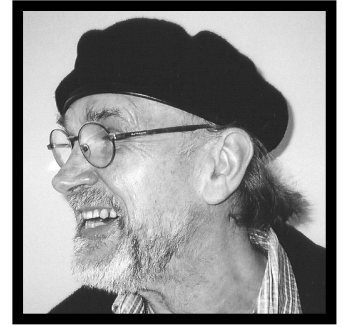
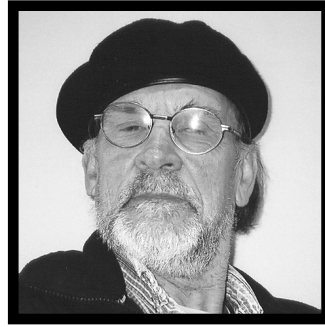


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### Glass artist and designer Bertil Vallien:

*"I think the feeling I would like to convey, the only way I can describe it is that I would like them to get the same feeling as I get when I listen to blues music."*

## Interview:

**Bertil Vallien is an ambassador for Swedish glass. He is without doubt one of the world's leading glass artists as well as one of Sweden's foremost glass designers. His majestic sculptures as well as his functional design pieces like vases, bowls and stemware have been given a prominent position in museums around the world. In Japan he has been hailed as the world's best designer. During the 80s Vallien was a teacher at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Wa, the Mecca of the glass movement and he still works closely with the Museum of Glass in Tacoma where he had a one-man show in 2003. Bertil Vallien was born in 1938. He is married to the glass designer and artist Ulrica Hydman-Vallien**

*Swedish Press: Do you come from an artistic family?*

BV: I was brought up in a working class home in Sollentuna outside Stockholm. My father was a priest and a house painter. It was not an intellectual home and there wasn't any interest for art. None of my brothers and sisters went that way. They all have very ordinary jobs. My self-esteem and security in the world as a child was very much based upon the fact that I was good at drawing and that was important with my friends. I drew horses and portraits of my friends. That was an interesting discovery, especially coming from that environment which was religious. This talent I knew I had was fun but I never considered it as useful for a job. I wanted to be a pilot, all those exciting things

as a young boy. But at some point I started taking art lessons. I was 15 or 16 then. I went to Konstfack in Stockholm. They had evening classes. Things went pretty well. Then I decided to go for it all out. I was so surprised that I was accepted as a full-time student at Konstfack. I tried sculpture and was concentrating quite a lot on clay and pottery. My family thought it was exciting. They did not have any resistance. I discovered that my talent was actually good enough to be educated in this area. I went to Konstfack for four years and graduated as the best student that year.

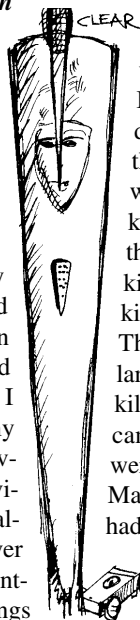
*SP: How has the US influenced your?*

BV: When I graduated from Konstfack I got a grant and with it I went to the United States. There was a request from a ceramics factory in Los Angeles to the school for me to come and work at the design department there. I thought that was fantastic. That was in 1961. I was 21 years old and I had never been further than Denmark. This job evolved in a very nice way. The idea was that I should stay for six months and I did all kinds of menial jobs. But then I lucked out. The manager was superstitious and he wanted a kiln guard to protect the firing of the kiln. And my job was to make a kiln guard each time they fired the kiln which was about twice a week. Those kiln guards became so popular that I started designing a line of kiln guards for this company that became enormously successful. They were spontaneously bent pieces of clay. Many of them were angel-like, they all had wings, kind of abstract. So the ceramics factory asked me to stay and offered me a studio of my own and I started redesigning the

whole line for this factory over a period of a year. My 40 dollars a week was raised considerably. At the same time I did my own work with my sculptures in my studio there. And I actually had a show in 1962 already and I was very well received. And then I won the Young American Award from the Museum of Art and Design in New York that had a competition and you could compete in all traditional crafts like silver, glass, ceramics, textiles. I entered two large ceramic sculptures. People laugh at this because I was not American but that award I consider very important because it gave me a connection with the galleries here who wanted my work and it was the first ticket to the art market in America.

*SP: How is Sweden different?*

I am very grateful for my connection with the United States even though I can be very critical of lots of things that are going on here. The openness and the vitality and the willingness to accept someone coming from another country, to accept success, these are all important things here. When I am teaching here, the students bend over to help me with my work and to try to comply with my ideas, to solve the problems or the assignments I am giving them. Great enthusiasm. In Sweden people always question everything, always asking me what I mean, if they really have to do something. It is good to be critical but if I come and teach for three weeks, for example, I will give you everything, why shouldn't you just take it in. In Sweden the first reaction is criticism while here, even if it is false, the first reaction is enthusiasm. Without the connections I have with the galleries here in the US I would not be able to do what I



am doing. In Sweden, especially in those days, the saying less is more really was honoured. That is the Scandinavian way of designing and living. Pure material and function, elegance. In America, it is the opposite. Too much is not enough. I brought back with me the vitality that I met in the US and the willingness to break rules and experiment, walk out on thin ice and take risks. And so many times with disasters but always to go further and continue.

**SP: Why move from ceramics to glass?**

BV: I had loved the American Studio Glass Movement and then when I came back to Sweden the glass industry was in crisis so I thought art would be its saviour. I am very satisfied with touching and material. That's why I hated to do glass to start with because I could not touch it. Sandcasting, that is an invention of my own, gave me the opportunity to actually put my fingerprint into the glass without touching the glass. The technique I came up with sandcasting has been used for centuries with iron and steel. But I was the first artist to apply it to glass. I think the difficulty dealing with a craft material like glass or silver or textile, is that you are immediately boxed into a certain field. My goal with my glass sculptures is actually to make sculptures. It is not to make decorative objects. I don't want to deal with the seductive qualities of glass, the paperweight or the reflections, the facets that are alluring to your eye and your mind, like the diamond quality. I am more interested in the fact that glass can capture light, capture stories. That I think is the big challenge for me with glass. It offers something that no other material offers. I find it my goal to actually move glass into the fine art world by not falling into the trap of using the obvious seductive qualities of glass. To me glass is not interesting in how it reflects light. I am interested in how it absorbs light.

**SP: How do you combine your two roles - the artist and the designer?**

BV: I have always accepted the role of a designer and I have taken part in the more traditional way of thinking. The more I got to know the glassblowers and the craftsmen the more confidence I got. And this also helped to developing the sandcasting method that I needed for my art. When I was done with my design work, stemware, vases and bowls, I put my other hat on, because I do consider myself having two professions. I have



*"It starts with a drawing. Sketching is a universal language. A piece of paper and a pen is for me the most important tool. That's the starting point. So I make a drawing, I try to find a concept and put it down on paper. I make the intrusions, the metaphors or symbols that are to be part of the final piece. And I place them in the order I want on paper and then they are very organized. The real work is in the preparation. Then a mold is fabricated. Then the molten glass is poured directly into this mold made of sand."*

no difficulty in separating the roles. But they kind of interact. Sometimes I work on products for production from six o'clock in the morning until 12 and then I run away into my studio and do my artwork in the afternoon. And sometimes I do my artwork solely for a couple of months. I don't find it a problem at all.

**SP: Where do you get your inspiration?**

BV: I get it from something I am reading, or something I have experienced becomes a starting point. If you walk in the woods in Småland and you find one of the old houses that has just been left there in the woods and you step to the window that is totally matted over the years by dust and you have to rub your finger on the glass and sneak in to the world in there that has contained the life of a family, the tragedies, the happiness. That is a picture that I want to be close to in my art. To peak in to something that is forever gone, hidden. I think the feeling I would like to convey, the only way I can describe it is that I would like them to get the same feeling as I get when I listen

to blues music. We are all different. Music can sometimes awaken senses and feelings, sometimes it can make you almost cry or make you happy or make you dance. If I could come close to that, I would like that.

**SP: Can you see yourself working with any other art medium in the future?**

BV: I am getting old and this is hard work and so I am starting to paint now. I always considered myself a bad painter and always liked to use my hands. But I have been doing quite a few paintings recently. Then again I hate the brush. I would prefer to use my hands. So I am using the dry pigments and rubbing them into beautiful paper, like pastels or crayons. So there is still the activity, the physical activity. I have shown some of the works, mixing them in with my sculptures.

**SP: Do you work closely with Ulrica?**

BV: No. Ulrica and I knew each other from Konstfack and we have lived together from the time I was in Los Angeles. There is a big difference in personality between my wife Ulrica and me. Ulrica is almost naive and folkloristic, loud and provocative. I am more introvert. She has a background in painting. She did a big transition when she went into glass.

**SP: There is much focus in Sweden on how financially successful you have been.**

BV: Of course both Ulrica and I have become well-off because of the fact that we have been connected with the factory and we have never accepted the salary, we have always negotiated a royalty. We are free-lancing. Both Ulrica and I work very easily with other people. We are willing to take part in the problem, in the teamwork. And that has become a payoff. I don't believe that an artist has to suffer in order to be creative. Being well-off raises some suspicious comments, whether they come from envy or sound criticism I don't know. There is that feeling that a true artist should not prostitute himself, to work with commercial stuff. That is one reason why I'm a bit suspect in the fine art world in Sweden. Because when people walk down Kungsgatan and pass gift stores they will see my name and my photograph showing production pieces which of course have no soul or struggle or artistic depth. Both Ulrica and I, and especially Ulrica has been finding it rather amusing to exaggerate that.

