

from the archives

BRITTLE STARS AND SEA ANEMONES: THE BLASCHKA COLLECTION

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The rediscovery of a collection of rare glass models is creating a buzz of interest among collectors, glass artists and aficionados. Archivist **Patricia Egan** unearths the precarious history of these fragile pieces from another era.

Father-and-son
artisans Leopold
(right) and Rudolf
(far right) Blaschka.



'An old collection of glass models ... is now discarded from our collection', wrote the Curator of Marine Invertebrates to the Museum Director in 1972 before consigning the incomplete, partially broken collection to the Museum's exhibition stores.

Twenty years later, the collection was unearthed and transferred to the Museum's Archives where it has since been rediscovered as the work of renowned German scientific model makers Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka (see panel).

Age of discovery

The story of how the Museum acquired such works begins in the mid-19th century, a time of prolific scientific expeditions that brought back many strange new life forms from previously unexplored lands and oceans.

These new natural history discoveries, underpinned by society's strong commitment to science, fuelled a growing public interest in museums and exhibitions.

But marine specimens posed particular difficulties for exhibition curators and scientists alike. The rudimentary methods of preservation available at that time

meant that soft-bodied specimens quickly became distorted and lost their vibrant colour. Perishable specimens netted during journeys of survey and discovery had to be quickly dissected, drawn and described, with barely 24 hours to spare before a specimen would disintegrate.

As a result, many early comparative studies of marine invertebrates had to rely upon written descriptions and illustrations penned on rolling ships in order to unravel the relationships between animals.

One leading 19th century scientist, Thomas Huxley, had overcome these limitations to establish an international reputation founded on his study of Pacific marine invertebrates during the late 1840s. Huxley is also remembered as an ardent defender of Charles Darwin, and Huxley's assistant, Jeffrey Parkes, was to play a key role in acquiring the Blaschka models.

right: Some of the models present challenges for Museum conservation staff.

opposite:
The Blaschka models are based on common species from the northern hemisphere, like this anemone, *Sagartia elegans*, var. *venusta*. Photos Stuart Humphreys.



LEOPOLD AND RUDOLF BLASCHKA

Leopold Blaschka (1822–1896) of Dresden, Germany, was a skilled craftsman and glass worker. In the mid 1860s, Leopold turned his hand to modelling marine invertebrates in glass, sensing the public's entrancement with these newly discovered life forms.

His initial works were based on drawings he made of sea creatures netted on a voyage to the USA in 1853. He also used published illustrations by the eminent German biologist Ernst Haeckel and English taxonomists George Sowerby and Philip Gosse.

Leopold was joined in business by his son, Rudolf (1857–1939), and together they established an international reputation as scientific model makers. As demand for their products increased, the Blaschkas undertook further field trips and even installed an aquarium which allowed them to work from live specimens.

Working only on commission, the Blaschkas made these splendidly realistic objects not only for natural science institutions but also as *objets d'art* for private collectors.

While they used mainly standard techniques at the time to create the mixed-media models, primarily from glass, it was their finishes – the coatings and painting – that really captured the delicate structure and luminescence of living marine specimens.

But this productive and fruitful aquatic enterprise was soon to become terrestrial. In 1890 the Blaschkas signed an exclusive agreement with the Botanical Museum at Harvard University whereby they no longer made models of marine invertebrates but instead turned their skills to the creation of over 4000 glass flowers.

Rudolf continued this work after his father's death for 40 years. Unfortunately, the techniques they developed are not seen elsewhere and, because they had no apprentices, their skills died with them.



Commissioned works

In 1879 the Trustees of the Australian Museum applied to the Colonial Parliament for £2000 to spend on the 'purchase of specimens of illustrative & comparative anatomy, fossils & books'.

At that time Australian Museum Trustee Archibald Liversidge was undertaking a tour of leading European scientific cultural and educational institutions and was asked to report on how the monies should be spent.

Liversidge recommended that the Trustees commission an educational supply business in Prague, owned by a Mr Válav Frič, to arrange a 'collection of specimens illustrative of Comparative Anatomy' of European vertebrates and invertebrates.

The Trustees contracted Frič to provide specimens and models of an 'educational character based upon Professor Huxley's system of classification' and authorised Jeffrey Parkes to act on behalf of the Trustees in London.

The Trustees required a collection of animals that would be accurate and comprehensive. Where specimens were not available, models of wax, glass and paper pulp

were to be obtained. Frič contacted the Blaschkas, a father and son team from Dresden, who based the Museum's models on illustrations from books such as Philip Gosse's 1860 *A History of the British Sea-Anemones and Corals*.

Arriving in Sydney in 1881 the glass models were registered by Museum staff as a 'Teaching Collection' and were incorporated into the invertebrate display in the Museum's Barnett Wing in the same year.

The 1883 *Guide to the Contents of the Australian Museum* informed visitors that 'exquisite glass models illustrative of the family of Sea-Anemones are displayed alongside spirit specimens of largely European specimens'. In 1907 the glass models were re-registered in the Marine Invertebrate Register as models of individual specimens, some of which can be identified today (see captions).

Changing sentiments

Some of the models have inherent inaccuracies but remained on display in the Museum until 1941. During gallery renovations they were re-examined and removed, with annotations in the Collection Register that they were 'written off ... anatomically incorrect'.

left: Jewel anemone, *Corynactis viridis*.

right: Tentacle of the cup coral, *Caryophyllia* sp. Photos Stuart Humphreys.

But unlike many other Blaschka specimens around the world, the models were neither lost nor destroyed. The collection is now being restored by Museum conservation staff in readiness for a new display to open in March 2010.

The glass models may have little enduring value as educational or anatomical objects, but their value for the Australian Museum resides in their provenance and the unique part they play in the exhibition history of the Museum.

More significantly they are examples of some of the finest glass objects ever made. The Australian Museum's Blaschka collection stands proudly beside the few other Blaschka collections held by internationally prestigious natural history and cultural institutions.

Patricia Egan is an Archivist at the Australian Museum.

➡ See the Blaschka glass models on display from 1 March 2010, Level G near the Shop, or visit www.australianmuseum.net.au/Blaschka-glass-sea-anemones.

➡ Don't miss the special Night Talk and glasswork course. Details, page 27.