

Amy West

Mastering the Language of Glass

by Shawn Waggoner

Amy West captures the magical quality of light experienced on the islands of Venice and Murano in vessel forms and engraved glass. The surrounding waters magnify the effects through changing surface reflections, ripples of refraction, and images from ancient cities cast upon a vast and changing mirror. Every season, every stage of the sun and moon, delivers mystical wonder. "Having my coffee early in the morning, it's not uncommon to hear blue-collar workers discussing the quality of light coming from the furnaces or the angle of the light as it filters through the glass of a window. In the beginning, I was amazed by that."

West has studied, worked, and lived on four continents. After 20 years as an international communications professional, she left behind a successful corporate life to pursue her passion for the art and beauty of Venetian glass. In 2005, she began an apprenticeship to learn glass engraving with Luigi Camozzo, master engraver and sculptor. "My nine years working with Luigi and learning about glass through his eyes has taught me that on Murano, glass is a living entity."

With humor and patience, West meets the challenges of being a woman and a foreigner as she establishes her own studio on Murano. The benefits of living in the land of glass far outweigh the struggles. For the time being, borrowed studios provide a place for the artist to work on glass. West's repertoire includes engraving, battuto, and lampworking, and the resulting work is collected and exhibited worldwide. Last summer, in an article published by *Elle Décor*, her studio earned a mention for its glass vessels. The artist's current work was exhibited at the Palazzo da Mula in an exhibit called *Gruppo 30141 Murano*, which recognized Glass Masters of Murano.

From November 20, 2014, through January 6, 2015, The RIR Gallery at Reinstein/Ross in New York City presented West's first solo exhibition, *RiverStones*. Large projections of her sketches and photographs accompanied her glasswork in this installation-style tribute to Murano and the Ardo River. "The exhibition paid homage to the images that filled my mind and thoughts long before the collection started forming five years ago. My first collective set of work hopefully gifted the viewer with a piece of beauty that touched and moved me to this creation."



Amy West, Discolored Dove from the Frida Collection. Photo by Norbert Heyl.

RiverStones

The river Ardo is a tributary to the well-known Piave River in northern Veneto, and for West it has been a source of peace, relaxation, and inspiration. "This collection is the result of several years of finding calm in this space and stimulation from its life. Its continuity is accompanied, challenged, and contrasted by dramatic changes and modifications. The river is alive and makes its presence known to those paying attention.

"Coming out of a dark time in my life, the light of the river playing off the movement of the current, the color of the rocks, inspired me, gently pulled me out of my darkness. Opening into the beauty and touch of the stones tumbled and shaped by the flow of the river, I found a similar sense in how I felt tumbled and shaped by recent events in my life, hoping to come out of my experiences as rounded and smooth as the stones around me."



Amy West, Ivory RiverStone from the RiverStones Collection. Photo by Norbert Heyl.



Amy West, Carved Barbini Bowl (top) and Red River Blue Grey from the RiverStones Collection (bottom). Photos by Amy West.



Five years ago, West began sketching the colors, light, shapes, and forms for this new series of vessels and jewels. Once her designs were formed, the vessels were blown by local glassblowers. Murano glass is usually made from raw materials according to special color recipes, or “partie,” passed down through generations, or developed through evolutions of such family recipes. These used to be seriously guarded secrets, whole parts of glass equations being withheld from any one family member, in order to prevent someone from stealing the secret.

The *RiverStones* collection was blown in the studio of Pino Signoretto, using his glass. In some cases once the base was blown and shaped, glass was swirled around the vase, creating a multi-colored striation effect that mimics the movement and dynamic of water current and flow. In other cases, colors were combined during the gather and swirled in the blowing process while the shape was being formed.

Once the pieces were annealed, West began carving and cutting on her lathe to texture and sculpt the glass into its final form. This stage of the process requires a minimum of two or three wheels of various grains and contours. For more complex carving, 10 or 20 various applications of wheels, texturing, and polishing occur. “Creating highlights and deep relief executed with precision and accuracy, yet leaving room for voice and flow in the glass to be, takes time and experience.”

To create the jewelry for her *RiverStones Collection*, West used photographs in the design phase rather than drawings, because the collection needed to be more organic. Every bead was cold worked, then mounted multiple times to ensure a sense of harmony in how the necklace flows around the neck and how the beads interact with each other. “I don’t like that a necklace goes to the back and stops, which is why I started from the beginning to have a series of beads in back.” West creates a focus bead and a closure bead through which strands of small seed beads extend down the back, creating a watercolor effect. “It’s nice because as women, as people, we are not just what you see on the front. A woman’s back is a beautiful canvas. The necklace should be able to be enjoyed from all angles, and making that happen in this collection was a real challenge.”

West wore one of the *RiverStones* necklaces to the opening of the *Masters of Murano 30141* exhibition. “Someone at the opening came up to me and asked, ‘Are those stones from the Piave river?’ The Ardo dumps into the Piave, so to have such a precise recognition of where those come from was validating.”



Amy West, Opalino Swish (left) and Rolling River (right), both from the RiverStones Collection. Photos by Norbert Heyl.

From Bead to Necklace

With a concept in mind, West creates glass beads at the torch inspired by stories and lives of artists and historical sources, as well as impressions from nature. She works with Effetre, Moretti, and Vetrofond glass, but also obtains special glass not publicly available such as Opalinos, transparent blueberry or green apple from various island furnaces, and scrap piles only insiders can access. Initially making single beads only, West now designs, frameworks, cold works, and strings complete collections of wearable art. “Making one bead at a time, I did a lot of experimenting and learned about color and creating 3-D effects by laying transparents over other colors. It was actually a wonderful introduction into the world of wearable art.”

Inspired by Frida Kahlo, West’s first jewelry collection *Frida* was introduced in 2008. “Frida presented herself as a work of art in how she dressed and how she wore her hair and jewelry. Most of her jewelry was made from antique ceramic beads and bones. My forms, shapes, and color inspirations were based on jewelry she wore or included in her paintings.

“When I started wearing the *Frida* pieces myself to see how they worked, the weight made me stand up taller and straighter. They received attention based on intrigue, giving me a strong sense of presence and assuredness, making me aware that this very feminine object can lend itself to being a source of assertiveness and strength. These are attributes I want to share through the creation and adornment of this collection, being strong as a female, in a feminine manner.”

Using a novel approach, West began designing the *Frida* series by doing watercolor paintings prior to making any beads. For other series, she made beads first and did paintings after. “The initial watercolors were incredibly important when I was making the beads. Finding a way to get the glass to respond like watercolor was a wonderful series of experiments. I also had to find textures that would project the sensations the necklaces gave me. Through this work I learned what a collection can be.” West finished the last *Frida* necklace in 2014, and the collection was shown in Amsterdam at ArtFair as featured artist along with the Lilly Zeligman Gallery.

In 2009, Italian glass company Salviati was purchased by new owners who wanted West to design a line of jewelry that could be mass produced, but not look like it was, along with one-of-a-kind and limited edition pieces. Her designs for the collection were inspired by company history, including various Salviati designers and masters, glass from the 1800s, Salviati colors, combinations of colors from vases and pieces in current production, and beads that look like vases designed in the '60s, '70s, and '80s. Though the company did not move forward with its jewelry line and the collection was never brought into full production, West loved doing the designs and the creative process of working with Vicenza goldsmiths.

Hot glass at the torch allows West to bring her contemporary expression and sensibilities to the form, color, and light of her glass beads, rings, and necklaces. “The more comfortable glass becomes as a medium, the more it reveals its possibilities in design, lighting, and technique innovation.”

Engraving

From a young age, West was mesmerized by glass prisms, the refraction and reflection, projection, and movement in light and color. Incising and cutting into the surface of glass fascinates West, who is captivated by light and how it can be transformed by a simple stone cut into glass, creating designs and images. Through traditional wheel engraving on a lathe obtained with stone, diamond, or copper wheel incisions, West applies texture and shading to add dimension, perspective, and richness to her work. Her designs draw heavily on cultural, historic, and organic influences.

Battuto, literally meaning “beaten” in Italian, is a style of cold working glass using diamond and stone wheels on a lathe to sculpt and bring texture to the surface of the glass. Battuto can also modify the shape of an object and add refined detail and texture that cannot be achieved in hot glass work.

West engraves and does battuto texturing on vessels and beads. She also frequently embellishes beads with engraved phrases and quotes. “Engraved glass is the least popular in terms of marketing. Due to my background in book arts and calligraphy, I love the detail that engraving brings to my work. What is impressive to me is being able to put pressure on the wheel to shape the glass, forcing the light that filters through it to be refracted in a new way. Which wheel I use and the shapes and cuts I make change and sculpt the light that is reflected on and through glass.”

West works closely with Murano glassblowers to make her vessel form designs. At the hot shop, she lays out and configures her murine and colors, while blowers do the roll up and blowing of the piece. Her new studio will accommodate an engraving lathe for continuing her experiments and designs on traditional blown glass and will eventually house a larger lathe for bigger battuto pieces and heavier cold working.



Amy West, Three Planets: Saturn, Jupiter & Venus (left) and Irises for Bill (right). Photos by Amy West.



Amy West, The Violets, a pair of etched glass vases shown next to the artist's inspiration, her original watercolor of an iris. Photos by Amy West.

Another Day in Paradise

Merging other areas of creativity and artistic interests, West draws on her vast experiences in cultures from around the world, expressing a unique style that is truly her own. A contemporary art collector recently asked if she would consider doing an installation piece in large scale, hanging from the ceiling. "That suggestion blew my world open to a whole other level. The next stage of my development will be three-dimensional sculptures and hanging pieces. I'm excited to get started on that."



The Broken Column *from the Frida Collection.*
Photo by Norbert Heyl.

In the summer of 2015, West will teach a class in battuto and cold working, "Texturing Glass," at The Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, New York, July 27–August 1. Her partner, Davide Fuin, will be teaching a master's course at Corning during this same time. Fuin was raised around glass on Murano, often accompanying his father to his job at Barovier & Toso. Davide worked at Venini from 1978 until 1980, when a number of masters, including his father, left Barovier & Toso to open their own factory, Toso Vetri d'Arte. He joined his father and began working with the master Carlo Tosi

Carama. In the late 1990s, Fuin founded D.F. Glassworks with two assistants. They primarily produce glasses and stemware, together with museum reproductions in traditional Venetian style.

Having lived internationally and studied four languages before starting to work in glass, West established a pattern of completely immersing herself in a culture and language, but would eventually get bored and move on. "I was really afraid glass would be the same, but there will always be much more to glass than I can ever learn and understand. It's a language that will never be boring or have any confines for me or my imagination."

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West's work is available at her studio and exhibition room on Murano, with viewing by appointment or upon request via e-mail. Walk-ins are accepted, but appointments are preferred.

*Look for **Subscriber Benefits** coming to **Subscribers Only** via links in upcoming e-mails from Glass Art. This **Bonus Content** will include more information about Amy West's history, art, and life on Murano.*



Photo by Penny Roberts.

Amy West

Fondamenta Lorenzo Radi 24 & 25
30141 Murano (VE)
Italia
amywestdesigns@gmail.com
www.amywestdesigns.com

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