

Making Pipes & Making Art by Milon Townsend



I feel that I have more to offer an advanced flameworker than a beginner, so I require that students in my classes have at least a year of experience behind a torch. This naturally leads to my having several pipemakers in each of my classes.

Pipemakers tend to have gotten into working with hot glass somewhat unintentionally, usually for the money. Nothing wrong with that! Many pipemakers find themselves, after having developed some decent skills, a little bored with the repetitive nature of production work, and find themselves looking to do something a little more artistic.

There is a very typical conversation that I have with many of my pipemaker students, one that they initiate. It goes something like this:

"Milon, I want to stop making pipes, and make Art."

"Well", I say, "it's not quite as simple as that. There are a few steps between the one and the other." Then we spend some time looking at what some of those things are.

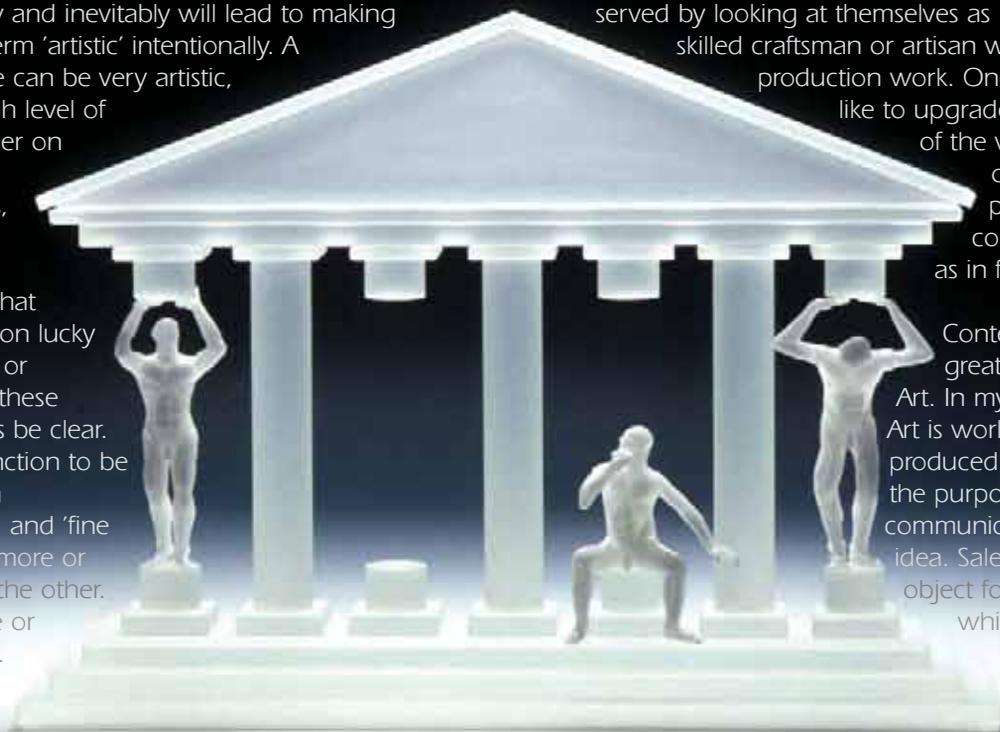
One common misconception that many pipemakers have, I think, is that their ability to make an artistic object naturally and inevitably will lead to making Art. I use the term 'artistic' intentionally. A well made pipe can be very artistic, with a very high level of decoration either on the surface or inside the glass, with colored patterning and special effects that dazzle the person lucky enough to see or handle one of these beauties. Let us be clear. There is a distinction to be made between 'decorative art', and 'fine art'. Neither is more or less valid than the other. Neither is more or less 'important'.

I have often thought that the well made decorative object will have more of an impact on real people than the so-called 'fine art' object. A piece of decorative work is something that gets used in daily life, while a 'fine art' object is often accessible only in a museum or gallery.

While there is no shame in making decorative or finely crafted objects, a problem does arise when you try to pass off such an object as fine art. Although there will not be universal agreement as to what constitutes the limitations of these areas, I think that we can agree that they exist, and that it would be best to be honest as to which category your work actually fits into.

Many pipemakers believe that they are discriminated against because they make pipes. While this will sometimes be the case, I submit that this is not always the case. Often, the problem will actually be that one's finely decorated, well crafted object simply does not make it into the category of fine art. That's OK, as long as we can honestly admit it. I think that the efforts of those glass workers who want to make the transition from 'making pipes' to 'making art' would be better served by looking at themselves as being a skilled craftsman or artisan who does production work. One who would like to upgrade the quality of the work that he or she produces, in content as well as in form.

Content is the great definer of Art. In my own mind, Art is work that is produced primarily for the purpose of communicating an idea. Sale of that object for a profit, while beneficial and



desirable, is secondary to communicating the idea contained within the work itself. Production work, or 'beautiful product', is produced for the primary purpose of generation of income. Beauty in the object exists partly in order to carry the content, to support the idea in the work, but also to enhance the desirability in the mind of the prospective buyer.

Producing well-made products of quality and beauty is honorable work. You need not feel that you have to make Art in order to be successful, make a good living or be a good human being. Venturing onto the path of Art will often cost you more than it makes you, require you to endure the sometimes relentless criticism of your ideas and your artwork, bringing you success, if it ever comes at all, at a much dearer price than you had imagined.

If you truly wish to participate in the creation of Art, you'll need to look within yourself. You'll need to begin identifying the ideas and images that really move you, that resonate harmonically,, that strike a chord. Art is a series of symbols that the artist uses to express an idea. Sometimes those symbols are very familiar and identifiable; sometimes they are esoteric and mysterious.

An artist begins with the development of a vocabulary. Just as a child begins to communicate with a few basic words, and gradually adds to his or her vocabulary, so do artists develop their repertoire of symbols and images that evoke emotions or carry meaning. This is by no means always a conscious process. Over time, you will notice images and ideas that creep almost unbidden into the piece as it progresses. Things that just keep showing up again and again and again. These are the beginning components of your artistic vocabulary.

As a child begins to make sentences, they learn to use different tones of voice to communicate the more subtle nuances of emotion or idea. Also the artist develops his or her voice by combining ideas and images in various ways. The artist explores the relationships between them and seeks out the hidden meanings that are waiting to be discovered. These new insights bring about further associations. The artist grows in his or her ability to recombine and synthesize, improvising and flying



through different levels of fluency like a great musician doing a riff in a particular key.

Once you've developed your technical skills, and explored the breadth and width of your subject matter, deep understandings and epiphanies will spring into your mind at unexpected moments. This would be akin to the student of a foreign language beginning to actually think in that other tongue, and to see the world in it from the point of view of the culture in whose language he or she has been immersed.

This is artistic vision. It comes only on the foundation of technical excellence, a full artistic

vocabulary, and having developed your artistic voice. Am I speaking, yelling, or whispering to my audience in my artwork? Am I embedding hidden meanings for them to discover and explore, or am I hitting them over the head with exactly what I want them to think? Am I working within the context of dissonance or harmony? These are all artistic choices that I make, and they all affect the outcome, nature and appearance of the artwork itself.

Making art is a long-term proposition, and there will often be periods of little or no income. One must explore directions to their limits, and then perhaps redefine those limits. I believe that this is why I see so few pipemakers making the transition to art. This is neither good nor bad, it simply is.

One of the things that made a profound impact on me a number of years ago was when my friend Robert Mickelsen said to me, "If you're not making mistakes, Milton, you're not really trying." At that point in my career, the definition of a successful piece was a saleable piece. Robert's statement helped me develop a willingness to try ideas and techniques that I knew in advance might very well not work. Some of them worked out better than I thought, some of them worked out differently than I'd thought, and a lot of them ended up in the trash, but that basic change in attitude and perspective transformed my artwork and me forever.

Making art is not for everyone. I make some art, but I still make a good amount of production work, because my glasswork exists in order to serve me, and not the other way around. Making a good living is critical to my being able to live the life that is important to my family and me. Each of us has to make our own choices, based on our own goals. Designing, selling and producing a strong line of production work can be very satisfying, and offer a good living. Making production work forever will eventually lead to boredom and dissatisfaction. Making one-of-a-kind pieces all the time can be challenging as well. I find that what works best for me is to mix it up, to vary the type of work that I do so that I never get stagnant, but still make enough production work to generate a consistent income.

Finding out what other artists have done is a very useful exercise. In showing us what has been done we get new (to us) ideas, and also learn where not to go, since that's already been done. I liken the design and creation of a completely new type of piece to writing or composing a piece of music. I compare producing multiple, similar pieces to performing the same piece of music several, or many, times.

If you really think, or feel, that you want to make Art, take some steps. Make some pieces. See what really turns you on - is it form, color, narrative, or what? Are you able to sell this putative Art? Do you enjoy the process? The important thing is to understand that there is a lot more to it than "I want to stop making pipes, and make Art." Explore, experiment, develop technical skills, and figure out what you're about. All Art is to some extent auto-biographical. Be honest in your self-evaluation, and don't worry what somebody else is doing, or even what they'll think. Decide to do what's important to you, and stick to it. If you do, I guarantee that you'll grow in ways that you never imagined, and you might even make a few pieces of Art along the way.

Milon Townsend has been making & marketing his own glass sculptures for over 30 years. He is the author of 5 books, and has produced 8 videotapes. He lives in upstate New York with his family, working with a small team of highly skilled glass artists. If you're interested in reading more of his ideas, visit his publishing company's website, www.thebluemoonpress.com. You can call, toll-free, 1-866-564-4848. If you'd like to see some of his artwork, take a look at www.milontownsend.com.



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