

Flamework 2006 Part 1 -- the Artists

Conversations with Seven Artists -- a Collective Consciousness

By

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Every morning in Japan, Italy, Australia and the U.S. from coast to coast, torches are lit and flamework is created. Flameworkers everywhere pull up their chairs, open their gas torches and light up! With a burst, a red fire lights from an invisible gas and a beautiful bluish white flame slowly appears as oxygen is added.

Even though every flameworker has seen this sight a million times; he or she always takes an instant and stares into the force that brings life to ideas. As the artist slips a colored glass rod into the flame, it deepens in hue and almost magically, through gravity and surface tension, starts forming a ball. For a moment the flameworker thinks about what to make -- molten glass can become anything -- anything the world dares to imagine and a few things it can't.

No matter what time zone you live in, there is never enough time to create flamework. One hour turns into five, the only way to tell that time has passed is a stiff back and tired eyes. Time flies, the day is over so quickly, the blue flame turns back to red, and then it is gone. Gas turned off, work left to slowly cool, lights out --a quick glance back to the bench -- all is dark. Supper is cold, warm thoughts of tomorrow's work smolder.

Flameworking defies boundaries; it is truly a totally uninhibited art form. Flamework also invites the use of multi-media techniques allowing for the addition of any techniques and materials the artist can imagine.

Possibilities for Flamework: Flamework can be large or small; it can go from floor to ceiling. Artists can heat it, cool it, paint it, sandblast it, spray, luster or acid etch it. Flameworked glass can be electroplated, slumped or encased in clear crystal. Artists can add blown or pâte de verre components to their designs. The work can be hung on a wall, set on a mount or just placed on a table. It can fit on a head of a pin. Flameworkers can create multimedia art by adding found objects, frames, metal wood or even plastic components -- anything legal. Flamework can be just pure flameworked glass.

Flameworkers are limitless artists working in total freedom making innovative, exciting work. One reason that artists who create flamework are so versatile is they often come from diverse creative backgrounds, music, gardening, painting, ceramics, sculpture, and photography just to name a few. They apply their knowledge of other fields to their work and create the perfect mixture of serious design and creative innovation. Like

Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol in the 1970's, framewokers today just do their own thing to achieve original results.

The seven framewokers interviewed by e-mail for this article expressed very strong feelings about their ability to compete across all disciplines of art. The desire to have their work seen outside of glass circles and to expand interest in their work, and all framework beyond glass was evident in each view. They do not want to be separated or pigeon holed – they want to be viewed as a part of a larger artistic universe.

All framewokers use a torch to create some or all aspects of their designs. There is a growing trend towards expanding techniques beyond the torch. Artists are beginning to use the torch as just one tool among others to create art work. Multi Media frameworking may be the bridge which brings more artists into the field and expands interest beyond glass.

An art form must be accessible to develop. Fortunately, frameworking is accessible to all artists who pursue it. Unlike glass blowing, which takes a more complex expensive studio, elementary frameworking can be done in a well ventilated, fire proof area, on a card table with one torch, tweezers and a hot plate. The materials are easy to acquire by the Internet. Classes with the finest teachers are widely available. It is also possible for beginners to spend time alone experimenting with new techniques. You may innovate and discover a new way of doing things.

Tools and Techniques: Framewokers are masters of controlling subtle forms in glass and those who are very skillful can accomplish just about anything with a torch. In the early days the work was created totally using torches which come in all sizes and shapes. There are so many types of torches on the market that doing them justice would take a technical article on the subject. Many artists just use the torches they have become accustomed to.

Today artists create work using several pieces of equipment. A framework studio can have torches of all sizes, kilns; a glory hole a sandblaster and torches for metal working. Some artists begin shaping their idea in the torch, then use a glory hole for overall heat as the piece becomes larger. Others start the hot portion of their work in the torch and end it there. Artists may use a hot plate or kiln to heat and anneal frameworked parts. A kiln with controls allows the artists to know the exact temperature of the work so annealing is more accurate. Sometimes a portion of the studio is dedicated to painting, mold making and drawing potential designs. Artists add new equipment to enhance their art and create possibilities.

Framework encompasses many hot sculpting techniques. Tools such as graphite paddles, small jacks and steel pincers are used to squeeze and manipulate the glass. Tweezers and other small home made shaping tools are employed. Dental tools are often employed to create textures in the surface of the hot glass.

The torch flame itself is a shaping tool allowing the glass to flow and drip into place through careful handling. Skillful use of the torch allows for total control over fine details. Very tiny torches are available to create and attach the smallest parts perfectly. In contrast a glory hole alone can produce too much heat for a very delicate piece, and can melt away small elements. Artists may find they need several sizes of torches to keep their options open.

Material: Artists creating flamework use either soda lime, “soft” glass, or Borosilicate, “hard” glass. Artists can become just as adept with one type of glass or another. A wide selection of both color and clear glass is available today. Some individuals have even created flamework out of melted bottles. So anything goes if it works for you, again no boundaries.

The Artists: There is a great deal happening in the world of flameworking today. Flamework is a hot area. Once a field begins to push forward beyond simple forms the need arises to find a way to talk about the work in all of its richness. As a field matures and expands people want to know more about it. They are hungry for information about the art, and those who create it. A dialogue begins to take shape in the community.

To get the conversations started I conducted e-mail interviews with Ginny Ruffner and six other artists – Shane Fero, Marshall Hyde, Carmen Lozar, Robert Mickelsen, Milon Townsend and Berndt Weinmayer. It is a fine tribute to the generous spirit of all the artists, that they openly shared their views with me--Thank-you.

We begin exploring flamework with Ginny Ruffner. Ginny recreated the meaning of flameworking and opened the door to one of the most creative sustained adventures in glass today. Her work is unique. Early on Ginny shared her knowledge of flameworking by teaching the first flamework class at the Pilchuck School. Ginny also brought flameworking to public attention creating a demand for glass as a medium for fine art. Her constantly changing and evolving vision gives us something to aspire to. Her example of artistic freedom parallels that of the flame itself.

An E-mail Conversation with Ginny Ruffner

DT: What is your art background, have you experimented with any other types of art and if you have, how has that experience influenced your work?

Ginny Ruffner: MFA, drawing and painting. Being trained as a painter has obviously affected how I approach 3D work. I tend to view objects as opportunities to paint -- the more interesting the shape, the more interesting the challenge.

DT: What was your first experience with flamework what drew you in, and when did you decide to use flamework to express your own ideas?

Ruffner: My first experience with flamework was seeing a whole shop of it. I really didn't like what was done with it, but I was excited by the potential—what COULD be done with it. I wanted to see if I could use it to make my art, so I talked my way into an apprenticeship. (From 1977 to 1984 at two different companies)

DT: If you can, please contrast working with a torch against other techniques such as sculpting and painting?

Ruffner: I work with a number of materials, scales, and techniques. I use whatever I need to make what I want. I don't try and stuff all my ideas in the Cinderella's slipper of flamework, or even glass. And if I want to make something in a material or technique that I'm unfamiliar with-then I learn how to use it. Creativity requires resourcefulness. If I want to make something, I'll figure out a way to do it. I don't take 'no' for an answer-especially from myself.

DT: In the course of your flameworking career how has the public's and the art world's perceptions of flamework changed?

Ruffner: Back when I started, and dinosaurs roamed the earth, flameworking was the 'bastard stepchild' of glassblowing. Most glassblowers did not even consider it glass blowing. Perhaps that is where the biggest perceptual change has occurred. With the glassblowers.

DT: How do you think about flameworkers today, do you think they are reaching high enough to create new and innovative work the way you did? Do you feel the art has progressed, how?

Ruffner: I am always saddened when I see talented people making knick knacks and bongs. Same ole, same ole. Boring. But I'm also always excited when I see a fresh beautiful perspective on object-making. I see that happening more and more. It takes courage to try something new...

DT: How do you define flameworking? Does your definition depend on whether the heat source is a torch? Is work shaped using a glory hole still flamework in your mind?

Ruffner: I honestly don't care about strict definitions. But it does seem as if the name itself defines it. Whether you call it flameworking or torch working, it equals working with a flame or a torch.

DT: Do you consider yourself a sculptor, and if not what would you call yourself? Many flameworkers call themselves sculptors, when do flameworkers satisfy the definition of working in sculpture?

Ruffner: I am an ARTIST. Period, the end. I refuse to be limited by adjectives, media, or methods of working. I believe that one is entitled to call themselves whatever they please. Now whether or not anybody believes you is their right as well.

DT: Where would you look to find venues showing fine and innovative flamework? Do you feel there is enough scholarship on the subject to support a serious art field?

Ruffner: I think to separate flamework from any other media, whether in galleries or in the press is true self-ghetto-izing.

DT: How would you like to see the art of flameworking and glass sculpting

evolve in the future?

Ruffner: Just to continue evolving is enough for me.

DT: What is the most joyous aspect of your work, when do you get the greatest satisfaction from your work?

Ruffner: The most joy for me is in the conception. In other words-thinking it up, it's a major thrill. I also like the part when I start to paint on the piece and I find that my plan for it needs to change. Usually I need to totally rethink the surface/form marriage. I love that challenge---making the form and the surface work together to create a different meaning than either of them had alone.

DT: What are you working on at present?

Ruffner: Today, I'm working on a traveling exhibition of bronzes, a new pop-up book, and a large public commission with absolutely no glass in it.

E-mail Conversations with Flameworkers: Fero, Hyde, Lozar, Mickelsen, Townsend and Weinmayer

DT: What is your art background? Have you experimented with any other types of art and if you have, how has that experience that influenced your Flamework?

Shane Fero: I have worked in glass since I was fifteen years old as an apprentice. I also studied art history and other mediums in art on my own and still do. Academically, I studied philosophy in college. I do draw and paint somewhat and use them in my mixed-media shadow boxes. I occasionally paint canvases because I enjoy it and I think it adds another dimension to my experience and skills. I also create vitreography, printing from glass plates at Harvey Littleton's studio. I also do some hot glass, now-- always with a gaffer, but I took some classes at Penland. I once took a welding class at our community college, but I really don't use it. I used to work wood, but I don't anymore, because I am afraid of losing my fingers. I think all these elements give me a broader perspective for my flamework and I can use them in combination for other pieces in my work.

Marshall Hyde: For my BFA (1978) I studied painting, printmaking and sculpture. I earned my MFA in 1995 studying sculpture and glass. Between those years, and since, I continued to study, teach, and assist other instructors in glass and a variety of art making processes.

The result of this formal education is a grounding in art history, and strong drawing skills, which is so important that I would say that drawing = thinking (when it comes to understanding form.) Learning a variety of art making processes gives one a foundation for learning new processes, and, importantly, confidence.

Carmen Lozar: I have Masters in Fine Art from Alfred University in New York as well as being greatly influenced by my parents. My mother is a puppeteer and my father is a collector of scale model ships. Growing up in an environment rich with stories

and surrounded by delicate models has definitely influenced my work and choice of medium. I started in ceramics but was drawn to glass for the sense of movement it can bring to a sculpture.

Robert Mickelsen: I did not go to school for art. I did not complete college at all. My education has come from making a living at glass and learning as I go. I do not recommend that young people take this route... if you have an opportunity you should go to college... but one way or another you will have to get the education eventually. College is just easier than learning as you go.

I have always been able to draw competently but have little experience with other mediums. I am currently interested in metals and may try to learn welding... practical not artistic.

Milon Townsend: My visual art experience began with flameworking. Prior to that, I'd been involved in instrumental music and the theatre. One of the key things that my musical background gave to me was the ingrained understanding of the centrality of practice, discipline, and mastery of technique as a precursor to expression. Music is, I believe, one of the art forms that best understands and requires this technical mastery. It is not enough by itself, but is a fundamental building block to being able to freely communicate the ideas and images that each creative person receives and wishes to share.

I took a life class in clay sculpture as a means to better understand the human form, and quite enjoyed it. I also enjoyed the differences in physical manipulation of the medium, working with my hands directly on the clay, and having a nearly unlimited amount of time to refine the pieces. I've been able to incorporate much of the information that I learned in the sculpting class into my glass figures, and it awakened in me the understanding that I need to be able to take from any discipline and incorporate it into my glass work. Flameworking being such a relatively young art form, we are of necessity required to crossover and borrow from many related fields. I like being on this part of the curve, the leading edge. There are fewer people who can give advice and guidance, but, at the same time, we are required to pull more from within ourselves, and having no-one to tell us what can or cannot be done, we frequently try things that take us beyond the envelope of reasonability and comfort.

Berndt Weinmayer, BW: I'm a creative person. I believe you can not learn or study art - you have to have creativity in your blood.

DT: What was your first experience with flamework? What drew you in, and when did you decide to use flamework to express your ideas?

Fero: I was a teenager and I saw flameworking at tourist attractions. I moved to Florida when I was fourteen from Chicago and lived about a half mile from Bob & Marie Howell's studio/ shop. He retired and sold out to Jerry & Lee Coker within a year and that is where I started as an apprentice. I was about twenty-two when I decided I could express my ideas about philosophy, mythology, anthropology, nature, etc, into flamework. It was a revelation or an epiphany!

Hyde: My very first flameworking was in 1993 . . . I was making very small bamboo stalks to be inserted into openings cut into vessels I was blowing at the furnace.

I first began flameworking as an end in itself in the fall of 2002. I did this because without access to a furnace, or kilns for casting, I was not working much in hot glass and I was missing it very much. But I did have access to a flameworking studio that I built for my wife, Caitlin Hyde, a well-known bead maker. Largely self-taught, Caitlin is now in high demand to teach flameworking classes across the country. I realized that I had the equipment, materials and a wonderful teacher in my own home, and that if I was going to continue to work with glass that this was my best opportunity. . . .

Lozar: Although I had an excellent introduction to glass at the University of Illinois during my undergraduate work, flameworking was not touched upon. There was an unused torch sitting in the corner of the shop that I started to experiment with to create components for sculptures. Because of my interest in making small delicate narratives I was immediately drawn to torch work. After I graduated in 1999, I took a workshop at Corning Museum of Glass with Emilio Santini and was amazed at what could be done at the torch. It wasn't until this last year that I have been creating more pieces using specifically flameworking, not that I haven't wanted to, but flameworking is a difficult technique that I am just beginning to learn.

Mickelsen: I stumbled into flameworking in 1974 while walking through a shopping mall in Colorado. I saw a guy in a kiosk making glass motorcycles and was fascinated. (That guy turned out to be Don Niblack who now resides in Seattle.) I resolved to get a job with that company and learn to make glass motorcycles thinking that would be a really fun way to make money. One year later, I was making glass motorcycles (as well as a lot of other cheesy items) and although it was fun, it was not at all satisfying. After working for this company for two years I happened upon a Frabel catalog and saw for the first time the true potential for the medium. I quit my job, moved to Florida and over the next ten years learned to make the glass do what I wanted it to. This was a long, slow process because I had no one to show me how to do anything. There were no classes, books, schools, or videos at that time. Formulating my own ideas that I could adequately express in glass is the single most challenging thing I have ever had to learn to do.

Townsend: I first discovered flamework when a fellow student brought a piece of tubing up from the biology lab in high school that he had twisted in the flame. I was immediately drawn to the curvilinear flowing shape, and 'borrowed' a torch and some tubing to take home...I never stopped.

I was initially not very concerned with expression of ideas. I was entranced with the physical properties of the material and the process – fire and liquidity – and that held me over for a while. I then discovered that I could make a pretty good living doing something that I really enjoyed, and for the next 10 years or so, I experimented with many different forms and images...without even knowing it I was developing a vocabulary and arsenal of technical skills.

I didn't even really begin thinking about expressing ideas until 10 or 15 years ago. As I've grown and matured as a human being, the ideas that I choose to work with become at once more interesting and, I hope, less obvious. Having gotten a pretty good handle on how to make the work, I'm now very focused on the idea side of things. As we all observe, a film or music or painting moves us much more with the content than the form. If someone tells us how well we've made our work, we've not yet succeeded. It is my goal to have the technique become a transparent opening through which my viewers can come into contact with the ideas contained in the piece itself.

Weinmayer: After finishing a commercial schooling program in Germany I only had one aim -- no more school. I was just signing up as a gardener -- then luckily I saw the glass school in Kramsach, Austria. I decided to try flameworking because it was a very cool atmosphere. There was a coffee machine in the middle of the room and a lot of students around it. It looked inviting. Schooling is important for some individuals to find their way, but you don't have to always be the best in a regular school to have a chance to find exactly the work you are born for.

I found this out when I attended the glass school in Kramach. After some months at the glass school, I felt I liked not only the kind of school life it provided - I also enjoyed the flameworking. This was my start 17 years ago; I had become a glass fanatic. So, I'm convinced that each human has a special born talent; the problem is to recognizing this talent and have the chance to bring this talent into full bloom. I feel lucky that happened for me.

DT: How do you define flameworking? Does your definition depend on whether the heat source is a torch? Is work shaped with a glory hole still flamework in your mind?

Fero: I suppose I would define flameworking as a process using torches, but any concentrated heat can also move the glass in ways you desire. As is generally agreed, Billy Morris's work is large scale flameworking and hot glass people all over are using torches. It is pretty standard today.

Hyde: The work must be made using a torch to be called flameworking, but that isn't the sole, exclusive tool that can be used. I recently curated a museum show of flameworked glass, and I told the artists: the primary means of shaping the glass must be with a torch; having said that, the finished work can be cold worked, painted, metal plated, gold leafed, etc., and combined with any other material with glue or any mechanical means and the finished work will still be considered flameworked. And I want a glory hole!

Lozar: I generally describe flameworking as using a torch to manipulate rods and tubes of glass.

Mickelsen: This is a rather curious question. My definition would be that if the glass is being softened primarily by a flame, whatever the source, then it can be defined as flameworking. Whether or not a glory hole qualifies as a flame is open to debate, but if it were, it would lead to confusion. We define things in order to understand them and too broad a definition would not promote understanding. Therefore, in my opinion, flameworking means glass that is worked primarily in an open flame Some glassblowers who sculpt at the bench use a hand torch to spot heat while doing their broad re-heats in the glory hole. They are flameworking and furnace-working. I actually do not consider it important how the glass is heated. What is important is the final result.

Townsend: I don't think of it as being very important as to how 'flamework' is defined. I think it's much more important to make good work, and for the artist to incorporate whatever technique best suits the purpose at hand. . . if we are going to refer to something as 'flamework', then working the piece in a flame will be an important part of the process...but who really cares? Are we going to try to define it based on whether 51% of the work is done in the flame, or what? I don't think that spending a lot of time or psychic energy on that is going to do anybody much good. . . .

Weinmayer: I think a flameworker is working mainly behind a torch. We don't know the direct translation of flameworking in German. Here in Europe the glassblowers are the flameworkers and the furnace- workers are the glassmakers...

DT: What is the most joyous aspect of your work and what is it like to spend time behind the torch?

Fero: The heat melting color, the rhythms of hand manipulation, the control of breath, molten form solidifying, and the final details are so exciting. The meditative state and the musicality of it are what do it for me. The most important aspect of it all is the 'IDEA' and the evolution of that idea to it's finished form. That's what grabs me!

Hyde: I can't say what the most joyous aspect is, but here are a few of my favorite things (about flameworking): I work at home; I work with my wife next to me, while she makes her own work; we are masters of our own shop; I make mostly what I want to make; I am getting better at what I do; it is interesting and constantly challenging; and, on the odd chance that someone buys my work, I get my ego stroked and make a little money. That all sounds good to me!

Lozar: The most joyous aspect of my work is the materialization of my ideas and thoughts. Working behind the torch offers the opportunity to address a material that I love in a direct, immediate, and ever challenging way.

Mickelsen: I admit I love my work. I work almost every day and have done so for more than 30 years. I have yet to grow tired of the medium simply because there is

always something new to learn and fresh surprises to discover. I am an eternal student of glass.

Townsend: I'm excited to get up in the morning and out to the studio when I have something new to do. I get ideas in the shower, jot them down, and want to go out and immediately put them into effect. I don't always have that luxury, but I often do. I'm also able to recognize a good idea when I see one, and can't wait to make it.

I do a huge variety of different things, which is one of the reasons that I'm not insane and am still in business today. I like developing new and experimental work, creating things that I've never seen before. I also like sitting and pounding out production work that is already sold – there's something very satisfying about generating a good income from the work. I often listen to books on tape while I'm doing production work, but need to focus when making large or new work, when I listen to music.

I like making large pieces, since they require so much physical energy, and periods of waiting while the piece reheats in between steps. I am fully challenged by making large work, and although it beats me up physically, I get a lot of breaks during those days, and feel very satisfied when they come out well. Doing production work is, frankly, becoming less and less appealing, although I will do it whenever we need it, being part of the price I pay for the lifestyle that I enjoy.

I compare creating large, one of a kind sculpture to composing music, and doing production work to performing it. Given my musical background, that is a natural analogy for me, and it is important for my collectors to understand that, just as a great musician can perform the same piece of music over and over again, giving it all that he has, the same can be said for creating the same piece of glass, again and again.

Many artists denigrate production work, but I celebrate it for having supported me and my family and my lifestyle over the years, as well as for giving me the technical ability that one can acquire in no other way. Fluency, proficiency, mastery...what prices can you put on those?

Weinmayer: Every day- a new project with a little of my soul in it. In the global world, you are only a number in six billion. In the flameworking community you are unique and have a name. It feels good to work and decide what I want.

DT: Do you consider yourself a sculptor, and if not, what would you call yourself? When do flameworkers satisfy the definition of working in sculpture?

Fero: I consider myself an artist that works primarily in glass. However, some of my work is purely sculpture. The sculpture community is sometimes very conservative about its materials and processes, but who cares except for them. It is up to the artist's and their work and of course the art community in general to debate these issues. That is a healthy thing!

Hyde: Yes, I do consider myself a sculptor, whether I am working in flameworked glass or any other material. As far as what is sculpture that becomes harder to pin down. It isn't defined by the material or the scale, but by the idea and the intention,

and those criteria will always be open to acceptance or rejection by the viewer. What is art? I know it when I see it....and so does everyone else. We'll all have to live with each other's conflicting definitions.

Lozar: I consider myself an artist that works in a material and manner that is complimentary to my thought processes. Flameworking is a traditional craft based process, which like any other media has the potential to become sculpture.

Mickelsen: Susanne Frantz once told me that it is not for a craftsperson to define themselves as an artist, but rather it is up to the people who view his/her work to bestow that title upon them. I agree with her. I believe that "sculptor" is another word for "artist" and so the same concept would apply. I call myself a "craftsperson who works primarily in glass".

Townsend: I am, in fact, a sculptor. I know that in part due to the fact that I recently began working in clay as the means to create original artwork from which to make castings in lead crystal. I found a very interesting thing happening to me...I felt that I was in fact an artist, and found that the innate understandings of form and figure that I'd developed through decades of creating forms in hot glass were embedded on my internal hard drive, accessible to me regardless of the medium through which I wanted to express them.

I found it a very liberating and empowering thing to know that my artistic abilities and understanding transcended the one medium I'd been focused on for so many years.

Flameworkers satisfy the definition of working in sculpture when they produce good sculpture.

DT: If you can, please contrast working with a torch against other art techniques such as sculpting or painting?

Fero: I like to say that solid flameworking (sculpting) is like a combination of line drawing (the rods) and welding (fusing)! My surface decoration on my sculptures, blown vessels and now blown birds are all about being painterly. It's all about color, line, depth, grid, and stroke.

Hyde: Wow, this one is tough. All techniques make demands of the practitioner, and some people may find they have a particular skill or affinity for one technique over another. My problem is that I like them all (all I have tried, anyway.) I would say that the big dividing line between techniques is between 2-D (drawing, painting, printmaking, etc.) and 3-D (sculpting, blowing, casting, throwing, etc.) techniques. Since using a torch is a 3-D process, I think it is only fair to compare it to other 3-D techniques. . . . I just say that I do what I do because I love the doing, and I do many different things many different ways for many different reasons.

Lozar: Working at the torch is difficult of course because you cannot directly manipulate the material with your hands. Because of the molten glass, metal tools must

be used to shape an object. In the end, I believe, this obstacle actually contributes to the sense of movement a piece of hot worked glass can have. With flameworking one has to relinquish a little of the control that one might try to exert upon wax or clay.

Townsend: Over the past 5 years, and more recently as well, I've been spending time sculpting in clay – both organic and plastilene. One of the aspects of clay that I enjoy the most is the luxury of an unlimited amount of time to work on the piece, to refine and incorporate as many details as I'd like. Working with hot glass, we have a much shorter amount of time to work the form. We also have the requirement to continually reheat the piece, which has a tendency to melt away finely worked detail. This leads to a tendency to reduce our process to a series of moves, a kind of shorthand that offers a line that intimates more than infinite detail that illustrates.

If the artist working in glass has a fully grounded understanding of the form that he or she is creating, then this shorthand is by no means any lesser an expression of the idea or the truth that is being communicated. Simplicity is not the same as easy – I believe that it is more difficult to make a simple form that moves one as powerfully as a complex, involved form. When using simplicity of form, it is critical that any information present be exactly true to the essence of the idea or concept being offered. Anything incorrect will ruin the entire idea, as the viewer will either consciously or unconsciously immediately sense that the artist was not familiar enough with the subject to get it right.

There's also not a lot of re-working available to the hot glass artist. You either get it right, or you do it over. That all right with me, – I enjoy both methods of working. Like Sumie brush painting, where you have a brush, ink, and a piece of virgin rice paper, you don't have the luxury of making mistakes. I like that element of risk.

DT: What do you think about flameworked glass as a medium in which to create main stream sculpture?

Fero: I believe it is a medium used for mainstream sculpture. Ginny Ruffner, Anna Skibbska, Susan Plum, Robert Mickelsen, Emilio Santini, Licio Bubacco, and the other entire well known flameworkers use it in this fashion. I remember in the late 1980's someone wrote an editorial in 'Sunshine Artist's' of how terrible it was that Shane Fero won Best in Sculpture in a craft fair, with his small scale flameworked sculpture against the marbles and bronze sculptures being shown there.

Hyde: It is as legitimate as any other material. If in doubt, look at the work of Anna Skibbska, for one example, and just try to convince me that that isn't sculpture. Some people may not like it, or consider it practical, and that's OK. But flameworked glass has a legitimate seat at the table.

Lozar: I think it is entirely possible and will eventually happen but it will take a widening of the field as well as educating the public to do so.

Mickelsen: I am not sure what you mean by "main stream sculpture". I think glass makes a fine sculptural medium and flameworking is as valid a way to work the

glass as any.

Townsend: What is mainstream sculpture? Does that mean representative, figurative work? Does it mean non-representative, deconstructionist abstract work? They could both be referred to as ‘mainstream’ work.

How the work is made has very little to do with its merit. It could be argued that, since flameworking is so well suited to making figurative work, and that figurative work is regarded as a tired category no longer worthy of serious artists, that flamework is no longer worthy of serious consideration as an art form.

If, however, an artist creates abstract, conceptual objects concerned only with color, light, and form, then the work could be considered cutting edge or serious. Whether the work has flameworked has very little to do with it. This obsession with defining and justifying flameworking as a serious art form is very reminiscent of the old argument about the various merits of art vs. craft. I think it is a dead argument, and that we’ll all be better served if we engage in more productive discussions.

Weinmayer: Why not? It’s possible to make for example, a five meter sculpture with a torch.

DT: Where would you look to find venues showing fine and innovative flamework? Do you feel there is enough scholarship on the subject to support a serious art field?

Fero: Museums and galleries are showing innovative flamework. There is more scholarship on the subject than before, but if the work warrants it, the scholarship will follow. It is really about the excellence of the work, flameworking or not.

Hyde: There is no one place to go to find the cutting edge of flameworking. Galleries show what is selling, which means if it is new and exciting but hasn’t sold yet, it likely won’t get the chance. Museums show what draws crowds and funding, or what doesn’t cost them anything. “Serious” schools (i.e., colleges and universities) don’t generally teach it. Yet there are thousands of people flameworking across the country, and around the world. Much of it is not very good, but then most people by far aren’t trying to make art, or even be innovative with it. . . . As far as scholarship goes, I haven’t seen much but that doesn’t mean it isn’t out there. I’m not too concerned about scholarship when it comes to contemporary flameworking; I prefer discussion and exchange, like what you are instigating with this questionnaire. . . . I think if the “serious” flameworking community wants a venue, then it will have to create one. And I’ll be right there, helping, if not starting it myself.

Lozar: There is an annual flameworking conference at Salem Community College in New Jersey that features some of the premiere artists in the field as well as offering lectures on historical and contemporary flameworking issues. There was also a show this year at the Castellani Art Museum, featuring contemporary flameworked figures that was put together in an innovative way, curated by Marshall Hyde. I believe it is difficult to find innovative flameworked sculpture in galleries although it seems as

though every major glass gallery tends to represent one flameworker. Flameworking has such a rich historical tradition and an ever-expanding future that I believe it is inevitable that the field will continue to grow in a more sculptural direction.

Mickelsen: If flameworked glass is to be considered serious art then the same venues that are available to all artists are available to them. While there are galleries that specialize in glass it would be a mistake to restrict one's self to just those venues. I would like to see more glass exhibited in fine art galleries alongside paintings and other mediums. I do not believe there are classes you can take to tell you how exactly to do this, but the information is available. The internet is a wonderful way to obtain such information and I do it every day.

Townsend: Follow the field. Be aware of what's going on. Go to SOFA. Keep an eye on the galleries that show flamework – most glass galleries do. Follow the artists that interest you, and keep track of what they're doing and where they're showing. There are a good number of books out, currently; magazines; demonstrations at conferences; and entire conferences devoted to flamework.

It is not so big a field as to be hard to keep track of. The scholarship is coming, concomitant with the development of work worthy of scholarship. As museums and galleries host exhibitions that feature or include flamework, note is made in the catalogs that document the shows. It is a growing, burgeoning area, and I am glad to be a part of it.

Weinmayer: World Wide Web - thanks a lot. The web is the only way for me, at the "End of the world in the Alps", to see other flameworking.

DT: Do you think having an annual Flamework Review of new and innovative flamework, open to all artists, would help showcase excellence in the field and expand interest?

Fero: I am not against this, but to be accepted in the art or glass world we shouldn't set ourselves up in such an exclusionary fashion.

Hyde: I love the idea of a "Flamework Review." What can I do to help? Where do we start?

Lozar: Yes, in the same way the biennales have had a way of raising the awareness of different art forms to the public.

Mickelsen: A "Flamework Review" that is open to all artists or a "Flamework Review" that is open to all flameworkers? I would approve of the former but doubt its chance of success while I would disapprove of the latter but know that it would be very popular. Figures, eh? I simply believe that the more we isolate ourselves from the broader art community the more we undermine our collective credibility.

Townsend: It might. Depends on how it is structured, what distribution and publicity it gets, who sponsors it, and so forth. Generally, education is a good thing. It would take serious time, effort, and money – perhaps best to be sponsored /funded by one of the academic institutions to garner the serious art crowd. If it was sponsored by corporate sponsors, it would be perceived as a commercial vehicle – an inevitable and desirable by-product of any educational vehicle.

Weinmayer: No, I want to compete with all the other glass artists. Only a huge association will have the chance to be heard in the non-glass world.

DT: In the course of your flameworking career how has public and art world perceptions of flamework changed, if at all?

Fero: I think it has changed immensely with attention given by collectors, museum curators, galleries, and critics. It's really about the excellence of the work, it's there or not.

Lozar: I don't believe that the general public has been alerted to the art of flameworking besides at a carnival or fair. Although the popularity of bead making is on the rise – the complexity with which contemporary artists that use the torch is not recognized. Which is strange considering that an educational flameworking facility is much more cost effective to start and run than your average hot shop and generally speaking more accessible. Glass collectors may recognize flameworking as an integral part of the glass movement but in the larger art world a work is either good or bad, material is not necessarily an important part of that distinction. With the amount of time and energy it takes to master flameworking techniques, it becomes doubly challenging to enter the larger art community but I believe it is entirely possible.

Mickelsen: The biggest change came in the late-80 when Ginny Ruffner became famous. She took the medium to another level that had never been seen before and single-handedly changed the public perception of what flameworking was good for from carnival novelties to fine art. The rest of us have followed in her path. Being taken seriously still took many years and acceptance by the glass community as a whole took even longer. Most flameworkers today have never experienced a world where flameworkers were universally looked down upon like we were in the 70's and early 80's.

There have been many other developments since that have contributed to the acceptance and advancement of flameworking. Primary among these is the development of commercially available colored borosilicate glass, something that did not really exist before the middle 1980's. These products allowed for the complete expression of ideas in borosilicate glass in a way not possible in soft glass or blown glass. This allowed boro workers to create their own niche in the glass world that was as strong as other glass mediums.

Townsend: In the beginning of my career, I didn't associate with a group of people who either knew or cared about flameworking as flameworking. They either liked

the work or didn't like it. I think that the same is true today – it's either perceived as good work, or not. In my experience, customers, clients and collectors don't really care how something was made – was it hard or easy; cast or blown; flameworked or not; soft or hard glass – none of that really matters. Is it good work?

The group that has been hardest to win over to understanding that flameworking can be a medium for serious art is other glass artists, hot shop artists in particular. Flameworking came from a tradition of non-serious commodity/trinket oriented production work, and hot glass artists were already fighting for respect in the art world with the ball and chain of a beautiful material to haul around. They didn't need a group of carnies trying to horn in and claim some of the hard won respect that they'd eventually begun to earn from the serious art world.

I think that today these lines are beginning to be blurred. We can all point to artists that are making serious work in flamework, and museums and collectors agree. Every top level gallery today is currently or has represented one or several of the better flameworking artists that we see all around us. We owe a debt of gratitude to those who pioneered that path by making good work and not really caring what people thought. I think that's always going to be the bottom line solution to any perceived problem of work's being appreciated – we just have to follow our own vision and keep making better and better work. It's hard to argue with excellence.

DT: How would you like to see flameworked art evolving in the future? What do you see happening now to flameworked objects, either in your own work or elsewhere, that excites you the most?

Fero: I see it evolving into architectural work, more mixed-media pieces, and site installation work and I am very excited about where it may go. Although I love the 'object', I see the most innovative work moving away from it.

Hyde: . . . I cannot say how flameworking should or even could evolve. As for my own work, it changes when the idea demands it, or my skills improve (yes, please!) or through a combination of the two.

As far as what excites me: I like things that are done very well, with thought and style. And I like seeing things that are new; they don't have to be radically new, maybe just a new way of looking at a very familiar thing.

Lozar: I would love to see more universities, community colleges, and even high schools add flameworking to their art curriculum. Flameworking is an extremely versatile and immediate way to create works of art, sculptural components, and structures - the possibilities are endless and right now somewhat unexplored. I hope that as more people become familiar with the process that the field will expand and the possibilities of the material will be pushed.

Mickelsen: Flameworkers, and glass workers in general, are guilty of clinging almost desperately to their material and techniques without considering the broader possibilities. I think the best thing would be for the emphasis to be taken off the medium

and transferred to the ideas instead. Too many flameworkers (myself included) are guilty of exploiting the beauty of glass without really working on concepts. For flameworkers to be taken seriously by the broader art community they must develop their ideas. This means carefully evaluating why they work in glass and asking themselves each time they make something, "Is flameworked glass the best way to do this?" What is happening to me more and more is the answer is coming back, "no", and that is leading me to explore other mediums to use in conjunction with glass.

Townsend: I don't have a desire for flameworking to go in any particular direction...other than that artists working in it make excellent work, and keep pushing the envelope.

One concern I have is the huge influx of young artists doing flamework today. Artist is used rather loosely here, being an appellation conferred on themselves, rather than having received it from the traditional sources. Many of these young people are making work with flamework without much, if any, understanding or knowledge of what has already been done – in flamework as well as in the art world. There's a good amount of wheel re-inventing being done, often poorly done. Even if well done, the artist that 'comes up with' an idea, thinking and presenting it as new, makes themselves, and to a lesser extent, the rest of us, look foolish and uninformed.

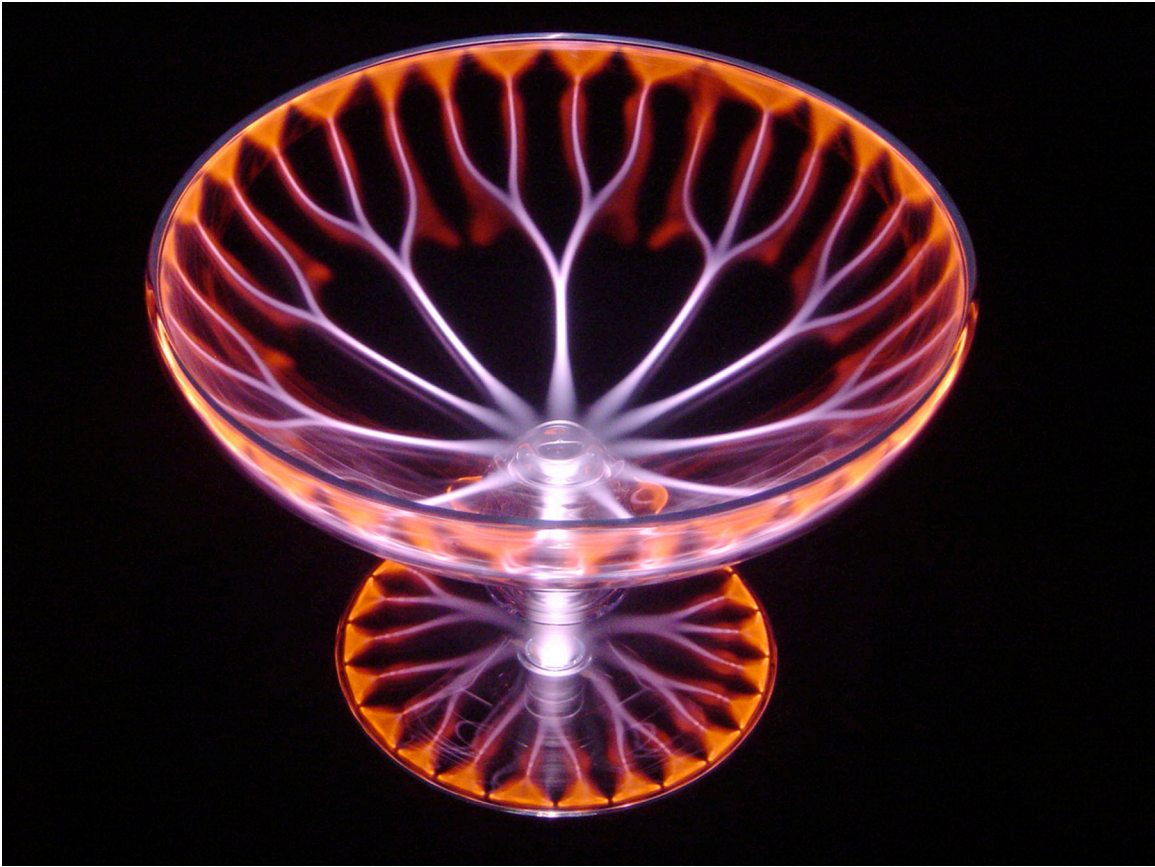
We all benefit from having some basis for our work, some foundation of understanding, giving us the building blocks on which to grow and develop and mature. Knowing and crediting our predecessors and their work allows us to save huge amounts of time, see the logical outcome of certain directions, and helps to understand better which avenues will be most worthy of our pursuit. . . .

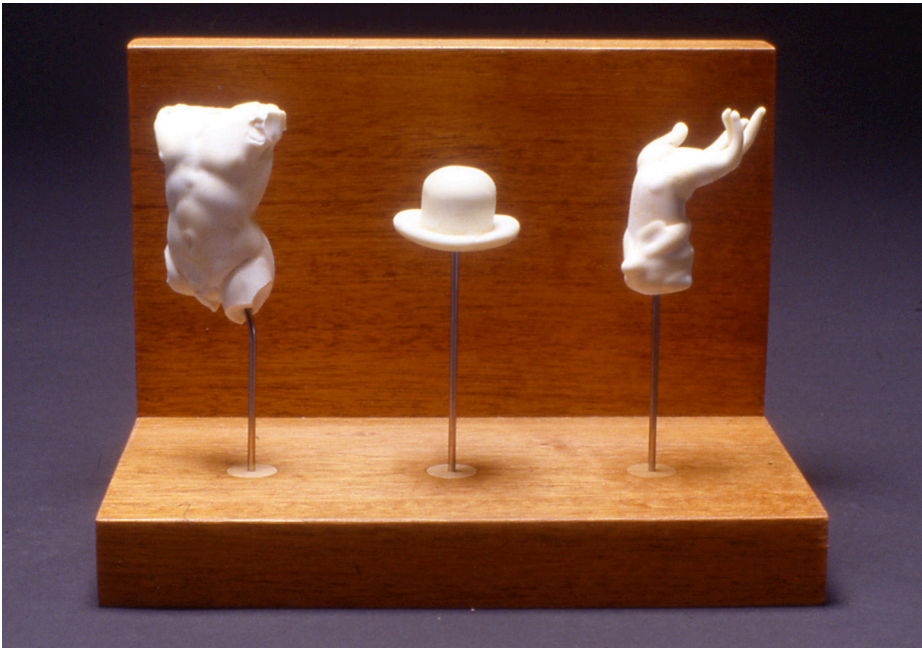
Weinmayer: The future belongs to us-- flameworkers. There are so many new fields to discover as a flameworker, especially in combination with other crafts, but you always have to be flexible. The market is changing all the time.

DT: On any give day, entering the word "flameworking" into Google search can produce 82,100 hits, adding the word supplies brought 54,000 hits and flamework classes brought 55,600. Flamework is definitely on the map, here to stay and going strong.

The next part of this planned series of four articles will give major galleries a chance to explain their views on flameworking.

Debbie Tarsitano is a flameworker, paperweight artists and writer. She is a technical consultant to Glass art Magazine.
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Object Study 1.7.2004

Flameworked, coldworked and acid-frosted soft glass, stainless steel, maple base with mahogany inserts, tung oil finish.

approx 6" h x 8.5" w x 5.5" d

This work was donated to the Pilchuck Glass School for their annual auction

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