

# The Stained Glass Association of America Hosting the Art Glass Manufacturers Forum at the SGAA + SAMA 2023 Conference

*Featuring the latest from the Stained Glass Association of America*



*Mixing the molten glass at the Kokomo factory during the 2010  
SGAA Conference in Kansas City. Photo courtesy of SGAA.*

by Megan McElfresh

The Stained Glass Association (SGAA) is looking forward to its upcoming 2023 SGAA + SAMA Conference, which runs from September 27 through October 1 in Buffalo, New York. During the conference, SGAA members are also excited to once again host an *Art Glass Manufacturers Forum*. In this year's forum, we will discuss both the challenges and the opportunities for innovation and progress as we take a look at the inspiring model that Kokomo Opalescent Glass (KOG) continues to provide to the rest of the art glass industry. By facilitating an exchange of ideas between artists and manufacturers during the forum, we can work together as a community to advance the industry as a whole.

## Exploring Ways to Invest in Necessary Updates

Major progress is being made at the Kokomo factory. KOG's historical significance to the American art glass community is immeasurable, having developed and supplied glass to notable artists including Louis Comfort Tiffany since the very beginning, while quickly becoming the most prolific and consistent manufacturer in the early American art glass industry. Now at 135 years in business, Kokomo is facing the same challenges of restoration and renewal as much of the rest of our notable historic places in America. Until just a few years ago, for example, the factory was still using its original equipment from the late 1800s and early 1900s.

When Jeff Shaw became the new owner of Kokomo Opalescent Glass Company in September 2017, the entire art glass manufacturing industry was still dealing with increased scrutiny and pressure from environmental agencies across the country. In addition to that, Shaw faced a staggering number of infrastructure and equipment issues at the historic Kokomo factory that had been escalating for decades.

Shaw, together with representatives from nearly all of the other art glass manufacturers, participated in the 2019 *Art Glass Manufacturers Forum* at the joint SGAA + AGG Conference in San Antonio, Texas. There, Shaw discussed the need to get more effi-

cient and more flexible in order to produce the art glass demanded by modern makers in the different quantities now requested. He readily admitted to the challenges ahead and expressed a need for patience as the Forum explored ways to invest in those changes while also finding ways to serve the needs of their historic factory space. Shaw was hoping to begin work on some of those changes in early 2020.

## The Light at the End of the Tunnel

Of course, we all know what happened in early 2020. As the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic stretched from months into years and the complexities of supply chain issues and production across the world shifted dramatically, Kokomo was just beginning the lengthy process of having to completely redesign the company's furnace systems to come into compliance with new environmental demands. The regular rebuilding of furnaces is hard enough. Completely redesigning furnaces and putting them into production is really like starting over completely from scratch, as if you are rebuilding the entire company from the ground up.

If you can imagine every possible issue with sourcing material, custom equipment design and production, plus international shipping, all of that seemed to go wrong, and then some. For instance, a pyrometer, which is a crucial part that measures the temperature conditions in the furnace, would break during installation, and the new one would take six months to get remade and delivered.

Now in early 2023, the team at Kokomo is finally feeling like they can see the light at the end of the tunnel. It will still take years to fully catch up, however. KOG is close to three years behind on processing orders and feels the pressure keenly. The lehr furnace, which is used for annealing the glass, is restored and better than ever, work began on a new roof in March of 2023, and the new furnaces are churning out sheets of glass consistently. Shaw and his team feel they can finally put a production schedule in place that they can rely on, having worked through every possible hiccup that could have been thrown their way.



Jeff Shaw, owner of Kokomo Glass Co., presenting during the Art Glass Manufacturers Forum at the 2019 SGAA + AGG Conference in San Antonio, Texas.  
Photo by Kyle J. Mickelson, courtesy of SGAA.

KOG's continued production of a variety of glass textures and colors is crucial to the industry's care and conservation of stained glass treasures across America within our most historic structures. However, we must keep looking ahead. The entire industry faces challenges due to infrastructure needs and rising energy costs. If we can return to our roots of constantly experimenting and creating, we can seek aggressive, creative solutions to spark the next era of manufacturing sustainability that will impact a much wider community than our own corner of glass manufacturing.

## Working Together to Advance the Glass Art Industry


SGAA believes that the 2023 Art Glass Manufacturers Forum is an essential part of the conference in order to hear from manufacturers directly about their challenges and needs so that we can support them effectively. In this year's forum, we will discuss both the challenges and opportunities for innovation and progress that exist in the art glass industry. The same spirit and willingness to experiment that made KOG a success in 1888 can once again be an example and a beacon for the entire art glass industry and beyond.

We look forward to having every single stained glass manufacturer in attendance at this year's conference as we dig deep with our attendees. You can find more information about this and other exciting aspects of our 2023 conference on our website.

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Visit [www.stainedglass.org](http://www.stainedglass.org) for more information about the upcoming 2023 SGAA + SAMA Conference and how to become a member of the Stained Glass Association of America.


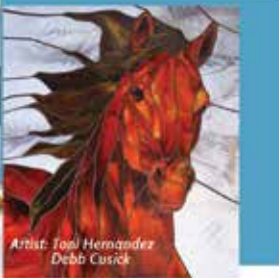
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