

# The 2007 Art Glass Invitational

by Bandhu Dunham



The Glassblowing Center in Hilliards, Pennsylvania, is a school and tourist destination that is a bit off the beaten track. With a gift store and glassblowing demos, they attract those traveling in their rural county as well as local groups such as scout troops and school children. Once a year Tom and Elaine Doner host their Art Glass Invitational, which is a sort of glass camp where lampworkers of all stripes and experience levels mingle and learn from each other. Their motto is, “We are all students, and we are all teachers.” The schedule includes technical talks from suppliers and other experts in the field, as well as demonstrations by top-notch lampworkers from around the country, even around the world. Events go on for about a week, with most of the attendees camping on the property in tents or their cars, with others staying in local motels or bed-and-breakfast inns.

Several buildings on the campus are set up with dozens of workstations around their circumference, and the large central building houses most of the demonstrations. Throughout the days and late into the nights until mandatory shut-down at 2:00 a.m., participants practice new and old techniques, trade tips and tricks, and generally cross-pollinate their skills.

## Monday, August 20

On Monday morning, the participants gathered to set up their blowing stations and renew old acquaintances. After an orientation from Tom (aka “Mr. Wonka”) at four thirty in the afternoon, Roger Parramore had a demo at about five. He made a lidded goblet and discussed his philosophy of design as well as giving a number of valuable, subtle tips while he worked. Roger likes to think of his designs in terms of the flow of lines and the relationships between lines within the work, as well as the negative space around the work. He also asserted that the goblet is an intrinsically feminine form and that you will see contours and proportions from the female body in any classically designed goblet. Additional tips and comments from Roger’s demo included:

*If you want to know how to do a thing, you must first have a complete desire to do that thing. Then go to kindred spirits—others who have wanted to do that thing—and study their ways and means, learn from their successes and failures, and add your quota. Thus you may acquire from the experience of the race. And with this technical knowledge you may go forward, expressing through the play of forms the music that is in you and which is very personal to you.*

—Robert Henri, Painter

- When preparing the components of a goblet, marver a nub on the top of the foot and the bottom of the bowl to a tight, symmetrical cone. This makes it very clear where center is when you make actual connection. Furthermore, when making the final joint, push the taper of the clear nub up into the softened glass of the stem so that the stem glass spreads slightly and flows around the clear to form a nice raised edge. Getting this right takes some finesse so that excessive stresses are not introduced. An advantage of this method is that within the joint the interface between the two glasses is therefore cone shaped rather than a straight plane across the width of the stem. This somewhat reduces the chances of failure at the joint if there are any slight differences in the COE or other properties, as there almost certainly are if the colors are different.

- When preparing the lid for a goblet or other vessel, take a caliper measure across the opening in two directions (that is, measuring 90 degrees apart) and use the wider measurement. Then when preparing the bubble that will become the lid, make the diameter one centimeter less than the measurement of the vessel. This will allow five millimeters on each side of the lid’s inner rim for the best fit.

- One of Roger’s mottos is to remove as many variables in one’s working technique as possible in order to develop consistent results. For this reason he eschews the use of points, preferring to set up sections of tubing for each of the goblet parts with a hollow blowtube/handle made of 1/2" medium-wall tubing.



## Tuesday, August 21

The studios were opened each morning by about eight for people to work, although most slept in, having been up blowing glass and socializing into the wee hours the night before. Three or four demos were scheduled each day starting around noon. My first presentation on Tuesday was a digital slide show of my work and a talk about some of the ideas of my hero, the painter and teacher, Robert Henri.

That evening Deborah Carlson led one of her “playtime” sessions in which she exposes the audience to some basic exercises and experiments designed to energize their creativity. We had spoken ahead of time and agreed that our presentations would complement each other. At previous AGIs, she’s had students play games such as creating a collaborative piece, with each participant having only five minutes on the object. This year’s activities included some free-form drawing and the creation of sculptural objects based on a randomly chosen word or phrase. A number of participants later said that the exercises made a deep impression on them.

This year’s AGI had been limited to sixty-five people, and guests continued to arrive in a steady stream over the next couple of days. I was glad to see a number of friends and former students as well as a lot of new faces. It was mostly a younger crowd in their twenties and mostly borosilicate workers, but there was a good mix that did include some seasoned veterans. There was an entire studio, the Moretti Building, that was dedicated to soft glass where people were making beads and other objects out of soda-lime glass. The feeling of community was inspiring, and there were plenty of opportunities for people to mingle and bond throughout the week, drifting in and out of each other’s workspaces and gathering at the Grill or around the campfire.

## Wednesday, August 22

A noon presentation on glass adhesives was sponsored by Loctite. I was impressed with the range of adhesives and fillers that are now available for the glass artist. Technology in this area has really advanced in the last few years.

The presenter for the talk scheduled at three o’clock had a family emergency—the birth of a grandchild, fortunately—and was suddenly unavailable to give that talk. Roger Parramore and I were asked to fill in and share what we knew about working with galleries and wholesale markets. There were a lot of good questions, and audience members also shared some of their experiences from the “school of hard knocks.”

In the evening, Roger and I each had demo slots. Roger’s vessel was a simple miniature version of the tall vessels he had been making recently. He described it as a study, useful for evaluating different proportions on a small scale. The piece he made was big enough—over two feet high—but the finished works in this series are as tall as fifty-one inches and decorated with a layer of colored glass powder that gives them a more ceramic-like finish.

And now for some shameless self-promotion. For my own demo, I showed off some of the techniques that I have developed for making mechanical contraptions out of glass (to be covered in my next book). I brought out some of the jigs I make out of kiln shelves and showed how they ensure perfect alignment between mechanical parts so that the moving pieces don’t jam or break. These techniques can also be used for nonmechanical sculpture when you need to make repetitive components or ensure that parts have a consistent geometry. I showed how I put together parts for a marble elevator, a kind of staircase that marbles march up when you turn a crank. For those of you who are interested, I will be teaching a class at Pilchuck in May of 2008 that will focus on kinetic glass sculpture, including marble machines, steam engines, and other simpler devices that anyone can make.



## Thursday, August 23

By Thursday morning the rain had mostly cleared away. At noon Robert “Robbin” Mickelsen gave a slide talk and demonstrated the beginning stages of a graal-decorated goblet. His demo was divided into two sessions, so he completed it on Friday. Readers of *The Flow* will already be familiar with the details of Mickelsen’s use of the graal technique, but several points bear mentioning:

- Since his recent article in *The Flow* about graal, Robbin has changed the specific mask material that he uses and is getting more reliable results. According to the manufacturer, the material does not have a shelf life, but the artist does not necessarily agree with this assertion.

- Mickelsen says that even with all the sandblasting he does, he has never owned an air compressor. Instead, he uses bottled nitrogen from the welding supply store. It is quiet and eliminates the space and maintenance needed for a compressor. Bottled nitrogen, however, is also completely without moisture, which can make the abrasive clump and clog the blaster. A K-tank will run a sandblaster at carving pressures for about fifteen minutes, so it is not a cheap option in that respect. If you choose to go this route, you will be better off getting a pot compressor system rather than a siphon-fed type, because this kind uses the least volume of air or, in this case, nitrogen. I’ve always used a compressor, but bottled nitrogen seems as if it could be a good option if your space is limited or you have grumpy neighbors who don’t like the noise a compressor makes.

- Robbin applied a tiled pattern to the goblet he made for his demo. In this case, it is important that the blanks be perfectly cylindrical so that the edges of the mask will line up properly. When blowing the blank, bring the ends up to size first and then the middle section. This gives a neater and more controllable result.

- The manufacturer of the photosensitive masking material that Mickelsen uses recommends an exposure time that is longer than necessary. Robbin says thirty seconds is plenty and gives a better result. And if you use the exposure machine that he recommends, don’t trust the built-in timer. Time it by your own watch.

After the first phase of Mickelsen’s demo, there was a brief ceremony in which the Glass Blowing Center’s Bar and Grill was dedicated in his honor. We had each received commemorative coasters, and now lunch and cocktails were served in honor of the event.

Later in the afternoon Doni Hatz gave a presentation to the group about her recent trip to Murano where she spent several weeks studying with Cesare Toffolo at his studio. She had some great pictures and video footage of the maestro at work, including his gold leaf stuff-and-puff and his version of *retticello* made with ribbed tubing.

In the evening Matt Eskuche demonstrated several pieces from his “White Trash” series. These are thinly blown vessels made to resemble crumpled beer cans, soda bottles, juice jugs, and other containers one might find in the garbage. The individual objects that Matt blows are mind-bendingly realistic in their form and detail. It has taken him a lot of experimentation to develop the techniques to mimic the bends and folds in discarded plastic bottles in a convincing way without causing cracks in the finished work. When the individual vessels are grouped together, they make a dramatic statement not only about our garbage but about this one lampworker’s skill as well.

The evening concluded with an outdoor demo by Marcel Braun of Living Glassworks. Marcel demonstrated the use of one of his presses for making a large section of ribbon cane. He made relatively quick work of producing a three-foot length of cane that was over one-inch wide by one-quarter-inch thick with multicolored stripes and two layers of dichro thrown in for good measure.

Visit “Articles” at [www.theflowmagazine.com](http://www.theflowmagazine.com) for AGI events from Friday and Saturday and Dunham’s favorite quotes from Robert Henri.

You can get more information about the Art Glass Invitational from Tom and Elaine Doner (aka the Wonkas) at:

The Glass Blowing Center  
114 Leonard Rd.  
Hilliards, PA 16040  
724-791-2100  
[www.Glass123.com](http://www.Glass123.com)

*Bandhu Dunham is the author of Contemporary Lampworking, the definitive how-to text on shaping glass in the flame. He teaches lampworking internationally, and his work is in museum collections around the world. His other books include Formed of Fire and Creative Life. This article is excerpted and adapted from the next volume in his Contemporary Lampworking series, which has no publication date scheduled as of this printing.*

[www.salusglassworks.com](http://www.salusglassworks.com)

