



## GLASS OF THE CAESARS

An exhibition organised and presented by  
Olivetti and the British Museum

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*Following the exhibitions of the Horses of San Marco, one of antiquity's greatest creations whose origins are still a mystery to international archeologists, and the Treasury of San Marco, the most richly varied and invaluable collection of "treasures" inherited from the past, the "Glass of the Caesars" is the third exhibition of antique art in which Olivetti has taken part, or promoted, in cooperation with several of the world's most distinguished museums and art scholars.*

Some of the most precious and interesting pieces in the exhibition of the Treasury of San Marco, shown in nine European and American cities before returning to Venice, were examples of glasswork, though only one was made in Rome or in a workshop somewhere in the Roman Empire, and could not have been left out of this exhibition. Those pieces represented the art field which is the subject of this catalogue; but their small number, differing dates and origins, and the limited range of techniques they exemplify mean that they offer no more than the barest notion of ancient glasswork, an art which advanced greatly in the Roman Imperial Age and whose variety of expressions and inventive skills is revealed in these pages.

Culture can also be considered a consistency of themes, persistent motivations, successive explorations of related fields. Perhaps these three exhibitions and the preparatory research for them, conducted mainly by the scholars and museums involved in their organization and display, provide an insight — beside the quality achieved and the problems raised which make each exhibition its own justification — into the reasons for the cultural activity and civic commitment of a company which is essentially an economic concern; the reasons why a company whose goal is technological progress and innovation, and which must always look to the future, has not abandoned its search in the past, in the history of man, for the virtues which have made the present: most important of all, work, ingenuity, the association since history began of the idea of man with the concept of *homo faber*, in which man recognizes and identifies himself.

From this point of view, glasswork reflects more closely than any other field the nature and aims of the production process. The greatest technological advances in this ancient art, whose first examples date back to before 1500 B.C., were achieved during the period illustrated by this exhibition, with the introduction of glass-blowing: a technique which permitted great ductility and variety of forms, a higher degree of material purity, a production speed which until then had been unthinkable, a reduction in costs and therefore a wider market, without losing or compromising the aspiration to beauty which always seems to have been a factor in glassware production, and only partly the case of ceramics. As in any industry, and glasswork of course is an industry, the characteristics of glass production — even in the rudimentary workshops which existed in every corner of the Empire (as the catalogue shows, pieces have been found from the Sahara to northern Europe, from Russia to Great Britain) — were not only technological innovation and specialized skills, but also responding to market demand, mass diffusion, reduction of costs, standards of quality. So much so that, as the catalogue and the exhibition demonstrate, very little substantial progress has been made in the field since the period considered here. Modern glasswork, even the loveliest pieces which would be created in Venice in particular — perhaps because of the similar idea of transparency, of liquidity, of delicate colour which the city suggests, the illusion of immateriality, of a city of light — has been unable to produce anything finer than the most significant achievements shown here. This ancient craft has been passed down almost intact, glassblowing methods have not changed and the mixture of substances is still much the same.

This combination of continuity and innovation has always been at the heart of industrial transformation. But we can draw another, moral rather than aesthetic lesson from the group of works examined here: the constant dedication to formal quality reflected in objects intended for practical purposes: not created as a purely artistic expression, to reveal and transmit the artist himself and his own world, but designed to meet a practical need, to improve daily life, instruments of repetitive formalized rituals, objects in which to conserve personal or precious belongings. Obviously, the items in the exhibition represent the peaks of a huge production (as D. B. Harden says in an essay, more than a hundred thousand pieces have so far been found from a production which, through daily use and because of its fragility, must certainly have been largely destroyed). But they are not the only representatives of man's irrepensible desire for beauty, which provides both identity and a feeling for "form" and should be reflected in all industrial products and not degraded in mediocre standardization; given the relatively lengthy process, complexity and cost of modern design, this goal should be constantly pursued and achieved.

These considerations perhaps explain our satisfaction and pride in having contributed to the organization of an exhibition of this kind, the first to be attempted on a scale which may not be possible again for many years; we wish to express our warmest thanks to all our partners, the museums, the institutions, the scholars, the countries and the art authorities, who have been involved in the project.

Visitors to the exhibition in its four different locations will see proof, in the variety of the collection as a whole and in each single piece, of the universal truth that beauty is indispensable: that it can therefore must enhance practical daily objects too, that its contribution to the history of man and to the meaning of life lies principally in the aspiration to create objects which extend beyond time, which hopefully live, if not forever, at least longer than those who created them and those who used them.

We are profoundly convinced of this need, and events such as this exhibition strengthen our commitment. Our age of relentless, almost overwhelming change has the right to endure over the centuries through the objects we make.

Carlo De Benedetti  
Chairman of Olivetti

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