

The Legacy of Stephen Rolfe Powell: Apprenticing with a Master

Brook Forrest White, Jr.

Stephen Rolfe Powell's passion for glass is so great that he actually leads a double life. His day job is that of an award winning college professor whose classes are among the most popular on campus. His not-so-secret other life is that of a highly respected and sought after glass artist who thrives on the roar of the glass furnace and having the blow torches turned wide open. To achieve great success in just one of these "lives" would be remarkable for most people. The ability to excel at both could be called "just being Steve".

Stephen's work has made him an internationally renowned artist, and he is widely considered one of the top glass artists in the world; but perhaps his most defining moment occurred in 1985 when he created the very first hot glass program at Centre College in Danville, Kentucky. That small glassblowing studio provided Stephen the resources to create his signature glass art, and allowed him to share his love of glass with his students. It is also significant that almost 20 years would pass before any other university or college in the state of Kentucky would offer any glassblowing / hot glass classes.

In the early days of glass classes at Centre, besides the furnace (where the molten glass is stored for pick-up on the blowpipe) and the glory hole (where the glass is heated to be kept hot enough to work), there was only one small blowtorch used to heat the pattern and the mold. As his work grew in size, so did the size and number of torches utilized throughout the process. All that fire, along with the essential beat of the loud and ever present music, continues to generate a rather exciting show for the numerous spectators.

Stephen's process for creating breathtaking glass art is a performance that explodes with color and passion. The hot glass studio team has to be incredibly focused on the process because timing is critical. There is little room for error when Stephen gathers 30 + lbs. of molten glass on the end of a 5 foot metal blowpipe and then, with deft accuracy, applies his trademark pattern of colors to the surface. The atmosphere literally heats up as the final move approaches. The last step in the process is a make it or break it situation. The crescendo builds as Stephen puts the final touches on the art and then ends abruptly as the piece is taken away to an oven to cool. These work sessions have evolved into quite a fire-driven thrill ride over the years.

Stephen's dynamic personality and sheer determination make the studio an exciting place. His natural talents in art and sports are perfectly combined for him to realize his vision for his glass artwork.

When I first began assisting Stephen, he would stand on chairs from the classroom to elevate himself high enough to blow the glass into its final form. The progression grew in size, necessitating a move up to wooden sculpture stands, but the work quickly outgrew them also. Finally, we welded together a 5-1/2 foot tall metal platform complete

with steps. Those first pieces that I assisted with stood about knee high. Ten years later, some of the pieces we made were as tall as his students.

At the end of these sessions, Stephen makes a simple yet magnanimous gesture by shaking hands with all of the team. This exemplifies his belief and acknowledgement of his assistants and apprentices in the creation of his work. Stephen further recognizes his team by listing their names on his show cards and posters. This may seem like a trivial thing to do, but in reality it is extremely rare that any artist, much less an artist of Stephen's caliber, recognizes his or her assistants in this way.

Some may wonder how a one-year visiting instructor in ceramics at a very small liberal arts college in the middle of Kentucky came to be such a force in the glass art world. However, this world renown comes as no surprise to the individuals who were lucky enough to work with Stephen over the years as his apprentices.

Working as an apprentice to Stephen is a special opportunity to learn what it takes to be a successful glass artist. Students are exposed to situations far beyond any classroom, and as apprentices, are involved in every aspect of the creation of his work from molten state to gallery pedestal. These experiences include constructing and maintaining studio equipment, performing demonstrations, traveling to galleries and museums for show openings, attending lectures and conferences and meeting other well-known artists.

Stephen has high expectations and challenges himself and others to push their boundaries. His legendary work ethic sets the pace; being on his team is not just a job, it is a commitment.

During the time that I apprenticed with Stephen, it became our mission to perform to the best of our ability every time we walked into the studio to help create his work. We came together to work harder than any of us had ever worked before in the pursuit of assisting Stephen. -He taught class during the day, and then we would come back in the evenings and on the weekends to make his personal work. The summer sessions were particularly intense with the heat and humidity of the bluegrass area adding to the sweat from the heat of the furnaces, but mixed in with all of this demanding work was a good dose of fun. Stephen's unique sense of humor provided some great entertainment. Stephen's all or nothing attitude was not for everyone, but those who weathered his hectic schedule received an incredible and invaluable experience as an apprentice. There has been a small group that has thrived on the pressure and excitement of working for Stephen.

Many of his apprentices have gone on to pursue glass on their own, and several of them have started to have influence in the glass world. Some have become assistants to other well-known artists; one is a world-renowned ancient glass expert; and two others are college professors, each heading their own glass program. A few others have operated their own private glassblowing studios, one who now co-owns the largest glassblowing studio in the Southeastern United States. Many of Stephen's former apprentices now create and exhibit their glass art across the country.

There may have been others working with hot glass in Kentucky before him, but no one has had a greater impact on Kentucky's current glass art phenomenon than Stephen Rolfe Powell. A great deal has been written about his work and its impact on the glass world. In fact, most all of the recent developments in Kentucky involving glass art can be traced directly back to him, where his advice and approval were sought well before these new projects came to fruition. The reference "Godfather of Kentucky Glass" may be a worthy accolade.

Stephen's hot glass high wire act transforms molten glass into provocative sculptures oozing color, and his energy radiates from each piece. His amazing body of glass work and his world-renowned reputation will always be his legacy; but perhaps his inspiration and influence on his apprentices will be his greatest legacy, and with all that energy swirling about, it is likely they absorbed some of it.

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