

Renee Wiggins Design Coming to Glass

by Colleen Bryan

Renee Wiggins uses her time at the torch to produce beads and jewelry evocative of flowing, organic, earth-and-sky metaphors. Nothing she makes is literal or sculptural. “I like layers of meaning and use many different elements to tell a story. You don’t look at my work and see a flower or a chair. It is more elemental, more about color and small detail. My aesthetic, if not my intention, tends toward an Asian feel.”

The Tucson, Arizona, artist incorporates elements of millefiori murrine in most of her handmade artwork. She has focused on beadwork since 2006. “When I’m working on a fused glass piece or a bead, I start with an idea of colors that I want to work with. I make a millefiori cane on the torch through a process of layering molten glass, color upon color, then pulling the design down into a slender rod of cane. Once it is cooled, I cut the cane into chips that get melted into the finished piece and resemble tiny flowers. That is my artistic signature.”

Wiggins’ favorite material for working beads is soft glass with a 104 coefficient of expansion (COE). “I love working with American-made, silver-rich glasses best. They produce amazingly lustrous colors that shine — mother-of-pearl shimmer, wispy turquoises and blues, singular depth that you can’t get with non-silver glasses.”

Wiggins’ first experience with lampworking was making beads in 1993 in a class at a community arts and crafts school. Since then, her glass career has spanned 20 years in disciplines that include fusing, stained glass, mosaics, and casting. “I loved it all but finally settled on fusing, then got into strictly lampworking.” Wiggins pursued a career path in photography and digital arts while teaching herself glass crafting through reading and YouTube videos. “It is fantastic what is now available to help you learn if you are willing to do the research.” Wiggins turned her passion into a profession in 2008 and opened a glass store on Etsy in response to the economic downturn. “Necessity can carry us to some unexpected and wonderful places.”

In a delightful turn of events, Wiggins has found her way into a glass community in Tucson. She is now in her third year as a flame shop instructor at the local nonprofit Sonoran Glass School. “It has been a lot of fun meeting with peers on a personal level rather than just sitting behind a computer screen. It allows me to be with people rather than isolating myself in my own artistic world.”





Rhythms

Wiggins spends her workdays moving between her renovated garage studio and a cooler home office. The small studio accommodates kilns, including a fusing kiln, a torch, and a worktable. “I usually spend early mornings answering questions on e-mail. Then I collect my orders and ship them between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. After that, I try to be diligent about working in the studio on art and research. I stop work about 5.”

Adhering to a steady routine is by no means standard operating behavior among independent artists, but Wiggins finds that the discipline helps move her work forward. “It is possible to become entangled in one or another aspect of the business—photographing, buying supplies, talking to customers, or Web design—and lose track of doing the actual work. I find it is critical to work on a project or to sketch something every day, to tackle the uncomfortable stuff. I was lucky in having a background of digital arts and photography, which made it easy for me to incorporate those into my business plan. For me, the challenge was to get more glasswork out. The opposite might be true for other people, but structuring time can be important to finding the balance and facing challenges, whatever they are.”

Stopping for rest and play is an important part of the discipline. “Pushing too far for too long strips away my creativity. It is a temptation to try to do too much too soon, but more often than not it is an exercise in frustration. Saying ‘I’m done’ and putting the work away for the evening to focus on family and friends, stepping back, allows creative flashes to occur. Creativity is not something you can force.”

Wiggins admits she was not so disciplined at the outset of her glassmaking. “I was not sure of myself. Many artists have fear about putting their vision out in the public eye and weathering criticism so they can reflect on it and make the work better. But I’ve learned to do that, to push past anything that makes me not want to do my work. These are the dilemmas that most artists must face. And you only do it by recognizing that you have something pure and singular to offer, by listening for your unique voice.”

Now Wiggins feels more able to hear the still, sweet voice within her artistic spirit. “I make art that I like and focus on being true to myself as an artist. I think that is the true source of innovation.”



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Ambition for Her Art

Art is always evolving as artists question how to push themselves, their materials, and their techniques toward the next new clever and inspirational thing. If Wiggins had one ambition for the glass industry in general it would be this: “I would like to see a really intense non-devitrifying 104 COE purple glass made. That and a bright lime green. They are so elusive in the family of glass.”

Wiggins also craves more “designerly” techniques transferred from traditional hard glass applications and adapted to soft glass work. “Borosilicate is at the forefront of the glass lampworking world now while that industry is adapting and changing. I’d love to see similar techniques crossing over from hard glass into soft glass rather than maintaining them as such distinct families, even though they are different, each with its own challenges and workability. Learning from artists in other disciplines is exciting and drives new innovation.”

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Find out more about how hot glass artist Renee Wiggins makes strategic use of social networking to continue her artistic education, conduct market analysis, and market her work in the November/December 2013 issue of Glass Art.

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