

CASTING FOR THE FLAMEWORKER— AN INTRODUCTION

by Milon Townsend

I'm sure that one of the first questions you're asking yourself is, "Why should I even be interested in casting glass in my kiln? Why should I step away from what I've been doing so long and so well? Why do I need that?"

I suggest that we ask ourselves a couple of other questions first. Am I a "flameworker" or am I an artist who works with glass? Am I willing to experiment, explore, and look at different ways of doing things? How long has it been since I learned a completely different technique, and what would the effect of doing that have on my artwork?

We cannot quantify what it would mean to not know and have been exposed to any of the friends who have been important to us and who have had an influence on the way that we think and interact in the world. In just the same manner, we cannot imagine what new directions and approaches working with glass in a totally different way would open up to us if we were to take a step on that path less traveled.

The Essence of Casting

Casting is different from flameworking in many ways, but one of the biggest is this: Flameworking—and blowing in the hot shop, for that matter—requires literally years of practice to develop the hand skills necessary to produce work of a reasonable level of quality and interest. Due in part to that fact, much of the work that we produce is derivative of the process, and we tend to pursue the paths opened up by our technical skills. This is not in itself a bad thing. It shapes and nudges our work inevitably in a certain manner.

Casting, on the other hand, is not at all about hand skills, per se. It is about conceptualizing and planning; it is about forming a hypothesis and testing it to see what will happen. It is much more thought oriented and will force the practitioner to create work based on ideas. I believe that this new way of thinking, when transposed into other work that we do, will give us a larger framework from which to perceive and create new work.

I consider casting to be one of the four pillars of glassworking:

- Hot Shop
- Flameworking
- Cold Working
- Casting

The Benefits of Casting

A casting can be taken from almost any object that we encounter in daily life—whether profound or profane, sacred or mundane. Making a silicone rubber mold of an object is exactly like scanning an image into your computer, after which you can manipulate and change it in many different ways.



Flameworked figure in opaque red glass. Base cast from stone in water-clear glass with red dichroic/dark gray under layer.

- Casting will allow you to create a different class, type, or nature of objects than those that are possible through flameworking. These include large, flat panels with imagery cast into the body of the piece; lighting fixtures; signs; and architectural components.

- Casting may be combined with the hot shop, the flame shop, and the cold shop, given an interchangeable, compatible system of glass.

- Casting may be useful to flameworkers in supporting and augmenting the work that they're already doing, such as creating bases and environments within which to compose their flameworked elements.

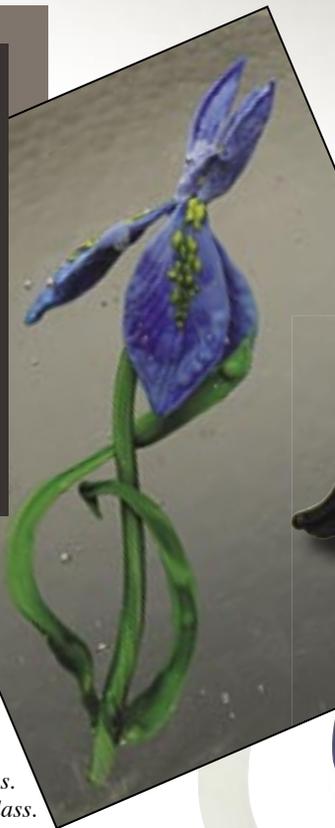
A New Journey

When we enter into a new arena of exploration, we bring with us our preexisting sets of ideas, images, and ways of working with the material. It is natural that we begin by executing work similar to that which we were previously making, or that which is related to our previous work, and simply producing it by using the new technique. Over time and through experience, however, the new process will begin to speak to us, and our observant internal eye will begin to see in new ways and create a new body of work that is derivative of the new process itself. While our earlier work was central to developing our sense of aesthetic, use of color, and overall conceptual direction, the new work will build on that and ultimately depart from it.

Some of us like to have a specific plan for developing new and different directions, while others prefer to just plunge right in and see where it takes us. I like to start with a plan but not be too attached to it so as to stay open to the happy accident, the epiphany that is a suggestion more than a statement, the whisper that must be listened for in order to be heard.



Flameworked figure in white glass. Base cast from stone and convex form in zinc gray glass.



Flameworked flower in System 96 glass. Hot-cast in compatible furnace glass.



Figure cast from flameworked original. Flameworked wings added to wax. Invested, steamed, and cast with aqua blue billet chunks.

Points of Departure

Here are some of the natural jumping off points for a flameworker who is considering casting:

- **Bases for sculptures.** Casting is extremely well-suited to the creation of a wide variety of solid, weighty objects with simple or complex color patterning. Flameworked glass objects to be mounted can even be heated and pressed into the wax from which the glass casting will be produced, creating an indentation that exactly matches the piece to be mounted on the base.

- **Cast environments within which to display flameworked artwork.** This could be architectural settings within which figures could be displayed, a coral reef for divers, or a mountain for climbers. It could be an abstract base or a component to go with a sculpture, an Art Deco–inspired design for a figure, or a casting of a quartz or amethyst crystal.

- **Castings of original flameworked artwork.** If you have developed a series of images or forms that you are adept at producing in the torch, these may be excellent candidates for casting in glass. You'd be able to work with the magic of perfect symmetry, the repetition and rhythm of identical forms, incorporate a number of images together in positive or negative relief, or use colors in a different way than is typically possible through the process of working glass in the torch.

- **Combining flameworking and casting in the same piece.** You'd be able to make flameworked components, insert them in waxes made from your silicone rubber molds, and end up with a casting that has individual and discrete flameworked parts cast right into the glass.

Getting Ready

In the next few issues of *The Flow*, we're going to explore some of the many ways that you can easily incorporate casting into your artwork. Here's what you'll need:

- Kiln with a digital controller
- Silicone rubber mold-making material
- High-temperature casting plaster mix, called investment
- Casting wax
- Turkey roaster for melting the wax
- Wallpaper steamer for steaming out the wax

The only really expensive component is the kiln, which you probably already own. As we go through the series of articles, explaining step-by-step how you can cast components for your artwork, we'll list the supplies that you'll need for each type of project.

Once you have begun to get your mind around the possibilities, you'll find that kiln casting will add an infinity of options to your existing work. Once you've gotten your feet wet and produced a number of actual cast objects, you'll find that new ideas will begin to suggest themselves to you, freeing your artistic and creative self to explore vast new areas that you'd never even imagined existed . . . Enjoy!