

Lunar Cycle Glass School and the Borosilicate Art Expo by Kienan Tiemeyer

The country and culture of Japan are very different from our own. It is hard to believe that barely more than sixty years ago we were mortal enemies fighting for ideologies that could not find a common ground. In a short period of time, our hostility towards one another has quickly faded into the past and the relationship between the U.S. and Japan has become intricately intertwined.

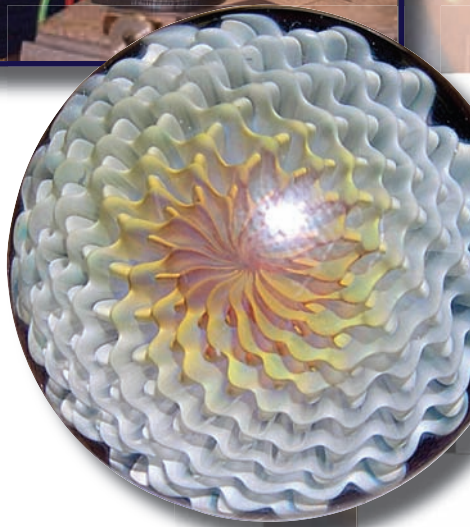
It is amazing how the American influence has been integrated into the Japanese culture over the past sixty years. Even more so is the effect that Japanese technology has had on our lives. Yet there are many differences that separate the two countries, and the challenges that face the visitor from the West in the Land of the Rising Sun can be daunting.

The list of challenges when visiting Japan is long. The time difference, especially for east coasters, is the least of the problems that face the American visitor. To understand the intricate cultural nuances could take a lifetime. The language barrier, especially in a workshop setting, can be frustrating even with a competent interpreter. While the cuisine of Japan is interesting, to say the least, it is unbelievably hard to find a Taco Bell, and to eat as a vegetarian is a huge challenge, if not nearly impossible. Fortunately when it comes to borosilicate flameworked glass, much of what separates their Eastern culture from that of the West fades away and a wonderful common ground is found. This common ground and the unique character and culture of the Japanese people made my visit to Japan well worth the effort.

While flameworked boro has been used in laboratories for decades in both countries, it has taken a special group of people on both sides of the Pacific Ocean to advance its popularity and collectibility. Those involved in the production of glass pipes have created a borosilicate “scene” in the U.S., and the same is true for Japan. If it were not for this group of like-minded people, I would not have felt so comfortable in a foreign land.

Late in 2005, I was asked by Yishai Dror if I would like to come to Japan and teach a series of classes at his Lunar Cycle Supply & School in Kashiwa just outside Tokyo as well as attend his second annual Borosilicate Art Expo (BAE). The opportunity to travel to Japan was enough, and the opportunity to teach only made it better. I had been blessed four years earlier to have made a contact with a store owner in Osaka and had been selling my work there ever since. I realized that there was a thriving glass scene in Japan. Ultimately, I had little idea of what the scene was like over there. It is more positive than I could have imagined, and the enthusiasm of the young flameworkers is overwhelming.





The boro scene in Japan right now is very similar to what it was in the U.S. about six years ago when I got into glass. They are just now gaining access to more brands of clear and colored glass. The availability of quality tools is increasing. The “senior” members of the boro community have about five to seven years of experience. Many of them have spent time in the U.S gaining their base knowledge of glass from Bob Snodgrass. The more experienced lampworkers, such as Takahashi of Spiral Arts Glass, have passed on their knowledge to the newcomers. More recently, a number of schools and private studios have begun to offer beginner courses and a limited number of advanced workshops. There is an increasing number of people dedicated to promoting flameworked borosilicate art and exposing it to a larger number of mainstream glass and art lovers.

One of the primary people involved in promoting boro art glass in Japan is Yishai Dror. In 2004 he founded Lunar Cycle Glass School and eventually began supplying raw glass and tools. In 2005 he also held the first annual Borosilicate Art Expo (BAE) in Shibuya, Tokyo. Bob Snodgrass was the featured guest along with Corbin Freeman and Wes Chumley. This year the event was larger, as was the number of people involved.

There were a dozen or more Japanese artists displaying their work for sale along with five American artists including Amber Pellegrini, John Kobuki, Josh Sable, Filip Voegelpohl, and myself. The “Edge” warehouse where the event was held consisted of



two large exhibitor rooms with a separate demo area that had an upstairs lounge where music was constantly playing. Throughout the two-day event, there were ongoing flameworking demonstrations by the Japanese and American artists along with Keith Bryan of Walt Disney World, Tokyo. Two demo tables were running at the same time along with multiple video screens so everyone could watch the action. A number of collaborations took place between the artists performing demonstrations. Filip and Diasuke Saito collaborated to make a beautiful spoon (tableware). I teamed up with Gen of Shanti Glass to make a three-piece bracelet that turned out to be very nice. John Kobuki and Josh Sable incorporated their signature styles into a double-sided marble that was stunning. I could not imagine having the opportunity to collaborate with a Japanese artist, much less to blow glass in Japan, without the BAE.

I found it interesting that Japan's glass market is primarily made up of functional items. Pendants—pendant tops, as the Japanese call them—are the primary production piece of the Japanese lampworker. I saw very few items for sale at the BAE that did not serve an immediate function. There were pendants (although almost no beads), spoons (tableware), hanging lamps, letter openers, bracelets, incense burners, and pipes. While there were some marbles, they were by far the minority.

Even though a good number of artists make pipes, the scene is not developed to the degree that it is in the U.S. Many of the artists I talked to mentioned that they hope to be able to make a living from high-end glass pipes in the future, but for the time being the market is limited. Because pendants are a fashion statement as well as an expression of an individual's personality, they attract a much larger group of people outside of the hemp/glass pipe culture. The interesting thing about the pendant market in Japan is that it seems to be thriving, because it is a functional item as well as a fashion statement. Fashion is very big in Japan no matter what group of people you associate yourself with. In a lot of ways, the pendants that people choose to buy are a reflection of their own style.



The BAE is the first annual event of its kind that focuses specifically on borosilicate glass. Yishai's philosophy is that boro should be available to the masses. He realized that not only is borosilicate

glass underexposed in Japan, but in the past it has been fairly inaccessible to the average middle-class Japanese. The price of raw glass and tools is almost three times as much as in the U.S., thus limiting the number of people who can afford to buy the finished work as well as creating their own. It is exciting to see a young scene growing in similar ways as it has in the States.

With continued enthusiasm and support of those already involved with boro in Japan, it is not hard to imagine things expanding over the next few years. I feel honored to have had the opportunity to visit Japan as well as participate in promoting boro art through BAE and Lunar Cycle Glass School. I felt very welcome among my fellow glass enthusiasts. It is nice to know that no matter how cultures and their people differ, there is a mutual love of glass. There is enough common ground for people of the world to come together and have a *really* good time. I can only wish everyone involved with boro art in Japan the very best, and I look forward to seeing the work that comes out of Japan in the future.

