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The Ancient Skill of Glassmaking Feels New Again

Exhibitions at museums across the United States are exploring today's complex scientific and social issues through the lens of glassmaking.

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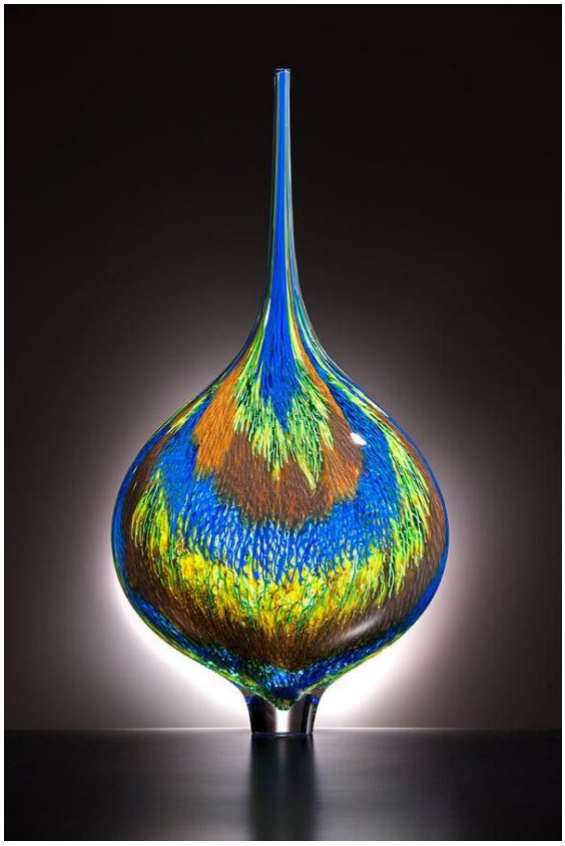


"Fuji" (2012) by Lino Tagliapietra. The Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Wash., Credit...Lino Tagliapietra, via Lino Tagliapietra, Inc.; Photo by Russell Johnson

This article is part of the Fine Arts & Exhibits special section on how the world of art and museums is pushing boundaries.

At a time when museums are looking for new ways to attract visitors, an ancient skill dating back thousands of years in the Middle East is a draw. Maybe even more than ever.

The skill? Glassmaking. The history, combined with the opportunity for hands-on experience, is fueling new exhibitions at museums across the United States that are exploring today's complex scientific and social issues through the artistry's lens.

They range from an exhibition of early 20th-century work by the legendary American glass artist Louis Comfort Tiffany, to brand-new works by Monica Guggisberg and Philip Baldwin, a multimedia artist team

based in rural Wales, which have been commissioned by the Sarasota Art Museum of the Ringling College of Art and Design.

On display at the Sarasota, Fla., museum from Nov. 15 to April 17, the exhibition of Guggisberg and Baldwin is titled “Precession Through Glass.”

“Precession,” the name of one of the artists’ newly commissioned works, refers to the slow, conical motion of the earth’s rotation axis. Their other new work, “The Cosmic Serpent,” is a 31-foot-high, mixed media sculpture made of glass and metal, which represents the DNA double helix.

Several exhibitions trace the evolution of the role of women both in the larger society as well as in the glassmaking field. The former includes an exhibition, **“Joyce J. Scott: Declarations,” at the Princeton University Art Museum**, on show through Jan. 10. The works by Scott, a multimedia artist and MacArthur fellow based in Baltimore whose practice often draws on her African American ancestry, include her 2018 sculpture “Harriet’s Rifle 2,” made of blown glass, glass beads, thread and repurposed objects. It recalls the story of Harriet Tubman, who escaped slavery and carried a weapon as she guided others through the Underground Railroad.

On display through Jan. 10 at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, N.Y., is “Tough Stuff: Women in the American Glass Studio,” the first survey of female glass artists practicing in the United States during the 1960s and ’70s.

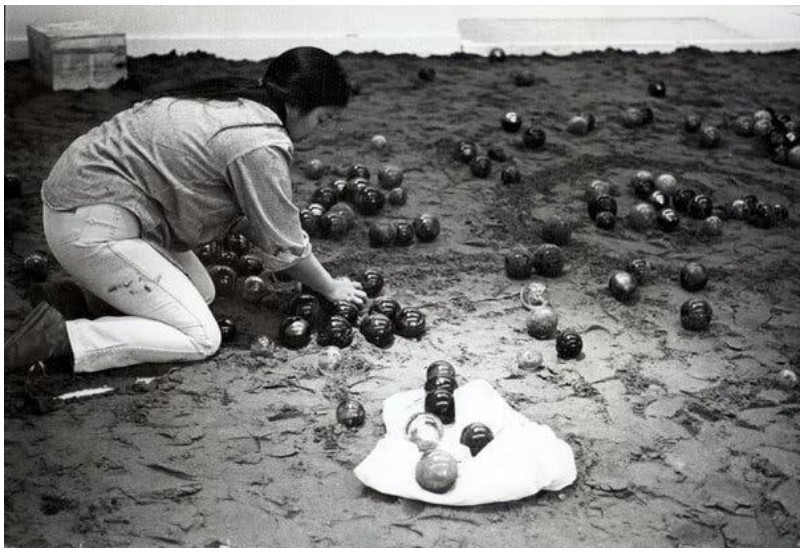


Ruth Tamura at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1967. Credit... Marvin Lipofsky Papers, Rakow Research Library/Corning Museum of Glass

The exhibition’s title comes from the 1969 master’s thesis by the glass artist Ruth Tamura, who was in the first graduating class of the glass program, started in 1967, of the California College of Arts and Crafts. Tamura wrote, with the famous glass artist Dale Chihuly, a 1971 grant that helped launch an experimental summer workshop that became the renowned Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Wash.

In a recent telephone interview, Tamura said “tough stuff” referred to molten glass, which she called “rather tough stuff.” Contrary to popular belief, she said, “it’s not precious, delicate, thin-walled.”

“With some formulas of glass, you could throw it across the room and it would bounce,” she said.



Tamura at work on an installation in 1969.Credit...Courtesy of the artist and the Libraries of the California College of Arts and Crafts

The Corning exhibition features some 200 objects made by female artists from the 1960s to today. The museum said in a statement that these acknowledge the artists' "persistence, ingenuity and influence" as well as the "wide breadth" of their techniques.

The museum is also working to engage visitors through live glassblowing demonstrations, as well as make-your-own experiences, in which people can create their own work.
The Chrysler Museum of Art in Norfolk, Va. — whose collection includes more than 35,000 works ranging from ancient glass to paintings by Jackson Pollock and Andy Warhol, many donated by the automotive heir Walter P. Chrysler Jr. — will offer a groundbreaking exhibition from Feb. 19 through June 13, titled "Woman in the Window: Tiffany's Masterpiece Reunited."

It was inspired by the 1911 Tiffany stained glass window "Woman in a Pergola With Wisteria," commissioned by the sea captain and mining financier Joseph Raphael De Lamar for his Pembroke estate in Glen Cove, N.Y. When the estate's mansion was torn down in 1968, the window's three main panels, depicting the woman, were separated from their three, smaller upper transoms. Chrysler bought the three main panels and gave them to the museum in 1978; in 2021, the museum's curator of glass, Carolyn Swan Needell, recognized the lost transoms in photos on Twitter. The museum acquired them this year, and collaborated with conservators and curators at the Metropolitan Museum of Art to repair and integrate the complete set.

Needell discovered in her research that the artwork depicts the early 20th-century American opera star Lillian Nordica, shown in the window as the heroine of Verdi's opera Aida. In an interview, Needell called Tiffany's portrayal "particularly rare" because "it depicts an identifiable, historic figure," rather than the allegorical or religious figures typically depicted in his windows.

De Lamar was in love with Nordica and proposed marriage to her twice; she declined but the two remained friends. The window in the exhibition "immortalized his lifelong and unrequited love," Needell said.

This exhibition will feature not only the recently reunited Tiffany window, but also correspondence between De Lamar and Nordica; her period attire and jewelry; photos of her in opera costumes; and a Louis Vuitton trunk she used when she toured.

(The Metropolitan Museum is featuring the panels and transoms of Chrysler's Nordica window in its current exhibition, "Designing the Gilded Age: Drawings from the Studios of Louis C. Tiffany," on display through Feb. 7, and featuring almost 120 of the artist's design drawings.)

The Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Wash., began work on its first renovation project in the second quarter of this year; the project, budgeted at $25 million, is scheduled to be completed by December. Established in 2002, it owns more than 2,000 international objects dating from the late 19th century to today.

One of the museum's main efforts is the creation of what it is calling the "immersive Lino Tagliapietra Legacy Gallery," dedicated to a gift of 175 works and installations from Tagliapietra's archives. The 92-year-old artist, born in Murano, Italy, worked at the Archimede Seguso and Galliano Ferro glassworks in Murano as a teenager and young man, and taught at the Pilchuck Glass School from 1979 through the '80s. From the late 1980s through the mid-1990s, he worked for Chihuly and began concentrating on producing his own art, spending 45 years in the Pacific Northwest and completing 19 residencies at the hot shop, the museum's working glassblowing studio.

The first exhibition in the artist's new, 4,000-square-foot gallery will open Dec. 12 and feature overlapping series of glassworks made from 1998 to 2023. The museum said in an exhibition overview that its more than 50 works will "demonstrate the sculptor's brilliant inventiveness, including the dynamic use of line and gesture, surface textures, complex lace-like patterns and intense color."
Susan Warner, the museum's curator of education and legacy projects, said the exhibition will be on display for five years, with works refreshed periodically.

Discussing the new glass exhibitions, Andrew Page, editor of Glass Quarterly, a magazine published by UrbanGlass, a nonprofit glass center in Brooklyn, suggested that each explored a different aspect of "the incredible possibilities of a single material, from the Tiffany window from the early 20th century, to Tagliapietra's Murano techniques, to Joyce Scott's highly personal meditations."

He added that "Tough Stuff" was noteworthy as a corrective to the incomplete history of glass as a material for art.

"The record is being addressed and expanded from the story of a few great men creating the glassblowing movement in America to the many participants, many female, who were not there in the initial telling, but who are now being included retroactively," he said. "This is a very important step for capturing the full story."