

## **Magic in the Mountains: Kelsey Murphy's cameo glass is Made in Heaven**

By Donna Meredith

Not so long ago, women were banished from traditional glassmaking, the secrets of artisans passed only from father to son. Today women have challenged the male dominance of the field, and none more so than Kelsey Murphy.

In a small studio near Huntington, Murphy is carving a substantial niche for herself in the history of American art glass. Her accomplishments have mounted over the years, pushing both the technical and aesthetic elements of cameo glass to levels unimaginable just a few decades ago.

Any one of her accomplishments would be the amazing stuff of fairytales:

- Until Murphy developed her methods, only five layers had ever successfully cased and carved. She and Pilgrim Glass Union glass blowers pushed that number to twelve.
- Her 1994 “Run for the Roses” was likely the largest cameo vase ever carved in the 2,000 year history of glass. It stands 6’ 2” tall. A team of Pilgrim Glass master craftsmen—including Doug Chapman, Bonnie Crockett, Dwayne Wallace, and Bob Blakely—executed Murphy’s design. Cranberry roses climb the neck with galloping white horses laced among the green leaves.
- In 1995, the New Orleans Museum of Art offered a retrospective of Murphy’s work, an ultimate achievement for any artist.
- A three-dimensional carved eagle blown by Pilgrim master craftsman Keith Adkins and carved by Murphy was presented to Bill and Hillary Clinton when the president visited Huntington in 1996. The life-size eagle was crafted from five colors and blown without the benefit of a mold. The piece now resides at the front door to the Clinton Library in Little Rock, Arkansas.
- Murphy’s “Gardens of Heaven” cameo vase sold for \$100,000 in 2011, a new milestone. The piece boasts nine layers of glass, each a brilliant contrasting color. Murphy carved through the layers to reveal large magnolia blossoms and leaves that frame swans gliding across a blue lake.

Dean Six, executive director of the Museum of American Glass in West Virginia, believes Murphy’s cameo glass will stand the test of time.

“It will prove to be some of the most respected and dominant art glass of the 20<sup>th</sup> century,” he says. “She has the amazing ability to look at a piece of glass and see art within it. She’ll take a brown blob and see a hillside in autumn. Besides the technical skill, besides the graphic design, that vision is what sets her apart. Way apart.”

Six should know. The Ritchie County native is the author or co-author of some of the most respected books on glass collecting, including *West Virginia Glass Towns*, *West Virginia Glass*

*Between the World Wars, Viking Glass 1944-1970, and Lotus: Depression Glass And Far Beyond.*

### Accidental Discovery

In the spring of 1980, Murphy was restoring a run-down Gothic Revival building in Lebanon, Ohio. Andy Rainey, an employee helping with the project, knew she had recently bought an air compressor and suggested she might hook it up to his sandblaster to remove old paint from an antique medicine cabinet destined for a sitting room in the building. Because she tends to be impulsive, she didn't protect the mirrored door of the cabinet when she turned on the blaster. Just then, one of her daughters wanted something and while Murphy was distracted, sand splatted onto the mirror and etched it.

That's the moment many of us might have cursed ourselves for the mistake. Instead, Murphy screamed and ran in the house to get a sheet of the thick masking material known as frisket. She had the mask on hand because she owned an advertising and sign-painting business at that time.

So giddy she could hardly hold her hands steady, Murphy covered the entire front of the mirror and the frame with frisket, pressing it snugly into the corners. Sandblasting would cut through anything hard, like glass, but she thought the softer texture of the masking material would resist abrasive action. With an X-acto knife, she cut out an impromptu design of vines and stylized leaves.

She pulled the sandblaster's trigger again and in a few minutes returned to the house screaming again. "I was so excited I couldn't stand it," she says. Soon she had her assistant, Kathy Link, squealing too. Over five days, they developed a catalog of 400 different window designs with a pricing schedule.

Murphy, one quickly learns, never does anything by half-measures.

The women made catalogs formatted as flip-through pages attached to Masonite boards and placed them in area glass shops. A few months later in October 1981, Murphy incorporated Glass Expectations and began manufacturing etched glass and mirrors.

"That discovery was the lightning strike that changed my life forever," she says.

### Early Years

That lightning didn't strike in a vacuum. Years of training and design work prepared her for that meeting with the mirror. After graduating from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1966, Murphy worked as a book designer for Houghton Mifflin in Boston, led a design team that developed *The Godfather Game* and *The Howard Hughes Game*, and later served as a art director for a university in Mexico City.

Early exposure to industry also shaped Murphy, allowing her to quickly grasp what manufacturing could offer an artist. Her father designed and operated brick factories in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Connecticut.

"He was always the first one at work in the morning and the last to leave at night," she says. "And he was always the dirtiest." That ethic transferred itself to Murphy, who often worked around the clock, first to get her factory into production, and later to fill outrageously large orders.

The renovated building on Silver Street kept Murphy alive financially for years. The elegant, spacious one-bedroom apartments rented for \$500 apiece. This income insured she could feed her daughters during the start-up of Glass Expectations, Inc. A small trust that became hers when she turned 35 helped bankroll the new company.

Like any fairy tale, Murphy's story had dark moments.

"During the Glass Expectations years, I was always horribly broke, horribly in debt," Murphy says. "We had a lot of great projects, but I was always under-capitalized."

The company made windows for Chi-Chi's and Wendy's, as well as thousands of etched mirrors sold through discount stores. At one point, the company employed 40 workers.

Murphy's ability to persuade others to join in her projects is one of her greatest gifts. One of the people she pulled into glasswork was Robert Bomkamp. He is a machinist who had worked in many factories, including General Electric, contributing to projects like the B-1 bomber and Harrier jet when they were just concepts.

The two met at the opening party for Glass Expectations and Murphy hired him right away.

"I was totally amazed," Bomkamp says of their first meeting. "I appreciated her industrial bent."

Murphy claims Bomkamp was able to match her energy, no matter what they faced: ridiculous deadlines, number of hours on the job, early morning starts. Bomkamp's technical and building skills merged with Murphy's artistic talent to forge a business and life partnership that has lasted 30 years.

"He turned out to be a great carver," Murphy says. "Whether it was production volume etching of glassware or very detailed deep carving in multi-layers, he did it beautifully, creatively and efficiently."

### **The Pilgrim Years**

Three years after Glass Expectations began production, another chance meeting shaped Murphy's future. She and Bomkamp visited Pilgrim Glass Company in Ceredo, looking for a source of large glass vessels. By extraordinary coincidence, Pilgrim's CEO Alfred Knobler and General Manager David Davies happened to be in the plant that day. Based in New York, Knobler didn't often visit the Ceredo plant. That meeting began a collaboration that would change the future of Pilgrim Glass, as well as the direction Murphy and Bomkamp would take.

Knobler and Davies placed an order for 100 each of 12 vase shapes and solid eggs. More importantly, Glass Expectations sales representative Larry Sarno gave Murphy a book on 19<sup>th</sup>-century English cameo glass. Fascinated by what she saw, she presented Davies with a copy. They all fell in love with the idea of giving cameo glass a new life in a 20<sup>th</sup>-century factory.

To Alfred Knobler's credit, he backed the arduous process of developing cameo as a commercial venture. The slightest flaw in a piece of cased glass caused it to shatter when carved. In the beginning, 95 percent of the pieces broke, due to expansion coefficients inherent to the glass. In time, the loss rate was reduced to 5 percent because the company figured out how to make each color compatible with the surrounding glass layers. Bob realized that many of the breakage problems actually were the result of faulty annealing, the cooling of the glass by calculating their molecular weights.

Bomkamp's skills as a machinist were indispensable in creating tools to enable mass production of three-dimensional, compound-curved objects at Pilgrim. In 1987 Murphy and Bomkamp moved the Glass Expectations equipment from the Cincinnati area to Ceredo and officially became part of Pilgrim Glass Corporation. They bought a 300-acre farm nearby. Each piece of cameo made there is stamped "Made in Heaven" and signed by the artists.

The relationship between Knobler and Murphy was troubled almost from the beginning. "He either fired me or I quit about every other week," Murphy says. "There were times when I was working with Pilgrim, that if you'd asked me what I thought of Alfred Knobler, I'd have told you I would like to stick in knife between his eyes, but looking back, I realize he had the best

instincts. He could see the potential in something, and would throw his money behind it. He wouldn't quit if he believed in something.”

The marriage of fine art to manufacturing was uneasy in other aspects. Knobler's and Murphy's push to develop cameo glass created tension in the factory as some workers felt the wares they made, such as cranberry glass, were relegated to less important status.

Initially, Pilgrim cameo was produced in white opal over cranberry or cobalt blue. The first three-color combination Pilgrim produced was called “Midnight Cameo,” with black glass cased over crystal over cranberry. Soon Murphy experimented with other combinations.

### **The Art**

Wildlife is a major motif in Murphy's art. Since childhood, she has loved and ridden horses, but after she moved to West Virginia she was able to own them for the first time. Repeatedly, they show up in her art, as do bears, wolves, and peacocks. From daisies to hyacinths, from peaches to willow leaves—the plant kingdom is equally present as subjects. Yet her art also transcends the natural world and ventures into fanciful themes with fairies, mermaids and figures from Greek myths.

Six discerns differences in Murphy's and Bomkamp's styles of art. “She often draws from familiar objects in life,” Six says. “This gives her the same popular appeal as Norman Rockwell and other great American illustrators. Bob is creative in an entirely different way. His expressions are more abstracted and less dependent on realism.”

Bomkamp is currently experimenting with enlarged dot patterns, similar to halftone screens of hot-type days. Only from a distance can a viewer discern that the dots form a nude torso.

The carving produced by sandblasting results in a style distinct from its English and Art Nouveau forerunners. In a catalog produced for Murphy's retrospective, John Keefe, Curator of Decorative Arts for the New Orleans Museum of Art, explains it this way: “The sandcarved edge achieved by Murphy and the Pilgrim Glass Union artisans is deliberately more sharp and precisely delineated, creating an effect pronouncedly more striated than the Art Nouveau types. This is enhanced by bold, dramatic contrasts of colors.”

Stacking colors results in the brilliant palette Murphy works with: green, topaz, plum, cobalt, cranberry, ruby, persimmon, purple, black, white, and crystal. The order of the layers affects the coloration.

### **Where To See Made In Heaven Cameo**

Huntington is a good place to start if you want to view an impressive representation of Made in Heaven cameo. It is on display not only at the Huntington Museum of Art, which has 42 pieces, but also at Marshall University's Drinko Library, which boasts 82 pieces. Local physician Dr. Joseph Touma donated these pieces from his private collection. He also bought up Murphy's cameo wherever he could find it from sources like eBay in an effort to preserve what he sees as an important part of art history and local heritage.

Touma likens Kelsey's cameo to stardust that's been scattered far and wide. “So bright, so beautiful! I'm trying to gather it and bring it back together for the museums.”

“Not only is Murphy a gifted artist, there's nothing impossible for her,” Touma says. “Between her and Bob, they solved all the problems with multi-layered glass. Every piece of her glass is unique and beautiful.”

Murphy's cameo is also part of the Louis S. Harris Collection, donated to the New Orleans Museum of Art in 2003. The collection contains just under 200 pieces of glass. The curator of

decorative arts for the New Orleans Museum was a serious promoter of Murphy's work, according to Harris's widow Karen "Kim" Harris.

"As curator, John Keefe's passion of all the decorative arts was glass," she says. "So when he saw Kelsey was doing things nobody else was doing, with these new techniques that hadn't been updated since Gallé and Daum, it was tremendously exciting because the skills had grown so withered and here they were coming back like blockbusters."

She added that her husband claimed if he had it to do all over again, he would have concentrated on contemporary glass, rather than the antique glass he bought in his early years as a collector, "because working with the artists was way more exciting than researching old stuff."

### **An Uncertain Future for Cameo**

At 67, Murphy is confronting carpal tunnel issues that limit how long she can sandblast the glass in one session, and Bomkamp is recovering from lung cancer. The health issues have made them more focused on ensuring all they've learned isn't lost.

After Pilgrim closed in 2001, Murphy and Bomkamp sought other sources of glass. For a time, Murphy collaborated with Fenton Glass, training carvers to use her designs with traditional Fenton colors such as the peach and yellow Burmese glass, as well as the pink and white Rosalene and iridescent Favrene. They also bought glass from Ron Hinkle, GlassWorks, and Blenko.

One possibility to carry on the work is Chris Carpenter, who was the lead cameo artisan at Fenton. Unemployed since Fenton shut down their hot glass operations, Carpenter is shadowing Murphy every chance she gets to learn more about multi-layer designs and carving. Carpenter looks forward to the challenge of carving super cameo. "It's more three-dimensional," she says. "You can do so much more with all the colors."

Not only are artisans needed to carry on Murphy's and Bomkamp's work, but the source of glass blanks has also caused concern. A blank is an undecorated piece of cased glass that can be carved. As Pilgrim, Fenton, and GlassWorks closed, a source of glass became critical to moving forward with the cameo.

A solution arrived in November 2011 when a friend purchased the remaining blanks produced by Pilgrim and made some of this glass available for carving. Murphy now believes she and Bomkamp will be able to obtain an adequate stock of blanks to work their magic on as long as they are able to carve.

Marketing strategies also had to change when the weight of the Pilgrim and Fenton sales forces were no longer behind the cameo glass. Internet sales provided only a partial answer, so Murphy explored another option.

In April 2012, an auction of 210 pieces of Murphy's cameo glass took place at the Greenville Auction Center in Greenville, Ohio, where auctioneer Jim Wroda specializes in glass.

"Kelsey's glass is probably some of the finest contemporary art glass out there and by far takes the most talent," Wroda says. "As a person who collects antiques and Webb cameo glass, I am a bit jaded from contemporary glass but would have *no* problem putting her glass in with our Webb glass."

Although Wroda had only hoped for 75 potential customers, he was pleasantly reprimed to find 147 registered bidders. "We had people bidding from California, Colorado, Florida, Texas, New York, New Jersey, West Virginia, Ohio, Arizona, Louisiana, Australia and Canada," says Wroda. He hopes Murphy will continue to sell through auction and predicts her customer base will grow as word spreads.

Luckily, adapting to change is something Murphy does well. “Even after 30 years this journey seems to start new each and every day,” Murphy says.

That’s because, as Murphy will tell you, every piece of glass behaves like a living entity. Similar to others, yet each with its own unique qualities. Strong, yet fragile. As real as the physics and chemistry that rule its structure, yet as magical as the transformation of grains of sand into luminous art.

A marriage of physics and fairy tales.

## Sidebar

### *Where to Buy Made in Heaven Cameo*

- Studios of Heaven, 777 Buck Fork Rd, E Lynn, WV 25512 (304) 849-4320
- <http://www.studiosofheaven.com/>
- Tamarack, One Tamarack Park, Beckley, WV 25801 (304) 256-6843
- Museum of American Glass in West Virginia, 230 Main Ave, Weston, WV 26452 (304) 269-5006
- Oglebay Park, Carriage House Glass, 465 Lodge Dr, Wheeling, WV 26003 (800) 624-6988
- Ron Hinkle Glass, Rt 9, Box 467, Buckhannon, WV 26201 (304) 472-7963
- The Bronze Look, 311 Mercer St Princeton, WV 24740 (304) 425-5005
- Collectors Showcase, Star Center Mall, Snohomish, WA 98290 (360) 568-1339
- Joyce’s Collectibles, 2872 Rt 26, Parish, NY 13131 (315) 625-5054
- Glass Accents Etc., 2 East 28th Division Hwy # 7, Lititz, PA 17543 (717) 625-2973
- Corning Glass, One Museum Way, Corning, NY 14830 (800) 723-9156
- Fenton Glass Dealers, various locations, often carry Made in Heaven cameo

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Clarksburg native Donna Meredith is the author of two novels, *The Glass Madonna* and *The Color of Lies*. She is currently working on a biography, *Magic in the Mountains: Kelsey Murphy, Robert Bomkamp, and the West Virginia Cameo Glass Revolution*.