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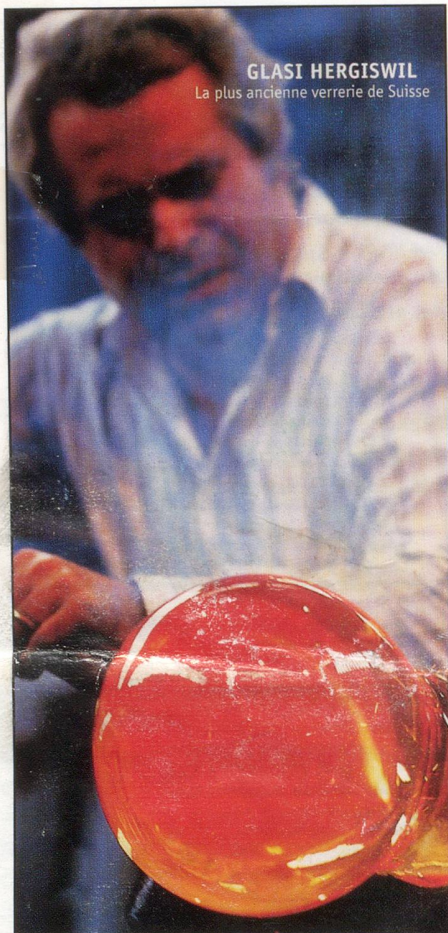
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The history of glass making in Switzerland becomes transparent during a visit to Hergiswil

About 25 craftsmen are busily taking molten glass out of a large furnace and pouring it into moulds or blowing it into shape.

About 200,000 visitors come to the factory every year (located just south of Lucerne on the shores of Lake Lucerne) to see the designer vases and other trendy glassware being made by hand. But they also come because the factory's excellent museum, exhibitions and playground make a visit one of the most entertaining and educational family outings in central Switzerland.

The factory is unique because it is one of the few in Europe producing handmade glass that is profitable.

The owner Robert Niederer is the son of the Italian-Swiss glassware designer Roberto Niederer, who saved the factory from ruin in the 1970s, but was unable to turn a profit in his lifetime. "Before he died he said, 'look my son, you are now the big boss of the factory, but don't be afraid, one day you will earn a lot of money' and it happened as he said," remembers Niederer. He proved to be the businessman his father wasn't and capitalised on the Niederer name and came up with the idea to open the factory to visitors. What started as a museum dedicated to the life and work of his father evolved into a show highlighting the history of glassmaking and the Hergiswil glassworks. It was named by the Council of Europe as one of the most beautiful museums on the continent in 1996.

Visitors are led through a dark labyrinth, which begins in ancient Egypt and moves past dusty offices and up lopsided corridors simulating the harsh factory conditions in the 19th and early 20th century. After 20 minutes, a door opens onto the noisy viewing platform above the furnace. It becomes immediately evident that the craft of glassmaking in Hergiswil has changed little.

Quartz sand mixed with calcium and soda is melted at 1,500 degrees before being removed from the furnace. Niederer compares the molten glass to honey. "It takes two or three days before it reaches this consistency and is taken out," he says. The workers use iron blowpipes to shape the

glass or blow it into moulds. "There are always five to six people working together to make one product," he explains. "To make a normal drinking glass, for example, we need five people. A vase requires three." Beyond the viewing platform, an "archive" room displays the type of products made in Hergiswil since the factory's founding in the middle of the 19th century.

Fragile painted bottles and vials made way for a large-scale production of preserve jars during the 20th-century war years, and these in turn made way for the artistic designs of Roberto Niederer in the 1970s and 80s. Most visitors then move on to the permanent exhibition, "Phenomenal Glass".

(Article by Dale Bechtel -Swissinfo, condensed by ed.)

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