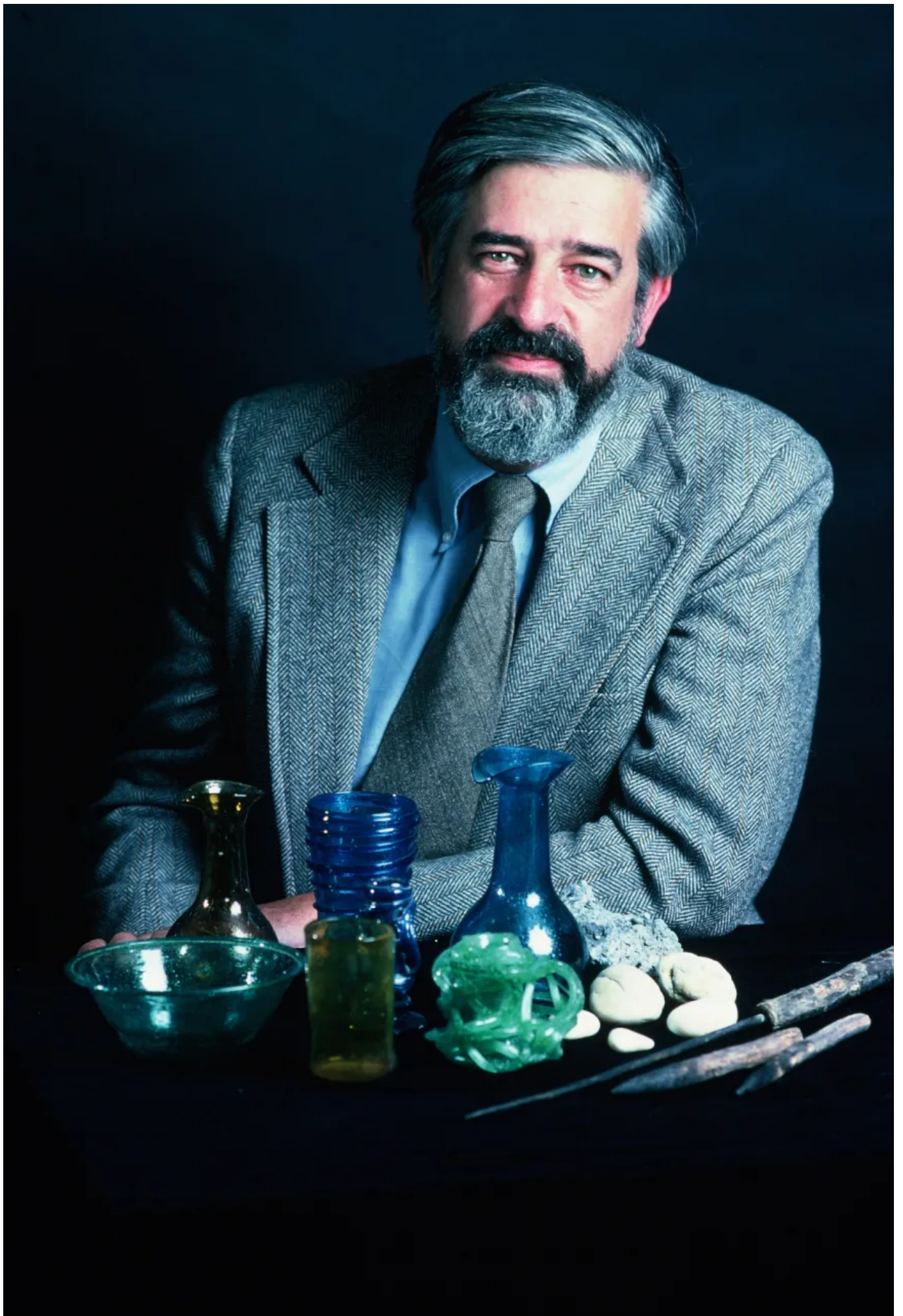


# Obituary: Robert H. Brill

Submitted by sharragrow on 25 Jun 2021

Image



By Elizabeth R. Brill and Stephen P. Koob

Dr. Robert H. Brill, research scientist emeritus at The Corning Museum of Glass, died peacefully on April 7, 2021 at his home in Corning, New York. A highly respected scientist in glass science and conservation, he researched the history of glass technology worldwide and published extensively in the fields of archaeometry and chemistry.

Born on May 7, 1929, in Irvington, New Jersey, Dr. Brill (Bob) received his B.S. in chemistry from Upsala College and his Ph.D. in physical chemistry from Rutgers University in 1954. He then taught chemistry at Upsala until accepting a position at the Corning Museum in 1960, where he spent his entire career of more than 50 years.

Bob joined the Museum to establish the Scientific Research Department, creating high respect for it quickly with publication of a 10-page cover article in *Scientific American* just months after his arrival. The article described a novel approach of applying lead-isotope analysis to samples of glass and other materials to determine when and where particular objects were made. These methods formed the foundation of much of the work of Bob's career, which expanded from when and where to how glass was made, what it was used for, and where it was traded from its beginning 3,500 years ago to modern times.

From 1972-1975, Bob served as director leading recovery efforts for the Museum and its affiliated Rakow Library after the disastrous 1972 flood. In the aftermath he published *The Corning Flood: Museum Underwater*. Also during his tenure as director, Bob hired the Museum's first conservator, Ray Errett, a Corning Glass Works employee, developing Ray's conservation education through worldwide collaboration. After these achievements, Bob felt free to step down from the directorship, returning to his preferred role as administrator of scientific research until he retired in 2011.

Through decades of international interaction, Bob served as mentor to innumerable conservation interns, conservators, conservation scientists, glass scientists, and students. He generously shared his time and expertise with them, facilitated their educational and research goals, and helped them achieve important roles in the fields of glass conservation and glass science.

During the course of his career, Bob conducted scientific research on the manufacture, trade, history, and conservation of early glasses, authoring approximately 190 publications. With his global network of colleagues, chemical analyses of almost 4,000 ancient and historical glasses were conducted by Bob using a variety of techniques. He was the first to apply lead-isotope analysis to archaeological artifacts and oxygen-isotope analysis to ancient glasses. Too numerous to mention individually, Bob's contributions to the field of conservation and scientific research critically expanded an understanding of glass manufacture and glass deterioration.

Bob participated in numerous archaeological excavations and led expeditions to document traditional glassmaking in Afghanistan and India. The study of glass found along the Silk Road and Asian glass featured heavily in his later career. His research was augmented by approximately fifty trips to fifty-two countries in Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and the Far East, where he collected samples, conducted research on local glassmaking traditions, and expanded scholarly and scientific knowledge about glass manufacture. His global work is

epitomized by his work in China where he was a distinguished scholar sponsored by the Committee on Scholarly Communication with the People's Republic of China and the China Association of Science and Technology. He lectured and examined objects throughout China in 1982, 1984, 1990, and 1995. The collaborations in China led to publication of the well-respected *Scientific Research in Early Chinese Glass*.

Bob's extensive publications include approximately 150 articles in scholarly journals and symposia proceedings, mostly on subjects related to ancient glass, lead-isotope research, early glass technology, and glass conservation.

His largest work is the *Chemical Analyses of Early Glasses*, vols. 1, 2, & 3, The Corning Museum of Glass, 1999 and 2012. He also directed a field expedition, wrote the storyline and narration script for [\*The Glassmakers of Herat\*](#), an award-winning 30-minute film made with Elliott Erwitt documenting the glassmaking process in a one-room factory in Afghanistan (1977). This film was shown on public television and at the Museum for many years and can still be seen on YouTube. His published articles on "crizzling", a deterioration phenomenon in glasses primarily caused by an imbalance in chemical composition, were seminal in the fields of glass study and glass conservation.

Bob was honored with many distinguished awards, including the American Chemical Society's Eugene C. Sullivan Award in 1987 and the Archaeological Institute of America Pomerance Award for Scientific Contributions to Archaeology in 1990. In 1982, he founded the Technical Committee 17 for the International Commission on Glass (ICG) and served on its leadership for 40 years. He also received the William E.S. Turner Award in 2004 from the ICG for his lifetime contributions. Bob received Honorary Membership in 2008 from the American Institute for Conservation (AIC) and Honorary Fellowship in 2016 from the International Institute for Conservation of Historic and Artistic Works. He was a founding member of AIC. Other awards include Quantum Society Award for work in Physics, Upsala College, 1951; Honorary Chairman of the American Technical Committee of the Corpus Vitrearum, 1986; Founding Member of the Blair Society, 1992; Fellow of the American Ceramic Society, 1996; and Samuel R. Scholes Lecturer at Alfred University, 1999.

The AIA Pomerance Award summed up his career:

"Robert H. Brill has spent an enviable life as a productive scientist and administrator. He has been a pioneer in the application of many scientific techniques to the study and understanding of artifacts and the technologies behind their manufacture. His research, his field projects, his lectures, and his impact have extended throughout Europe, the Middle East, Africa, Central Asia, and the Far East."

After he retired, Bob continued to provide generous and extensive support to the conservation field through his contacts, communications, and good will. His non-professional interests included wildlife photography, ornithology, early exploration, and the building of miniature mouse-themed dioramas.

Bob is survived by his wife, Margaret R. Brill, professor emerita of art history and humanities, Corning Community College; his daughter, Elizabeth Rose Brill, a glass artist and marine research assistant; and three cats.

Those wishing to express their wishes to Bob's family can find information at:

<https://tinyurl.com/brillmemorial>

(Read the memorial in the June-July 2021 "News in Conservation" Issue 84, p. 30-31)

"Glassmakers of Herat" film (1979) © Corning Museum of Glass. Original link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMYE83DJU4Q&t=474s>. Visit the CMOG Youtube channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCAMsTmQTOPbSfXs6QIDgGXg> and you can learn more about the film on the CMOG website [HERE](#).