



L TO R: Pincer 2, Parrot 3,  
Beads, Cerdyn, Pincer, Wooden  
Scut. Glass and mixed media.  
H (tallest) 15 ½ in.  
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



# Feathered Friends

Czech artist **Ivana Šrámková**'s birds are cast-glass symbols of personal and political freedom that she artfully pairs with weathered found objects to develop an enchanting aviary of timeless creatures with human-like personalities.

BY JOHN DRURY





**In scale and coloration,** Czech artist Ivana Šrámková's birds fly against the oversized and multi-hued approach of many U.S. glass artworks. Her creatures are sculpted into cast-glass figures of mostly muted coloration and demure proportion. There are approximately 10,000 living species of birds, yet it's rare that any in Šrámková's flock can be positively identified. Šrámková's have only the necessary, loosely rendered features—beaks, legs, crests, and wings—but each is full of personality (more human than avian). While her figures reference birds, they can be seen as anthropomorphic studies of individual personality in their highly expressive, playful qualities—cartoon sketches of human idiosyncrasies. The weathered found objects that stand in for a beak, an eye, or a crown, add to the sense that these unusual characters have some wisdom to share from their experience.

There is nothing simple about their forms, whose bumpy, dimpled surfaces pair well with the rough-hewn textures of the antique ceramic, wood, and stone found objects. It's helpful to know that birds are not Šrámková's only subjects: she also depicts barnyard animals in glass. But her four-legged beings are mostly chiseled, blocky, angular figures rendered in a single color, with

*Pecking. Glass and stone.*  
**H 4 ¾, W 5 ½, D 2 ¾ in.**  
 COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY





right angles that stand in sharp contrast to the softly rounded birds, accessorized with textured add-ons. All her feathered creatures are intimate and spirited while disarmingly toy-like.

The birds' hues echo psychological moods in their range of values from light to dark, from translucent to nearly opaque. Perched on two legs, before or after flight, the birds are messengers bearing secrets from the viewer's imagination. As Šrámková explains: "My birds are certainly friends, with many relationships between them; they are a lineup of traits: happy, worried, curious. And they look at us with amazement."

After graduating from the technically rigorous program at the Secondary School of Glassmaking in Zelezný Brod, Šrámková became a student of the legendary Stanislav Libenský (1921–2002) at the Academy of Art, Architecture and Design in Prague. Before the 1993 Velvet Revolution, Communist authorities in Czechoslovakia closely controlled the visual arts, but given the limited history of glass as a medium of sculpture, Libenský and his wife and artistic collaborator, Jaroslava Brychtová (b. 1924), were able to explore a wider range of artistic expression than their peers working in other media.

Šrámková says it's difficult to identify the most important lesson she learned from her esteemed teacher, who influenced her in countless ways. "During the six years I studied with him, we saw each other almost every day—it is impossible to choose one moment. If I had never met him, I think that I would be a different person; I would do something else, in a different way. That's how important he was to me!"

In some respects, her depictions of birds could be seen as the antithesis to the Brychtová-Libenský approach, which uses meticulous planning to achieve metaphysical interior volumes. Šrámková's capricious birds revel in the simple pleasure of their intuitive making—hand following a train of thought as a free association takes physical form.



Kohout. Glass/mixed media.  
H 13, W 12, D 4 ¾ in.  
COURTESY: HELLERY GALLERY

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Piece. **Glass/mixed media.**  
**H 5 ¼, W 4 ¼, D 2 ½ in.**  
 COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



She explains: "Even though I make sculptures and paintings that are different, thematically and process-wise, from Professor Libenský's, he understood me and knew what I was after ... He showed that he believed in me and supported me—that was his genius. My work has been always been figurative, which differentiates it from many other artists working in glass."

Yet to think of her birds as simple whimsies would be incomplete given the political history of the culture from whence they spring. Says their creator: "My birds represent freedom through their ability to fly, to overcome their own weight, to rise above the earth and soar!"

They also carry a spiritual dimension, tapping into the folktales and rituals of Czech culture and its agrarian cultural traditions. "They are my way of expressing admiration of nature as the genius creator of so many species, shapes, characters, features, qualities, and abilities of different beings."



L TO R: *Cerdyn, Parrot 3, Dish, Wooden Scut, Pincer 2.* **Glass/mixed media. H (tallest) 15 ½ in.**  
 COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



Parrot 2. Glass/mixed media.  
H 16 ¾, W 11 ¾, D 4 ¾ in.  
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



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But this is no simple misty-eyed nostalgia: “Today I am inspired by nature—because I fear for it—but also by contemporary civilization, which seems to be in a dangerous place, both on the technological and social levels,” says Šrámková. Her work reveals cognizance of the vast challenges of contemporary life, even as she seeks to mine the spontaneity, playfulness, and creativity of ancient Egyptian and African art, as well as even older forms of art from hunter-gatherer and nomadic peoples that she terms the “Fourth World.”

Šrámková’s birds exist in an avian world animated by magical found objects, objects that call to mind the short, surreal, stop-animation films of Jan Svankmajer (b. 1934). For instance, Svankmajer’s *A Game With Stones* (1965) is a dance of pebbles

**Two views of *Letec*. Glass/mixed media. H 9 ¼, W 11 ½, D 9 in.**  
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



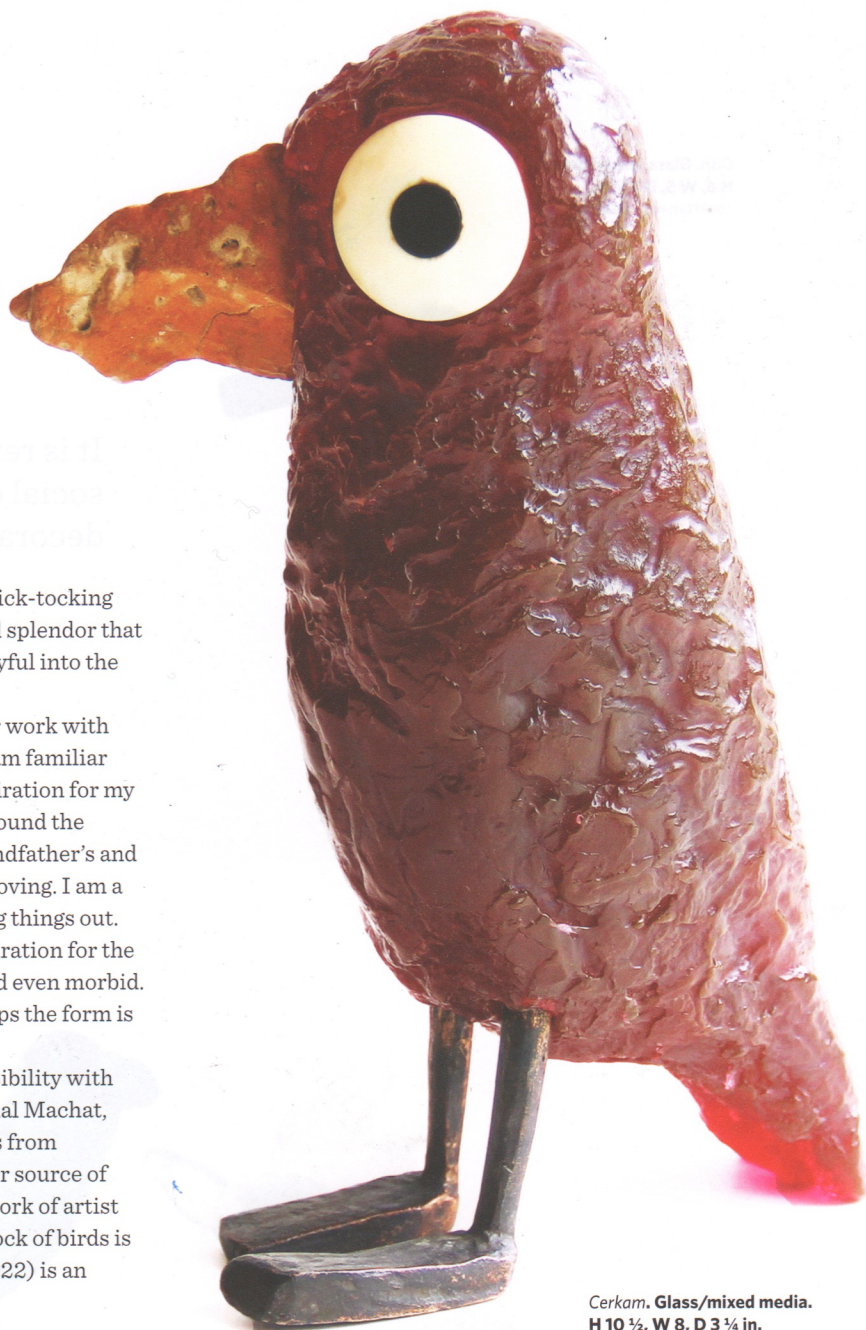


set to a windup music box and an ever-quickening, tick-tocking timepiece, a multitude of configurations in arranged splendor that escalates to an unbearable intensity, turning the playful into the anxious, the humorous into the urgent.

Šrámková is quick to draw a contrast between her work with cast-off objects and that of the Czech filmmaker. “I am familiar with Jan Svankmajer’s work, but it was not the inspiration for my work. The birds are made from small things from around the world, including old medical instruments of my grandfather’s and fragments of ebony sculptures I discovered while moving. I am a collector of old things and have a hard time throwing things out. Often the shape of the found objects is the first inspiration for the entire sculpture. Svankmajer is sometimes cruel and even morbid. My sculptures are friendly, calm, and patient. Perhaps the form is related, but the content is quite different.”

In tone, if not in material, Šrámková shares a sensibility with other artists of her generation, such as painter Michal Machat, who helped her realize a body of work in blown glass from 2002–2005. Michal’s wife, Hana Hancova, is another source of inspiration, and then there is the similarly playful work of artist Paul Klee (1879–1940). And although Šrámková’s flock of birds is less mechanical, Paul Klee’s *Twittering Machine* (1922) is an obvious influence.

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Cerkam. Glass/mixed media.  
H 10 ½, W 8, D 3 ¼ in.  
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



**Dish.** Glass/mixed media.  
**H 6, W 5, D 2 ½ in.**  
 COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



It is refreshing to see a product of social concern rise above the merely decorative and depictive.



**L TO R: Coral Crest.** Glass/mixed media. **H 6 ½, W 6 ½, D 2 ½ in.**  
**Wooden Scut.** Glass/mixed media. **H 7, W 8 ¼, D 2 ½ in.**  
 COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY



*Lightswitch. Glass/mixed media.*  
**H 7 ¼, W 5 ¾, D 2 ½ in.**  
COURTESY: HELLER GALLERY

Glass is a wondrous and versatile material. And yet it's a medium in which makers too often boast about the inconsequentialities of production—what it weighs, how long it took to make—and other technicalities devoid of conceptual weight. It is refreshing to see a product of social concern rise above the merely decorative and depictive. Ours is a racist and sexist world, enforced by political affiliation, religious belief, and a system of class favoring the wealthy. To only decorate is to abet. Šrámková leads by example, revealing that an object can be both visually engaging and a tool for change. And she does it with the aid, and in harmony with, that age-old teacher, Mother Nature. ■

Glass contributing editor JOHN DRURY is a New York City-based artist, writer, curator, and instructor. His interviews with Ivana Šrámková in this article were translated by Czech native Katya Heller, director of Heller Gallery in New York.

