

Playing with Space and Light

Renato Santarossa's sculptures and collages are fascinating with their deceptive spatial effects. To achieve these the artist works, among other things, with special glasses from DESAG, Delligsen

Ute Hoffmann, Mainz

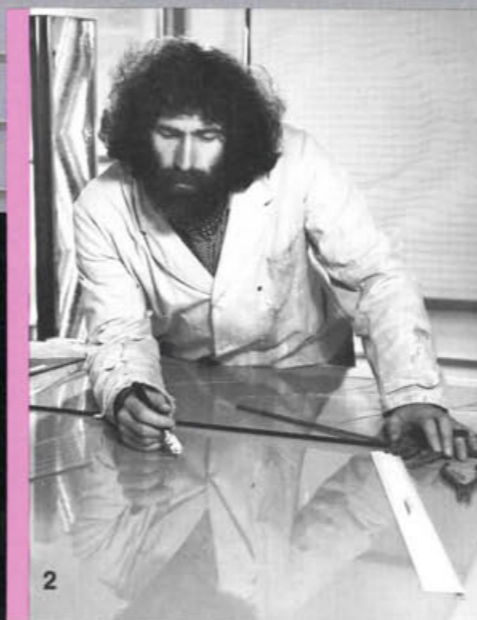
He is an Italian but has lived in Germany for a long time; he studied to be a civil engineer but for some years now has devoted himself to glass art: Renato Santarossa, born in Bolzano, now has his home and studio in Cologne.

In fact this shift to artistic activity was only a logical return to a dream of his youth which was finally realised after a diversion by way of architecture. Seven years as the manager of a German company brought him into contact with glass processing. His encounter with the material impressed him as did the many different design possibilities. He got to know many artists and architects, had long discussions with them and in doing so the desire to work with glass, but in non-traditional ways, gradually crystallized. The coloured glasses with which his work had previously brought him in contact were of no interest to him in his creative work. Renato Santarossa only uses industrial glass since what matters to him is the cut edge with its possibilities for expression, the contrasts of light and shadow. Of his work he himself says, "A glass cutter, a plate of glass – my tool and my material, you could say pencil and paper... each nick made by the glass cutter, each cut edge of the glass is a line – a line with its own transparency, light, life and expression. Handcut glass plates produce lines which go to form reliefs and structures, drawings in which the graphical is translated into the three-dimensional by the properties of the material, by the transparency and the reflexion of the space-seeking light".

Since the end of 1975 Renato Santarossa has worked as a freelance artist. He has, with some considerable success, entered numerous competitions. The most important for him personally were the 1979 National Prize which encouraged him to continue, participation in the 1983 "German Glass" Exhibition and the Medal of the Council of Europe, which was awarded him at the end of 1984. Dr. Helmut Ricke of the Düsseldorf Museum of Art wrote of this distinction: "The works for which the award was given owe their effect to calculated work with simple profiled flat glass strips. The concentration of colour and creation of rhythmic forms by graduating and overlapping and illusory creation of space by effects of per-

1 Handcut glass plates produce lines which form reliefs and structures.

2 Glass plate and glass cutter are like paper and pencil to Renato Santarossa.



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white flashed opal glass but also laminated glass and high-transparency spectacle lens blanks which likewise originate from DESAG, the Italian in Cologne composes his sculptures, collages and pictures (sizes from 20 x 20 cm to 2 x 2 m) for which there are now many interested buyers. Companies and public bodies and indeed private individuals purchase his objects which use glass not as a dividing element as with the window but are a three-dimensional statement in themselves. They play with space, create a world of illusion, conjure up optical tricks which constantly vary as the observer changes his standpoint.

Is making a statement the prime concern or the aesthetics? In response the artist says that the main thing is the idea, an idea which he can realise only with this material. But it is scarcely possible to make an out-and-out distinction and glass in particular by its very clarity could mean that the aesthetic aspect overlaps with the intellectual one.

Renato Santarossa had to first find himself the right tool. Nowadays he works, in addition to the glass-cutter, with a small hammer and hardwood pegs, small wooden wedges which he uses like chisels. "You have to know how hard you can strike, have to develop a feeling for it." Watching him, how he guides the glass-cutter freehand with fabulous sureness to then "tap off" the individual plates using the little hammer and wooden peg, you do not have the slightest doubt that he has long had this feeling in his finger tips. At first the artist used ordinary panes. He then went over to laminated glass because the individual working of both sides made special effects possible. Are there any further plans for the future? "I have always been interested in pushing on to the limits of this material. The technical limit is reached fairly quickly but then it becomes fascinating to develop your own concepts and explore new paths".

Since 1982 he has been working on the idea of combining glass with marble and this year the first works in marble will be carried out in Italy. They will be shown for the first time in 1986, at the exhibition planned at the Oldenburg Landesmuseum.

spective play a large part in Santarossa's concept of design.

This of itself, however, does not account for the fascination of Santarossa's works. Crucial to their effect is the element of play expressed in them and which moves the observer to deal with the object actively: only when you move about in front of the objects do their hidden dynamic properties reveal themselves which make the works seem akin to works of music". Does he work to a design or does he reach straight for his glass-cutter? "I start from a design. But it's only a simple sketch which still allows me freedom to design whilst working. This produces new ideas and experiments".

For a long time he experimented with how to adjust to the hardness of the glass, in order to adhere to the intended line. Has he now got the feel of the material? "Yes, about ninety percent of the time. Sometimes a sheet has too much stress - and sometimes I too am tense. White flashed opal glass is a particular problem in that respect since it has two different stresses".

DESAG white flashed opal glass is one of the types of glass which Renato Santarossa uses for his work. With it he makes very complicated angular cuts, an artistic peculiarity which he was invited to demonstrate at a Workshop in Great Britain. Using

3 Amazing three-dimensional effect of flat glass which alters seen from each new angle.

4 The artist from Bolzano now has his studio in Cologne.

5 Highly transparent spectacle lens blanks take on a dynamic quality due to the special method of cutting.