



| in the studio |

Playing With Fire

Retired Art Teacher Puts Her Creativity Under Glass

By James Eppard | Photography by Erick Gibson

The glassmakers of Murano, Italy, in the 14th century were prized like rock stars—feted with money, fame and celebrity. But there was a Faustian catch: they weren't allowed to leave the tiny Venetian island for fear they might spill their trade secrets and threaten the republic's monopoly as the world's foremost source of artistic glass.

Of course, the secret leaked out. And while Murano and Venice are still home to some of the world's finest glass, the tradecraft to melt the raw material into intricate works of art has spread wide and far, including the 4,300 miles from Murano's once-isolated glass factories to Debby Weaver's basement studio in Middletown.

Debby's Fern Hill Studio turns out art glass beads and objects sold in boutiques from San Francisco to Key West to Frederick. And her work has appeared in the industry's leading juried shows and catalogs. But it wasn't until relatively recently that the retired middle school art teacher was drawn like a moth to flame to the art of lampworking, where glass rods of varied colors and composition are deftly passed across a blue flame to melt and produce stunning designs.





After heating to the perfect temperature (left), Debby carefully pulls glass into a strand and begins coiling (right).

MOLTEN MAGIC

"I like this," Debby told her husband Gary in 1997 after her first day of a two-day introduction to lampwork, or torchwork since the flame is generated not by oil but bottled propane and oxygen. Lest Gary didn't fully grasp the magnitude of Debby's new crush, she said it again, slower and lower, expressing in not so many words that she'd be needing some space in the basement to set up shop. "I really, really like this."

The two-day workshop with glass artist Kate Fowle Meloney led to a weeklong intensive workshop in Pennsylvania, which led to what Debby, 58, today calls her "retirement career" as well as her addiction. "It's been 12 years since I started and I have not lost the wonder," Debby said in early January as she prepared trays of her finished work for two juried winter shows in Florida. "Every time I do it there's something new."

Her beads, for example, are rarely the same. She makes each one by patiently melting colored glass rods over a mounted torch and winding the molten gobs onto a metal rod called a mandrel. Using special heat-resistant graphite tools and some basic kitchen utensils, she shapes, teases and "paints" each bead. She gently presses, pulls and winds strings of glass fibers around her "gather" of melted glass, always hovering a few

centimeters from the flame to keep the glass pliable and protect it from cracking due to sudden temperature changes.

Milk crates weighted with glass rods from around the world fill her studio space, along with trays and bottles of powdered enamels, millefiori (flowers) and crushed glass used for accents. About two-thirds of her glass comes from Murano. But lampwork is all about color, so she may have glass rods in a dozen shades of red from Germany, the Czech Republic, China, Italy, Oregon and Washington. A red Lauscha glass from Germany, for example, may hold its brilliance better in her small kiln than another red.

"You get picky when you start doing this stuff," Debby says.

A FUSING OF DISCIPLINES

Debby taught art at E. Russell Hicks Middle School in Hagerstown for 31 years before retiring in 2004. She says art teachers tend to be pack rats, a trait that reveals itself in her studio (nubs of glass rods aren't discarded; they're fused like Tootsie Rolls for later use) and serves her well in her current work.

"Anything I can put a bead on gets a bead on it," Debby says, only half in jest. She's looped donut-shaped beads onto



Beads adorn bottle openers, wine stoppers and knives (left), while others await a starring role in someone else's creation (right).

skeleton keys to fete the Frederick Keys and, conveniently enough, the Florida Keys, where she and Gary are spending five weeks on a working vacation showing Debby's work. Cheese knives, bookmarks, fan pulls, letter and bottle openers, pens—Debby's made one-of-a-kind art from them all. She teases expressive little fish out of multifarious combinations of glass and metals like copper and gold leaf. Her "wild women" and "wonkie" collections explode in Technicolor.

The prices range from about \$18 for a bookmark to several hundred for an elaborate necklace, but her bestsellers are in the \$35 to \$55 range. "I want for people to be able to afford them," she says.

A few years ago, Debby wanted to make her own jewelry that incorporated her beadwork. She took a class with local metalsmith Beth Carey at the Delaplaine Visual Arts Education Center and decided she'd rather just make the beads and let Beth handle the metalwork. That was fine with Beth, who says she's drawn to Debby's treatment of intense colors.

"I love the color and her creativity," Beth says, adding that Debby is able to draw on her 31 years of classroom experimentation with mixing colors. "Debby's an artist. Look at her beads. There's a lot of depth in her beads."

Meloney, Debby's first teacher, says Debby's seasoned skills as an art teacher serve her well: "She was organized, detail-oriented and logical—as well as being creative and having a pair of good hands," Meloney said. "She always imparted her personal aesthetic to the beads she made."

Debby and Beth's jewelry line can be found at The Muse on North Market Street. Debby's work is also on display at the Delaplaine Center and the Gifts Inn BoonsBoro.

Debby spends two or three hours a day "on the torch" three or four days a week, unless she's building inventory for a show, when it's 60 or 70 hours a week. Her obsession, she says, "pays for itself, and a little bit better."

Lampworking beads is as fun now as the day she fired up her first "mesmerizing" torch, Debby says. She's not quite sure where she is on the pecking order of artists, crafters and artisans, or even where the line is. "I don't know. I don't care," she says. "What I know is it's fun, it's challenging. I think it's beautiful and I have a good time with it."

As she packed her camper trailer with Gary to escape to sunny Key West, it's hard not to think she's better off than her forbears, old Murano's esteemed, indentured glassworkers. She gets to leave. ❖