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Artist sees the light through his work

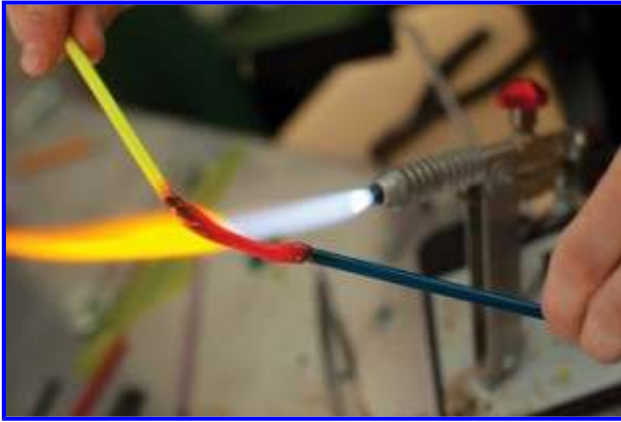
May 10, 2011 at 4:44 pm by Rebecca Haynes



By Abby Luby

Michael Skrtic gingerly holds a thin indigo strand of glass over a small torch. The flame reflects off the sunglasses shielding his hazel-colored eyes. Immersed in the heat, the fiery glass twists and turns as in a dance, arching into organic molten globules. When he sees a shape he likes, Skrtic gently releases the newly formed glass to cool and then starts melting another. Each shape informs Skrtic of how it will place in a completed piece.

“I like to make all the different components when I have an idea with an end piece in mind,” he says.



Skrtic is the owner of The Glass Source, one of the top glass studios in the country known for restoration and custom-designed glass. Based in Shelton, the 4,500-square-foot, brightly lit space boasts a retail showroom, gallery, work areas for custom work, classes and stained glass restoration. Working with glass is second nature to the 32-year-old Skrtic. When he was 15, he apprenticed with the then Metro Art Glass.

“I was lucky,” he says. “From that moment on, I knew what I wanted to do.” Skrtic apprenticed with Mary Pillsbury, who bought Metro Art Glass from the Kichar brothers, owners of the shop since the 1970s. At that time the studio made lamps that were sold at Tiffany House in Derby. Pillsbury changed the name to The Glass Source and ran it until she died in 1997. New owner Deborah Breither expanded the business to include commercial and restoration work on many area churches, universities and residences.

Skrtic studied fine art at the Art Institute of Philadelphia and Paier College of Art where he developed an acute sense of aesthetics and in-depth knowledge of historical glass restoration. In 2004 he became the owner of The Glass Source.

Personable and unassuming, Skrtic makes working with glass look easy, whether it’s the painstaking craft of restoration or creating a non-traditional window, stand-alone glass panel or his personal glass sculpture.



In the restoration room, Skrtic lifts the top layer of a large, arch-shaped stained glass window made in 1865 and salvaged from an old church.

Underneath is another, lighter colored sheet of glass that adds subtle hues and depth to the image. The window was in dire need of an overhaul before Skrtic’s client could display it in his home. It was a tall order, one that required historical knowledge of color and type of glass.

The window was photographed and dismantled, each pane numbered and catalogued. Colors used over a century ago are difficult to match and require delicate mixing of finely granulated, colored powdered glass. The job almost finished, Skrtic points out how the window was newly assembled. “The new lead between the panes has to be structurally sound and also look old. It has to last for at least another 100 years.”



Skrtic sees similarities between restoring stained glass and creating abstract glass sculpture or representational panels. It's like taking a puzzle apart and putting it back together, where plating, or layering of the glass, creates subtle hues and shadows, where the glass medium becomes both paint and canvas. "I always start out deconstructing as much as possible to figure out the process that will make the final piece. If there is a flower in the design I break it down to each petal."

If glass is Skrtic's muse, abstract work is his poetry. Letting loose and breaking with tradition is a process that nurtures his creativity.



"I like to fuse glass in the kilns that form and create new pieces of glass. Making modern or sculpture pieces means there are less limitations than taking a two-dimensional piece of glass, cutting it and fitting in a piece of lead."

In a newly created panel, several bright shapes punctuate the glass — textures of thick, red, geometric slats give way to disparate thin black lines, lyrical sprays and scintillating clusters. Turquoise layers float around the edges as soft, quiet puddles. The panel is energized by its translucency and the interplay between the multiple layers.

A commissioned window called *Waiting* took Skrtic over a year to complete. A close-up of an angular, upturned woman's face contrasts stark tree branches against a midnight sky brandishing a pale white moon. Although the content was original, the window used traditional, lead-lined stained glass. Skrtic also used hand-blown glass and brushed on powdered glass with lavender oil. He fired the piece in the kiln, painted it again and fired again. It was an arduous process. "I wanted the window to feel as traditional as possible. I painted and sand blasted the glass and used lead, copper and foil as well. It's about three layers thick."

Students taking workshops at The Glass Source range from those eager to make a large stained glass window right off the bat, to those who find smaller projects daunting. Skrtic reigns in the over-ambitious ones and encourages the timid. "They all see that the process is laborious and can be exhausting, mentally and physically. They learn to grind glass and apply subtle finishes. In the end they are amazed at what they have created."

Skrtic is working on a new series he hopes to display in the near future. "These pieces are different from what I normally do for customers; they are more modern art, sculptural. When people look at my work they don't ask me what it is but rather how it is made."@



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