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MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES
EXHIBITION : 'INTERNATIONAL DIRECTIONS IN GLASS ART'
TUESDAY, 7 JUNE 1983

GLASS AS ART

June 1983

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The Hon Mr Justice M D Kirby CMG
Patron of the Friends of the Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences

A SPECIAL DAY

This is a special day for me. This is my first function as Patron of the Friends of the Museum. In fact, it is my first function as Patron of anything. I am not really yet sure what a Patron has to do. Literally, it means 'boss'. However, I harbour no illusions of such power. This morning, I was welcomed as a Judge of the Federal Court of Australia. As I looked at the Judges of the Court — solemn in black robes and horsehair wigs — a phrase kept passing through my mind. Shakespeare, you know, often referred to glass and its fascinating qualities. In the tragedy of Julius Caesar, he had Cassius call on Brutus, for the plot against Caesar:

Therefore, good Brutus, be prepared to hear;
And, since you know you cannot see yourself
So well as by reflection, I, your glass
Will modestly discover to yourself
That of yourself which you yet know not of.

If only it were so easy to find such a glass. If only it were so easy to find a glass that would discover to ourselves that of ourselves, of which we do not know.

Shakespeare had a great fascination with glass because his art, through words, was to hold, at it were, a glass up to nature.

Lawyers like me have a fascination with words. Shakespeare did in words what glass does in reality. Describing inevitably distorts reality, even at the pen of a master. If the Bard was fascinated by glass, imagine the reaction of early civilised man as his eyes fell upon the beauty, the transparency, the reflection and the shapes of early glass.

FROM ANCIENT TIMES

Another fault of lawyers is that they tend always to look backwards. The wigs and gowns of this morning's ceremony, the wing collars, the bibs, the horsehair and the black robes, would all make another splendid exhibition at this Museum. Is it not interesting to reflect upon the fact that all those people in the crowded Court in Sydney this morning were simply wearing the ordinary day dress of lawyers in London in the reign of Queen Anne. Think on that and you will understand the problems of a law reformer!

But by the time of Queen Anne, glass manufacture was well advanced. I had no idea before reading the catalogue for this exhibition of the antiquity of glass. The oldest specimen of manufactured glass beads from ancient Egypt date from 2500 BC. True it is, at first glass makers were unaware of the way in which hot plastic glass could be manipulated. Only after a thousand years did glass vessels begin to appear in Egypt. The blowing iron dates from just before the beginning of the Christian era. The Romans learned from the Egyptians and showed astonishing skill. Indeed, for a thousand years the skill in glass actually went into decline and was not attained again until the stained glass window of the Medieval churches.

It is the good fortune of our generation that we are living through a revival of the appreciation of glass as a popular and fascinating art form. This exhibition permits a look at the past and a review of the creative present.

THE EXHIBITION

The catalogue makes it clear that this is not a fully representative collection, in the sense that it does not cover every age, every country, every technique and every skill. But it does hold a glass up to the variety of examples of this art form. The reflections are pleasing to the eye and to the mind.

I want to thank Australian Consolidated Industries, Australia's largest manufacturer of glass, for sponsoring the exhibition. I must also thank the Crafts Board of the Australia Council for its initiative in seeking to have such an exhibition brought to our country. I should also mention the Art Gallery of Western Australia, which organised the exhibition and arranged the tour around Australia. I acknowledge the presence of Martin Lipofsky, one of the artists whose work is specially featured in the exhibition, and who is here tonight.

In our busy world, we tend to take glass for granted. I invite you to pause and consider its utility and its beauty. In the hope that you will do so, I now have pleasure in declaring open this exhibition.