, curator of 20th century glass at the Corning Museum of Glass at the 1991 Ausglass conference about 'the confusion among glass people about the purpose of their work and what it means to be an artist'.²⁹ Cochrane saw the marketplace as determining much of the work being made, and the collections that were ultimately built from that work having "few real connections with the society for which they were produced".³⁰ Her concern is not unique to glass, but it affirms the value of a curator, as someone who cares about the processes by which objects enter a museum context and the meanings that they become ascribed with.

While acquisitions in public collections generally assume a particular status, they have had to satisfy a number of selection criteria at a number of different levels in a complex evaluation process. So, while collections reveal things about cultural practice they also reveal much about the institutions that cultivate them: the human and financial resources given to specific areas, and even the personal orientation of the

²⁷ Layton, P. 1996 *Glass Art*, G + B Arts International by arrangement with A & C Black Publishers (London), p.10.

²⁸ Cochrane, G. 1993 'Collecting our thoughts' in *Art Monthly Australia*, June 1993, Number 60, p.4.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.4.

³⁰ *ibid.*, p.4.

curator.

In Australia, contemporary glass probably has the same public profile that is accorded to contemporary craft, i.e. as a foreign and little understood artform. Both have powerful advocates who are advancing their passage for greater recognition and representation. They are developing a theoretical and critical language to a growing audience, but still there is far to go before they can claim a place in the mainstream.

The Australian glass community has its critics and observers made up of curators, theorists and historians including Cedar Prest, Jenny Zimmer, Grace Cochrane, Nola Anderson, Geoffrey Edwards, Sylvia Kleinert, and Noris Ioannou. Many have warned the community against the easy appeal of the notoriously seductive material³¹ and have offered theoretical and practical insights about aspects of glass practice.

Nola Anderson's incisive research identified the difficulty of categorising glass:

To date the medium has been dividing with amoebic doggedness: there is production work, exhibition work, medium-based work, conceptually based work, architectural glass, the vessel form, the autonomous panel etc... The casualty of this territorial manoeuvring has been glass criticism....Here is a medium which was developing particular orthodox institutions (and therefore, one could assume, needing a particular orthodox criticism) which was in its practice signalling the validity of idiosyncratic, medium specific, even technology-conscious criticism.³²

Anderson also pointed out that "there were idiosyncrasies, both aesthetic and critical, which arise in art forms which have not grown independently from existing cultural traditions". This referred to Fiona Gaven's report in 1978 for the Crafts Board that concluded that much of glass activity since the Crafts Enquiry of 1973/74 had been fostered by Crafts Board funding.³³

Around the same time, Sylvia Kleinert delivered a keynote address at the 1991 Ausglass conference, identifying the two concerns of the community being "what the practitioners are making and how they are being evaluated by theoreticians".³⁴ She identified how the position of the decorative arts had been historically marginalised from the fine arts and architecture hierarchy, and proposed strategies for its empowerment.

³¹ Edwards, G. 1992 'The Singing of Crickets and the Orthodoxy in Contemporary Australian Glass' in *Artlink* Vol. 12, No. 2, Winter 1992, p.40.

³² Anderson, Nola 1991 'Glass Roots - Australian Studio Glass History as Contemporary Narrative' in *Craft in Society*, Ioannou, N. (Ed.), Fremantle Arts Centre Press, p. 5.

³³ *ibid.*, p. 109

³⁴ Kleinert, Sylvia 1991 'An Historical Context' in *Ausglass*, Post Conference Edition 1991, pp. 5-11.

In his introduction to *The Nature of the Beast*, a collection of essays delivered in 1992 by craft notables covering issues of craft practice, Peter Timms pointed out the potential power that craft had in a museum context:

We are accustomed to museums collecting 'important' works, but deciding what constitutes importance is now a tricky business. The dilemma faced by the modern museum, struggling to reconcile its basically nineteenth-century ideals and structure with the cultural relativism and loss of confidence which characterise our own times, is perhaps most apparent when decisions have to be made about collecting everyday objects (especially mass-produced ones). It is a dilemma which turns, to a large extent in the distinction between high and mass culture, a distinction that gave Modernism its legitimacy and still serves as one of the art museum's main foundations. Craft may well prove to be the disruptive and anarchic element which awakens the art museum to a changed world.³⁵

In reevaluating the role of galleries and museums and what they collect, it is timely for contemporary craft to be considered in the discussions. Perhaps only a dedicated museum for craft or glass will fully satisfy its specific interests, but until then, it is important for it have representations.

Let us now examine some of the biases of four public institutions with collections of contemporary glass, and consider their implications for the critical development of glass.

³⁵ Timms, P. 1993 'What are 'the crafts' and how do they operate in our culture today?', in *The Nature of the Beast*, Craft Victoria, p. 4.

3.0 Collection and curatorial biases for Contemporary Australian Glass

3.1 Rationale for investigation

The development of contemporary glass practice in Australia has been accompanied by a development in its representation and collection by public galleries. Certainly the opportunities for glass, from any point of view are greater now than they have ever been, and public collections will be expected to reflect that growth.

Public institutions have built up collections of glass that reflect their history, donor opportunities, curatorial interest and financial means, and the direction of a collection is generally formalised in a policy. There are many public collections of glass in Australia³⁶, and each offers its own particular bias, in historic orientation and curatorial approach. For instance, Gippsland Regional Art Gallery has a collection of glass by artists who worked in the region, and was recently donated a collection of perfume bottles; Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery has collected contemporary glass of national significance since it began to be made, and has recently been donated a collection of international glass paperweights; and, the National Gallery of Victoria has an exemplary collection of British glass, built up by various bequests and rigorous collecting practices.

I will consider four public institutions with significant collections of glass that have been active in its representation:

- . National Gallery of Victoria
- . Art Gallery of Western Australia
- . Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (The Powerhouse)
- . Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery

Quantitative and qualitative information about each collection was sought and is summarised in the appendices. Answers to the following questions were sought:

- A. How did the collection evolve?
- B. How is glass represented in the collection policy?
- C. Who looks after the glass collection?
- D. Is there a dedicated glass budget?
- E. How many glass items are there in the collection?
- F. How many of them are contemporary Australian?
- G. Is glass exhibited with other decorative/fine arts or on its own?
- H. How much of the collection is on display?
- I. How often does it change?
- J. Who decides that?

³⁶ Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery 1986 *Glass Collections in Museums and Galleries of Australia*, The Daily Advertiser Press, Wagga Wagga

- K. What has been the most important exhibition/s of glass initiated by the institution?
- L. Who is the audience, and how is it being developed?
- M. What plans are there for glass in the future?

The detailed responses from each institution are listed in Appendices 2-5.

Further to understanding the specific glass collection of each institution, general background information about the institution was sought, to be able to compare the resources, both human and economic, that they operated with i.e. the scale of their operating budget, the number of curatorial staff employed, how long it had been established etc. For this, I made contact with other departments within the institutions: the library, registration, and human resources. Useful information generally arose in the course of these inquiries. A comprehensive summary of this information is provided in Table 1, Appendix 1.

My interpretation of this data, and comments about each institution are included in the next sections.

3.2 FOUR CASE STUDIES:

3.2.1 National Gallery of Victoria

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) is among the oldest State art galleries in Australia. It had an early predisposition towards collecting the decorative arts (refer to notes on the evolution of the collection in Appendix 2), and has amassed a relatively large collection of glass (1,731 works) as part of the Department of International Art in the Gallery structure.³⁷ The NGV Prints and Drawings collection and the NGV Glass collection are two specific collections that enjoy a truly global reputation.³⁸

The NGV Draft Acquisition policy has a strong agenda for collecting work to illustrate the history and development of International art from antiquity to the present day. The policy declares NGV's claim in this regard: 'of the art galleries in Australia, only the NGV provides a basis in which to illustrate the history of world art'. The full policy is located at the back of Appendix 2.

Through its early reference to the British models of art museum practice and subsequent professional links with British curators, the strengths of the NGV glass collection are 17-19th century British glass and the 20th century. The collection of 'studio' glass is a strong though small aspect of the overall collection of about 73 works, and of those, 33 are contemporary Australian.

Curatorial responsibility for the glass collection is that of the Curator of Sculpture and Glass, a position that has been held by Geoffrey Edwards since 1983. The split curatorship is an interesting combination, which developed through opportunity rather than by design. Edwards has maintained fluidity between the areas, and brings a wider body of knowledge to both. In his catalogue essay for the Klaus Moje exhibition he curated, Edwards offers an indirect account of this dual perspective:

the dilemma faced by many artist-craftsmen of our time: whether it is more noble to follow the time-honoured path of handcrafting fine utilitarian wares, or whether the better course is to reject this venerable role and to aspire instead to the ostensibly higher cultural ground, conceptual sophistication and rosier market prospects of the 'fine' artist. Such an aspiration need not, of course, mean the abandonment of all allegiance to traditional craft practices, although it usually means deploying them in a manner unconstrained by functionality.³⁹

³⁷ National Gallery of Victoria 1996 Annual Report 1995-96

³⁸ Correspondence with Geoffrey Edwards of 29 September 1997

³⁹ Edwards, G. 1995 'Klaus Moje: Three Decades of Glass' in *Klaus Moje glass: a retrospective exhibition* National Gallery of Victoria

He describes Moje:

like other artists who have recognised that 'fine' art and 'applied' art need not be as wilfully mutually exclusive as the art-versus-craft debate would have us believe, has unified these two streams⁴⁰

Edwards is certainly active in both contemporary and historical glass arenas, but is also working increasingly with 20th century international art in general. He has been a regular contributor at the Ausglass conferences; curated the *Ausglass* exhibition that toured to Denmark and Europe in 1995/96; was a judge for the RFC Glass Prize in 1995/96 and the New Glass Review of The Corning Museum of Glass this year. The NGV has been instrumental in curating significant exhibitions of glass and attracting significant exhibitions from overseas (Dale Chihuly in 1995, and the Saxe collection possibly in 1998 from USA).

With the international standing that the NGV has secured, any glass work in the collection will be highly regarded.

⁴⁰ Edwards, G. 1995 'Klaus Moje: Three Decades of Glass' in *Klaus Moje glass: a retrospective exhibition* National Galley of Victoria



ill. 3a/3b Two views of the International glass collection not on public display
at the National Gallery of Victoria

3.2.2 Art Gallery of Western Australia

The Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) has had a complex early history of associations with other cultural bodies such as the Library and the Museum, and their collections, which would have made it difficult to establish a true gallery identity. The Gallery has been independent since 1960, and moved to a new purpose built gallery building in 1979. This move was in time for the newly appointed Curator of Craft and Design, Robert Bell, to advocate for a separate craft gallery space, which was granted and continues to the present.

With the appointment of Bell, AGWA became the premier gallery for craft at a national level, and many important exhibitions ensued. Among the first was *International Directions in Glass Art*, that toured nationally in 1981/82. It is recognised by many as the most important exhibition of contemporary glass to be mounted in Australia to date. In summing up the exhibitions of the decade to 1988, art historian Jenny Zimmer wrote:

This magnificent glimpse of high quality glass provided the first opportunity for Australians to see a sizable collection of the art form in this country. The studio glass movement was only previously known through overseas publications, from the information and skills gleaned by our glass craftsmen while abroad and the expertise transmitted by visiting artists and those who had been overseas.⁴¹

Then came AGWA's International Crafts Triennials, commencing in 1989, a landmark event on the national craft calendar. Peter Timms confirmed its importance in his catalogue forward to the inaugural event:

until then, there had been no single strong public focus for the craft debate and too few opportunities to see intelligently curated exhibitions. In the long term, this series of major exhibitions had the potential to give craft the national profile it needed and deserved, to help switch the emphasis away from promotion and sale of work towards issues of artistic and philosophical innovation.⁴²

Through these contexts, AGWA has offered contemporary Australian glass a considered position as part of a State art collection of international craft and design. Though AGWA's holdings of that category are not large (30 works), the aesthetic occupies 9% of the total collection of glass.

The Collection Policy states that the term 'art' refers to the full spectrum of visual art and craft. There is no specific mention of craft or design. The collection is being

⁴¹ Zimmer, J. 1988 'Studio Glass - Australia's first decade of exhibitions', *Craft Australia*, Summer 1988/4, p. 85.

⁴² Timms, P. 1989 *Perth International Crafts Triennial*, Art Gallery of Western Australia

developed through two broad interconnected areas of Australian and International Art. This basically ensures that Australian work is seen within an international context: the Crafts Triennial fulfils this most successfully.

3.2.3 Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences (Powerhouse Museum)

The Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences is an old institution that has undergone several identity shifts and mergers before it reopening in 1988 as The Powerhouse Museum. It manages a massive collection of over 380,000 objects, of which 97% are in storage.

The museum offers a unique interpretive experience, and prides itself on being a premier cultural institution of national and international significance⁴³. The collection does include artwork, including several glass pieces, that have satisfied the specific criteria listed in the collection development policy. The three areas relevant to glass are:

- . One-off production
- . Multiple Production, and
- . Visual Communications

The expanded definitions of these are provided at the end of this Appendix.

While being primarily a museum for the display of 'objects' and information about them, it has also exhibited artwork in the same manner as art galleries, as evidenced by the Dale Chihuly exhibition of paintings and glass in 1995, also seen at the NGV. It was interesting to note the differences in display of the Klaus Moje retrospective exhibition at NGV and the Powerhouse, where the latter provided insight into the design and production process with extra interpretive displays.

In this technical and process oriented context, different aspects of glass making are revealed, but here the glass medium is one of many under the umbrella of the decorative arts, and no glass-specific exhibitions have ever been generated. The Powerhouse has however mounted several important touring glass shows. In these instances, it is interesting to consider that the Powerhouse has been *the* public venue in Sydney to exhibit the glass.

⁴³ Museum of Applied Arts And Sciences 1997/98 Corporate Plan

3.2.4 Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery

Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery (WWCAG) was able to establish its interest in collecting glass at a time when the glass movement was just beginning. This has enabled it to build a collection that shows the progression of the local glass movement, and provides an important reference for curators and students of glass. The Gallery now houses the largest collection of contemporary Australian glass of any institution.

The WWCAG collection policy lists four areas of interest, of which one is contemporary glass.

WWCAG has generated many exhibitions of glass including six major juried survey shows, several exhibitions of limited edition work; a curated exhibition that toured Europe and the recent selection of works from the National Art Glass Collection that toured nationally.

Balanced against the level of resources that it works with (staff/ operations budget/ collections budget/ exhibition and storage space/ support network), WWCAG has performed well in representing Australian glass. The only concern for the future may be that a Council-run regional gallery is supporting a national collection of glass that may become too expensive to maintain.

WWCAG is currently part of a major restructure of the city's cultural services, and will be relocated in 1999 to architect designed premises nearby. The new configuration will provide three times the gallery's current space and includes a separate building for the glass collection, two large temporary exhibition galleries, and an access gallery. It will be interesting to monitor how the relocation serves the gallery and the glass community. Plans are under way to reinvent the past programs, which had lost favour with the glass community in its later stages. The last Triennial exhibition of 1994 was criticised by historian Sylvia Kleinert who challenged the Gallery's ability to satisfy a critical audience.⁴⁴

Discussions are already underway to hold the next Ausglass Conference at Wagga Wagga to coincide with the historic move. The gesture may revitalise the weakened relationship that the Gallery had with the community.

⁴⁴ Kleinert, S. 1994 Reframing 'The Cutting Edge', in *Object*, 4.94/95, pp.15 - 18.



iii.4 Elizabeth McClure (right), former lecturer in glass at Canberra School of Art, at the 1991 Australian Glass Triennial, Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery discussing her work in the exhibition.



iii. 5 Part of the permanent glass display at Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery: note the diversity of display formats

4.0 Comparisons

The four institutions investigated offer four quite different contexts for collecting and curating glass.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), The Powerhouse Museum (MAAS) and the Art Gallery of Western Australia (AGWA) are all institutions over 100 years old with a certain amount of curatorial inertia: theirs would be a context of long term value and compatibility with large existing collections. All three institutions are State funded and maintain prominent profiles in and out of Australia. None of them specify 'glass' as a collectible item on its own, but infer its presence within the wider concerns of art. Being older also implies a greater size, and a history of amalgamations and separations with other cultural bodies and their collections. Table 1 in Appendix 1 confirms provides these details.

The older, and larger organisations would also have greater overall resources to operate with to be able to generate touring exhibitions with relative ease compared with Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery (WWCAG). Despite its size and relatively small resources however, WWCAG has however mounted several significant exhibitions, that have not only toured nationally but also internationally.⁴⁵ Wagga has been able to respond to collecting Australian contemporary glass more than others, which claims 85% of its glass collection. AGWA has the next largest proportion of Australian contemporary glass in its glass collection with 9% and NGV and the Powerhouse confirm that their reserves of glass are vast, but in areas other than Australian contemporary.

The NGV has the strongest historical collection of the four organisations, and has generated exhibitions of historical glass from its own holdings (refer to Appendix 2). While it has the smallest collection of contemporary glass of the four, it has generated important exhibitions of contemporary work, such as the recent *Klaus Moje glass: a retrospective exhibition*. The NGV provides the largest curatorial investment in staff and size of overall glass collection.

The position at WWCAG is constrained by overall lack of staff to give satisfactory curatorial attention to the collection, other than basic maintenance and purchases. The gallery's staff restructure in 1995 merged the curator's position with gallery manager. With the largest collection of Australian contemporary glass in the country, WWCAG has an important asset to maintain, and efforts are being made to improve its profile

⁴⁵ City Art Gallery Wagga Wagga 1995 *National Art Glass Collection from the Collection of City Art Gallery Wagga Wagga*

with the public and glass communities. The relocation in 1999 to new architect-designed premises (refer to Appendix 4), and staging the 1999 Ausglass conference in Wagga Wagga to coincide with the opening of the new gallery will raise the Gallery's profile. Curatorial rigour may need to be imported for specific projects as the Gallery cannot provide it in its present arrangement.

The Powerhouse Museum (MAAS) has collected works of contemporary Australian glass (150 works since 1940s), for criteria quite different to those of the art galleries studied. With emphasis on science, technology, design and processes, MAAS presents glass with a dimension that is equally part of its fascination as the conceptual content.

5.0 DISCUSSIONS

5.1 The role of the Art Museum revisited

With five institutions currently offering glass courses at tertiary level, the number of graduates that enter professional practice each year is approximately 50. Art museums have a role to play in this process and provide an important resource to the glass community in the following ways:

- . by developing and maintaining collections of glass
- . by developing and implementing exhibitions
- . by developing educational programs to support and interpret exhibitions
- . by providing various expertise about glass: curatorial, display, conservation

All four institutions offer the above services in different capacities.

5.2 How well represented is contemporary glass?

Glass is best represented in a historical continuum by the National Gallery of Victoria, while Australian contemporary glass is best represented by Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery. The Art Gallery of Western Australia offers a strong international context for glass within a craft and design orientation and The Powerhouse offers a more expanded context for glass that makes important connections with science, technology, industry, production, and innovation with materials and design. This last context reveals the complex applications of glass.

WWCAG offers the strongest proportion of glass of the total collection, with early 20% of the holdings. So far, glass in Australia has always been part of the context of other collections, which brings both advantages and compromises.

One thing to consider seriously is that there may be glass practice that exists outside

the gallery/museum context, This would include architectural glass, stained glass, and glass installations.

5.3 Other Models/The Future

I propose that the strongest position that glass could assume would be within a museum or gallery for glass only, where it received undivided attention. While this is not yet a reality in Australia it is an option for further exploration.

The four institutions examined in this paper are already promoting and educating people about contemporary glass, and have a foundation to build on. They are all extending their contribution to glass on their own terms. Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery is certain to experience the greatest change with the relocation to new premises.

6.0 Conclusion

Contemporary Australian Glass work has such a diversity of expression that it is difficult to consider that any one existing institution could represent them all. It is important nevertheless for glass practice to have a place and voice.

Being a relatively young aesthetic, it will take time to to achieve better representation and develop a continuing critical language. While the older and larger establishments have other collections to consider, perhaps it is time for the Australian glass community to be extended in more challenging ways. What is apparent for the contemporary glass community now, is that it is growing and its expectations of opportunities and representation are too. Overseas opportunities and challenges may be greater than local ones, which presents the question of what challenges Australia can offer glass artists to keep them developing their practices here. In the same way that the Craft Board of Australia Council was concerned about the lack of glass practice in the early 1970s, we could be concerned about the lack of local opportunities for glass artists. Exhibitions are certainly a mechanism by which this can happen, and it is up to curators to devise the formats and the platforms that will ensure continuing exploration.

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SUMMARY						
Establishment date/ Former associations/ Current Associations	National Gallery of Victoria	Art Gallery of Western Australia	Powerhouse Museum	Wagga Wagga City Art Gallery		
	1861	1895 - Museum & Art Gallery, 1911 - Library was added, 1960 - Separated, 1979 - New Gallery Building	1879 - Industrial, Technical and Sanitary Museum/Currently incorporates Sydney Observatory & Mint Museum			
Management Body	Council of Trustees	The Board of the Art Gallery of Western Australia	Board of Trustees of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences			Board of Trustees
Governing Body	Arts Victoria	WA Ministry for Arts & Culture	NSW State Government			Council of the City of Wagga Wagga
Total annual operating expenditure	\$15,614,858 in 1995/96	\$6,853,915 in 1995/96	\$35,985,000 in 1995/96			\$336,960 in 1996/97
No. of total staff	265 (216 full-time)	65	440			3
No. of curatorial staff	20 Curators in 9 curatorial areas	5 Curators & 3 assistants, 1 intern in 5 curatorial areas	32.7, incl. assistants for 33 collecting fields			0.5 covering 3 collecting areas
Who is responsible for glass	Curator of Sculpture and Glass, within International Art	Curator of Craft and Design	Curators of Australian and International Decorative Arts			Manager/Curator
Overall size of collection - all areas	60,000 estimated; 8,000 in Decorative Arts	over 14,000	approx 380,000			1,419
Overall size of glass collection (A)	1,731	332	12,141			255
No. of contemporary glass works (post '62)	73	81	search not possible with current data base program			approx 95% (242)
No. of contemporary Australian glass (B)	33	30	150 (from 1940)			approx 85% (216)
% Australian of total glass (B/A%)	1.9%	9.0%	approx 1.2%			approx 85%
Dedicated annual budget for glass?	Some in Art Foundation of VIC; Dec. Arts \$40K all media; Major Acqu. fund \$100K	No special allocation: Total art purchases 1995/96 \$5.5m	No allocations for specific media: 1997/98 Budget \$500K			1997/98 budget for glass \$6K, augmented by fundraising
Is glass exhibited on its own?	Yes, occasionally with other media	Yes, generally with other media	Rarely			Usually