

# A Journey through a Fertile Decade

The Development of Bead Artist Bronwen Heilman

It sounds paradoxical, but the desert surrounding Tucson, Arizona is suffering an unusual drought. It's been 130 days without a drop of rain. Usually the spring is cool and damp in Tucson, with the desert ground soaked and fertile with annuals beginning to grow and cactus swelling with stored water. One of the few fertile places to be is in Bronwen Heilman's small adobe studio close to the city's downtown. Within this oasis, Bronwen strives to maintain her productivity as she endeavors to be as original as she can in a medium that could be described as creatively conservative. Confined to small work surfaces characteristic of beads, and faced with a strong demand for proven designs, it is challenging to find one's own voice in glass bead-making.

Bronwen, in contrast, seems to find a way to reinvent herself almost yearly and to a degree that may appear uncompromising to many, whereas people familiar with Bronwen's art and career expect nothing less.

Bronwen as a child showed a strong interest in art and in expressing her own individuality. Her mother, a high school art teacher, remembers her drawing detailed illustrations of objects such as hands and faces. Then young Bronwen would turn the drawings into something that demonstrated her own personality, but that was unacceptable to her more traditional mother. Feeling a bit discouraged to pursue art, and encouraged more to pursue her more recognized aptitude for mathematics and drama, as Bronwen enrolled in the drama department at Arizona State University. Although she enjoyed drama, she complained to her mom that she missed not taking mathematics. She moved to Tucson and enrolled in the engineering program at the University of Arizona. Bronwen graduated with a mechanical engineering degree in 1985. Prior to this, Bronwen became involved in the local music scene and began an apprenticeship running PA systems for bands. Bronwen met her future husband (David) in a recording studio; she soon started playing percussion in David's band. As part of their band costumes they would shop the Tucson Gem and Mineral show for African trade beads. Their interest in glass beads grew as they began collecting beads. David, who worked in a biological laboratory at the time, had even made a few crude glass beads using lab pyrex stir rods, a Bunsen burner torch and colored the glass with available mineral salts. Bronwen and David's band lasted for five years and when the band broke up in 1990 Bronwen searched for an avenue for her creativity. She decided to pursue her interest in metalsmithing.

Bronwen enrolled in blacksmithing, welding and silversmithing at a local community college. She was soon setting up a small silversmith studio and creating pendants, bracelets and necklaces. Bronwen created unique pieces that generated more interest than income. Although she was frustrated and confused as to why her pieces didn't sell, she never gave up. Slowed down a little perhaps, but never gave up. While exploring the 1996 Tucson Gem show she stumbled on her first Best Bead Show. She was mesmerized. The beads were unlike anything she had seen before. She bought a minor torch, some glass rods, bead release and a video from Lewis Wilson on basic beadmaking. She rushed home, set up the torch. She watched ten minutes of the video and went to the torch to make her first bead (she still has this bead).





In two years, Bronwen had quit her engineering job to devote herself to glass beadmaking. During this time many American beadmakers were exploring the possibilities of recreating and modernizing ancient glass bead designs. Bronwen was producing beads that used enamels, dichroic glass and fuming along with sandblasting to create beads that were unique. Bronwen's early influences in glass bead design were local glass artists, Tom Philabaum and Debra May. Bronwen would watch the glassblowers work in Philabaum's studio and her early use of glass stringers was a direct result of these visits to his studio. Philabaum's work in using the Graal technique and painting on blown pieces was highly influential. Debra May was a neighbor of Bronwen's and May gladly shared her knowledge of glass sandblasting with Bronwen.

Once Bronwen became comfortable within the medium of glass she began to incorporate her silversmithing skills into her beadmaking. She used a method of cold working, or riveting, silver end caps onto her beads. She created several new designs of findings that enabled customers to wear her beads and as a result broadened the range of available designs that existed. Her designs also began to incorporate fine silver embedded into the glass itself at this time.

In 2000, Bronwen did her first show in New York. This would prove to be a major event in her career. While there Bronwen went to New York art museums and saw the original works of the great 20th century abstract painters in person. Her fascination with Kandinsky, Miro, and Picasso, to name a few, was intense and soon her beads reflected this interest. Looking for a method to paint with glass, she began to develop techniques to use a bead as her canvas. She began to experiment using enamel as paint but her first successes used glass stringers to 'paint'. With interest in Bronwen's beads growing, demand for her as an instructor grew as well. Her classes have always stressed how important it is for beadmakers to learn the basic techniques, but develop one's own voice within the medium. Struggle to find individuality that can be expressed in a glass bead. Today Bronwen still goes to art openings and museums for inspiration. "Even if I get envious and depressed by what I see at an opening, or museum I take this as inspiration. In addition, at openings I'm also inspired by the free food and wine," she says with a grin.

By 2002 Bronwen had fully developed adapting the Graal and the pickup wrap technique for painting on glass beads. She began to create her "Face" beads along with still life beads of rooms, vases of flowers, and musical instruments. She also painted "Cityscapes" reflecting her new love of the urban landscapes she found in the cities she traveled to do for shows. By 2004 her focus began to shift again to themes once again influenced by her home area in and around Tucson, Arizona and began her "Dia de los Muertos" series that she continues to create. She is also developing her "Topo" series of beads loosely based on the topographic maps of the areas her husband (a wildlife ecologist) works (see the step by step in this issue).

Bronwen continues to search for her creative muse in all aspects of her life. In addition to her glass art she has taken up playing the electric bass and plays in an alternative blues-rock band in Tucson that plays all original tunes. Her music is becoming a passion as strong as glass. As a result the influence that her music will have on her glass art is hard to predict. But it is all part of her evolution as an artist and her constant reinvention of herself.

Bronwen Heilman has been published in many major magazines and books, including Jim Kervin's : *"Bronwen Heilman: Vitreous Painting Techniques for Glass Beadmakers"*.

Bronwen teaches this technique across the world.

Bronwen can be contacted through her website:

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