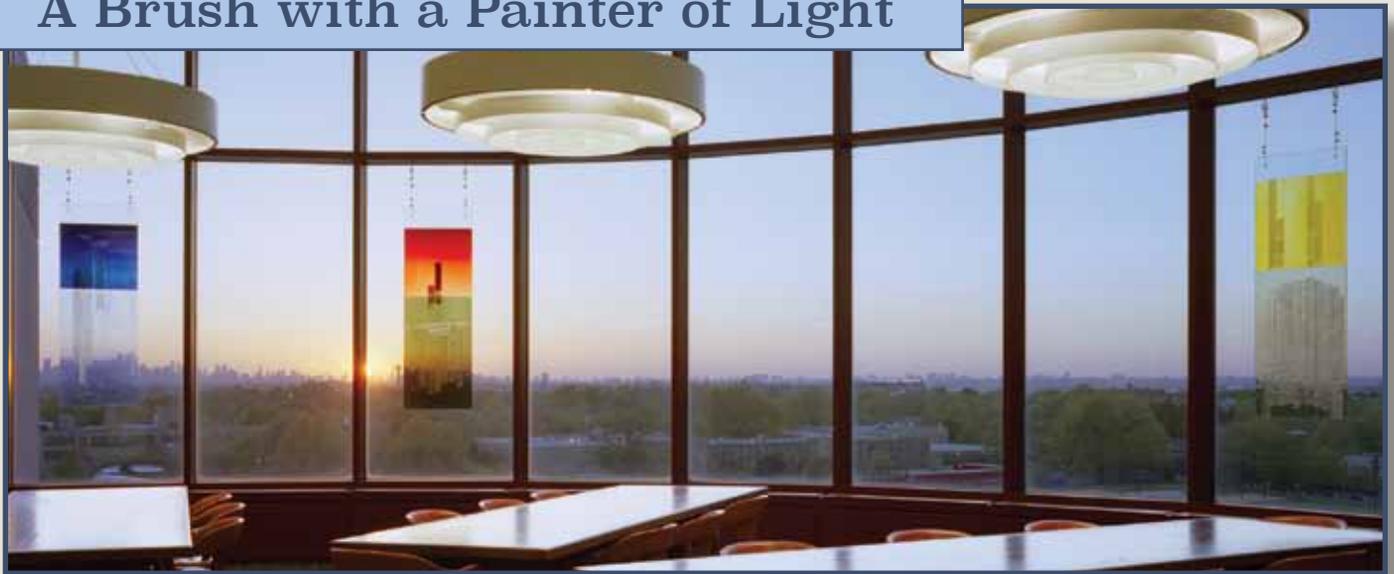


Featuring the latest from the American Glass Guild

Considering Ellen Mandelbaum A Brush with a Painter of Light



Mandelbaum, Colors of the Sky, Queens College Art Center, Flushing, New York, 5' x 2', 2006. Photo by Elizabeth Felicella.

by Troy Moody

This past summer I was fortunate enough to attend the 2019 joint conference between the American Glass Guild (AGG) and the American Glass Association in San Antonio, Texas. These annual conferences present opportunities not only to visit a new city but, more importantly, to connect with old friends, new business associates, studio professionals, artists, and glass enthusiasts.

I've enjoyed these dynamic events for 14 years now and have come to especially relish the causal rendezvous found among the sanctioned lectures and demonstrations. The random snippets of time spent in the bar, dining rooms, and elevators often lead to memorable off-hand chats with colleagues steeped in the history of the craft. Treasured moments with individuals driven by relentless professional passion and decades of personal experience become unscripted highlights of the events. One such encounter from the recent Texas congregation was the chance to visit with renowned glass designer and painter Ellen Mandelbaum.

Fortuitous Beginnings

I first had the extreme pleasure of meeting Ellen many years ago in the dirt floor cellar of a 200-plus-year-old New Hampshire farmhouse. The Antrim School was the brainchild of Dick Millard. It occupied a somewhat dilapidated farmhouse on the outskirts of a sleepy village nestled near the picturesque Contoocook River. For a brief, magical time at the end of the 20th century, it was a gathering spot for glass students, artists, historians, conservators, odd characters, and living legends in the world of stained glass.

In that long-ago time, I spent an afternoon glazing an auction panel for Ellen. I was struck by her gentle sincerity and creative curiosity. After all those years had passed, it was wonderful to once

again spend time with her over the course of a few blurry days deep in the heart of Texas. We sat lost in the cluttered basement of a conference hall, strolled along the charming San Antonio riverfront, and laughed amongst the celebratory atmosphere of the formal award ceremony. It was an unexpected luxury to converse easily with this remarkable friend. I was delighted to find her as enthusiastic and sharp as ever. Her passion for the glass arts is refreshing, and her radiant authenticity is inspiring.

Distinctive Work

Most students of stained glass have encountered images of and references to the distinctive work of Ellen Mandelbaum. Her commissioned work is easily recognizable, with its large swaths of colored antique glass washed in loose, painted movements and gestural lead lines. The artist had an intimate familiarity with brushes long before she found glass and feels that the painting utensils become an extension, not only of her hands but of her entire body. This immersive approach is evident in the brush strokes and fluid character of the painted shadows and the pulled highlights of raw glass. A large part of her skill lies in knowing how to achieve dramatic, glowing panels of modulated light with little technical intrusion.

As a designer, Ellen understands the need for structure and embraces the aesthetics of an underling lead matrix. She allows quiet spaces that are juxtaposed against bold clusters of sweeping lines to occupy her architectural panels. The intentional actions of her glass compositions become graceful dances joining the worked glass screens with the external imagery of the seen world existing outside the window.



Mandelbaum, Glass Landscape, South Carolina Aquarium, Charleston, South Carolina, 18' x 30', 2000. Photo by Marilyn Ott.

From Painting to Glass Art

The visual effect of Mandelbaum's work seems to be almost effortless—direct and intuitive—yet it is, in fact, the result of intense intellectual consideration and a lifetime pursuit of academic understanding. After earning an MFA in painting with high honors in 1963, the artist taught modern painting at Hunter College and worked as a lecturer at the Whitney Museum in New York City. In 1975, she began studying stained glass as an art form, attending the Stained Glass School in North Adams, Massachusetts, in 1983 and the fabled Pilchuck School in Stanwood, Washington, in 1985.

Ellen participated in the first Architectural Stained Glass Seminar at the Hein Derix Studio in Kevelaer, Germany, and studied directly with giants of German Abstract Stained Glass Ludwig Schaffrath, Johannes Schreiter, and Jochem Poensgen. In fact, it was Schaffrath who first encouraged her to abandon her more pedestrian glass designs and aspire to achieve in glass the remarkable artistry he saw in her early expressive oil paintings. It was legendary Lithuanian Master Albinus Elskus who taught her the noble art of glass painting, which in turn led her to the realization of that goal.

Finding Inspiration in Nature and Light

When considering Ellen's expansive body of work, it is easy to see that nature and light have been consistent sources of inspiration for the artist. Through years of concentrated effort and determination, she has harnessed a highly individualized language of visual expression in glass art and has employed this voice in her monumental architectural commissions and intimate autonomous panels alike.

Through her involvement with The Women's International Glass Workshop (WIGW), Ellen has traveled and exhibited extensively. The WIGW is a loose alliance of architectural glass artists who meet every two years to exchange technical ideas, discuss professional

development, and share their individual conceptual approach to glass design. Meetings have been held in Ireland, Japan, Iceland, Austria, Wales, the United States, New Zealand, and Canada.

Delighting in the Magic of Glass Art

After decades of study, execution, and exploration, Ellen continues to delight in the possibilities and magic of stained glass. She has completed dozens of notable architectural installations and has had her original glass art included in countless national and international exhibitions. Active and curious, she continues a committed practice of creating watercolor paintings and autonomous glass panels. In recent years she has been experimenting with incorporating fused glass into her repertoire and began mounting her watercolors on paper behind painted glass to produce original interdisciplinary art pieces.

Mandelbaum remains a celebrated member of the greater art glass community. She was recently awarded a lifetime achievement award from the Stained Glass Association of America and is a cherished Senior Adviser to the American Glass Guild. Her accomplishments in and contribution to the world of stained glass is commendable and impressive, but greater still is her truly lovely personality. Quick with a smile and a kind word, she is approachable, generous, and eager to engage. Ellen Mandelbaum is forever an inspiration in more ways than one.

GA

Visit www.americanglassguild.org to find out more about the AGG's upcoming events and how to become a Guild member.

© Copyright 2020 by Glass Art®.
All rights reserved.