

**Saint-Gobain: A Company in the Face of History 1665-1937:
An Exhibition of Industrial Memory at the Musée d'Orsay**

Review by Didier Bondue

About ten years ago, Caroline Mathieu, chief curator of the Orsay museum initiated a series of exhibitions on the history of great French enterprises : First, in 1995 an exhibition was dedicated to Schneider-Le Creusot; then, in 2004 an exhibition was presented about the De Wendel family of Lorraine.

The fundamental role of Saint-Gobain in French manufacturing and craftsmanship provided an ideal subject for the conclusion of this trilogy: the mirror-making and glassworks' highly advanced technical development and, in particular, the connections that this industry established with architecture.

The project for setting up this exhibition was summarized as follows:

“The wealth of [the company’s] business archives, the extent of its history, the interest of its realizations, which have always fascinated artists, painters, sculptors, architects and artisans, allows the exhibition of objects of widely diverse natures: a portrait on a medallion of Louis XIV, in cast and beveled glass manufactured in 1685; large portraits of administrators (Madame Geoffrin by Nattier, on loan from Japan); paintings of major events like the visit of the Duchess of Berry; displays of technical innovations (such as Sanguine dating from the 18th century, representing the casting, models, plans and watercolors regarding the innovations introduced by the company); emblematic objects, such as the remarkable representation in spun glass, Lion et Serpent, preserved in the Museum of Technology and Scientific Culture; watercolors, wash drawings, technical plans and photographs portraying the evolution of the company and its branches, as well as its various offices in Paris.

The outstanding production of this unique enterprise should lead the visitor along a path of three hundred years of activity; from the Glass Gallery in Versailles and the re-creating of the Universal Exhibitions to the Nevada bricks of the glass house by Pierre Chareau and the pavilion of the International Exhibition in Paris of 1937.”

Given the ambitious aims of this project, the problem was to conceive an museum-exhibition meant for the broad public that could also be used by the different branches of Saint-Gobain as a means of communication among their clients.

It took three years, the last ten months of which were particularly intense, to open the exhibition on the 6th of March 2006, sponsored by the Orsay Museum and Saint-Gobain under the management of three commissioners, Caroline Mathieu, Curator of the Orsay Museum, Maurice Hamon, Director for General Public Relations of Saint-Gobain and Didier Bondue, Director of the Saint-Gobain Archives. The objective was largely fulfilled: at the end of the exhibition, on the 4th of June, we estimate that the number of visitors reached about 100.000 people.

Conceived in the surroundings of the Orsay Museum and supported by a particularly evocative setting, the exhibition will be reproduced in the subsidiary companies of the Group by the Archives. In addition, a souvenir DVD is currently being prepared for release.

Contact:

Didier Bondue

e-mail : didier.bondue@saint-gobain.com

The catalogue of the exhibition is available (€4)