



Elizabeth Johnson *Art Glass*

BIOGRAPHY

Elizabeth Johnson grew up in rural New Hampshire, where she spent many childhood hours outdoors picking and eating the berries she loves to make in glass. In those days nature-inspired television was a rare treat, and Elizabeth has strong memories of being allowed to stay up late to watch Jacques Cousteau and National Geographic Specials. Those images of exotic fish, plants and insects made a powerful impression that still inspires her current work.

As a teenager and young adult Elizabeth studied pencil drawing and oil painting in the photo-realistic style. Early in her marriage, her husband Dean noticed how much she loved glass and encouraged her to work with it as an art medium. She began with stained glass windows. Later, Dean brought Elizabeth to see the Blaschka Glass Flowers at Harvard. Then he arranged for her to travel to Murano, where she saw the realistic glass insects made by internationally renowned flameworker Vittorio Costantini.

On her return Dean helped Elizabeth to locate her first flameworking class, during which she made two glass irises. Thrilled with the qualities of the molten glass and the potential to make extremely life-like sculptures, she set up a flameworking studio at home, where she honed her skills as her children grew up. Today Elizabeth and Dean live and work in Colorado, where the outdoors and the change of seasons continue to provide inspiration.

ARTIST'S STATEMENT

"I am fascinated by anything miniature. Great beauty, complexity and drama can be seen in the petals of flowers and the lives of insects. But my enjoyment of these tiny worlds has always been accompanied by frustration. Flowers fade, insects fly away, and fresh berries often become moldy before I have a chance to eat them. Although I can visit the underwater world of coral reefs on film or in snorkel gear, those visits are brief at best. There is never enough time to see all of the amazing details that are apparent to the tiny creatures who live there. My work in glass is an attempt to capture parts of these miniature worlds, and to freeze them in time so that they can be held in the hands, observed closely and enjoyed over and over again."

PROCESS

Flameworking is the process of sculpting glass in the 4000°F flame of an oxygen-propane torch. The Italian-made glass Elizabeth most often uses has a working range between 1,000°F and 1,700°F. In the upper part of that range, the glass can become as liquid as honey and must be constantly rotated to prevent it from dripping. Toward the lower end of the working range, the glass begins to solidify and develops plastic qualities much like clay or soft wax. The sculpture in progress must be moved back and forth in the flame to maintain it in that critical plastic temperature range. If the piece is allowed to get too hot, surface details will be melted away and the sculpture spoiled. If it is heated unevenly or cools too much, the sculpture will shatter apart, sending near-molten bits of glass in all directions.

Each object Elizabeth makes is hand sculpted; therefore no two are ever exactly alike. Variations in the surface color are achieved by carefully controlled heating and cooling, by mixing several glass colors together, or by applying vitreous enamel, which is finely powdered glass. When enamel is used, it is completely fused into the sculpture and will not rub, flake or chip off. Any stems, such as those on cherries, are embedded into the glass and are made of solid copper wire that is unfinished or has an oxidized patina. No paint is applied to any of the objects.