



## 9 / PLEASING YOURSELF

What examples can I show where the thing made is what the maker *wants*, what pleases me, what pleases you?

## BLUE GLASSES

Here are some glasses I made for the Royal Dutch Glassworks in Holland. While working, I asked myself only what kind of glass would I honestly like. My childish spirit was perhaps running very well at the time, to get these glasses. Of course it took a lot of work to make them, sketching, then turning them in wood to test the shapes, then having someone make them in rough glass, then working with the glassmakers in Leerdam to make them just right with the blue spirals. At the end, even longer, when finally I sat, drawing and painting on them with gold enamel and placing gold leaf on the surface of the glass.

I know these glasses are likeable. Almost everyone likes them. No one says they are ugly.

To make sure you understand the special quality they have, I show one of these blue glasses here, side by side with a well-designed glass from the Royal Dutch Glassworks. The well-designed glass is conventional, elegant. But it is cold and hard, like brittle steel. It was done by one of their best designers from a generation when the kind of thing I am writing about had been forgotten, lost, altogether.

There is a story about these blue glasses. The chief glassblower was a man named Henk Verweg. When I was designing the glasses, Henk and I worked together; each time I had a suggestion, he blew a glass. The hot glass, as it came from his pipe, was put straight onto a conveyor passing through a long annealing oven to cool it down. When it came out the other end we could look at it. Hour after hour, we tried many variants, colors, modifications of shape, thickness, texture, and so on. At the end of the day, as the last glasses were going into the annealing oven, one particular glass caught my eye; but the



*An earlier prototype of my finished glasses. Christopher Alexander and Katalin Bende, blown by Dan Reilley*



*A typical drinking glass, Royal Dutch Glassworks: it is beautifully made, and utterly cold in feeling.*



*Handblown glasses designed, painted and ornamented by Christopher Alexander, blown by Henk Verweg, 1997*

last glasses were too hot to look at until the next day.

Next morning, when I came in, the very nice one, the one that went in last — I couldn't find it. I looked around. Still couldn't find it. I asked the foreman if he had seen it; he had not. He looked around for me, but it was nowhere to be seen. More people started looking. All of a sudden, Henk came up to me and took me aside to a corner where no one could hear us. "Look," he said, "please don't be angry. You know that last glass — it was after the end of our session, and I made that one just like the one before, and I made it for me, for me to take home. It happened to turn out well. After so many years blowing glasses in the factory, that is one of the first glasses I have ever deeply liked. Please don't tell anyone."

And that was that.

To go to such lengths, just to have one of these glasses for himself! You know he really liked it. I was so happy he liked the glass of course I let the matter drop. It will be no surprise

that many of the glassblowers themselves when they were making my blue glasses, came to me, one by one, and told me that they really liked them, they liked making them. I knew, from the way they expressed themselves, that nowadays they rarely blow glasses that they truly like.

So that is the outward manifestation of what I mean when I say that these glasses truly pleased me, while I was making them, truly please others, now that they are made. They please, and appeal, at a lower level, in the belly. To a small degree, they have something of that heart-stopping quality.

These glasses have something of the self in them. Because of that, Henk liked them. And because of that, they are truly likeable.

#### GREEN TEA-TRAY

I made this tray (on the next page) as part of my experiments in construction, in 1970. It was made in knot-free pine boards. When I was finished I needed to work out a way of making

it so that I really, really liked it. I could not imagine paint. Varnish seemed banal. Finally, I began to realize how wonderful it would be if it were a soft glowing green, shining. I made a French polish — shellac and linseed oil — and rubbed the oil with pure oil pigment, the best pigment I could buy. I rubbed it in and rubbed it in, all the time making it more and more likeable, more and more lovely to me.

A WINDOW IN THE GIOJA HOUSE

Randy Schmidt and I made this window in the Gioja house in Texas. We did pay special attention to it, to the formation of a design of small glazing bars which concentrated the mind, which formed the end of the room, and looked out over Lake Travis. Here I can say truthfully

that there is nothing, not one particle in the design, which was foreign to our liking. We were lucky in that. It rarely happens that liking is so pure.

THE GIOJA HOUSE, TEXAS

Here (next page) is a terrace, also on the Gioja house. This house began with a genuinely childish impulse from the Giojas: Geoffrey and Linda wanted somehow to live in a dream they had of a courtyard house — Geoffrey's connection to the Latin and Italian archetype. They designed a house which, ambiguously, had a courtyard that was both outdoors, and also the house's main living room. This ambiguity caused quite a bit of grief — what was inside, what was



*Pine tea tray with green French polish, and green oil pigment ad linseed oil, Christopher Alexander, 1972*



*Dining room window, Gioja house, Austin, Texas, Christopher Alexander, Randy Schmidt and Saul Pichardo, 1996*



*Terrace overlooking Lake Travis, Gioja House, Austin, Texas, Christopher Alexander, Randy Schmidt, and Saul Pichardo, 1996*

outside, where were security locks, how did one keep a rainstorm out, etc.

But in the end this house did, without question, come from real liking. I made my contribution, too, from real liking, in the shape of the column capitals, the view of the lake, the sultry light, and the open water.

What would it mean to make something one truly likes. How, if someone says, “I like *this*,” but what he points to is an artificial thing, not likeable at all. How is this to be seen or understood?

The answer is that the real liking comes from the whole person, it comes from a childish truthfulness, in which one does respect one’s own feeling, and does not pay homage to a theory, or to an idea.

THE PINK CLOUD

This pleasing yourself is central to the art of painting, too. I painted a picture not long ago, of a dark pink cloud that I saw by my house while returning home one night. The sky still had a trace of light in it as I parked the car by the garden, and was dominated by a huge cloud, looming, light-filled and dark at the same time.

I wrote later, to a friend, about the experience of trying to paint the cloud:

*Sunday afternoon, Nov 23. I did it, I did it. Finally I got back my soul in painting. I have just come from the studio, I had a painting in mind for two days, of a cloud I saw at night, I made a tiny colored sketch of it (in oil) about an hour ago. It*



*The Pink Cloud*, oil on canvas, 35 by 50 cm, Christopher Alexander, 1997

came out fairly good. Then I was supposed to go to the supermarket to get there before they closed. But I thought, if I don't do it now — the actual painting itself—I will lose it, not be able to do it later. So I pulled out a piece of canvas, measured the same shape as the little one, and started, I kept wondering, will I be able to do it, will I be able to do it as well. I worked and worked and worked, purple, red, pink, black, a minute touch of orange, umber, purples, deep blue purple and reddish purple, and in the middle — a dark pink cloud hovering.

When I got . . . no, I have to tell you, I worked and worked so fast. It only took about fifteen minutes to paint it. From the small sketch I knew it would work, it was just a question if I could hold it together at the larger scale.

After I got done, I just stood there sweating, all by myself in the house, I shouted out loud, I did

it, I did it, I grunted it out, I felt, for the first time in months I had painted a picture as good as my old pictures. I kept on shouting out in a low voice, I did it. I could not contain myself, it was an ecstasy. Even now, ten minutes after I finished, I am still trembling, I ran in here after finishing in the studio, to get it down on the computer.

*I really did it.*

*I am still trembling, My mouth is dry.*

To do this, to do only the simple thing that pleased me, just to do what pleased me, I had to do something that was outrageous, obviously wrong in the picture. Of course the sky was not so pink, my inner voices said.

Yet in the end it is this quality — the staring, looming, deep purple pink — which gives the picture any connection to the I that it may have.