

Glasscaster with Marcie Davis

# Marvin Lipofsky—

Sharing the Beginnings of the  
American Studio Glass Movement

*Below are excerpts from a Glasscaster interview featuring glass artist, Marvin Lipofsky. Glasscaster podcasts feature “hot glass talk in a high-tech world.” This series, hosted by Marcie Davis, can be found at [www.fireladyproductions.com](http://www.fireladyproductions.com) or on iTunes.*

## **W**as there a single moment when you fell in love with glass, Marvin?

I don't know if I ever really *fell* in love with glass. It was just a progressive thing. Most of my graduate work was in metal and clay. Glass was just starting then.

I studied under Harvey Littleton at the University of Wisconsin. My first course was a ceramics class, but I was majoring in sculpture and wanted to use clay for that end. As I walked into my very first class, which was Harvey's ceramics class, he was inviting the students to be part of the first class in blowing glass at the university, which was mainly just going out to his studio at his farm one day a week and blowing glass by themselves.

The second semester, we obtained a building near the campus, built the equipment with Harvey, and started blowing glass as an official class. Harvey gave us one demonstration—gather a little bit of glass and blow it and do this and that. Then he said, “There it is. Go do it.” That was Harvey's approach to it, and we just had to learn for ourselves. There wasn't a Lino Tagliapietra or a Pilchuck at that time. There wasn't anything except Harvey saying, “Do it,” and a couple of books. We just developed ourselves, mostly in Harvey's shadow, because that's all we knew. Harvey never was a very good glassblower. He just started it and used glass, because that's what he was interested in.

**Since everybody views you as one of the central figures of the American Studio Glass Movement, tell me a little bit about the spirit that prevailed in those early days.**

I was the first student of Harvey's to get a job in glass. Actually, I was the first person out of my graduate group of students who got a teaching position. I walked into Harvey's office one morning, and he was reading this letter. He turned to me and said, “Here's your job, boy.” I looked at the letter from Ed Rossbach, the head of the decorative arts department at the University of California in Berkeley. He was asking if Harvey would like to come out and do a workshop at the university that summer, but Harvey was becoming the chair of the art department at the University of Wisconsin, so he didn't want to go. I wrote back to Professor Rossbach saying that I was interested in continuing in higher education and would welcome the challenge to develop a glass program, and they hired me to come out. At that time in Berkeley, the department was changing from decorative arts to design. They had built a new building, the College of Environmental Design. I was the first person in this big building, and I started organizing and building the studio. My first class was made up of six women, and we built the studio together.



Autumn in L'viv Again, 1995-96 #3,  
12" x 13-1/2" x 12"

## **Did your own work continue to progress throughout this experience as well?**

Yes, I would work on the weekends in the studio. It was slow, because teaching takes a lot out of you.



1970 Royal Leerdam Glass Factory  
Leerdam, Holland  
in photo: Leendert van der Linden, Marvin Lipofsky



Above: Russian Group, 2006–2007 #5,  
10-1/2" x 12" x 11-1/2"



Right: Pilchuck Summer Series, 1988–1991 #13

**You've been all over—Yugoslavia, the Czech Republic, Russia, Finland, Japan. Can you share some of your adventures with us?**

I started traveling because I was a one-person department. Glassblowing wasn't the most important thing when I was in graduate school doing my other work, so I didn't have much of a background except what Harvey talked about. I realized that Europe was where we got our information for glass in the beginning, so I started traveling around, looking at things, meeting designers, visiting factories.



1972 Venini Factory  
Murano, Italy  
in photo: Gianni Toso, Marvin Lipofsky

**How did these various cultures influence your work?**

When I would be invited to another country, I would try to pick up on the cultural aspects of the area and adapt my work to it. Most of that came through the use of color. When I was in Hokkaido, Japan, it was springtime. The little flowers were blooming and it was surrounded by water, so there was blue. The factory where I worked, The Glass Studio in Otaru, was on a hill, so you could see the ocean and the various colors in the sky.

I also worked in the Ukraine a few times, usually in the fall, and I picked up on the oranges, yellows, and reds. I tried to use whatever color was available to me. It was my own aesthetic plus using the color that happened to be in the factory, then mixing it. I overlapped things to get different tones and color.

**You've watched the Studio Glass Movement grow up. Where do you think it might be headed now?**

People have gained tremendous skills. Of course, they've looked toward the Italians for that skill in people such as Lino. Actually, the first Italian who came to the States to demonstrate was Gianni Toso. When I met him I thought he was a lampworker but then found out that he was a master glassblower.

When we started in the early '60s, we blew glass. There wasn't any choice about that. That's what Harvey introduced to us and that's what we did. I made glass beads when I was a student, too. What we used to do there was take a piece of small copper tubing and wrap the hot glass around it, then cut it off and drop it into acid to eat the copper away. I still have some of those beads.

**You were also a part of the formation of the Glass Art Society. Do you want to tell us a little about that?**

The people at Penland—Mark Peiser and Fritz Dreisbach—organized a meeting of the glasspeople at Penland



California Loop Series, 1970 #17, 9" x 27" x 18"

*Photos courtesy of Schantz Galleries,  
3 Elm Street, Stockbridge, Massachusetts*

with the Director, Bill Brown's, approval. They called it GAS, because everybody had to use gas for their furnaces, which is not so true anymore. They had the first meeting at Penland in which people got together and blew glass and did whatever they did. At the second one, which I came to, we decided that we wanted to form an official organization. Henry Halem was, of course, waxing eloquently and became the natural nominee for president. GAS became the name of the organization.

It was extremely informal. As it progressed, there was a lawyer from New York who blew glass. He said that he would help us get our nonprofit status, but he never came through. I had been working with the American Craft Council and knew that their lawyer, Sidney Rossoff, could help us, so I grabbed him. He was in New York, so we incorporated in New York. That made us official.

From Penland we went to Fenton Glass Company. We had two meetings there where we were able to work on the floor of the factory. There always were women involved. A lot of people think there weren't any women, but there were as many women involved as there were women who were interested. The premise of the Glass Art Society was that if you're interested in glass, come join us, whether it be working, buying, researching—we didn't make any restrictions. The factory workers were kind of amazed that women were in there working or were even allowed to work, because they didn't have any women working on the factory floor at that time.

*International Glass Symposium 2000,  
Bild-Werk  
Frauenau, Germany  
in photo:  
Marvin Lipofsky, Petr Novotny*



**Is there anything that you would like to add to what you've already told us?**

I just want to thank Harvey, because he's the one who's the principal behind glass. Nick Labino was an important person, but Harvey was the one who really had the "go get 'em," and he was the one who promoted everything. Nick offered a lot of technical information, and Nick and Harvey were friends. Harvey is the guy who deserves the credit. He happened to be the guy who didn't blow glass the best, but he surely did promote the medium.



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