

The Inestimable Value of a Teacher

by Matt Eskuche



When I found out that the *Flow* was doing an educational issue, I set out to write an article about the failing enrollment of flameworking classes at professional craft schools and public glass studios across the country. This greatly concerns me,

because I find taking classes a valuable part of one's flameworking lineage. Studying with an established flameworker can prove to be hugely beneficial. In general, most teachers offer a compacted version of their years of practice, knowledge, insight, and connection to the industry. Being around them for many hours a day for several days in a row tends to bring that out in a way that isn't easy to mimic in other educational formats. Seeking out instruction based solely in technique can be hugely beneficial. Proficiency never ends, and the hardest technique in flamework is to overcome a bad habit. I feel it should be noted, regardless of one's experience level, that technique alone is not the only offering a class in flameworking gives. At a class you may meet a lifelong friend, have the chance to explore a new city, expose your work to a new audience, hear anecdotes of days of old, or take part in the exchange of ideas you may not be surrounded by in your own studio setting.

A few weeks before the first class I ever taught, I called my teacher Emilio Santini for advice. I was absolutely overwhelmed with the inherent responsibilities of giving students the base of knowledge for their endeavors in flameworking. In my mind I needed to give 110 percent, and the students needed to leave the class with everything I knew and the ability to put it into practice. He said that if the students leave with even 10 percent of what I've taught them then the class has been a huge success. This rings truer and truer to me, as I find myself taking classes simply because I enjoy the instructor's personality or want to make a professional connection with the faculty at a certain facility.

With all these benefits in mind, I am concerned about the lack of enrollment that has forced so many schools to cancel classes. As a flameworker whose career is indebted to professional craft schools, I am extremely interested in why it is happening and what we, as a community, can do to remedy the situation. I've prepared a few questionnaires designed to gather as much information as possible regarding the many aspects of education in flamework. With input from teachers, school programming directors, and students

of all experience levels, we could apply the results in an effort to repair this downward trend. The questionnaires will remain online until May of 2009, when I will post the results on the e-newsletter of the *Flow* plus several websites and Web forums and will have a report on hand at the Glass Art Society conference in Corning, New York, the next month. There are three surveys designed for schools, teachers, and students. Many flameworkers will fit into multiple categories, so feel free to fill out any survey that applies to you. They can be found at:

- tinyurl.com/67m4c9 (students and hobbyists)
- tinyurl.com/4m3mer (teachers)
- tinyurl.com/4slppl (programming directors of public and private studios and schools)

E-mail me at eskuche@hotmail.com with any insight or commentary that the surveys fail to cover. I look forward to seeing your responses.

As I grow within the flameworking community, I clearly see the importance of attending every conference, class, lecture, slide show, or demonstration that we can. Many flameworking artists might be content to get their information from step-by-step tutorials in magazines, online sources, local private studios, through self-teaching, or just through the grapevine. While I don't qualify these methods as substandard, I invite us to look at the benefits offered by a class with an established teacher at a professional craft/glass school such as Penland, Corning, or the Pittsburgh Glass Center. I chose those three schools to exemplify the social experiences they create as well as the potential they offer in delving into your medium in a way that just can't be duplicated outside of their environs. Of course, there are many other schools that will fulfill similar criteria and still others that rise to the top in their own specific ways.

Penland offers things such as a campus living situation where you stay in cabins very near your studio, eat all your meals together with the other students and teachers, and have access to the studios twenty-four hours a day. Another opportunity that Penland affords is the chance to drop in on the many studios and converse with the students and teachers about their mediums, which include clay, wood, metals, blacksmithing, drawing, fiber, screen printing, and photography. There is also the anticipated opportunity to visit Shane Fero's studio a half a mile down the road for a demo and

hear some humorous anecdotes surrounding flameworking's varied histories.

At Corning, students have access to a state-of-the-art facility with tools, technologies, and assistants there to aid the students and teachers with any application of the medium they can think of. Attached to the studio of Corning is a museum of extraordinary glass objects, both historical and contemporary. It is held as one of the most dynamic and important glass museums in the world. A few hundred feet from that is the Rakow library, which has amassed one of the most comprehensive collections of books, periodicals, images, videos, and other glass-related reference materials. At any time, whether a student or not, you can go into the Rakow library and request information on a specific topic, and before you know what hit you they will roll out a cart with just about every book, video, or article on that subject.

The studios of the Pittsburgh Glass Center are filled with every piece of equipment you could hope for, hosting possibly the best flameworking and cold working studios in the country. With floor-to-ceiling windows, air conditioning, and a dozen Herbert Arnolds, plus a kiln and ventilation for each student, the flame shop is in a category of its own. As far as the cultural aspects, after living in Pittsburgh for four years I still am finding unique little corners of the city filled with character at seemingly every turn. Added to that is its storied industrial history, many museums, a theatre district, restaurants of every cultural descent, botanical gardens, a zoo, an aviary and its many expansive parks.

All of these schools also share something that holds great import for those seeking to educate themselves—knowledgeable, established teachers with years of experience informing their educational

practices. For the last few decades, it has been these and similar institutions that have provided the venue for the legendary makers of flameworked glass to share their knowledge of the history and technique of flameworking. We must give our steadfast attention to keeping classes and programs of their merit alive and well. Without patronage to the schools that host experienced, knowledgeable teachers, I fear we risk slowly diluting the historical content and technical methodology of our medium. In the not-too-distant future, many of the legends of flamework will reach a time when their roles as educator will be passed on to the next generation. I fear we will suffer if we haven't milked them of everything they have to say and seen everything they know to do a hundred times over with an eagerness to carry those traditions on. The generation of flameworkers who have been working for five or ten years now will soon be the group who are leading the way for the folks who just saw a lace schooner demo at the mall yesterday. Outdated example maybe, but it goes straight to my point. What better way to learn of that specific aspect of flameworking lineage than to hear it directly from Ray Olson, Emilio Santini, or Lewis Wilson while speaking of the horrors of their mall gigs at a class or conference?

As a teacher, student, and witness to the state of contemporary flameworking, it pains me to see courses cancel, teachers reconsider scheduling classes, schools slim down their offerings, and beginning students lose out on the chance to study. There are many bright people coming into the world of flamework every day. Hopefully we all will contribute, through study and in teaching, to the burgeoning growth of flamework while keeping strong ties to its history.

FLOW

matteskuiche@gmail.com

