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## The Queen of Glass

CMoG  
Builds a  
New Glass House

By Alison  
Fromme



The forest and the trees: glass artist Katherine Gray's *Forest Glass* glows in CMoG's new Contemporary Art + Design Wing.

Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

# THE QUEEN OF GLASS

CMoG Builds a New Glass House

By Alison Fromme

**B**efore The Corning Museum of Glass (CMoG) unveiled its new Contemporary Art + Design Wing in March, museum staff prepared the exhibits. They brought in hundreds of wooden crates, removed foam packing materials, carefully extracted the contents, and placed the artwork just so.

Careful hands removed drinking glasses from a box, one by one. Some were clear, others green or brown, and some were decorated with paintings of birds, leaves, or mushrooms. Each glass, bought from eBay or thrift stores, including stores in Corning, had been numbered. As each glass came out of the box, it was cleaned and then set on an acrylic shelf according to a photograph and a written key. Then another box was opened. And another. The process required ten people working periodically over several days.

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Light upon light: the architecture of Thomas Phifer and Partners illuminates the new wing of The Corning Museum of Glass.

Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

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You might recognize a style of the glassware from your own kitchen cupboard, or your grandmother's. But these glasses are no longer for drinking, because what has grown from these individual glasses—more than 2,000 of them—is a single work of art called *Forest Glass*, by Seattle-based artist Katherine Gray. Viewed as a whole, the glassware forms the suggestion of three trees, with brown hues shaping the trunk, greens creating the trees' canopies, and transparent cups enveloping the edges. More than ten shelves tall, the trees stand at the end of a gallery within the museum's new addition.

Built to accommodate the growing number of visitors to CMoG, the \$64-million expansion showcases large-scale contemporary art and the glassmaking process itself. "Glass has never been displayed this way before, and we are really looking

forward to pushing the boundaries of contemporary art and glass," says Karol Wight, president and executive director of CMoG.

## Light and Fire

*Forest Glass* and more than one hundred additional pieces in the new wing are bathed in natural light raining down from above. Diffuse and subtle, light became an early inspiration for the architecture. Light, which is not so simple as it seems. Nor is the building, nor the glass itself.

Architect Thomas Phifer and Partners was tasked with designing the 100,000-square-foot expansion, including gallery space, a hot shop for glassmaking, and administrative offices. The award-winning architect designed the North Carolina Museum of Art in Raleigh, North Carolina; the United States Federal Courthouse in Salt Lake

City, Utah; and many other buildings since opening his practice in New York City eighteen years ago.

"The first thing we did [when conceiving this design] was take a glass object out into the sunshine, and it just exploded with light," Phifer says. "And that was a kind of wonderful moment for us, because we discovered that glass loves light."

In most museums, light is something to be feared. It fades paintings and tapestries. It can heat up display cases, damaging the artwork. But most glass is immune to the damaging force of light. Instead, glass comes to life with light.

"Thomas Phifer didn't set out to make an architectural statement," says Tina Oldknow, senior curator of modern and contemporary glass since 2000. "He set out to create a building that would truly showcase the artwork within."

The vision for that showcase was

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almost literally a showcase: a white glass box, reminiscent of a museum display case. Inside, the geometry flowed and curved, with walls that mirror the object Phifer viewed out in the sunlight: a vase by renowned architect and designer Alvo Aalto. A vase with smooth irregular curves.

"Inspired by the image of walking into a white cloud, we designed a collection of spaces defined by soft curving walls that dissolve the separation between the art, atmosphere, light, and space," Phifer says. "The walls and light unify the experience while honoring the works. Freed of a normal museum relationship of wall-mounted works, the curving walls and the light from above enable the pieces on the floor to levitate."

Such a space sets the artwork front-and-center, with few distractions to bother a viewer. And yet, gazing at the pieces of artwork—some huge, some small, some translucent, some opaque, some sparkling, some etched, and all

immobile—one might forget that their origins were in a fiery furnace. Two thousand degrees—or more!—of heat melted silica, the main component of sand. This, plus other materials, transmogrified into molten globs that were then shaped by molds, or by gravity, or by the movements of a gaffer into their final honored forms.

Lest we forget those origins, the former Steuben Glass, a production facility that operated on this spot from 1951 until 2011, was adjacent to the museum and is now part of the expansion's footprint. Steubencrafted engraved fruit bowls and animal figurines were presented as gifts among the country's elite since Steuben's founding in 1903. Prince Charles and Lady Diana received Steuben glass as a wedding gift. Pope Benedict XVI in Rome was presented with a figurine as a gift. Steuben Glass became known for quintessential American artisanship.

The renovated Steuben factory building is big, industrial, and the

color of soot, topped with an iconic structure, like a pair of tongs reaching skyward, which once ventilated the hot factory. The vision for this factory was to strip it down to its bones and create a twenty-first century hot shop, the Amphitheater Hot Shop, with equipment for artists and glassmakers to show off their skills to as many as 500 guests at a time. "We wanted to build the best hot shop in the world, where any glass artist would want to work," says Eric Meek, manager of hot glass programs at CMoG. "This creates new opportunities for artists to engage with The Corning Museum of Glass," says Meek, "and for the community to be able to watch an amazing level of talent come to our town."

### Building the Glass House

Turning the architectural and artistic vision into reality was no small feat. The new wing had to be constructed from scratch. And, unlike

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most buildings, which are built from the outside in, the new wing was built from the bottom up, from the inside out.

"As you can imagine, for a project of this size, it is difficult to sum it up simply," says John Franzese, Senior Project Superintendent at Welliver. The Montour Falls-based company was part of the joint venture construction management team, along with Gilbane Building Company, that took the project from the end of the design phase through the finishing touches. The team planned site logistics and safety, managed the project during construction, ensured quality, and more.

Crews broke ground on June 7, 2012. More than 1,000 tradesmen and women worked through three tough winters to get the Contemporary Art + Design Wing built and the Amphitheater Hot Shop reinvented.

Foundations were excavated, poured,

and backfilled. The superstructure—the concrete floor and serpentine walls that would create the gallery spaces—was built. A maze of ductwork and the utility framework was hidden within the walls, so that no trace of building mechanics would distract museumgoers from the artwork. Reinforcing steel crisscrossed the site. Concrete pumped its way through a giant tube suspended in the air and poured out at the rubber boots of workers carrying backpacks of gear, making sure that this floor was done properly.

Karol Wight visited the site on occasion, wearing a hard hat, and project managers Ken Jobe and Joe Dubendorfer kept her abreast of the construction progress. In her previous position at the Getty Villa in Malibu, California, Wight helped oversee a \$275 million renovation, so she was well suited to lead CMoG through this process. The original museum, including its earlier

additions, regularly felt too small, she says, especially when multiple tour busses arrived simultaneously. "Really, the expansion was the answer to our prayers," Wight says.

When the concrete walls were finally poured, a bird's eye view revealed the curving walls winding their way within the rectangular box. The bones of the building were in place.

Lifting a thirty-ton steel truss was another tricky construction moment, and potentially risky, says Franzese. The truss, a structural support, would span a wall with a 140-foot long window. The truss was built in three pieces in Rochester, assembled on-site at Corning, and set into place on a Sunday morning, while the rest of the construction site was quiet.

During various phases, a 350-ton crane stretched 200 feet in the air. A tower crane hoisted big bulky insulated metal panels. Two hundred and six pre-

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cast concrete beams became part of the ceiling. Nine hundred and eighty glass panels, from opaque to translucent, became the skylight.

And finally, to create the glass box itself—the white, white façade—huge panels of glass arrived from Germany by ship and then by specialized trailers. Most of the panels were ten feet by twenty feet, weighing about 5,000 pounds each, but the largest was ten by twenty-eight, topping out at 6,000 pounds.

“The seemingly simple ‘white glass box’ was anything but simple and required the overcoming of multiple engineering and design challenges,” says Bob Gray, National Enclosure Company Project Manager, who worked on the façade. “It had never been done before.”

Despite their unwieldy size, not a single panel of glass broke during installation. “Working with such large lites of glass requires patience and a delicate touch,” says Gray. “Every move of the glass must be methodically planned out ahead of time.”

To hoist the giant glass panels, a custom glass vacuum lifter was fashioned to handle the units—a contraption with a set of electronically controlled suction cups, attached to a crane. The panels were hung on the building’s exterior, with industrial-grade hooks, and then released from the suction cups by remote control. One hundred fifty panels were lifted and placed this way, painstakingly planned.

Franzese adds, “This phase required careful measurement to ensure accuracy, careful management to ensure all pieces arrived in time, and especially careful installation to ensure safety of all construction personnel.”

When Franzese walked through the building with architects from Thomas Phifer and Partners about a week before the grand opening, they told him that it was like walking

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A life in glass: Italian artist Javier Pérez's *Carroña* (Carrion) is intended by its creator as a metaphor for the gradual disappearance of the traditional glass industry in Murano, Italy.



Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

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through their rendering. “That’s about as good as it gets in our business,” he says.

### The Glass Within

The Contemporary Art + Design Wing, and its 26,000 square feet of gallery space, opened on March 20, 2015. Entering from the main entrance lobby, visitors are enveloped in white light filtering through the skylight roof and down between the concrete beams twenty feet above. Curving walls stand in contrast to the boxy exterior. With otherworldly light and high ceilings, it is clear that the place is one of reverence, whether or not you recognize the names of the world famous artists who created the works. Lino Tagliapietra, Klaus Moje, Roni Horn, Ann Gardner, Karen LaMonte, Beth Lipman, and Liza Lou are just a few of the artists that more than 400,000 visitors will encounter this year. The space is the largest in the world devoted to contemporary glass. And yet, says Oldknow, it is not aggressive or overwhelming like some large modern spaces are. It is still human in scale, she says.

In one room, eighteen glass forms, like narrow hulls of boats, hang from the ceiling at various but symmetrical

heights, as if floating, but immobile. A fleet of ornately decorated gondolas in Venice inspired the artist Lino Tagliapietra to create *Endeavor*. Each piece of glass is a different hue, or a blend: vibrant blue, muted orange, red, turquoise, and others. The interiors are shiny smooth. But the exteriors are textured, like fishes’ scales, perhaps. “See all this detail? Now we can see all of this so clearly because of the light,” says Oldknow.

Another piece, *Untitled*, by Roni Horn, stands near a translucent window. Low, large, and circular, the piece appears to emit a lime green glow. As light plays off the glass, a viewer might wonder, “Is it hollow? Or full of water?” No, upon closer inspection, it is solid: perfectly clear glass contained within colored glass. But on another day, with different weather? With the quality of light changing as clouds pass over the sun? The piece might transform slowly across the seasons, or in just a few minutes, changing right before the viewer’s eyes.

Contemplation requires effort, and the opportunity for rest to recover from museum fatigue is a welcome addition. Visitors will find that rest on the “porch,” an area along that 140-foot window that looks out on a landscaped green (in progress). This connection with

the natural world was intentional for architect Thomas Phifer.

Back in the gallery, *Forest Glass* also connects visitors with the natural, and its changing state. The name not only refers to the tree forms, but also a Medieval type of brown and green glassware, according to Katherine Gray. To fuel the furnaces that created glass during that time period, trees were cut for fuel. *Forest Glass* is something of a recycled reforestation.

But perhaps it is even more. Somehow, the sunlight that grew those forests became part of the trees themselves. The fires of glassmakers’ furnaces released that light from wood. And from those furnaces, it’s as if the glass that emerged had harnessed and stored the sunlight and fire itself. In the Contemporary Art + Design Wing, under the giant skylight, sunlight won’t make the *Forest Glass* trees grow. But sunlight does glow back at us, urging us to be present in the moment, look toward the future, and grow.

Reflecting on the expansion and the collection, Tina Oldknow says, “We’re in a whole new realm now.”

*Alison Fromme is an award-winning freelance writer in Ithaca, NY.*