

**Benjamin Moore:
On Center**

by Ron Glowen

31



f, by a stretch of the imagination, the contemporary studio glass movement in America could be compared to the early days of cubism, then Dale Chihuly and Benjamin Moore are, respectively, the Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque of glass. (In this equation the role of Paul Cézanne would be played by Harvey Littleton.) While the protean accomplishments of Chihuly are well documented and widely seen, it is Moore who has been largely responsible for directing the course of contemporary American glass. He has been working from behind the scenes and building — as did Braque — a rigorous formal and modernist basis for this new aesthetic of glass.

Chihuly and Moore were "rather like two mountaineers roped together," as Braque described his intense collaboration between 1908 and

1914 with Picasso. Moore's introduction to glass came at the California College of Arts and Crafts in classes taught by Marvin Lipofsky. In 1974 he became Chihuly's first assistant at the Pilchuck Glass School and started in his position as the new organization's first educational coordinator, a job he held until 1987. After that summer Moore went east to the Rhode Island School of Design to pursue his M.F.A. He became Chihuly's gaffer at RISD and while he found the collaboration "fun and exciting," for Moore, "to work in that loose, organic manner was not my sensibility." Indeed, Moore's sensibility would follow a more deliberate course. He was not satisfied with the American style of glass training (in which, principally, one follows the instructor's example), and was intent on dedicating his efforts to glass design, which naturally led him to Murano. He went first in 1978 and then again in 1979 to work at the Venini glassworks under the direction of Ludovico de Santillana. Though offering himself as a designer in Italy, he initially worked as an apprentice in the hot shop with the glassblowing maestro Checco Ongaro. After Moore acquired the most basic and mundane skills — gathering molten glass, learning the tools, etc. — Ongaro asked him to bring in his design drawings so the factory team could make them. Thus Moore was thrown into the roles of both the glassworker in a traditional European factory context, and technician and/or designer, a dichotomy that was to become a very valuable experience.

"The most successful designers working with a glass master," according to Moore, "are those who can work with the strengths and limitations of the master — those with glass experience [themselves] will know what these are." After his experience in Murano Moore produced his "Venini Prototypes" (1979), simple and elegant beakers, bowls and bulbous

vessels *in vitro a fili* mosaic.

He returned to Europe in 1980-81 to work with Peter Rath at the J. & L. Lobmyer studios in Vienna, where his experience was radically different. Rath, who had sponsored Chihuly and Michael Scheiner among others, was more open to the experimentation that characterized the American glass movement at the time. In 1981 Moore produced a production line, a number of design prototypes and unique pieces for exhibit in the Lobmyer showroom on Vienna's Kärntnerstrasse. He also came to know Viennese art nouveau glass, in particular the design work of Josef Hoffmann and the Wiener Werkstätte.

All this time, Moore had been spending his summers at Pilchuck. After his sojourns he settled in Seattle and worked as a designer for Rob Adamson's production studio, the Glass Eye. In 1984 the Glass Eye moved, and Moore bought the facilities and the site. His goal was to establish an operation like that of Venini — he would have a workshop with a line of products he designed in glass.

The most notable among the products to come from this process have been lamps and light fixtures with metal components (designed in collaboration with Walter White and Louis Mueller). The "Saturn" lamp, with its opposed *scalas* orbs and brass hardware, was among the first of numerous hanging, wall sconce and free-standing light fixtures Moore designed. Though clearly indebted to Hoffmann, the lamps are Moore's own. Pristine clarity and simplicity of form are the main concerns of the work; its reductive purity is expressed through technical excellence. The European model, however, didn't work for Moore. The showroom marketing strategy of the design showrooms in Milan was quite different from the crafts and fine-art gallery route American glass artists would adopt. Today Moore exhibits his work occasionally in galleries and executes architectural commissions. While upgrading his furnaces in 1987 he realized that the European system he had come to know and appreciate might work in another way. The burgeoning Seattle glass scene was in need of accessible production facilities, and Ben Moore's studio became the choice location to make glass. Artists hired him, his facilities and production crew to produce their own work. "It became very apparent to me that factories such as Venini produced many varieties of things that resulted in the workers acquiring many skills," says Moore. "In running my studio, everyone is continually challenged with new projects and we don't have to make the same thing over and over again. Primarily, because of my experience with Dale Chihuly's team and with Pilchuck, I've always been in a position to work with others. Those communication skills have carried over into my shop — it's like Pilchuck without the educational aspect." The roster of con-

Preceding Page:
"Interior Fold" series,
1990-present, glass,
10 x 22". Photo:
Robert Vinnedge.

Right: "Elements"
series, 1992-94,
glass, sizes vary.
Photo: Robert
Vinnedge.

Hornet Lamp.
1989–present, glass,
brass, 18 x 16".
Photo: Robert
Vinnedge.

temporary glass artists who have or continue to use Moore's team, or who have worked as part of the team itself, is impressive: Dan Dailey, Fritz Dreisbach, Paul Marioni, Dante Marioni, Richard Marquis, Cappy Thompson, Richard Royal, Lino Tagliapietra and Dale Chihuly, among others.

As a facilitator, Moore's most enduring and significant contribution is having brought the Italian master Lino Tagliapietra to the Pilchuck Glass School in 1980. Moore's willingness to learn and understand the traditional maestro/teamwork and designer/apprentice relationships inherent to the Venetian factory glassworking system was undoubtedly important in convincing Tagliapietra to come to America. (Moore at first tried to convince Ongaro to come; after one visit he refused but suggested his brother-in-law Lino.) Tagliapietra's discipline helped to bring Pilchuck's early wayward experimental direction into focus, and has helped to catapult a new generation of American virtuoso glassblowers into prominence (notably Lino's disciple Dante Marioni).

In due time Moore's involvement with Chihuly and the Pilchuck Glass School may become more widely recognized; he should be known as one of the key components in the establishment of Seattle as a center for contemporary art glass.

But let us return to Picasso and Braque. Picasso's towering personality, voracious appetite for experimentation, appropriation of a wide variety of styles and influences and his tenacious pursuit of self-promotion would cast a large shadow over the career of his former collaborator. But whereas Picasso was continually searching for new heights, Braque was content to refine and master his control over the cubist palette of form, space, texture and color. Picasso showed us what could be done with cubism. Braque showed us what cubism was.

The analogy applies as well to Chihuly and Moore, although it must be noted that the context here is a more restricted one (the approach by each to the Italian glassmaking tradition) and the field more narrowly surveyed. Under the influence of Pilchuck and the diverse activities of Chihuly, the contemporary glass art movement in Seattle during the 1980s seemed to go in every direction, like the spread of cubist variations in the 1910s and 1920s. In retrospect Ben Moore's work was situated right in the center of the vortex. His "Interior Fold" series, in fact, even looks the part — forms that in stasis appear as if they revolve around a perfectly symmetrical axis. The works are a natural reduction of the glassblowing process: round, centrifugal, and pure.

The reductiveness that is the hallmark of Moore's work allows for pure variations within the series format or ensemble. Thus the objects tend to look best in carefully arranged configurations,

"tuned," if you will, to the elegant sonority of each. The "Palla," "Elements" and "Interior Fold" series often display simple morphological contrasts. For example, the "Elements" series might feature a trio of conical forms; one short, one tall and one in between. The use of pure geometric forms and pure primary colors plus black, white and clear also links Moore to the purist aesthetic of de Stijl (he is an aficionado of Gerrit Rietveld's furniture designs).

The geometric design motifs in Moore's fixtures and lamps also echo both the formal elegance of Hoffmann's furniture and glass and the functional forms of the Bauhaus school. The floor lamps, done in collaboration with metal designer Louis Mueller, have a precise sense of balance and, somewhat surprisingly, an anthropomorphic sense of whimsy. The purely technical modalities that govern the blown-vessel works ("Elements," "Palla," et al) give way to more evocative shapes that suggest cosmological, biological or techno-morphic entities: blossoms, bellows, sine curves, spaceships. Some of these are done as unique objects, but often they are made in production series and incorporated into architectural surroundings. Moore's workshop can quickly accommodate large-scale production projects, such as the recent 650-piece lighting installation for the new performing arts center in Escondido, California (designed by the late architect Charles Moore), or commissions for buildings and houses in Seattle, New York, Hong Kong and elsewhere.

Benjamin Moore's situation within the present context of the contemporary glass movement raises a pertinent issue, and offers a personal solution. The American system of teamwork — especially as it is manifested by "hired hands" who travel from studio to studio offering themselves as assistants in exchange for working time — runs the risk of creating a rather homogenous look. Everyone's work starts to look a bit like everyone else's; everyone begins to mimic everyone else's licks. Moore's studio is at the center of this aesthetic and technical exchange. He, perhaps more than anyone else at the moment, is directly engaged in the production of many different aesthetic and technical possibilities in contemporary glass. Thus his own work could easily become the sum of each of the particular styles or techniques that pass through his shop. The purity, rigor and technical excellence of his own work is not, however, a mark of resistance to the temptations of other modes. Instead, Moore's work is a quiet proclamation of self-assurance. He shows us what glassblowing is, pure and simple.

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