

Adventures in LAUSCHA

For over 500 years around the town of Lauscha, a special tradition of glass making and blowing has been handed down. I've always wanted to see everything that goes on there for myself, so imagine my delight at getting to go there with a modern-day group of glass buddies. The kaleidoscope of glass-working, museum pieces, and ideas from this southeastern German region was inspiring to say the least. First, however, let me introduce you to the "Jungs" (German for "boys") and tell you how my remarkable trip came about.

Some years ago, while traveling around in Seto, Japan, I met a very remarkable person. He and I were traveling with a group of light artists attending the GAS (Glass Art Society) conference there at the Art University. We were hiking along the edge of some spectacular bamboo forests visiting some of the local temples and artisans along the way. We started talking about glass and neon and how they are done in Germany. All of us were participants in the "Traveling Light Exhibit", an illuminated suitcase art show held in conjunction with the GAS conference. My new friend's appearance and work were equally one of a kind. His piece for the show was done in the Lauscha tradition. That is, what appeared to be made on the lathe was done entirely by hand with a German (gas, oxy, air) bench burner. We had over 30 pieces in the show and most all of the other light artists were curious and amazed to find out how Herr Thomas Wendler made his piece. The work was a suitcase with a wonderful red glass vessel and a three dimensional cocktail glass made out of small diameter clear tubing. As a decorative border it had lighted, meticulously worked large diameter cobalt blue tubing. The whole thing was animated; the vessel slowly lit up and then seemed to pour liquid light into the cocktail glass thus filling it. While in Japan, I talked to Thomas about Lauscha and it's very long (at least 500 years) glassblowing tradition. He then told me that it would be possible to visit this northeastern German town with him and I filed that away for a future adventure.

Some years later at a GAS conference in Amsterdam I met Thomas again and we toured and took part in the activities of the conference as well as visiting with Dirk Boonstra who gave us a tour of many of the neon shops in the area. Dirk was a great host and is the Maestro of the neon school over there in Holland. During these visits we saw demonstrations of phosphor powder coating and European glass bending techniques. A lot of the technology we saw has great possibilities for art applications.

Opposite page, top left: The Jungs at Pressler Museum (left to right: Ed, David, Alex.) **Opposite page, top right:** Artistic display of glass products at Glashaus. **Opposite page, bottom left:** Beyond the Plasma, Little Miracles. Glass, plasma sculpture by Ed Biggar. **Opposite page, bottom right:** Typical old homes in Erfurt (capital of Thuringia). **Below:** The first view the Jungs saw coming into Lauscha.

Back at the conference, we met one of the featured artists, Herr John Zinner, who is a well-known flame worker from Lauscha. He is famous for his devil figures, which are made entirely in the flame, and without external annealing (except in the flame). Some of these figures are over 12 inches tall and all are quite animated and anatomically impressive. He struck me as a happy, friendly, and very talented flameworker. I also filed away that first good impression for future reference.

That year Thomas and I traveled back to Berlin and I had my first taste of German hospitality. Thomas and his family showed me as much as you could possibly see of his wonderful city all in a very short time during my stay as their guest. In 2003, after years of talking and planning, Thomas was able to travel to southwest Virginia and be my guest and co-worker at my glass/neon studio here. For about 10 days we did some remarkable work using hand forming of blown objects (with a German burner), uranium, Faustian and *Italian (*thanks to David Abalon at Tecnolux) colored tubing and exotic neon techniques, much of those learned from my good friend and mentor, David Svenson, in the early 90's in Southern California. Thomas and I then left and drove across the U.S. to the Seattle GAS conference where we again worked together. We exhibited our illuminated (neon) artwork and demonstrated many exotic neon techniques in the flameworking demo area. Rusty Russo of EGL neon products supplied all of the equipment. This will happen again at the GAS conference in New Orleans in June.

I first met David Svenson in the early 90's in Southern California, where we both were living and working to develop our glass and neon skills. David and I were both learning off hand glassblowing at Cal State University in San Bernardino. Professor William D. Warehall was our guiding force and while there he encouraged us to stretch the medium any way we thought might work for us to make our art. That was a magic time! I assisted David with some glasswork that later became a tribute to the late Frank Zappa. I also did some work with David that won a national award and ended up in a notable collection. We both helped each other and learned how useful and efficient team efforts can be.

This team consciousness is why I have moved to this area of the country and if you have never experienced places like Penland School of Crafts or the Corning Studio you should. One year in North Carolina, I co-taught a class on exotic neon techniques in conjunction with the GAS conference and immediately fell in love with the atmosphere, beautiful mountain country and most of all the sharing attitude of most every artist I've ever met there. The next I received a scholarship from the Corning Studio to participate in their premier season and was fortunate enough to be around such glass greats as Lino Tagliapietra and Emilio Santini. Emilio showed us some great techniques during this class and when I asked if we would be able to use the glass lathe there, he said, "No, you must learn to become a human lathe!" Ever heard that one before? Sounds sort of familiar...



Written by Ed Biggar

While eating & enjoying the many types of German (to the tune of O Tannenbaum) “my nose is

While taking Emilio's flameworking class, I worked next to a guy who brought his own water cooled torch and did stuff that I'd never seen before or since. He is as meticulous as he is funny. This guy was none other than Alexander Hamilton from Manotick, Ontario, Canada. From that time forward Alex and I have been sharing interests and working together whenever the opportunity arises. Last year (to be repeated this year) I worked with him at the Corning Studio flameworking program. At last year's class we filled some of the hollow glass works and made them light up. Alex did a great elephant and I came home with a plasma slug (inspired by the Blashka models on display at the Corning Museum) to mount on a slab of fossil specimens. Alex is also an avid naturalist and often takes his students on field trips to find minerals and fossils. Some years ago, while on his way to work with Emilio at Penland, Alex brought me his extra glass lathe down from Canada. This is one of my most treasured tools, which I have and use to this day.

So now you have been introduced to the *Jungs* (Thomas's word for us guys which means “boys” in German) who came together in Berlin as his guests and traveled on a memorable adventure to the “land of glass”, Lauscha, Germany. Thomas works for the only ***American-style *(most Americans work quickly and dirty and Europeans are precise and meticulous, similar to scientific methods)** neon shop in Berlin and his boss agreed to let us borrow the company Volkswagen hatchback for our adventure. Early one morning we all loaded up our gear and Alex, who is one of the most efficient people I've ever known, drove us down the Autobahn in the direction of Lauscha. It turned out to be a foggy morning and we drove steadily into very mountainous terrain with few inhabitants in a lot of the stretches. Every once in a while we would come to a village and stop for fuel or good German snacks. I never thought of Germany being like this. It is a very old country with much of its natural beauty still evident everywhere. Alex got his international drivers license before our trip and I guess they certified him to perform high speed driving since he frequently exceeded speeds of 160 kilometers (about 100 mph) that we had all heard of but never experienced. David and I were in the back seat and paying full attention to what was going on most all of the time.

We stopped at Ilmenau and visited the factory where some of the most frequently seen German bench burners are made. Preiss-Daimler's manager, Gunder Kosler, and his staff made us very welcome and showed us so many neat glass toys that most of us were drooling in the showroom and some of us ended up buying torches and other tools to bring back home with us.

On the way to Lauscha we passed through the little town of Neuhaus, where we first sighted the Geissler Museum, which was something all of us had an interest in. We just had to stop and peek in the front window of Heinrich Geissler's original home and laboratory. Since it was way past closing, and locked up tight and very dark, we couldn't see much that night. This only piqued my interest and imagination even further. We made plans to get there at opening time the next day to see and soak up as much as possible since what we all are involved in what Herr Geissler originated way back in the 1800's.

In case you aren't familiar, Geissler was an expert scientific flame worker who constructed glass vessels in many amazing configurations, then vacuum filled them with gas, and he then brought them to life using electricity. Since they had little entertainment in the parlor in those days these wonderful glowing treasures served that purpose. A lot of them are still working today and many demonstrate numerous principles of physical science.

As we traveled on to Lauscha, we saw more of the typical slate-covered cottages that lined the cobblestone roads in the towns and villages along our route. In Lauscha we had our first view of the many colorful shops and galleries with lighted displays of hundreds of glass ornaments and other beautiful glass objects. After a short tour of the town we headed up the narrow mountain road to Herr John Zinner's studio and apartment, where we planned to stay several nights.

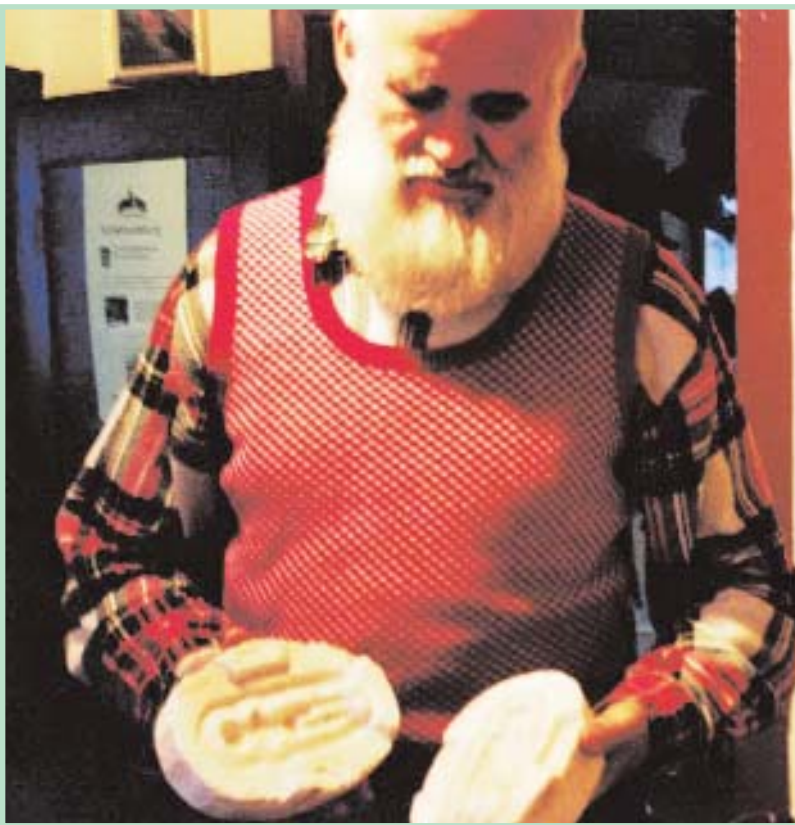
We pulled up in front of a typical slate-covered two-story house, which is built on a mountainside overlooking the picturesque town of Lauscha. The view was fantastic and it was hard for us all to believe we were finally there after all these months of planning. We got out of the car and John welcomed us with open arms and some good German beer to toast our arrival. He gave us a tour of his studio where he had been working all day and his trademark red glass devils (both male and female) were standing and sitting everywhere, complete in every detail. Since John does not speak a lot of English, Thomas was asking all of our questions in German for us. I'm sure this takes great patience from the Germans but no one ever got tired of it and we all learned a great deal during our stay. Some of us, especially Alex, picked up some German on the way (he even brought a book of translations!). That night we dined at “Gollo”, John's brother's bar, restaurant, and bowling alley. While eating and enjoying the many types of German local beers, we sang our new song for the locals; it goes: (to the tune of *O Tannenbaum*) “*my nose is cold, my nose is cold, my nose is cold in Lauscha.*” This sentence is in the Lauschan dialect but means exactly what it sounds like in English. We sang that many times during our stay! That song and Alex's imitation of a frog eating a cricket and then rubbing his bulging stomach opened many a door during our tour.

On Wednesday we walked around town and visited the glass museum where many very old historical glass works are on exhibit. We then window shopped and saw many typical Lauschan glass pieces from hundreds of ornaments to hollow deer figures and much more than I can describe here. Our last stop was to visit the shop called Glastradition, which is owned and operated by Herr Thomas Muller-Litz. Herr Litz comes from a glassblowing family and is a very skilled flameworker. The work throughout his shop shows his great talent. Thomas is known for his Montage work, we asked for a demonstration and he gladly responded with an invitation to return at 6 PM the next day. We happily accepted his



*local beers, we sang our new song for the locals; it goes:
cold, my nose is cold, my nose is cold in Lauscha."*

Opposite page, bottom right: Herr Herrenberger (Scientific Masterglassblower at Scientific Glass School in Illmenau/Thuringen) demonstrates making a coil from small tubing. **Below:** Caretaker of Geissler House shows one of the vintage doll molds that many of the homes have in the wall structure used as construction material. **Bottom right:** Maestro of Glass School showing the array of apparatus that a graduate will be expected to make after completing a 3 year apprenticeship.



invitation and went off to another dinner at Gollo. At that dinner David found a great opportunity with one of the regular diners there. He met the sales director of the Krebs Glas factory, where thousands of *Christbaumschmucks* (Christ's birthday jewels) are made, and was offered a special tour of the factory. This was a rare opportunity for David since it relates to his work.

On Thursday we went down to the Krebs location to drop David off for his tour. We all would have liked to go but it wasn't an option. At the last minute Thomas came running back from showing David where to go. He said that we all were invited to take the tour. Just a few minutes before the plans changed Alex found a four-leafed clover in front of the building. Is that luck or what? The company's sales director, Herr Gerd Ross, who led us into the large factory work floor, welcomed us. It was a mold blower's dream.

We were taken through the factory where many of the ornaments are still being made the old way using pulled soft glass points, pre heated, and then blown into hand made molds of every description. Since David frequently uses this technique in a lot of his artwork (and I occasionally assist him at demos using this technique) it was a rare treat to be able to see this first hand. It was especially good to see

how they do it using just one person for the whole blowing operation. The company has been around for a very long time and still makes some of the traditional ornaments such as the blown pinecones and Santas that many of us remember from our childhood. The director told us that they come out with at least fifteen hundred new designs every year. They make over 3000 different designs at any given season. The company also has operations in other countries including the U.S. The ornaments that required decoration were all done by hand as was the blowing. This was a real treat for all of us, although no photos were taken.

That afternoon we went to the next town to get batteries for my camera (I had left it on the night before). While at the photo shop, Thomas went off to have a smoke by himself. We looked over and he was jumping up and down in front of a window. It turned out that he had spotted a flame in a window of one of the local homes and got curious.

He introduced us to a flame worker, Herr Scheler Winfried from Neuhaus, who does nothing but make radiometers. Those are seen everywhere in Lauscha, whirling around whenever exposed to a heat/light source. That was a rare treat and Herr Winfried explained to us how they were made. I've often wondered about that since childhood. I brought back one of the nicest ones I've ever seen.

We then went to the Glass factory, called *Farbglashutte*, where the color used by most of the locals is made. The production manager, Herr René Seiffert, spent much time showing us around. There were displays of old molds for blowing and samples of the many colors made there. We saw teams of glassblowers working on their production line and we also saw how the tubing and cane are hand drawn by the teams of skilled workers. We all had the opportunity to see and buy glass tubing and cane of every description and color imaginable from their amazing warehouse. We were truly in glass heaven! We all bought glass and I bought some yellow striped clear tubing to bring back to make ornaments since Christmas was less than 3 weeks away and I was the featured glassblower at the "Christmas All Through the House" celebration here in Chilhowie, Virginia.

Finally it was time to visit our roots, the Geisler Museum, which is housed in the beautiful old two-story home place of Herr Heinrich Geisler. The house is built from old plaster molds for doll making, used as bricks in many of the old structures in the area.



There was room after room of beautiful glasswork! The curator told us many stories about the items on display there, all of which were translated by our good fellow *Jung*, Thomas Wendler. We saw many old tools including torches, molds and jigs for making the Geissler tubes. Also, we viewed early vacuum devices for filling the tubes. We all took many photographs, some of which you see here.

Soon it was time to see Herr Muller-Litz demonstrate his Montage technique. As we entered the *Glastradition* shop, we were offered some good local beer which we gladly accepted (they have some of the best tasting beers over there and we had so little time to sample them, so we seldom passed an opportunity such as this). After a toast Thomas Muller-Litz fired up his torch and warming fires and began to show us how he works this very old technique (please see photos...). Thomas used some of the very same glass that I bought at the factory earlier and it came out beautifully. I was lucky enough to bring the demonstration piece back home with me and I enjoy its beauty often. It's great to have some nice glass to bring back memories of great adventures such as this one.

I first learned about the Montage technique from Mr. Jean Boutz on a visit to his studio in Florida many years ago. I just talked to him on the phone the other day and he informs me that he is 89 years young and in very good health. When I told him about our trip to Lauscha he described the visit he made via Italy way back when the region was behind the Iron Curtain. I hope Jean will come to the next GAS conference in New Orleans and tell some of his great stories about when he was a glassblower for the Ringling Brothers/Barnum and Bailey Circus. I met Jean many years ago at the Asheville, North Carolina GAS conference. His son, Donovan Boutz, was one of Harvey Littleton's first students.

On Friday we got up early and thanked our host and the many new friends we made in Lauscha. Again we were on the road, heading back to Berlin to spend some time with our other host and his family before departing for California, Canada, and Virginia. We needed to stop to do some business for Thomas's boss in Ilmenau and also planned to visit the Scientific Glass School, which was where Thomas graduated from many years ago. On our way we took a few wrong turns (foggy morning again...) and ended up a town called Cursdorf. We were in the process of looking over the map and asking people how to interpret it when someone looked over across the street and there was the Pressler Museum! How could this happen? Thomas walked over and talked to the curator for a few minutes; they appeared to be closing up. He came back and said; "Come on *Jungs*, we're in luck, they are going to open it up for us!" They normally close for lunch but he had explained that three of us had come from the States and Canada in hopes of visiting their museum. There were a lot of great gadgets and old flameworking equipment for us to photograph and enjoy. After a long visit we said goodbye to our gracious hostess and were given posters of the museum as souvenirs of our tour. Was that fortuitous or what? We could not have done more in such a short period of time. It all related to our interests and work as well.

We then headed to Ilmenau and the fog lifted and the scenery was no less than spectacular. We wound through mountain roads through vibrant green forests, occasionally passing the many colorfully unique villages sprinkled along our route. We rolled up to the Vocational School in Ilmenau and soon we were welcomed into the classroom of Herr Jorgen and shown how he and his many young students work to build flameworking skills to carry on the tradition. The Maestro worked on my German torch, which I needed a few parts for, and showed us all how to adjust it for proper working flames using the various tip combinations. He then gave us a demonstration of coil making using clear small diameter tubing. I know we all saw that finished coil lit up in our minds eye. We thanked him and his students for their hospitality and were on our way back to Berlin.

We stopped at the torch factory to finish up Thomas's business (in the process Alex bought a new bench burner) we then continued on our journey back to Berlin. The car was loaded to the limit with lots of glass goodies from our trip. What a great time we all had in this true "land of glass". Some (if not all) of us *Jungs* are planning a return trip next year.



Top photo: Herr Thomas Muller Litz starting the Montage process using Lauscha striped tubing to pull a point at his studio. **Middle photo:** Geissler House Museum apparatus display. **Bottom photo:** Pressler Glass Museum apparatus display.

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