ASIAN ARTISTS IN CRYSTAL

BY KARL KUP

Mr. Kup is Chief of the Art Division and Curator of Prints and of the Spencer Collection at the New York Public Library.

That the world has become smaller is a common belief. Faster communications and the daily pressure of international events add weight to the assumption. It is therefore significant to place the arts of widely divergent cultures and civilizations into service to restate the terms of our common humanity. However, this must not blur our perception of real differences and deprive the world of art as well as civilizations of their individual and unique qualities.

Asian Artists in Crystal, an exhibition of designs by contemporary Far and Near Eastern artists engraved on Steuben glass, invites such speculative thinking, aside from the fact that it represents imagination, craftsmanship, ingenuity of design, and sheer beauty. The crystal was exhibited at the National Gallery of Art in January and February and is now being shown at the Metropolitan Museum.

Glass has been made for thousands of years. Its origin lies in antiquity, and Pliny reports on its discovery. As a decorative glaze on pottery or stone, glass may have existed six thousand years ago. But the first solid glass objects appeared considerably later. Museums contain such treasures from Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China dating back to about 2000 B.C. While glass was first plain and simple, the art of decorating the surface soon caught the imagination of its makers. Engraving is the oldest method. This technique was employed on an XVIII Dynasty Egyptian goblet in the Metropolitan Museum to depict the cartouche of Thutmose III. At a later time glass was actually carved in relief and intaglio. Toward the middle of the eleventh century there is evidence that glassmakers were brought to Venice from Constantinople to produce mosaics for the basilica of San Marco; by the end of the thirteenth century the industry was well established and a guild was formed. From Venice the art of glass making spread through the Western hemisphere, and it was there, too, that the art of glass engraving was brought to perfection. Scratch designs were made with a diamond point and encircled goblets from Murano with flowers, initials, and armorial symbols. Northern engravers, particularly in the Netherlands and in England, leaned toward figures and graceful calligraphy.

More recently, Steuben Glass has brought about a veritable renaissance in the art of copper-wheel engraving in America. It is one of the most exacting crafts, requiring a small lathe into which are fitted scores of interchangeable copper wheels. The glass is pressed upwards against the revolving wheel, and the engraver must work from the design on paper, using his judgment, in addition to his technical capabilities, to interpret the artist's design on glass. The merit of the artist's sketch, the pertinence of the designer's shape, the skill of the glass-blower and engraver—all these combine in a craft that has risen to an art worthy of attention.

Steuben Glass has a tradition of collaborating with contemporary artists in the creation of decorative crystal. Beginning in the thirties with such painters as Matisse, Cocteau, Eric Gill, and Grant Wood, a procession of artists have applied their talent to devising designs suitable for transcription to glass at the hands of the skilled engraver. Two years ago an exhibition of British Artists in Crystal introduced twenty British designers to America and Europe in a galaxy of ingeniously designed ornamental pieces, including the work of Cecil Beaton, Muirhead Bone, Oliver Messel, John Piper, and Graham Sutherland.

In 1954 the makers of Steuben glass decided to gather together drawings by contemporary artists from the Far and Near East. The great cultural areas of Buddhist, Hindu, and Moslem thought and tradition were to be represented by a collection of engraved glass: Asian Artists
Covered bowl with a scene of New Year's festivities in Formosa, by Ran In-ting of China. The crystal shown on these pages is in the current exhibition of Steuben glass engraved with designs by Eastern artists.
ABOVE: Vase with milkmaids waiting in a grove for Krishna, by Jamini Roy of India.
BELOW: Plaque with strolling lovers on Shemm-en-Neseem, by Hamed Abdalla of Egypt
Vase with a stylized design of rampant lions, derived from ancient Persian bronzes, by Parviz Mofidi of Iran
in Crystal. America's increasing interest in the cultures of the East was an enticement to many prominent and promising artists to contribute their drawings to this project. Sixteen countries were visited in search of artists whose designs would form the basis for such an international venture. Taiwan, Japan, Korea, and the Philippines were followed by Vietnam, Indonesia, Thailand, and Burma. India and Ceylon held promise. Pakistan, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Egypt completed the group. Hundreds of artists submitted sketches, worked with the project in mind, and shared the felicitous combination of arts and crafts across the seven seas. Designs by thirty-six artists were finally chosen. The Steuben designers set to work to create crystal forms in keeping with the spirit and the mood of the artists' original intention; glassblowers took up their blowing rods, calipers, and "wood-jacks"; engravers took hold of their wheels. Before long a sparkling and exciting row of crystal was to be seen.

Viewing the engraved vases, bowls, urns, and stele of crystal devised to suit the drawings, one is impressed by the variety of mood and idea. It appears that but few artists of the Orient are sufficiently under the spell of Western art to be in danger of losing identity, background, or roots. True, one may find a Matisse, a Picasso, a Braque imitator in almost every town in the East. But those are not necessarily the great talents. On the contrary, the emphasis that the Asian artist places on good draftsmanship above all is apparent in his sketches as it is in his finished work. Patience, practice, and innate reverence for the quality of the line is noticeable in Far and Near Eastern lands, as is the attitude toward the integrity of the profession. Yet, are there not restrictions: does not the Buddhist by the very nature of his belief, repeat established forms and lines obediently, in fear of treading upon holy ground and of offending where offense is easily taken? Does not the Hindu, in his exuberance of color and imagination, rely too much upon the folklore of his religion and his country? And does not the Moslem, hemmed in by the Mosaic laws, lean too much upon the purely decorative side of the design? One cannot generalize. Let us therefore look upon the designs as the work of men and women with traditional roots and individual characters who are artists above all and as such universal.

A splendid sketch of a bamboo reed swaying gently in the breeze was drawn by Ma Shou-hua of China. A former judge on the mainland and now the distinguished president of the Administrative Court of the Republic of China in Taiwan, Ma Shou-hua chose the bamboo, his favorite subject, which he has studied with love and reverence in rain and shine, in wind and calm. This is in contrast to Ran In-ting's dashing and extrovert drawing of the New Year's dragon, which he sketched prancing through the streets of his native village on Formosa. Exuberant, spitting fire and fumes like a volcano, the dragon is now entwined and engraved around an ornamental covered bowl that is essentially Chinese in character.

Ananda, the disciple of Buddha, drawn by Shiko Munakata of Japan, and a Bodhisattva, by Kiyoshi Saito, represent the dignity of Buddhist thought. A Korean orchestra complete with horsehair hats and dancing girls has come from the Seoul artist Kim Ki-chang. The scene is so happily drawn that for a moment we believe all is happiness in Korea again.

The Philippine and Vietnam artists drew on their daily life for their designs. A band of street musicians in Manila, a village festival in the countryside of the Philippines add sparkle to the over-all impression of the exhibition. And a floating village of Vietnam, of sociological interest if you will, designed by Saigon's learned Nguyygen-van-Long, is evidence of oriental fastidiousness in draftsmanship and composition.

The painters and draftsmen of Indonesia are enchanted and enchanting recorders of their land. In their studios in Djakarta hang large canvases of the mountains and valleys of Java, Sumatra, and Bali. Their sketchbooks tell of the life of the East, with fleeting moods and impressions, and with ever recurring designs of purely ornamental splendor. They are close to the people of their country, and it is no wonder that Indonesians flock to galleries and museums to see themselves through the imaginative interpretation of their own artists. Raden Basoeki Abdullah's sketch of Bhima and the Snake, a
theme from Hindu lore, seemed a natural choice, though the artist is better known as a portraitist, having painted both the Queen of the Netherlands and President Soekarno of Indonesia.

Thailand and Burma, essentially Buddhist lands, yielded designs recalling the past, subtle and delicate with a tingling of romance about them.

The masters of Indian art, Phani Bhusan, Gopal Ghose, K. S. Kulkarni, and Jamini Roy, made sketches of such strength and beauty that the spectator rejoices in the effort that the glass designers and blowers put into the pieces fashioned for them. With a touch of humor we see Jamini Roy's appealing design of Krishna, the playful and capricious, who had promised the milkmaids, or gopis, of Vrindavana that he would come to dance with them in the moonlight on the night of the village festival. The crowd surging to the shrines and temples was so
great, however, that Krishna could not be found. Although the disappointed gopis searched everywhere, even in the trees, the promised meeting never took place. A flat, round, jolly bowl of Indian design tells the story of the disenchanted milkmaids, who, it appears, have not given up hope. Gopal Ghose’s sketch of fleeting monkeys, as one sees them on the roadside in India, is a lively, impressionistic contribution of a man who knows how to draw with heart and mind. A tall and stately covered urn of crystal shows K. S. Kulkarni’s forceful designs of the Apsarases from Khajuraho Temple, a glimpse into India’s past drawn with vigor and imagination, a tribute to the country’s art both ancient and contemporary.

In the designs and engraved pieces from the Middle and Near East the spectator will find much that appears familiar. Persia has produced drawing and painting for hundreds of years and in a style so essentially its own that we have come to look upon it as the fountainhead of Middle Eastern art. But this can no longer be said of those countries bordering on the Mediterranean where the West has secured a stronghold never to be eradicated. On the Bosporus, on the slopes of the Lebanon mountains, and in the towns of Egypt along the banks of the Nile there is a searching and ever increasing recognition of the art of the West. The artist is now an emancipated man, freed of restrictions and adept in modern techniques. He aims at the palette of Paris, the mood of his own soul, and he seeks the technical superiority said to be found in American contemporary drawing and print-making.

Luristan is a land in the western part of Persia, bordering Iraq, that includes much of the area between the ridges of the Zagros mountains. In the second millennium before our era people lived in this upland region and in adjoining Kurdistan whose chief occupation was horse breeding. Luristan became famous, especially near the end of this era, for its metalwork, particularly in bronze, producing bits, harness rings, and plaques, usually decorated with fantastic animals. A contemporary Iranian artist, Parviz Mofidi, chose one of these ancient designs as the basis for his, which he calls Lions Rampant. It is stark and strong, timeless and *avant garde* in its archaic, static quality. The deep, scroll-footed vase fits it to perfection. In contrast, a dreamy, poetic, and fairy-tale-telling artist, Ja’far Shoja, drew Cypress of Shiraz, a tall and slender tree, black as sable and casting velvet shadows upon the sands.

Bedri Rahmi Eyuboglu of Istanbul, whose exhibition in New York caused favorable comment, drew The Turkish Tray, a stylized, witty, and capricious rendering of two small girls carrying an immense tray of stout copper laden with sweetmeats, fruit, and the inevitable coffee urn. This is a sketch at once happy and forceful. It restates Turkey’s love and pleasure in pure design, and yet it contains much that is familiar to Western eyes of individuality and artistic expression.

Every year on the banks of the Nile the Egyptians celebrate the age-old festival of Shemm-en-Neseem, or “sniffing the breezes.” Early in the morning people break open an onion and smell it; in the course of the forenoon they ride or walk to the country for a picnic, a boating party, a dance—to take the air, or, as they term it, to sniff the breezes. Lovers on Shemm-en-Neseem, by Hamed Abdalla of Cairo, is forceful, moving, and dynamic, engraved upon a rectangular form of sheer crystal that is almost a stele. Hamed Abdalla belongs to the group of Egypt’s great artists who have studied in Paris. His work is owned by most of the Egyptian museums, and it has been exhibited in the capitals of Europe. He continues to draw, paint, and teach in his studio overlooking the Maidan and the Nile beyond. While his design is essentially Egyptian in content and spirit, it is also the work of an artist with eyes turned upon the world at large, which he wishes to paint as he sees it with his mind.

The drawings of these Asian artists and the engravings of their designs on the crystal cannot be adequately described. Each must be looked at with an appreciation of its individual contribution. Yet they all may be seen and understood as a truly international marriage of the arts and crafts, “proof that art has no boundaries and that culture is one of the strongest links between civilized men.”