

Pino Signoretto— Maestro of Murano

by Andrew Glenn Gudger

Maestro Pino Signoretto walked into the Eugene Glass School (EGS) the morning of January 12, 2009, by the side door, next to the furnace, and all that I and the other students could do was applaud. Here in our midst was a glass art genius who had come to share his talents with us.

Unique Giftedness

Pino began working with glass when he was nine years old, being put to work at the furnace next door to his house. He credits his mother with recognizing artistic talent in him at a young age. All of our moms tell us that our drawings are great, but Pino insists that his mother actually meant it. While working in a factory on the island of Murano, Maestro Alfredo Barbini saw in Pino a talent that he said was only born once every hundred years. By the age of fifteen, Pino was himself given the title of Maestro and began a career that has spanned the better part of a century and has seen him execute work for a myriad of designers including such artists as Picasso and Chihuly. Pino is the man who brought the glass sculpting bible off of the island of Murano and shared it with the world.

Every year when Eugene Glass School officials set the schedule, they would call the Maestro to see if a class were a possibility. Persistence and the right circumstance paid off, and just at the school's tenth birthday, Pino agreed. With only a few months' notice, EGS quickly sold out two, fifteen-slot, six-day classes for January 2009. The Maestro had his friend and prominent glass caster, Pino Cherchi, EGS artist-in-residence Michael Hengler, and Carina Cheung assist for him and help with translation. Jasen Johnsen took time off from working with his wife Karen and came down from Washington to run pole, and students would crowd around for the opportunity to run doors and be a part of the action. The Maestro would demo every morning starting at eight. Then after lunch the students, in three-person teams, would do two-hour shifts on the five different benches.

EGS went to great lengths to dial in the hot shop for the Maestro's visit, outfitting the shop with brand new blow pipes and punties from Spiral Arts and a new 200-pound Denver Machinery electric furnace in the shop to complement the new 500-pound Charles Correll furnace built in a class at EGS last year. Industry leaders donated gear, with Skutt loaning color pots, Spectrum the color to fill them up, and Gaffer Glass giving frits and powders for the Maestro and students to play with. The opportunity to work with hot color was a treat for all of us, and the variety of available colors allowed Pino to demonstrate many different color application techniques. He was fond of the Spectrum Ivory, most of the time rolling gold leaf onto the outside, and would also go on to blow the minds of many students by layering powders to create lifelike colorations for his animal sculptures.





Experience of a Lifetime

I would look around during the demos feeling as if I must be in a dream, and the other students would have just as much awe on their faces as I was feeling. Pino would never waste a step, sculpting the glass hot and quickly. To give you an idea, to get warmed up on the first morning he made a female figure, a male torso, and a cherub resting on a rose. The pace at which he worked was phenomenal. The beauty of the work could not be described by my words and can better be appreciated online at Eugene's website in the store section. On the last day of the first class, the students returned from lunch to have Michael announce that Pino was having fun and was going to keep working until he was tired. He worked the rest of the day, and even the students who had made big plans for their last blow slots felt giddy to be honored to see the Maestro work just a little while longer.

Most days, Pino Cherchi would cook a large Italian meal for the Maestro at the far end of the building, causing amazing smells of marinara and risotto to waft through the hot shop as the Maestro dazzled our eyes with his brilliance. The length of Pino's demos were often determined by when the meal would be ready, with the Maestro's team retreating to the gallery to eat as the students disbursed to feed and get ready for their blow slots.

Pino was more excited about working than any of us. He truly loves the medium, relishing the opportunity to be free to create and teach, infusing the studio with a charged artistic atmosphere, feeding off our excitement and intensifying it. The demos in the second session would reflect that the Maestro's comfort level was increasing, becoming larger and more complex as he spent more time in the shop.

It was intoxicating to sit with the Maestro and listen as he spoke Venetian, with Michael translating, speaking about his passionate love affair with glass and his experiences throughout his storied career. Students kept asking if there were anything he had been unable to make out of glass, and all he would do was chuckle and say "money," a testament to all of our struggles and the dedication that it takes to keep working glass—even for the greatest.



The Celebration Continues

The Sunday after the second class, EGS threw its tenth anniversary party, and the Maestro was kind enough to stay and do a demo for the community. The crowd looked on as the Maestro, clad in an EGS T-shirt, made a octopus attacking a scuba diver. This was a second attempt after a similar sculpture hit the floor moments before completion as the last piece of session 2—the only one to do so in the entire two weeks. After flawless execution, Pino would go on to make a horse with the sounds of local musicians, The Conjugal Visitors, picking in the background. The Maestro from Murano was blowing glass to some live, down-home Eugene bluegrass. EGS had come of age, and we saluted all of the people who got us here in the best way we knew how—with eating and drinking our fill, beautiful music, epic glass, and a joyous celebration of the medium we all hold so dear.

This August, Pino's master coldworker, Loris Zanon, is already scheduled to come to EGS to teach. We must have done something right, because the Maestro has decided to join him and return to Eugene to teach for three more weeks as well. This class was a more amazing learning and life experience than I could have ever imagined. If you work hot glass and can possibly take one of the upcoming classes, you should. I will see you there, as my spots in both the hot and cold sections are already secured.

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