



Looking through the glass: do-it-yourself ornaments

by Judi Burton

Every year around this time, we dust off the old holiday box. Bows and tangled strings of lights, pine-scented candles and candy dishes sit waiting to be taken out and re-explored. The Christmas tree is perched in the corner of the room ready to be adorned with precious memories of years past. This is a wonderful ritual, during which time family members can reminisce about the stories connected to their ornaments. Some ordinary ornaments may have been bought as fillers, but many have a story to tell.

Scores of people are tired of the overcrowded malls and overabundance of pressure to buy, buy and buy more. It feels as if we have veered from the true spirit of the holidays and have been swept up into a blizzard of sales and Christmas jingles. Something new and different could be the breath of fresh air we need to enjoy the holidays again.

Eddie and Barbara Streeter of Conway Glass Center have a wonderful idea to appease the ever-growing desire to be like Scrooge and declare "Bah, humbug! They have a large glass studio set up in a fashion that allows customers to visit and blow their own glass ornaments. Yes, even your 5-year-old can make his or her very own art-

ful orb. "What a great idea," you might be thinking, and you are right.

Intrigued, I visited with the Streeters to learn more about their glass center. The showroom was a field of color and light. Prisms played off the sun that shone through stained-glass windows, producing dancing rainbows on the walls. Glass balls of all sizes and colors hung from wrought-iron chandeliers. I walked through to the back to see a humungous facility. Natural



light splashed in through the open garage doors, cooling the room against the 2160-degree furnace full of white-hot glass. A tall man and petite woman were setting up their equipment for the interview. Barbara shook my hand and ushered me in. She gave me a tour of the facility, pointing out the cooling bin, which looks like a huge stand-alone freezer. When she opened it, my breath was taken as I felt the heat emanating from it. "This has to be at 960 degrees, so that the glass can cool," she explained. "If it cools too fast, the glass will shatter. It takes about 12 to 18 hours to cool." Incredulous, I wondered how hot the glass had to be to make it melt, if it had to be cooled at such a soaring heat.

We ventured over to a small cylin-

drical-looking oven with a fire heating long steel rods. "These are our blow rods," said Barbara. "They have to be heated or else the rod cannot penetrate the molten glass. If they are cold, the glass will crystallize and shatter." To the left was a hulking furnace with a six-inch-thick door, which she opened. The heat that came out of the cooling chamber was nothing compared to this. It was like looking directly into the mouth of a volcano. I stepped back as she explained. "This is 2160 degrees from October to May. We put all of the components of glass into this furnace. There is a clay crucible in the bottom holding the glass. We dip the steel pipe into the furnace and the glass mixture sticks to it, allowing us to work with it."

Eddie took it from here. He asked me what colors I preferred for my ornament. My mother had just gotten married and her wedding colors were red and white, so that is what I chose. He took a long rod from the warmer and gave me a short lesson on the history of glass.

Glass was discovered 5000 years ago on the beaches of what is now Afghanistan. They were making pottery in a kiln that was broken down after every firing. What lay inside was a substance they had never seen before. They ran to their scientist of the time, and as soon as they figured out how it had happened, they started working with it. They fashioned clay around a long hemp rope and fired it in the kiln. The rope burned away and what was left was a blow rod. The Romans were the ones who invented the steel rod. The invention has not changed, except for a Teflon mouthpiece, which protects the glass blowers teeth. Evidently, there were many gap-toothed glass blowers in history. The reason why it worked was because the sand was the perfect consistency, much like flour.

I asked how he became interested in the art of glass blowing. He said he and his wife were visiting her aunt and uncle in South Jersey where there are more than 100 glass blowing shops.



The sand there is of the perfect consistency as well. He made a paper weight and has been saying ever since: "It was the best or the worst \$50 I ever spent." His son was attending the Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, FL, and helped them design their first furnace. He said it was a trashcan, like the one Oscar the Grouch from Sesame Street lives in.

"A lot of people think you can just toss a coke bottle into a fire and that's all there is to it." Eddie explained why this does not work. First, the sand has to be from washed silica and other components like soda ash, potash and borax (which keeps the temperature hotter for longer). Then they can add metal oxides to produce color. These can all be found in the table of elements. "It's kind of neat," said Eddie. "It's a little science, chemistry and a lot of heat all wrapped up into one amazing thing."

"So what about the coke bottle?" I asked. "I've heard of recycled glass before." He nodded and showed me two large cans full of colorful broken glass. "We recycle 80 percent of the material that doesn't make it to the showroom." Some of it is made into jewelry and some into 'eco vases.' They come out very beautiful. But this glass already has the right components; it just needs to be reheated and reformed."

He sat me down on a bench where I was to wait for my big glass-

blowing debut. I watched as he dipped a long steel rod into the furnace and pulled out a white bulb of molten glass. He brought it over to another furnace with a rod holder attached. He laid it on the holder with the glass end sticking into the fire. Twirling it, he spoke again. He explained that this is how they could keep the glass hot while working it. He pulled it back out and put the other end of the rod against his lips like he was blowing on a trumpet. The golden glass expanded. Gently, Eddie rolled the bulb across a metal table to cool the sides. He blew into it again and rolled some more. The glass was then dipped into a large metal scoop containing the white color I had asked for. He explained that he



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couldn't put both colors together at the same time. Rather, he would add the white, let it melt and then add the red. As soon as this was accomplished, it was my turn to use my expertise. He sat next to me and propped the rod across two metal arms. He nodded and as I readied to put my lips to the mouthpiece, I sucked in a lungful of air, and then blew. To my surprise, it didn't take much air at all. I could see why a child could do it. The globe expanded as he rolled it, pinching the stem with a pair of archaic-looking tongs. He brought it back to the furnace and repeated. Suddenly, my beautiful ornament was finished. He tapped gently on the cool side of the rod and it fell lightly into a padded basket. Expertly, he added a glass hook, pinch, twirled and was done. Quickly, the ornament was dropped into the cooler, and presto, finished.

After that, Eddie and Barbara entertained me with a show of making a beautiful oddly shaped bowl. They moved together as if it were a dance, Eddie leading and Barbara picking up the steps perfectly in time. Hardly any words were spoken, and I marveled

at the cooperation between them. She smiled and said, "This is when it's at its best." Eddie chimed in, "This is how Barbara and I relax." Imagine, husband and wife relaxing at work.

When they finished, I made a comment of how beautiful their Christmas tree must look. Eddie agreed, but said it was not due to their ornaments. As a matter of fact, they didn't have any of their own glass on their tree. "We make 3500 Christmas ornaments in season and every single one gets sold. We try to put them on the tree, but they never stay."

As I look back on years past, the holidays that I have the best memories



of are the ones where I put effort into my gifts. Not just searching high and low for the perfect foot massager for my grandmother Billy, but the ones where I made something. Two years ago, my mother made me a quilt and it is my most prized possession. As a kid, I can remember stringing popcorn and cranberries into a garland and being so proud of the end result. It is a satisfying feeling when you give someone a gift that was made from a piece of you. And it means so much more to the receiver. This year, even if you don't go to the Glass Center, try to put a piece of yourself into a gift for your loved one. After all, that is what the holidays are about. Love.

The Streeters invite anyone with a longing to make their own Christmas ornaments to stop by Dec. 11 and 18. It costs \$25 to make your own and \$20 for a pre-made ornament. They also host parties at their shop where you can bring your friends and all can enjoy the art of blowing glass.

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