

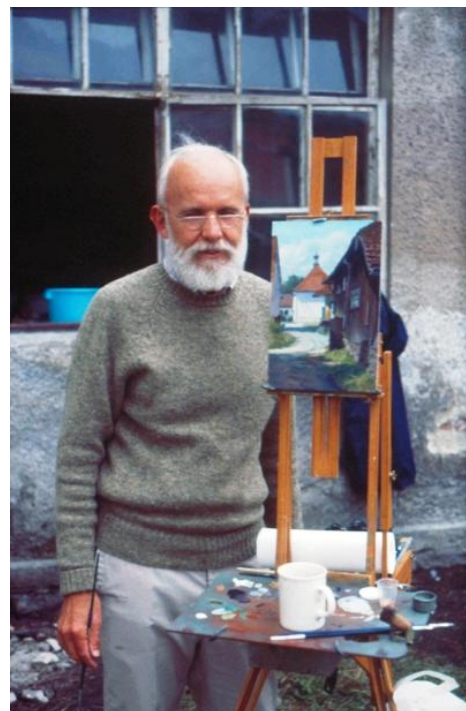


In memoriam, Thomas S. Buechner

Last Sunday afternoon news reached us that, earlier the same day, Tom Buechner had died. With his passing, we have lost a great mentor of the world of international glass and an exceptional master of painting. Frauenau and the large circle centred around Bild-Werk now lack a vital, close friend and pillar of the Academy's community.

In his Academy lectures Tom told his life story many times and illustrated it with pictures – or rather, his paintings - which reflected the stages of his life and his life experience, beginning with his childhood visits to the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art in the 1930s. There, where many years later one of his own paintings would hang, as a boy he had learned what art should be: “simply the best“. Thomas Buechner painted all his life and evolved his own art and art philosophy. He progressed from the painterly fantasies of a twelve-year-old to studying old master painting techniques in Amsterdam to become a highly-esteemed portrait and classical painter, by no means a “Sunday painter” as he, with a wink, liked to call himself.

Early on in his professional life he made his mark as a sought-after museum curator and – well before the birth of the International Studio Glass Movement – as an outstanding expert in glass. As early as 1950, as its first Director, Tom established the Corning Museum of Glass with its unique collection in the traditional glassmaking town of Corning in the North of New York State. During the 1960s he moved on to the Brooklyn Museum. In 1972, he returned to Corning, just in time to rebuild the first museum which had been overwhelmed by a catastrophic flood, as the President of the Corning Museum of Glass as well as the Chairman of the Corning Glass Works Foundation and President of Steuben Glass; furthermore, from 1976 onwards, he took part in setting up the Rockwell Museum for Western American art.



With his characteristic nonchalance, prudence, subtle irony and deep understanding of human nature, Thomas S Buechner, dealt with these multiple roles and responsibilities in a virtuoso manner. He brought together the worlds of art, museums, teaching and industry, just as he combined his natural ingrained American freethinking with European cultural tradition.

From 1988 he would leave these worlds behind every year for two summer months to teach “classical painting” in Bild-Werk Frauenau. Tom Buechner loved Frauenau. He participated actively in Frauenau village activities and the diverse events centred around the international Academy. However Tom was really himself standing in front of an easel in his studio upstairs in Tom's Hall, a

paint brush in his hand and a cigar in his mouth, with background classical music, if he wasn't to be seen painting scenes in front of the Frauenau glass-works or in the great, hilly, Bavarian Forest landscape, or entertaining guests at his never-changing seat in the Eibl-Brunner hotel dining room. His friendship with Frauenau, and especially with Erwin and Gretel Eisch, reaches back to the early 1970s, when Thomas Buechner as "the" museum man of the developing International Studio Glass Movement found his way for the first time to the Bavarian Forest on one of his countless trips to Europe. In 1976 he even sent his son Matthew, no more than 18 years old, to Frauenau to experience a demanding year as a glass-blowing apprentice at the furnace of the Eisch glass factory. When in 1988 the first Bild-Werk Academy sessions were being planned, he agreed spontaneously to teach two painting classes and moved into one of two barely decorated work-rooms in the derelict pot-making workshop of the former Gistl glass works – which Erwin Eisch renamed after his friend as "Tom's Hall".



From the very beginning, Tom Buechner's view was the necessary counterweight to Erwin's painting, with the latter's orientation towards the spontaneous exploration of fantasy and inner pictures. Tom vehemently rejected the search of modern art for what is "new", which he took as a fiction of the world of the consumer. He argued against circulating around one's own ego, proposing for the painter

a dialogue with the outside world and an exploration seeking understanding of what is there (which still remained shaped by the painter's attitude – up to the jealous red peppers and arrogant garlics in Tom's still-lives). He warned empathically of the loss of content following the loss of genuine craft skill. He criticised many a Bild-Werk course exhibition cobbled-up from short-living ideas as an elusive "soup of creativity". But, at the same time, he maintained an appreciation of improvisation, spontaneity and humour and possibly loved Bild-Werk precisely for that. Bild-Werk Frauenau grew from this tension, of the incongruity of viewpoints and the concurrent, unconditional respect for each other, and with this from half way across the world, Thomas Buechner stimulated and directed countless courses in glass and art as well as exhibitions, juries, books and discussions and many more. Tom nurtured and encouraged his students far beyond learning about classical "Sunday painting". There were hundreds of students, including many glass artists, who in his courses held through 18 summers reported at 9 a.m. for his morning lessons; they painted, learned as well as chafed at his rules, from his "simply the best" up to "do good work" that concluded every academy lecture during the first Bild-Werk decade.

In 2006 Bild-Werk Frauenau celebrated the splendid renovation and extension of Tom's Hall alongside Tom's 80th birthday. The following autumn he decided for age reasons, but also out of consideration for his wife Mary, not to return to Frauenau. Nevertheless, the links between Tom and his many students and friends, and the dialogue between Corning and Frauenau persisted. One year ago Erwin Eisch, together with Mark Angus and Sissi Zizlsperger went to Corning on the occasion of

the annual Glass Art Society conference. Here they met Tom Buechner, as divertingly engaging as ever. However the visit already felt like a farewell.

In the middle of May this year in a cheerful, lengthy, telephone call with Tom, Erwin and Gretel Eisch exchanged news from both sides. Then, on June 8th, his long-standing student Christine Herr-Tropp learned in a phone call about an unexpected diagnosis, which only gave him a week to live. At this point another Bild-Werk colleague, Ben Schasfoort from the Netherlands, happened to be with him. Ben had originally come to Corning for a painting week with him and instead kept Tom company for his last days until his three children, Bohn, Tom and Matthew, arrived.



Thomas S. Buechner died on June 13th. He had taken control of his dying in the same conscious, serious and humorous way as of he did with his life. His death comes as a great shock to his friends across the continents, but it has also reinforced an intense sense of togetherness. We shall keep Tom's work and inspiration alive and follow where he led.

Katharina Eisch-Angus, Frauenau, 16th June 2010

Translation by Katherine Coleman, London