

Ro Purser

Father of the American Marble Movement

by Darlene Welch with Ro Purser

Ro Purser discovered glassblowing in 1967, built his first glass shop in 1970, and most importantly for the reader, made his first marble in 1973. For that single act, plus bringing the first contemporary marbles to the public in 1975, he is credited with founding the American Contemporary Marble movement. I recently had the privilege of talking with Purser, who shared his recollections of the early days of the American Studio Glass movement from its beginnings in 1962.

A Life Filled with Unbelievable Coincidences

In 1967, at 18 years old, Purser felt that working in glass was the only career choice that could possibly keep his attention for a lifetime. He recalled three events from his life that steered him toward a career as a glass artist. The first was when he was about 8 years old, and his mother bought an old Tiffany-style lamp for \$5 that introduced him to the wonders of glass art. The second was when, as a ten-year-old paper-boy, he won a free ticket to the local theater. The movie was about an Englishman who owned a glass factory. Ro watched the screen as the glass was being gathered from giant beehive furnaces, then blown and shaped, a sight that really got his “glass juices flowing” and is still vivid in his mind to this day. The third was when a friend introduced him to Richard Marquis in 1967 when Dick was a student at the University of California, Berkeley (UC Berkeley). As Purser gratefully admitted, “Unbelievable coincidences like these have ruled my life.”

In 1969, without “the blessing or the curse of experiencing a college education,” as Ro puts it, he decided to build his own glass shop. It’s hard to imagine now but at the time there were far less than a dozen private glass shops in California. Almost all the glass being blown by the Contemporary Glass movement at that time was in schools, but going to college to learn to blow glass was out of the question for Ro. He was working at the time on commercial fishing boats out of Eureka, California. Purser’s sole funding for his new glass endeavor came from selling his beloved “Flathead 80” Harley trike. He and a longtime friend who worked on another boat landed on the steps of Mills College in Oakland California because they heard there was a glass program being taught there, and they were determined to research how to build a furnace and an annealing oven. They made sketches of a small tank furnace and bought a blowpipe, a punty, and a handle shear from an outgoing student. The next day they purchased the requisite bricks and began the journey into the world of glass art.

Since there were no studio-type glass furnaces being sold at the time, Purser and virtually anyone else who wanted a studio glass shop realized they needed to know how to weld, fabricate, and build everything they needed in order to obtain one. Ro took what information he could from the 1970 glass symposium flier from UC Berkeley he was given when he bought his first bricks and built his first furnace—a diesel-fueled number with a wood base that caught on fire. “I thought three layers of bricks was enough insulation between the glass and the wood,” he said. “Ignorance is not always bliss.” Success would eventually follow, but only after a lot of trial and error. He is possibly the only person during those early days of the Contemporary Glass movement to build a glass furnace who had not first studied the process in school of how to do it.

By the time Ro got his glass shop going in Gorilla Gulch near McKinleyville, California, Richard Marquis happened to be teaching in Seattle, Washington, after receiving a Fulbright scholarship and working in Murano, Italy. Richard was the first American to truly understand and use Italian cane and murrine techniques. He was driving back and forth to Berkeley and would occasionally stop by Ro’s place on his way. A friendship formed that led to many collaborative projects including the first contemporary glass art marble in America.



Sunburst



Penguin



Arte' NeuRo

From One-Man Studio to the First Marble

Purser grew up with old stuff, had respect for it, and knew how to use it. To him, scrap yards were where the raw material to build virtually anything came from. In 1973 while he was picking up scrap metal from Arcata Salvage, he found half of an antique German swirl marble in the mud and was very intrigued by the colors and the obvious method of manufacture. Trips to an antique shop to research the marble’s origins lead him to the discovery of a picture of a German marble tool in a book. Ro now *had* to make marbles. Humble but elegant . . . simple but amazingly beautiful . . . they became his focus. He fashioned a left-handed marble tool from parts of a sheep shear, a glass “handle shear,” and part of a Harley front axle.



Ro at the Marin County Renaissance Faire



Genera Window

Ro was Richard’s assistant at Haystack School of Crafts in Maine in 1973 in preparation for an extensive European glass-related tour, and Richard knew a great idea when he saw one. He donated the colored glass and his recently learned Venetian cane techniques to the project, and the first marbles were made. At the time there was no thought of any possible financial potential. Purser simply made them because it was “the right thing to do.” That attitude changed in 1975.

The team got together again and decided the time was right for Americans to start buying handmade marbles, and the place to do that would be the 1975 Marin County Renaissance Faire. With a double-ended glory hole that they could both work from, since Ro had taught himself to blow left-handed, they were garbed in period clothing and made marbles in full view of the public. Under the name “Elgin and Carrara,” they ultimately made 2,000 to 3,000 marbles at the Faire, which they sold for \$3.50 per marble, a long way from what their glass art brings today.

In 1982, Purser and Marquis decided that they would both relocate to Whidbey Island, Washington, to produce a line of Studio Art Glass. They began working together again under the name Noble Effort Design, an enterprise that would last for seven years. This new work was sold at art galleries, museums, and prestigious craft shows including the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, D.C., and the Philadelphia Art Museum in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. This is where the very large art glass marble had its start. Murrine was a basic part of all the glass art pieces they made, and Ro had invented a way to make silhouette murrine that was more detailed than any of that type produced even in the glory days of the Millefiori Paperweights of the past. By putting every one of the individual murrina available to them at any given time in a single sphere the “Noble Effort Style Murrini Sphere” was born. Ro continues to make this style, though there are many more silhouettes involved now in each marble than there were in those days.

At the end of the Noble Effort Design run in 1989, Ro again opened his one-man studio, spending the early ’90s focusing on the problem of what to do with “post consumer recycled glass.” He pulled out old technology, molds, tiles, batch, and pressed glass, and used chemical additives to soften and improve the materials. Then due to a major life change, he left the recycled glass scene and returned to marbles in the mid 1990s.

The Heart of Ro’s Work

Ro Purser has the ability to bring a visual story to life within each marble that he creates. One of his favorite sayings is, “As long as you’re telling a story, you might as well ask a question.” He lives by this adage as he sets up the story for each piece in such a way that every viewer is free to see something different and come up with his or her own story’s end. A good example of this is one of Purser’s latest marbles, *Really Free Willy*, that challenges the viewer to choose between three entirely different planes of reference/reality and suggests a statement about the shrinking realm of our planet’s space for our wildlife. “When I made *Really Free Willy*, it took me four solid months to make the murrine alone. I pressed, cut, and ground parts. Assembled and stretched cane. Reassembled and stretched more cane. It takes a couple of days just to lay out the murrine on the pickup plate for one of those. From that four months work, I should be able to make six or seven of them.” The multidimensional aspects of the design leave something new to discover each time the piece is viewed.



Noble Effort Style Setup Plates



Noble Effort Style Marble



Really Free Willy



It’s easy to tell which float was made from which glass. The green came from Heineken bottles and the amber from pilsner bottles—all recycled glass. Blues and purples were also made. As an added touch, there is a stamped logo on each float in the form of Japanese characters that, in a little comic twist of Ro humor, actually says “ Ro Basa Made in the USA.” As Ro explained: “I’m a big fan of ‘unrequited humor.’ I would take all the seconds that would float and toss them in the ocean for people to find, wondering what the odds were that someday someone who spoke Japanese would translate the stamp for the finder!”

Purser loves getting fine art into the hands of the viewer, even when he is involved in production work, such as putting state-of-the-art murrine in pieces he designs for paperweights made by the Glass Eye Studio in Seattle, and finds a great deal of pleasure in putting things in places where peeps wouldn’t expect to find them. One great example is the fishing floats he made in the late 1970s, for his mentors in the Northern California fishing industry. “The people who gave me my start now needed glass fishing floats of a certain size. These were the people I respected most in the world. I was much happier making floats for these guys to help put food on their table than any piece of ‘glass art’ I could make that went on a shelf and hopefully gained value over the years for a glass collector.”

A Stellar Career

During his forty-four-year career in glass, Purser has explored many facets of the art, production, and history of glass. He has designed product lines and produced cast metal molds for the art glass industry, performed EPA-funded studies on the problem of how to use postconsumer recycled glass, and combined glass, metal, and wood for custom architectural applications. He has also personally produced such varied items as Studio Art Glass, editions of Early American–style commemorative flasks, glass floats for his mentors in the fishing fleet, pressed glass window tiles, Egyptian-style core vessels, marbles, and his most famous marble, *Murrini Sphere*.

Ro loves the energy that he finds in today’s boro marble makers, which he feels is the closest thing to the original energy among the glass artists who started the American Studio Glass movement. There are artists and collectors he comes across at the various shows he has attended—like the “big furry dude” he saw down at the show GooseFire Gallery in Long Beach, California, last fall—who remind him of the energy and pure excitement of 1975 Garberville Harvest Festivals. “I feel right at home with this crowd. I love being known as the ‘O.G.’ of marbles.”

An important part of Purser’s life is still found in the realm of tool making through his company, Bayport Machine. Ro told me he lives, in every way possible, in the fictional town of Bayport, home of the Hardy Boys. The artist grew up an avid reader of the *Hardy Boys* adventure series and credits not only the ingenuity of brothers Frank and Joe but their belief that “the solution to the next problem is close at hand” with giving him the attitude he’s needed to live the life he has lived. He has even given presentations about the “Hardy Boy’s theory of cosmic coincidence.”

Ro enjoys working in the machine shop in the same way that he is drawn to working with murrine. “I’m a process guy.” The machine shop in this case is a leather belt–driven line shaft shop he has been expanding for thirty years. One giant motor runs the whole shop, and the average age of the tools is 100 years old.

From his *Marble Shooter* to *Really Free Willy*, Purser continues to expand the boundaries of classic marble designs and techniques with the excellence that comes from his years as a Studio Glass artist. His work can be found in many of the finest glass collections in the United States including the Toledo Art Museum as well as the permanent collections of The Corning Museum of Glass and the Marble Collectors Society of America. Marble lovers everywhere are waiting anxiously to see what Ro Purser will come up with next.

www.ropurser.com

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