

ATELIER D'ART DU VERRE AND THE LUXEMBOURG INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF GLASS ROBERT EMERINGER AND ZAIGA BAIZA FULFILLING AN ARTISTIC VISION



Foreground artwork by Vladimir Klein (Czech Republic)
at the 2021 Festival. Photo by Harry Baptist.

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Every two years in the sleepy village of Asselborn in Northern Luxembourg, the Atelier d'Art du Verre hosts the Luxembourg International Festival of Glass (LIFG). The Festival opens on a Thursday evening in mid-August and runs through Sunday. During that time, Luxembourg, one of the top ten smallest countries in Europe at only 10,742 square miles, welcomes a multitude of families who buzz around like flies. Their cars spill out of the car park and are strewn in every available space on the surrounding streets.

Upon my arrival at the most recent 2021 Festival, I walked down a small lane by a stone building that houses the stained glass studios. There I found half an acre of land turned into an outdoor exhibition space. As I walked, greeting artist friends and artist strangers alike, I passed by the outdoor glassblowing demonstration by German artist Torsten Röttsch and later saw Bulgarian artist Lachezar Dochev getting a sand mold ready for the sandcasting demonstrations. A little farther, there was Czech artist Petr Stacho mold making in preparation for kiln casting.

The exhibition and demonstration spaces also included a glass painting area for the children and every possible glass technique professionally exhibited in nature—installation art, flameworking, fusing, stained glass, and so much more. Even the Russian master engraver Alexandr Fokin was working on his wheel, his adult children standing next to him who were also showing in the exhibition as glass artists in their own right.

Bringing a Dream to Life

It was time to find out more about how the Festival began through the efforts of master stained glass restorers Robert Emeringer and Zaiga Baiza. I found Zaiga in the sales room where her husband Robert was busy walking around with his walkie-talkie while alternating his speech between Luxembourgish, English, German, and French. We all walked together to one of the quieter stained glass studios and locked the door to gain a smidgen of privacy in this magnetic and frenetic environment. This provided the perfect place for Robert to share how it all began for him.

“It was a long time ago when I didn’t know anything about glass and how it worked. I was 14 years old and still at school, and a friend asked if I’d like to work a little in a glass studio. In the beginning I was simply cutting float glass. As I became more experienced, the work became more specialized and I was taught how to lead. Not long after, I changed and moved jobs to work with a dedicated specialist.”

It was obvious that Robert was enjoying his reminiscing by the wistful look on his face. “This specialist was Paul Rölader, who was the most respected master in Luxembourg at that time. Rölader worked only with stained glass, painting, and restoration. I began my apprenticeship when I was 18, and I worked alone with the master. The company was focused on quality and authenticity rather than production, and it was very relaxed.

“After working for several years with the master, I became independent and discovered a groundbreaking restoration technique related to installation. My new technique retarded the condensation buildup that has spoiled so many stained glass windows in the past. The old restorers used to sandwich the stained glass in between protective glass panels. Restoration of that kind makes the glass sweat and give off gas due to the organic materials that were used in stained glass. Stopping the stained glass from breathing kills the fine paintwork.

“It is hard to know exactly what damage is done to the glass due to sweating and condensation, but when we open an old panel restored in this way, the smell can be appalling. The panels even have mushrooms growing from the lead came! Finally, the reflections on the protective glass spoil the look of the original stained glass.

“My groundbreaking technique involved installing the stained glass on the interior of the double-glazed protective unit. Once cold bonding the edge of the stained glass to the protective panel is done, the stained glass is allowed to breathe while simultaneously being protected from the elements outside. This technique extends the life of the panel by decades. I am proud of my work.”



Robert Emeringer working on the restoration of a stained glass window at the church of Marienthal, Luxembourg. Photo by Zaiga Baiza.



Sharing a Passion for Glass

Zaiga and Robert are a team. Rob has run his own stained glass business for 45 years, and Zaiga informed me with a wicked laugh that Robert was first introduced to glass in 1964, the year she was born. “I grew up in Latvia during the Soviet time, and when I came of age I attended the Art Academy of Latvia to study glass. It would be hard for someone in 2021 to imagine living in those times of the Soviet Union. Originally, I did not like stained glass. I couldn’t comprehend why someone would create a small picture and then place that picture in a window to close the view. Why? Nevertheless, I applied for glass because it was such an interesting material.

“In Latvia there was no possibility to learn sculpture. We had no blowing facilities, and we did not know *pâte de verre*. We didn’t even know fusing. What was available at that time was stained glass. Restoration is something Latvia knows very well, and they excel in it to this day.

“I had no idea what I wanted, and then I met Robert. He was visiting the Academy, and he was such an interested man about glass and such an interesting man in everything else. I decided to visit him in Luxembourg, and here I discovered ‘real’ stained glass. In Luxembourg, the glass wasn’t simply a picture

Zaiga Baiza working to restore a stained glass window destroyed during a fire at the church of Schengen, Luxembourg. Photo by Robert Emeringer.

in a window. It was a window! When you take on a restoration project, you have the entire large-scale window, and it isn't simply decorative anymore."

It was suddenly clear that Zaiga and Robert share two big passions—one for glass and the other for one another. "Working with Robert and restoring something so old was very daunting. It scared me because it was so delicate." When asked if they were replacing the glass in their restoration work she replied, "We never ever throw a piece of an old window away if it is possible to use it. Of course, if the glass is not there, then something new must be fabricated. For example, if there is only half of a portrait left from a panel, we will recreate only the half of the face that is missing and fuse the new and the old panel together. This is how restoration should be done, but we are in the minority when it comes to that level of love for the panels.

"We always endeavor to do the best we can with every project. We do not apply the same rules for each one, because every venture is different and requires original and project-specific approaches. Further, we also have to deal with previous restorations, which may not have been sensitively performed."

Restoring Liturgical Treasures

Most of Luxembourg's churches were built from the 19th century onward, since all of the country's older churches, including those from the Middle Ages, were destroyed in the many wars that have been waged in and around the country. According to Rob, he and Zaiga are presently working on a very interesting restoration of a church in Troisverge built in the 1850s.

"The church is old, but the stained glass was installed in 1932. The original panels were destroyed in World War I. There are six windows in this church, and they measure 6 meters by 2 meters each. Currently we are waiting on the ministry to perform a survey of the building, and once that is complete we can begin. When we start this project it will take a year to complete, and other than personal art projects, it is the only thing we will work on. This is how long a project takes because many of the pieces of glass are broken, and it takes time to create the appropriate replacements."

Zaiga shared what restoration of these windows, which is a rather intense process, actually involves. "We must uninstall the windows from the church and take them to the studio, then we disassemble the window taking great care to map exactly where the panes have been. It is at this point that we make our decisions about what must be done.

"Thereafter, the cleaning process is painstaking, because we do not want to damage the original panes. Every piece of glass must be cleaned with a Q-tip in water and fine soap only. We do not even dry the glass once it is cleaned for fear of rubbing away the color from the pane. Some of the glass panes are so extremely dirty that they need to be steeped in warm water for a day, although we would never do that with medieval windows. Even gently soaking extremely old glass is a processing measure that is too dangerous."

Once the panes have been cleaned and/or recreated, they are painted with a protective layer of special varnish, the double-glazed units are prepared, and finally the windows are ready to be reinstalled in the church."



Stained glass demonstrations by Inita Emame (Latvia) at the 2021 Festival. Photo by Jean-Marie Kremer.



Demonstrations for glassblowing combined with casting by Torsten Rotzsch (Germany) and Zuzana Kubelkova (Czech Republic) at the 2021 Festival. Photo by Elke Mank.



Hot glass casting demonstration by Lachezar Dochev (Bulgaria) at the 2011 Festival. Photo by Venzo Danev.

The Birth and Development of the Luxembourg Festival

Since my primary objective for coming to Luxembourg was to attend the biennale, I enquire what made them decide they wanted to organize a festival of glass. "In 2004 we took part in an exhibition with artists in the area. A year later we decided to organize our own exhibition, which was successful, since the Luxembourgish population have an appreciation for art. It was after this exhibition that we wondered why we hadn't made an exhibition that was solely glass.

"In 2006 we began what was destined to become the Luxembourg International Festival of Glass. In 2007 we organized the festival again, and that was the first time we created an exhibition catalogue. We also encouraged the exhibiting artists to give demonstrations for the public. At first, we offered only casting demonstrations. We quickly realized that we should give the festival the time and organization it needed and chose at that stage to host it every two years. In 2009 we were able to demonstrate many more techniques including glassblowing, glass painting, and cold working techniques.

"In 2011 we had more than 70 glass artists represented with three exhibitions including one in Luxembourg City. The standard of work at the LIFG is both varied, high, and eclectic. Each biennale includes artists from 20 to 30 different countries including the Ukraine, France, Estonia, Isle of Man, Australia, Canada, Belgium, America, and many, many more. In the beginning we had more artists from the west of Europe, but as the festival continues, there is now a 50/50 mix between glass artists from East and West. Along with the other countries in attendance, that makes for a really interesting display each and every year."

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Hot glass casting demonstrations
by Lachezar Dochev (Bulgaria)
at the 2015 Festival.
Photo by Julie Anne Denton.



Artwork by Robert Emeringer (Luxembourg) at the 2021 Festival.
Photo by Petr Stacho.

Volunteers darted in and out of the studio where we were conducting our interview to ask Zaiga or Robert quick yet urgent questions about festival organization, which meant our interview was coming to an end. Since my time was almost up, I inquired about their plans for the future of the biennale. Robert shared that in 2023 they will host a Jubilee, the tenth Festival, and it will be very special.

“We intend to concentrate on opening the festival to American artists, and in January 2023 we will make our call for applications. Any quality American artists who would like to know more can contact us any time to receive more details. We will concentrate heavily on the demonstration aspect of the festival, while giving our best exhibition to date.

“Looking back at the artists who have shown with us, we have been blessed to work with Scott Benefield (USA), Peter Layton (UK), Edvard Leibowitz (BE), Ed van Dijk (NL), and so many more. We are excited about the future, and we hope to see some of the readers of *Glass Art* magazine attending the event as exhibiting artists or coming to visit us to observe what a wonderfully versatile material glass can be.”

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Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flameworked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).

Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, www.Atelier315.ch, and her www.ZurichGlassSchool.com online learning platform for sculptural skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

Dr. Julie creates glass and bronze work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has also received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.

