Outlaw Glass

As cannabis legalization takes root and spreads, much of the media discussion surrounding this societal sea-change has focused on the economics or the politics involved. But how will ending the War on Weed transform us culturally?

The hottest hot take seems to be “marijuana is going mainstream,” an analysis that rather snobbishly presumes this cultural exchange will be a one-way street. So to better understand what authentic underground cannabis culture has to offer, Outlaw Glass examines work from leading “functional” glass artists and traces the history of this legally grey art form through its birth, the coordinated arrests of some of its leading practitioners, and on into a new golden age of increasing acceptance, and incredibly advanced works. For just as author Michael Pollan once described black market cannabis growers as “the best gardeners of my generation,” the most exciting movement in art glass today comes from those creating high-end artifacts that happen to double as tools for getting high.

Which is really nothing new. The history of using highly decorative ceremonial objects to inhale cannabis smoke dates back at least 2,400 years. In Southern Russia, archeologists recently discovered a set of solid gold smoking devices at least that old, that tested positive for THC residue. Those intricately engraved artifacts most closely resembled what we’d now call a “bong,” and likely belonged to tribal chiefs among the Scythians – well known as being perhaps the most enthusiastic cannabis users in the ancient world. All of which shows that the deep connection marijuana smokers feel towards their pipes is not a new phenomenon.

Today, even with an avid following of collectors scooping up their work, and millions of fans on social media awaiting each new innovation and collaboration, the leading names in functional art glass don’t tend to work in solid gold. But they can afford to spend months on a single piece, in order to bring their most elaborate visions to life. And so they’re fully supported by a thriving sub rosa culture that shares as holy sacrament a plant that’s still illegal in most places. And for the most part, they’ve done it all without ever coming to the attention of the large fine art world, though the movement does appear to be following the trajectory of graffiti culture, which started literally in the streets amid serious and sustained official repression, only to break through into galleries and then put its stamp on both high art and popular culture.

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The long famous comedian would end up being the only person involved to serve any time, but many of the country’s most talented functional glass artists spent that night behind bars, stripped of all their assets and wondering how long till they walked free again. Afterword, the scene co-opted the phrase “degenerate art,” a term the Nazis once used to describe banned modes of expression, and went right back to making functional glass.

That was nearly fifteen years ago, and the predominant cultural signifiers for functional art glass are no longer hippies on a Dead tour, or a defiant battle against government censorship and oppression. Now, if you’re likely to hear anything about this scene, it’s probably some click-bait story online about how “a bong just sold for six figures.” Money certainly changes everything, but make no mistake, the roots of this movement run deep, and remain radical.

“This world is full of characters,” according to collector Simon Abrams. “Some are art school kids wholly versed in sculpture, but many others are high school dropouts who found a way to express themselves after falling in love with first weed and then glass. And they all share a creative urge to improve upon their last piece and grow as artists, whatever that means to them.”

To honor the legacy of Bob Snodgrass and showcase the incredible achievements of the generations of glass artists who’ve followed the path he first blazed, Outlaw Glass includes a collection of top-level work from leading contemporary glassblowers, plus multimedia examinations of these artists’ lives, and the sub rosa subculture that supports them.

David Bienenstock © 2017

While living in Eugene, Oregon – between Dead tours, and after his retirement from the road – he took on hundreds of eager apprentices, many of whom would go on to be brilliant innovators in their own right, pushing the movement to new heights. With the rise of the internet, some of the most talented and entrepreneurial of these next-wave lampworkers and glassblowers built multi-million dollar business empires selling their work to head shops and over the internet.

Until the federal government stepped in, with a boot on the throat they called Operation Pipe Dreams. On February 24, 2003, as the culmination of an elaborate and long-running undercover sting operation, hundreds of businesses and homes across America were targeted for a series of coordinated law enforcement raids. Fifty-five people were arrested for crimes related to the sale of “drug paraphernalia,” including comedian Tommy Chong.

Pipes made during the Mystery Box Pipe Build competition held in collaboration with and at Brooklyn Glass are also featured in the exhibition. 15 people - 4 hours - 4 exact packages of just enough glass to make one pipe. Only the strong survived. Two cracked, two weren’t finished, and Dan Getz won.

See online for Outlaw Glass events: apexart.org/exhibitions/bienenstock.php

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