

Havel, Miroslav ('Paddy')

by Terry Clavin

Havel, Miroslav ('Paddy') (1922–2008), glass designer and craftsman, was born in Držkov, Czechoslovakia, on 26 May 1922, the only child of Frantisek Havel, costume jewellery manufacturer of Držkov, and his wife Anna (née Klubelova). He had a prosperous, somewhat sheltered, upbringing in the small village of Držkov and enjoyed winter sports. In 1938 he entered the glass academy at Železný Brod, winning a scholarship as an engraver. Graduating in summer 1940, he worked for a year as a cutter in a glass shop in Malá Skála before studying in the Academy of Art and Industrial Design in Prague. His studies were interrupted in 1944 when the German authorities conscripted him to work in a coalmine, and the shock effect of an explosion there permanently damaged his right ear.

In 1945 he began a one-year internship at a glass factory in Světlá nad Sázavou. The factory's owner, Karel (Charles) Bašák (qv), fled communist-dominated Czechoslovakia for Ireland in mid 1946 and convinced the guileless Havel to join him in a slyly worded letter suggesting that he was running a glassworks at Waterford and that Ireland had a warm climate. Havel left on 28 July 1947 expecting to be away for three months. On arrival, he found Bašák working from a shed outside Waterford at Ballytruckle, the factory not yet built, and that he was its first employee.

Intrigued nonetheless by Bašák's plan for reviving Waterford's glassmaking tradition and exploiting the fame of an earlier Waterford glass factory (1783–1851) among wealthy Irish-Americans, Havel prolonged his visit that autumn and in early 1948 regularly visited the National Museum in Dublin to sketch the antique Waterford glass pieces held there. Captivated by their exceptional shine and the depth and precision of the cuts, he delved into Ireland's art and design heritage, examining Irish glass made in Belfast, Cork and Dublin. When the communists seized power in Prague in February 1948, he decided against going home and as a result was barred from Czechoslovakia until 1973. He did not see his parents until the 1960s, when they were permitted to visit him separately, and never saw his sweetheart and prospective wife Růžena Štolfová again.

Meanwhile, the Waterford Glass factory had begun production in late 1947 making beer glasses, but needed to develop glass melting and blowing capabilities and a cadre of craftsmen. Bašák and Havel toured the continent inspecting factories and hiring experienced Czech and German glassworkers displaced by war. Havel trained the Irish apprentices and from 1948 taught part-time in a glassmaking course in the City of Waterford VEC, allowing him to spot promising youngsters.

Owing to his bad hearing, Havel struggled to learn English, always speaking it ungrammatically and with a heavy accent. Seeking integration by other means, he

converted to Roman catholicism in 1949, having been a non-practising member of the Czechoslovak Church. The confirming bishop blanched at pronouncing the Czech saint's name chosen by Havel and convinced him to take Patrick as his confirmation name instead; friends and colleagues called him 'Paddy' thereafter.

Havel was the factory's designer and engraver, but he could also blow, cut, paint, sculpt and polish glass, facilitating his grappling with every aspect of production. Frantic improvisations failed to compensate for the primitive operating conditions, and in 1950 Ba#ík was forced to sell his company to the Irish Glass Bottle Company owned by Joseph McGrath (qv). The new management led by Noel Griffin sidelined Ba#ík, and Havel feared dismissal given the friction between the Irish and foreign workers.

Instead, Griffin worked closely with Havel in putting production on a firm footing, as McGrath's Irish Sweepstake fortune enabled Waterford Glass to move to improved facilities at Johnstown in 1951. Trained Irish workers gradually replaced the foreign masters, but Havel was among the handful that were retained; he gained Irish citizenship in May 1958. A year earlier he had married a local woman, Betty Storey, living with her in Grange Lawn, Waterford; they had three sons and three daughters.

At first, Havel stipulated extensive cutting to hide defects in the blown glass while yearning to experiment with blank spaces. Such starkness required quality crystal (i.e., heavy translucent glass), and in time the Waterford factory realised Havel's vision of making crystal that was much denser than that of its competitors, the added difficulty of such production being compensated for by a peerless clarity and radiance. Anticipating this, he embarked on his most creative and intense period of work during 1952–3, developing hundreds of designs.

While the National Museum drawings provided a start, the minute embellishments of the antique Waterford pieces blocked rather than admitted light and required a labour intensity that was not feasible. The demands of commercial production and the initial limitations of both the factory and its workers meant he thought in rigorously practical terms, ensuring that his designs were easy to manufacture uniformly. This simplification by necessity helped him reinterpret Waterford glass for the contemporary aesthetic, which dictated plainer, more practical manufactures.

Influenced by trends towards varying shape, size and thickness in lieu of decoration, he still wanted to evoke a more ostentatious age, believing in the appeal of a sparkle such that can only be produced by deep but subtle cutting. He used wedge cuts, which created prisms for intensifying the reflection, and obsessively honed the process whereby the crystal is given its finishing gloss through being dipped in acid and polished. He appropriated traditional Waterford motifs, most typically the diamond pattern, and his intricate wedge cuts were concentrated in the thicker lower part of the glass bowl, being gracefully offset higher up with broad flat cuts.

Once Waterford Glass could do justice to Havel's sketches, the company made spectacular inroads in the USA from 1960, quickly dominating the premium glassware market. Wine was becoming fashionable in America, mainly for aspirational purposes, and Waterford's 'old world' mystique caught this mood; conversely, little headway was made in Europe, where glassware design was valued not for its lustre, but for suiting form and shape to the drinking experience. In 1965, five of Havel's designs were among the ten top-selling crystal patterns in the USA, with the list headed by his Lismore suite, long the world's best-selling stemware pattern, a combination of perpendicular cuts extending upwards from a closely cut starburst pattern.

American success transformed Waterford Glass into a mass-production operation, especially once it moved in 1967 to Kilbarry, where the world's largest crystal glass-making premises hosted nearly 3,000 workers in the late 1970s. Havel worked from a roof-level studio, but appeared regularly on the factory floor, intervening wherever he thought fit. This practice became unacceptable to the unions who eventually banished him upstairs, to his annoyance. Yet the workers respected him as a fellow craftsman, and his artistic temperament was as likely to be provoked by managerial officiousness as by union obstreperousness. Moreover, he supported the unions' opposition to mechanisation, regarding handmade crystal as intrinsically superior.

With volume rising to meet American demand, the more complex patterns were dropped, and he extended the scope of his existing suites with some comprising 120 different pieces. Latterly, his design role merely involved tweaking existing templates, and no new patterns were introduced in 1972–82. Havel would have preferred a smaller operation focused on exquisite commissions, but he found a fulfilling outlet in producing a variety of collector's pieces.

The first major international commission came in 1965 for sixteen chandeliers to be hung in the central nave of Westminster Abbey, after which he churned out giant chandeliers and crystal sports trophies, and made pieces for world leaders, including paperweights in the shape of St Patrick's Bell for popes Paul VI and John Paul II. His most cherished and technically challenging commission was when he designed and sculpted a scale crystal replica of the Statute of Liberty, which was presented to US President Ronald Reagan in 1986.

Havel was so closely associated with the success of Waterford Crystal (as restyled) that during 1982–7 he regularly toured North American stores specialising in its products. By then, however, his compromise between bygone extravagance and modernist functionality was being surpassed, and his stemware fell from favour in America, criticised for overwrought designs and impractical heaviness. In 1987 he accepted the retirement terms offered in the financial restructuring of Waterford Crystal, which, however, deprived the operation of too many experienced workers. As a result, he and others were rehired, and he did not retire definitively until 1990.

He kept busy, and in 2001 the Smyth company in America, which employed his youngest son, Mirek, as an engraver, launched a private label called the Miroslav Havel Collection based on designs he made while in retirement. In 2005 another son, Brian, published a biography, *Maestro of crystal*. Havel died in his home in Waterford on 5 September 2008 and was buried in St Mary's cemetery, Ballygunner.

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*Waterford Crystal* (1968); *Ir. Times*, 9 Mar. 1970; 7 May 2005; 20 Sept. 2008; Noel Griffin, 'Some memories of Ballytruckle', *Waterford Glass Newsletter*, i, no. 4 (Christmas 1976), 5; *Ir. Independent*, 1 Jan. 1973; Ida Grehan, *Waterford: an Irish art* (1981); *Irish Business*, 19 May 1983; *Business Week*, 24 Dec. 1983; Sean Brophy, *The strategic management of Irish enterprise 1934–1984: case studies from leading Irish companies* (1985); Redmond O'Donoghue, 'Success story of Waterford Crystal', *Waterford Glass Newsletter*, xiii, no. 1 (Dec. 1988), 13–15; Emmet O'Connor, *A labour history of Waterford* (1989); *Munster Express*, 13 Apr. 1990; 19 July 1991; 12, 19 Sept. 2008; Thomas Garavan, *Cases in Irish business strategy and policy* (1996); Edward Cahill, *Corporate financial crisis in Ireland* (1997); Mairead Dunlevy, 'Designer extraordinary: Miroslav Havel and the birth of modern Waterford Glass', *Irish Arts Review*, xiii (1997), 152–67; *Ireland of the welcomes* (July–Aug. 2002); Brian Havel, *Maestro of crystal* (2005); John M. Hearne, *Waterford Central Technical Institute 1906–2006: a history* (2006); *Daily Telegraph*, 24 Sept. 2008; *NY Times*, 26 Sept. 2008; *Washington Post*, 27 Sept. 2008; Tina Hunt and Audrey Whitty, 'The industrial design of Waterford Glass, 1947–c.1965' in John M. Hearne (ed.), *Glassmaking in Ireland* (2010)