

THE GLASS FLOWERS OF HARVARD

Carol Jones

Some time ago, around 2015, I read about the planned renovation of a collection of glass flowers at an American university. Rolling forward to October 2017 and we're in Boston, Massachusetts, for a few days. The guide book lists the world-famous Ware Collection of Glass Models of Plants in the Harvard Museum of Natural History. A trip to Cambridge and Harvard University was already on our itinerary, so a visit to the museum was a must. The gallery, with new cabinetry and cleaned and repaired specimens, had only re-opened the previous year.

The story starts in 1886 when Professor George Goodale from Harvard University travelled to Dresden to meet father and son, Leopold and Rudolf Blaschka. They were makers of glass models of marine invertebrates for museums across the world, including our very own Wollaton Hall in Nottingham, and he believed they would be ideal makers of plant models. The university wanted botanically accurate plant models for research and to instruct the public. This was not achievable with plant replicas at the time, which were made of papier-mâché or wax.



Lord Anson's blue pea
(*Lathyrus magellanicus*)



The cabinets containing the glass models of plants

Despite some reluctance, the Blaschkas were persuaded, and although the initial batch was damaged at New York Customs, their beauty and craftsmanship were enough to persuade Boston residents - including Elizabeth Ware and her daughter Mary - to offer to finance the continuing project.

The Blaschkas grew plants in their own garden for reference, and were allowed to view more exotic plants in the gardens and greenhouses of the nearby castle

at Pillitz. They devised a secure system of packaging, and their work for Harvard continued for over 50 years. I can only assume that Rudolf was still producing them in his seventies!



Aquilegia canadensis



Illustrating apple scab

The collection contains '850 life-size models representing 780 species and varieties of plants in 164 families, with over 4,300 detailed models of enlarged flowers and anatomical sections of various floral and vegetative parts of plants'. There were no secret methods; the Blaschkas were third and fourth generation Bohemian glass makers, and simply more skilled than their contemporaries. Sometimes they used wire to strengthen their models. Very few were painted, as they produced coloured glass to make the pieces.



Kalmia latifolia



Rhododendron maximum

Some of the glass has been lent to other institutions over the years, transported with considerable care. My favourite story is of a trip to New York one winter by plane. Fears of the risk from icy roads prompted the curators to research the best mode of transport from the airport. It turned out that the smoothest ride would be provided by a hearse. Two large black hearses, driven by drivers in funeral dress, delivered the museum cases from the airport. As this was so successful, they also made the 200 mile return trip to Harvard in the hearses. Sadly, the catalogue omits the style of outfit worn by the drivers on this leg of the journey!



Acer rubrum

Needless to say, I was completely knocked out by the exhibition and spent virtually the entire allotted time at the museum in the Ware room, examining and trying to photograph the specimens. I bought a superb catalogue, and the quality of its photographs does justice to the intricacy and beauty of the specimens. Unfortunately the copyright forbids reproduction, so you have our photos to illustrate this article. The *Aquilegia canadensis* (wild columbine) model is an example of a plant and some of its constituent parts. Some of the exhibits are part of a sequence showing plant development, such as the rotten apple which demonstrates fungal decay (apple scab).

If you'd like to see more, there are some excellent videos on YouTube: *Visit the Glass Collection*, dated 19/8/14 - this predates the restoration but shows the flowers in some detail; *Harvard Restores its Famed Glass Flowers*, 17/5/2016, and *The Story of Rudolf and Leopold Blaschka*, from 10/8/2007.