



GLASS MODELS OF SOFT BODIED ANIMALS. THE RELATION BETWEEN BLASCHKA, FRIČ AND THE NATIONAL MUSEUM.

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Abstract. Leopold Blaschka (1822–1895) and his son Rudolf (1857–1939) made glass models of invertebrates for museums and teaching institutions in the period 1863–1890. Václav Frič (1839–1916) from Prague acted as their re-seller for Austria-Hungary. Short profiles of the glassworkers Blaschka and the natural history dealer Frič are drawn. In 1884, a gift of four glass animal models for the National Museum was sent by the Blaschkas to Frič, who delivered it. Of this gift, possibly one models has survived until today. The Blaschkas' glass animal models are being discovered again all over the world; their glass flower models were made exclusively for the Harvard University.

■ glass animal models, L. Blaschka, R. Blaschka, V. Frič, National museum Prague.

The department of zoology of the National Museum in Prague exhibits a special object: a squid. The fact that the object is a squid is not remarkable in itself, but what makes it exiting is that it is neither a stuffed animal, nor an alcohol preserved one: it is a model made of painted glass. Recently the history of this object was uncovered: in 1884, Leopold Blaschka (1822–1895) and his son Rudolf (1857–1939) who made the model, donated it to the museum, while the merchant Václav Frič (1839–1916) acted as a mediator. Originally, the gift encompassed even four different models.

Leopold Blaschka was a glass worker from Northern Bohemia, born in Böhmisches Aicha or Český Dub, just like his son Rudolf. In the second half of the 19th century, they developed the natural history glass model. From 1857 on, while still living in Aicha, Leopold experimented with imitating flowers in glass. Camille, Prince de Rohan, owner of the estate Sychrov near Turnov, took an interest in Leopold's art. He ordered to supply the glass worker with all the greenhouse materials from Sychrov that he needed, even the rarest types. Leopold used these as models. Later, in the period between 1860 and 1862, he produced some hundreds of glass flowers, most of them orchids. The Prince de Rohan exhibited these works of art in his palace in Prague.

When Leopold moved to Dresden in 1863, the Prince introduced him to Ludwig Reichenbach (1839–1916), director of the Dresden Botanical Garden and Natural History Museum. In the same year, Reichenbach exhibited Leopold's glass flowers as well, and when an unknown Englishman requested for glass representations of the British sea anemones and corals, Leopold was ready to produce these. Subsequently, Reichenbach exhibited these innovative glass animal models in dry aquariums in the museum. This signalled the start of a business that would become world-famous. From 1876 on Rudolf, the son, was fully employed in his father's studio. Together, they produced glass models of

invertebrates like sea anemones, hydroids, echinoderms, worms, tunicates and molluscs. Ultimately, the number of animals represented in glass would come to the total of seven hundred. The objects were put to use as museum objects and as teaching aids.

The Blaschkas sold the glass animals to customers, who chose them from catalogues sent by mail. They used the services of agents too: in North America, Henry Augustus Ward (1834–1906) from Rochester (NY), in England Robert Damon (1814–1889) from Weymouth and in Austria-Hungary, Václav Frič (1839–1916) from Prague (Reiling, 1998).

Václav Frič descended from a prominent Prague family. Still in his early twenties, in 1862 after travelling abroad, he opened a natural history shop in *Vladislavova ulice* in Prague, inspired by British examples. In order to promote his business, he engaged himself in exhibitions and at many occasions he was decorated. We mention especially the medals that he was awarded at the world exhibitions of Vienna (1873) and of Paris (1878 and 1889). His brother Antonín Frič (1832–1913), curator of the zoological and paleontological collections of the National Museum, had an important influence on Václav and his business. For this museum, he regularly purchased objects from his brother's shop. (Reiling, 2000) Until today, objects from Frič's business survive in the Netherlands, Great Britain, Austria, Germany, Poland and Canada.

Frič acted as the Blaschkas' Austrian-Hungarian re-seller and his was not an exclusive agency. Large and thus important orders for, e.g. the Imperial Royal Court Collection (k.k. Hofcabinet) and the University – both in Vienna – were not submitted to him, but were placed directly in Dresden. (Based on Blaschka, 1872–1887). The first known sale of Blaschka's glass models by Frič dates back to 1865; these survive in the Leeds City Museum, GB. Apparently, Frič sold already the glass models at a very early stage of his and Blaschka's business (Reiling, 2000).

The Blaschkas' business composition notebooks have survived in the archives. These notebooks contain letter drafts, which were probably kept as an aid to memory. In one of these a draft of a letter to Frič, dated 8 November 1884, was found. From this, we learn that, together with a shipment for Václav Frič's business, four models were sent as a gift to the Museum in Prague. It consisted of a squid, two jellyfish and a sea anemone, all modelled in glass, of course (Blaschka 1881–1885). The gift was entered in the accession books of the National Museum and the squid *Eledone moschatus* survives until today in a showcase!

The National Museum houses the glass model of the adult jellyfish *Aurelia aurita* as well as a series, which shows the stages of development of that species. These objects differ that much from the models that the Blaschkas made of this organism, that they should be attributed to an unknown glass worker – which is remarkable in itself.

The Blaschkas' letter draft reads:

“... Da Sie bei unserem Aufenthalt in Prag Ihre gefällige Vermittlung in Aussicht stellen, so erlaube ich mir heute 4 Modellen: No 36 *Anthea cereus* v. maxima, No 224 *Aurelia aurita*; 235 *Pelagia noctiluca* und 553 *Eledone moschatus* der Sendung beizugeben, und ersuche Sie freundlichst, daß Sie die Güte haben wollen, dieselben als ein Geschenk von mir dem K. Museum zu überreichen. Indem ich Sie bitte, Ihren Herrn Bruder von mir und meinem Sohn bestens zu grüßen, verbleibe ich mit freundlichsten Grüßen, an Sie und Ihre werthe Familie. ...”

Translated:

“... As you, when we stayed in Prague, held out in prospect your pleasant mediation, I take now the liberty to add 4 models to the shipment: No 36 *Anthea cereus* v. maxima,

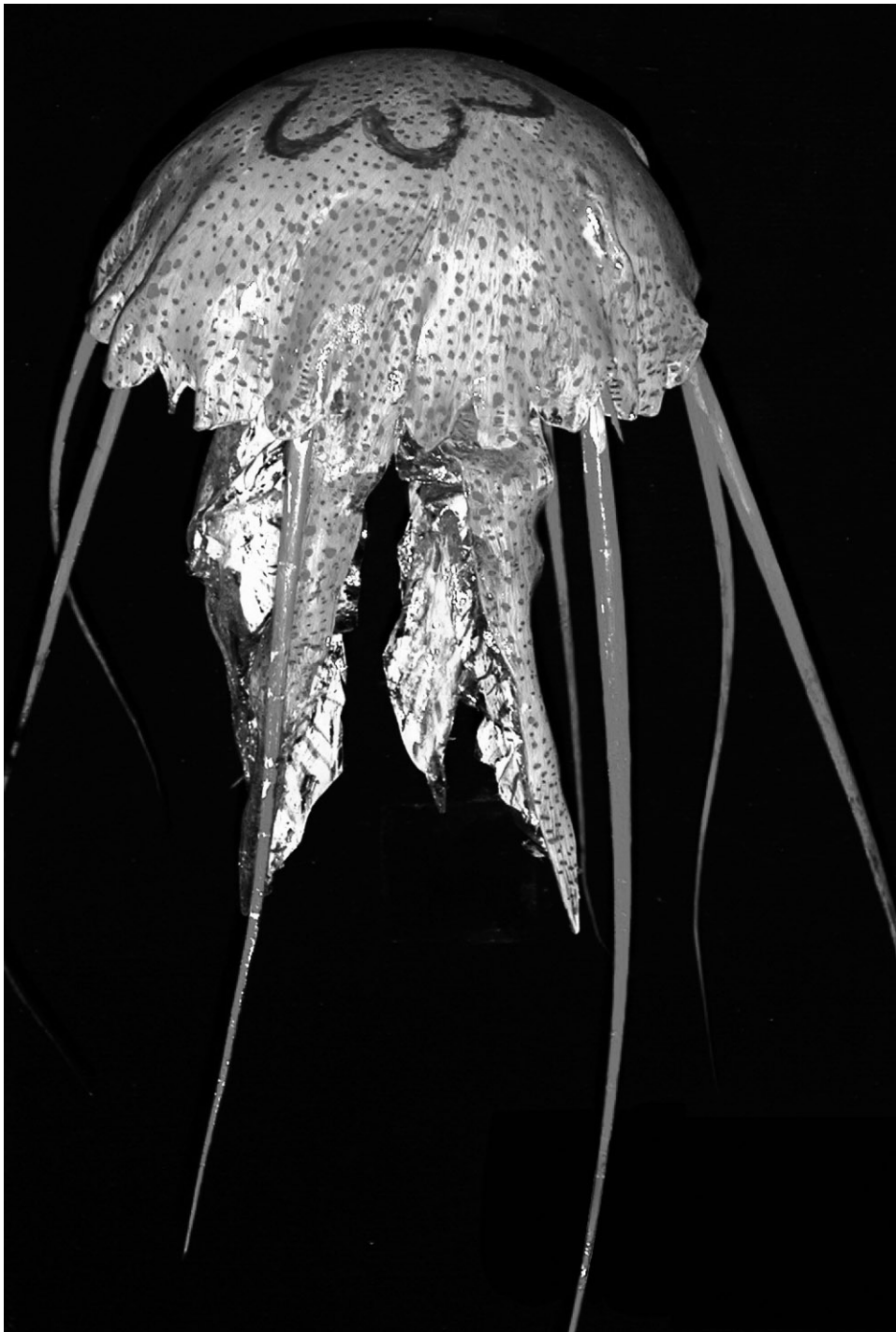


Fig. 1. Model of *Pelagia noctiluca* exhibited in the National Museum Prague, apparently an undated replacement of the 1884 Blaschka's model.

No 224 *Aurelia aurita*; 235 *Pelagia noctiluca* and 553 *Eledone moschatus*, and I request you most kindly, to be so good as to hand these over as a present from me to the R[oyal] Museum. Requesting you, to greet Mr. your brother most sincerely from me and my son, I remain with the kindest greetings to you and your valued family..."

Since 1886, no more entries of shipments of models from Dresden to Frič are recorded. This is not very surprising: in that same year, the glass workers signed an exclusive contract with the Botanical Museum of the Harvard University in the USA. The Blaschkas were engaged to produce glass models of plants that would be used as teaching aids for economic botany. In 1887 the first glass flowers were delivered. Until 1890 they made both plant and invertebrate models. In 1890 it was arranged with Harvard that the father and son could work on the glass flowers only. Subsequently, the production of the glass soft-bodied animals halted altogether then. As a tourist attraction, the glass flowers collection – comprising of 847 life size models and thousands of details – draws more than 100,000 visitors per year (Schultes et al. 1992). The glass invertebrates survive in almost 50 collections all the world over. This very year 2002, from March on, the London Design Museum opens an exhibition which highlights especially the Blaschkas' glass animals.

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