Collecting Loetz Glass
A Beginners Guide
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For the novice, the world of glass collecting, especially on eBay, is fun, fascinating and fraught with peril. Sorry, I couldn’t resist the alliteration. There are a lot of issues for the novice to consider and a potentially steep learning curve to become a smart shopper. What I want to do here is give the novice a quick start so I’m going to break this down into two fundamental questions: One, is it good? And two, is it Loetz? Let me begin this guide with a brief discussion of vintage Bohemian art glass.

Chapter 1 • Is It Good?
Bohemian Art Glass Before WWll

Bohemia was part of Austria-Hungary at the turn of the century and was a hot-bed for art glass. Some of it good, some of it bad. Some of it mediocre and some of it spectacular. The irony in this is that any particular glass maker of the time very likely made glass falling into all these categories. The best known names are Loetz, Kralik, Rindskopf and Pallme-König. All of whom produced some truly marvelous glass, and a fair bit of crap. So our first task in shopping for good, vintage Loetz art glass is first telling the good from fair from the crap. I’ll break this down to five easy topics; color, craftsmanship, condition, form and décor.
Color:

To put this as simply as possible: green is easy, anything else takes a bit more effort. That's a gross simplification so let me go into a wee bit of the science. **Colored glass** is caused by chemical impurities in the glass. Different metals, metal oxides and other compounds create different colors. Old bottles are usually green or brown because of iron oxide and copper oxide impurities naturally found in the silica used to make the glass. These compounds are also quite stable in heat. So coke bottle green and beer bottle brown are easy.

Other colors can be a bit tricky. They require first removing natural impurities in the silica to get clear glass. Then adding different impurities not ordinarily found in silica to get all the colors of the rainbow. Cobalt = deep blue; Gold = ruby red; Antimony and Lead = yellow; Chromium = emerald green. The problem using these exotic impurities is they can be unstable at high heat. If the glass gets too hot it may turn an ugly shade of beer bottle brown.

So all other things being equal, a piece with any exotic color or multiple colors, is better than a piece that's old coke bottle green. This is not to say green glass is bad, it's just one of many factors to consider in the context of the whole piece. Loetz used uranium to create a striking transparent green glass that glows vividly under an ultraviolet (UV) light. It's quite rare and would be considered a ‘good’ green.
Craftsmanship:

Creating hand blown glass is a two step process. Step one, blow up the blob of molten glass, frequently in some sort of optical mold to give the glass some initial texture, add décor elements, keep blowing and shaping the piece and then sometimes the process ends here. The piece is cut off from the blowpipe and the rim is ground and polished.

More involved pieces go through a second step. The cut off piece is attached to a pontil rod on the opposite end from the blowpipe, to what is now the pieces bottom. In the days of Loetz this was generally done with a small blob of clear molten glass. The glass master could then return the rim of the piece to the fire, aka glory hole, for more shaping, decorating and finishing. This of course results in far richer forms and rims folded, flared, pinched, ruffled, trimmed, threaded and generally more fabulous. (see images top & center right)

This extra step leaves a tell tale mark. The beautiful finished piece unfortunately has a metal rod stuck up it's ass (so to speak). Breaking the pontil rod off leaves a nasty rough spot that must be dealt with. In the Loetz days the area was ground down usually to a shallow dimple. Some glass makers left it at that but Loetz for good measure polished the dimple. (see image bottom right)

This dimple is a sign that a piece has gone through the more laborious two step process. Again all things being equal, a piece with a pontil mark is
probably better simply because a lot more time and effort was spent on it.

**Condition:**

It can be tricky to judge the condition of a piece by a few low res jpegs. So here are some things to look for. If you don’t see a photo in the listing that answers these questions then ask. A seller is obliged to answer honestly. If they are vague or evasive, skip it.

Most pieces with no pontil mark will have a ground and polished rim. If this is the case look the rim over carefully. It should have a smooth, highly polished factory finish (see Kralik example on page 3). If it looks rough or has little chips around the edge it was likely recut to remove previous damage, skip it.

If the piece has a pontil mark then the rim was originally fire finished (see *Craftsmanship*). Watch out for a piece with a pontil mark and a ground rim. This is sign that the rim of the piece was probably damaged and then ground down to remove the damage. Sometimes it’s obvious, like the green rim on the left, but sometimes a damaged rim is skillfully ground down and polished. This may have been done to preserve a beautiful piece of glass for continued use. This may have been done last month or last century. How do you tell? A fire polished rim has a smooth, rounded cross section, it was after all molten glass. It’s also likely to be the thinnest glass on the piece as this finishing is last last step and gives the glass on the
rim one last stretch. If the rim is blunt and clear (ie devoid of any of the iridescent finish or other decor on the surface of the piece) watch out. If the glass at the rim seems particularly thick, watch out. The piece is probably not in original condition. Skip it.

Take a look at the example on the bottom left. It shows an original Loetz paper cut-out pattern of a vase, form 7869, from the reference works in Chapter III. Next to it is a vase recently on ebay described as having only “minor flaws” that all occurred during manufacture and a “fire polished rim”. Clearly this vase has been cut down to remove damage. The seller in this case is at best naive and at worst committing outright fraud.

These pieces may be more than a century old. Expect an appropriate amount of wear on the bottom. This is normal, but if the bottom is shiny like it was new out of the box then watch out. It has probably had the bottom ground down to remove chips. Skip it.

Many beautiful Loetz decors use threading; **Formosa, Chiné, Aeolus, Ausführung 166**. Ask if there are any bits of threading missing. This is especially important in decors like Ausführung 166 were the threading is very uniform and controlled,

**Form:**

I’ve saved the two most important and the most subjective criteria for last. The ‘goodness’ of any particular form is subjective, but in a market of
collectibles some peoples subjective opinions matter more than others. If you want to see what forms are considered the most desirable by the ‘experts’ look at museum collections or reference works curated by museum leads (see Chapter III, Reference Works). You’ll learn what the ‘experts’ think is good. This is important if you expect to ever resell your pieces. If you are buying something beautiful, purely for your own enjoyment then expert tastes be damned. Buy forms you like.

Here’s an example. Many of the popular forms from Loetz were produced with variations to the rim. You can often find the same basic form with a plain rim or a ruffled rim. You may like the ruffled rim, I certainly do, but the ‘experts’ today generally turn their noses up at this variation. They prefer the purer expression of the designers original concept. Of two pieces otherwise identical except for the ruffled rim, the plain rim version will generally be more expensive. If you like the ruffles you may be able to pick up a bargain.

Décor:

The icing on the cake. The right décor can turn a competent piece of glass into a breathtaking one. Color, finish and form must be good, but décor takes it to the next level. The best place to learn something about Loetz decors is Loetz.com. This is an invaluable online resource that documents the majority of the Loetz decors you are likely to find on eBay. Spend some quality time studying every page on this site.
Loetz decors reached their peak in the early 20th century with what were known as the Phänomen Genres. These startling and spectacular decors eclipsed even the best works of Tiffany. After exhibitions of these new decors in Vienna and München, Loetz showed them at the 1900 Paris World Exhibition. They caused a sensation. These decors were unlike anything anyone had ever seen in art glass. Decors intrinsically linked to new forms resulting in what is unquestionably some of the most beautiful and important art glass in history.

The Phänomen decors were fundamentally experimental. Some could be reproduced consistently and became hugely sought after, like the Phänomen 2/284 (commonly called Medici) and the Phänomen 6893. Others required so many steps and were so difficult to repeat consistently that they remain forever experiments, existing today on only a handful of pieces or just in a drawing. In between are dozens of gorgeous, innovative decors with not a slacker in the bunch. Buy a good piece of Phänomen and you can’t go wrong.

This is where you need to be a well studied collector. Sellers know the appeal of the mere word Phänomen and tend to throw it around like so much confetti but sometimes they are just putting lipstick on a pig. Take the time to become very familiar with all the decors on Loetz.com and get your hands on some good reference books (see Chapter III) so you can get a good look at the real
McCoy before you start shopping.

Not all Loetz is Phänomen. Loetz was after all a business and wanted to appeal to the broadest range of consumer. Many Phänomen decors were time consuming, required extraordinary skill and were thus never cheap. Loetz made many other decors that were beautiful in their own right but had a very different look or had production advantages that allowed pieces to be produced in greater quantity and brought in at a lower price. These can be very attractive and desirable pieces and should be found for significantly less than the Phänomen decor pieces. Additionally many forms were made in a wide variety of decors to make a popular form available at the widest range of prices. For an introduction to Loetz decors you should visit the Loetz.com web site.

If you are trying to make an fine art investment or a resale business out of this glass you may want to stick to the Phänomen decors and the best of the other decors, but if you are buying mainly for your own enjoyment then buy what you like.

Chapter II • Is It Loetz?
Loetz & Other Vintage Makers, Old or New

This can be a tough question for a novice to answer but there are key things to look for so we’ll go through this point by point. None of these points are going to be an absolute answer to the question, so as we go through these points, imagine yourself evaluating a piece you’re watching on eBay and keep a running tally of
checks in two columns, 1) Loetz 2) not Loetz. At the end you’ll tally up the checks in each column and you should get a pretty reliable answer to the question *Is it Loetz*? Let’s start with the pontil mark.

**Pontil Mark:**

The pontil is actually a rod attached to the bottom of a blown glass piece to allow the master to return it to the fire for final shaping, decorating and finishing. It is NOT the divot on the bottom of the piece. That is the mark (or what’s left of it) where the pontil rod was attached *(see examples)*. From here on we’ll refer to this as the *pontil mark*. If you read the first chapter you already knew that but I’m guessing you skipped ahead... The pontil mark is what you will find on the bottom of any hand-blown piece that went through a two step creation process *(see chapter 1)*.

Any piece that has no pontil mark has been created with the one step process. The vast majority of Loetz glass will have a pontil mark because it’s the good stuff. It went through the extra steps to form, and finish each piece. I’ll refer to this as *fire-finished*. There are a couple of exceptions.

Exception 1: Sometimes pieces that were going to be set in mounts or rims or decorated in sterling silver were not fire-finished and so will have no pontil mark. For Loetz this practice was extremely rare. For other manufacturers such as Kralik, Rindskopf or Pallme-König it was quite common. So step one to identify the maker of a piece, if
it’s mounted, rimmed or set in silver look at the bottom for a pontil mark.

Exception 2: A few popular forms used by Loetz and other makers started with forming a flange at the bottom of the piece during the blowing.

This flange allowed the use of a special clamp to attach the pontil rod. Pieces with this flange could be fire-finished without leaving a mark.

Beyond these two exceptions it is very rare to find a loetz piece without a pontil mark. There are a few, but it’s a tricky finding best left to the true experts who have seen the notations in original Loetz factory documents indicating a form was finished with the rim cut and polished.

So you’ve found a pontil mark but is it a Loetz pontil mark? When Loetz fire-finished a piece and there was a mark from the pontil rod they generally ground out the area to a smooth, shallow divot. This divot was then polished to remove any trace of roughness left by the grinding wheel. These Loetz pontil marks are pretty easy to spot:

Now of course there are exceptions. During the heyday of the Phänomen decors I have never seen a Loetz piece that did not have a perfectly ground and polished pontil mark. Loetz worked through some difficult economic times, particularly in and after WWI. Occasionally on these later pieces you find pontil marks with some evidence of short cuts. If the bottom of a piece was quite thin they wouldn’t risk destroying it with too much grinding.
and the pontil mark may still be uneven or a bit rough or bumpy. The mark is polished but there may still be traces of the clear glass used to attach the pontil rod. I've also seen this on ball-footed pieces of this period. The ball feet required a small pontil rod for fire-finishing and sometimes a bit of the clear glass used to attach the rod oozed around a bit. Also it was difficult to get the grinding wheel in between the ball feet to do a really proper job of grinding out the pontil mark. If you see any evidence of this don't worry about it.

Other makers often left out the polishing step when they finished the pontil mark. You can see a faint roughness to the mark. If you have a piece in hand you can feel this roughness by scraping the mark with your finger nail. Some makers used what's called a “button” pontil. A neat blob of usually clear glass is put over the pontil mark to tart it up a bit. Loetz never did this.

Modern glass makers use pontil rods that snap off a bit more cleanly. Most of them don't do anything to the mark or at most just a wee bit of grinding an polishing to remove the worst of the roughness.

Form:

Loetz forms are quite well documented from surviving design drawings and profiles. These extensive records are available to collectors in a couple of sources (see Chapter III) and are an invaluable tool in identifying Loetz glass. If you've found a piece that matches a known Loetz form that's one check in the Loetz column of our tally,
but it’s not an absolute.

Vintage glass makers often all made similar forms because a shape was popular. They also copied or tweaked forms from each other that they liked. Worst of all, because the Loetz forms are so well documented, complete with scale, finish treatments and décor notations modern glass makers can and do attempt to copy them. So far the best modern copies come from a handful of glass makers in the Czech Republic, most notably Vaclav Stepanek and Igor Müller.

The Loetz forms are also being copied in China.

Decor:

The Loetz decors are the standard of achievement by which all others are measured. They were complex, innovative and sublime. They were not easy. There is some documentation on how certain effects were achieved but it’s largely a lost art. The Czechs mentioned earlier are getting close to reproducing some Loetz decors. The Chinese not so much, but they are trying very hard, and eventually will probably succeed.

The real knowledge and skill to create these decors was in the hands and minds of the Loetz glass masters and they are all long dead.

To spot a real Loetz décor get your hands on the best reference works (see Chapter ll) and if at all possible get a good look at the real thing. Join a local glass collector group. Go to a local
museum. If you’re going to Europe check out the museum page on Loetz.com and visit the Passauer Glasmuseum in Passau Germany.

Modern Copies:

The Czech glass artists, Vaclav Stepanek & Igor Müller are themselves not intending to sell forgeries. They are legitimately trying to build on the art of glass blowing by recreating and building on the techniques used by Loetz. Müller has a web site. Go here and study his pieces and decors.

Glass Studio Müller

Stepanek does not have a web site but you will find examples of his work if you google his name. Just be sure to get the spelling correct, Vaclav Stepanek or search eBay stores for Stepanek Studio. Pieces by Müller and Stepanek can be purchased brand new for a fraction of the price of a comparable, genuine Loetz piece so there is money to be made by unscrupulous sellers. The novice collector is a prime target, especially on eBay. I often see pieces made by Stepanek or Müller described as Loetz. Stepanek to his credit signs his pieces on the bottom VS/05. Müller often does not.

Regardless of the presence of a signature neither of these makers grind and polish the pontil mark the way Loetz did (see previous section on pontil marks). Even a moderately experienced collector can learn to spot the difference. Always insist on a good photo of the bottom of the piece and
examine it carefully. If you get a reply like ‘that piece is in storage and I can’t get to it before the listing ends’, ‘my camera isn’t working’ or ‘I’m not a very good photographer’ RUN.

There are some pieces out there that are out and out forgeries of Loetz. (See image top right and compare with original Loetz piece on page 5) A few of these have shown up on eBay. They have a real, documented Loetz form and attempt a Loetz décor. They try to copy the most sought after Phänomen decors. The pieces I have seen are pretty good at getting the forms right, less successful at copying the Phänomen decors. I don’t know where these are coming from.

They want to copy the Phänomen decors as these are the most collectable and expensive. They Chinese pieces look Phänomen-like but don’t seem quite right. The patterns look off and they seem to tend toward a garish all-over rainbow-colored iridescence. The forms also are simplified from the original Loetz forms. Fewer dimples, folds and pinches. The pontil mark is wrong. In the example here they’ve used a ‘button’ of clear glass to cover the mark. Loetz NEVER used button pontils (some vintage makers like Tiffany did).

Ask for better photos and if you get any fudging from the seller like ‘I’m no expert and I can’t be sure if it’s Loetz’ than it probably isn’t. Skip it.

They key to spotting these is study the real things. Get some good books. Look at lots of real pieces, then if a piece looks a bit off, trust your instinct.
Be suspicious if something seems to cheap to be true or has no bids but a low starting price and no reserve. If a piece says ‘this looks like a Phänomen décor’ with a Buy It Now price of $150 something is very wrong.

The experienced dealers and collectors are all over eBay and will be bidding on the good, real stuff. Many dealers will ‘pee’ on each others ebay sales to flag it as ‘Good’. Don’t be afraid to compete with dealers on ebay. Remember, they are probably looking for bargains to resell. They are unlikely to bid as high on a piece as a serious collector.

Unscrupulous Sellers:

Never forget these people are out there. Unscrupulous sellers will use language like ‘this looks like Loetz pieces I’ve seen in books’, ‘similar to pieces on loetz.com’, ‘just acquired from a large estate collection of an experienced glass collector’ and after dropping all the suggestions that it might be Loetz they protect themselves by saying something like ‘I really don’t know glass so you be the judge’. If you see language like that in a listing you should get a bad feeling.

One of the most perpetually annoying items listed as Loetz is this little piece called the “Teleflora vase.” After seeing this appear on eBay from different sellers, I finally learned the awful truth. This vase is sold by florists a la FTD as a freebie in a stock bouquet. The original piece is a modern glass piece like this (see image top right) perhaps
from Italy or China.

The florist version had some damage to the rim in manufacture and has been cut down. These are sold to the floral industry as factory seconds for pennies on the dollar (see image bottom right). The original piece in perfect condition can be had brand new for less than $50 so you can imagine what a cut down version of the same piece is really worth!

If you really like the piece then ask some tough questions. Ask for more photos and any other documentation. Any legitimate seller will be delighted to give you all the info you want. If the seller is reluctant to give any more info they probably know exactly what the piece they are selling is.

I frankly don’t think there are a lots of these types of sellers. I think far more common is the seller who really doesn’t know any better. They got a hold of a piece of fancy glass and they know Loetz is a good name. Ask how they determined that the piece is Loetz. Ask if you can return it for any reason if you are not satisfied.

One thing to watch out for, if a seller has their feedback (private) and/or the list of bidders is ‘User ID kept private’ that’s a strong indication the seller has something to hide. Ask them why?

Ebay old-timers like me have a long history of warning the bidders on a piece that been misrepresented by sending them ebay mail
by clicking their name in the bidders list. So unscrupulous sellers will keep this list hidden so we can’t warn the bidder.

Chapter III, Reference Works

• Lötz Bohmisches Glas, 1880-1940

This 2 Volume Set is considered to be the Loetz Bible. It was the catalog of the expositions in Düsseldorf (2/12/89 - 4/30/89), Frankfurt (5/25/89 - 7/16/89) and Prague (8/10/89 - 9/24/89). German Language only.

Band 1 contains 384 pages (9” x 11.5”) with hundreds of color photos of over 400 different Loetz pieces which were shown in the exhibition.

Band 2 contains 595 page (9” x 11.5”) with over 4000 line drawings of original Loetz designs and a wealth of information.

This is rare and long out of print but there are copies kicking around for the serious collector. Try Jeff Weller, one of the most knowledgeable and trustworthy Loetz dealers in the world.
Jeff Weller, Lötz Bohmisches Glas

In fact you would do well to buy your first piece of Loetz from Jeff. Visit his web site at:

JW Art Glass Web Site

- Loetz Bohemian Glass, 1880-1940

This is a new edition and just not a reprint of the above 2 volumes. Two thirds of the photos in this book are different from the earlier Band 1. It has a greatly expanded color decor index in the back. The text from the above book has been translated from German.

This is a large hardcover book (11 1/2” x 9 1/2”) and has approximately 336 pages and 455 color photos. Also included is a CD Rom with production line drawings from the earlier Band 2.

This new edition is widely available. You can get it from Jeff or from Amazon. It’s a fraction of the price of the rare and long out of print original edition above. If you are only going to get one book get this one.

There are many other good references out there as you begin to develop you knowledge and want to learn more. See jwartglass.com and Loetz.com for more detailed lists of reference materials, but start with Loetz Bohemian Glass, 1880-1940.