

In Looking Back — We Look Forward



Painting
with Glass
by Bryant
J. Stanton

I enjoyed listening to Narcissus Quagliata give his inspirational keynote talk at the National Day of Glass (NDOG). I have followed his career since the late 1970s when I first saw his work in Otto B. Rigan's seminal book *New Glass*. In looking back, he shared the journey of his long career as an artist and his thoughts on “not painting on” (glass) but “painting with glass.” Starting out as a painter, Narcissus became attracted to glass when he experienced the contrast between a Chagall painting and a Chagall stained glass window. The stained glass window stood out as a much more dynamic and powerful art form. This is when Narcissus was drawn to glass. Narcissus reminded us that over the past 800 years that the methods of stained glass have remained the same. Styles have changed, but “essentially a stained glass window is a mosaic of glass,” with each piece of glass divided by lead. “They are built this way because you can't mix the colors.”

In his early works, Narcissus experimented with and treated the lead line in his windows as intentional brushstrokes by shaving and shaping the lead to mimic thick and thin painted lines. In the early 1990s, he was invited by Daniel Schwoerer of Bullseye Glass Company in East Portland, Oregon, to be an artist in residence. At BGC, through intensive experimentation, Narcissus discovered he could genuinely “paint with glass.” He was finally free from lead lines and was now able to mix colors where light invaded and illuminated his “paintings in glass.”

About one hundred years before Narcissus went to Bullseye Glass, two other painters, Louis C. Tiffany and John LaFarge, ventured into Heidt's hot glass shop in Brooklyn, New York, to explore making a new type of rolled sheet glass. As with any movement, it was the beginning of a journey and a new art form, opalescent art-glass. Their desire, too, was to paint not on but with glass to escape thinly painted glass surfaces. They would

rather have a solid-color run throughout the entire sheet of glass, which would glow in bright sunlight and show visible color in refracted light. Sheets of glass were developed with multiple swirled colors and textures, allowing various sections of a sheet to be selected and cut out with which to ‘paint.’ Tiffany, like Narcissus, saw the similarity of stained glass to mosaics. Tiffany even quipped, “mosaics are the parent of stained glass,” so “The New” American School of glass was producing, in essence, illuminated glass mosaics.

Narcissus thoughtfully reflected on the investment made by others in buying into his new glass methods. Upgrading to larger kilns and the cost of experimentations working through new fused glass techniques were very costly in both time and materials. Tiffany's work, too, demanded endless hours of costly aesthetic experimentation. Tiffany invested an entire decade before achieving satisfactory results in creating glass to portray fabric or drapery. In 1917 he wrote, “How many years have I toiled to make drapery glass? My chemist and furnace men for a long time insisted it was impossible, claiming that the metallic oxides would not combine, and that was the trouble for many years. The mix would disintegrate. New styles of firing ovens had to be built, and new methods [devised] for annealing the glass.”

In his glass art, Narcissus has discovered the solution to the problem that LaFarge and Tiffany spent years attempting to solve—but never achieved. They could never realize satisfactory faces, hands, feet, or animals without turning to traditional surface enamels. Nor could they escape the shackles of the lead line. It took over a hundred years, but Narcissus has finally achieved so well that which eluded his predecessors. He is genuinely painting with glass.

In this issue, we look back at the contributions of members who have been a part of this organization for most of their lives. They brought their passion and

talents for a life of boundless beauty with them to glass and to the SGAA. We meet new members, and talk to talented artists we may not realize are in our midst.

In addition, we are thrilled to show the work of public artist Lynn Basa, a 25-foot fused glass art piece for Portland's new Multnomah County Central Courthouse.

The cover of this issue of *Stained Glass* shows a mosaic—of one of the parents of stained glass. It, and the article contained within, are a reprint from the Society of American Mosaic Artists' (SAMA) publication *Groutline*.

As I reflect on our industry's history, and then contemplate our future, I realize that we have never remained stagnant – we have continually adjusted and have reinvented the SGAA to meet the changes, materials, and technologies within our craft. For example, the Frenchman, Jean Gaudin, developed the *dalle-de-verre* technique in the 1930s which later achieved its heyday in America during the 1950s-60s. Acrylics and polycarbonates, developed during World War II, led to the development of Environmental Protective Glazing (EPG). Bullseye Glass Company developed colors of glass that were compatible during the fusing process, just to point out a few. Wouldn't it be interesting if Tiffany or LaFarge could make a visit to any of our studios? I think they would be proud of their contributions to our progress to get us to where we are now.

Winston Churchill believed that “the longer you can look back, the farther you can look forward.” A look back is to see how far we have progressed. It allows us to see how much we have accomplished and where we still want to go.

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