

Glasscaster with Marcie Davis

Michael Haberland

Ornament Master of Lauscha



Below are excerpts from a Glasscaster interview featuring glass artist, Michael Haberland. Glasscaster podcasts feature "hot glass talk in a high tech world." This series, hosted by Marcie Davis, can be found at www.fireladyproductions.com or on iTunes.

I'm here in Lauscha with Michael Haberland. Michael is a third generation Christbaumschmuck maker—he makes Christmas ornaments—and we're going to learn a little bit about his story. When is the first time you held a piece of glass in the flame?

The first time that I took a piece of glass in the flame was maybe when I was sixteen. It was possible for young people to learn a little bit of glassblowing after school, and I took some pieces to make a little ant. That was my first experience at the flame.

So was it love at first sight?

Love at first sight was with a glass elephant. I saw it when I was a child at my mother's workplace at a glass factory here in Lauscha. I think from that moment I wanted to be a glassblower. I learned to make elephants quite a bit later. I learned art glassblowing from 1985 till 1987 during the German Democratic Republic (GDR) time. We learned to make vases and do massive glass. At that time we also learned elephants and other animals.

Tell us about the style of training. In America we have some schools like Penland or Pilchuck where you go for several weeks only and study with a certain artist on a certain subject. There are one or two college programs that focus onamework. Many universities have furnace glass for off-hand glassblowing. But I think the training here is vastly different, so I'm curious how you were taught. Were there many students together in the class learning the same item at the same time?

The practical training was not in Lauscha but in the nearby village of Neuhaus. We were two boys and four girls, and we had one master. He showed us the articles, and we all looked over his shoulder and learned for two years.

Was it two years making animals at the beginning?

No, it was half and half—one year in actual "blowing" and the other year was training in massive glass.

Is massive glass, then, sculpted glass? Solid glass?

Sculpted, yes.

Did you always want to make ornaments or did you want to make sculpted glass?

I learned to be an art glassblower, because I love to do glass in freestyle. The reason why I am now an ornament glassblower is because at the end of the GDR I was out of work, and I had to see what I could do for the future.

During the GDR times, where did you work?

When I was finished with my training, I worked two or three years at home. Then came the German reunion. This was a very hard time for everyone, not only the glassblowers but many people lost their jobs and so did I. At that time I was twenty-one years old and blowing glass for a local company. As one of the youngest in the company, I was the first one who lost a job, and my mother was thinking, "What can my son do in the future." I wanted to stay a glassblower, and she said, "Maybe we should look behind our house." My grandpa had always done Christmas ornaments from molds, and she said, "Let's see. Maybe we will find some of the molds." One day we found them.

What did you find?

Mostly it was birds. We do mostly glass birds with glass tails and squirrels and Santas and angels.

Was it difficult for you to learn how to use the molds and make the products?

It wasn't easy at first, because you need other tools to make them. The difference between an art glassblower and a Christmas ornaments blower is that when the glass gets cold from the art glassblower, you are finished with your work. When you are blowing Christmas ornaments, after it's cold the work begins. You have nothing more than a clear Santa or bird or snowman or whatever, and you must silver it, you must dunk it in paint, and then it's all handpainted. It takes a lot of time, and it smells.

When you're in the studio and they're painting the ornaments, you lose a few brain cells because the lacquers are pretty strong. I think it makes you a little dizzy after a while.

Yes, we must open the doors and the windows. But it's better than having no work, I always say.

How many kinds of styles do you make?

That's a difficult question, because you can make from one mold different styles in different colors with different glitters. At the moment, I would say there may be 700.

Now, you don't make your own molds. There are one or two mold makers, and it's a secret. How do the molds come?

I only know two mold makers at the moment, and these two men are very old. Sometimes they want to work and sometimes they don't want to work, and that's the problem. When they are gone, I don't know what the future will bring with new molds.

Also, for the birds, some of them have feathers in the back and





some of them have the spun glass. Who makes the spun glass for the tails?

One person is doing the spun glass here in Lauscha. His name is Hans Karl. His story and mine are similar. I think he was also out of work after the German reunification, and he thought maybe he could do

something with the old spinning glass machine from his parents. He started spinning glass and still works today. I think it's the only spinning glass machine of this type in the whole of Europe. It's old-fashioned. Older people know it from childhood. They always say they want the glass birds with glass tails and not with feathers.

Tell us about how an ornament is made from beginning to end.

You sit on the table and in front of you is a flame, the burner. What I do is glassblowing ornaments in a mold. We have a tool also in this area where the burner is, and two-part molds, which I control with my feet. The first step is to make the *glaskolben*. I make the *glaskolben* hot, and when it's hot enough I must place the molten glass very quickly into the bottom half of the mold. With my foot pedal I can control the top half. It comes down, and that is the moment I blow inside the mold. Then it must be taken out of the mold very quickly, because otherwise it would break.

Yes, it's like propane only, no oxygen almost—an annealing flame.

Yes, and then that's all at that moment. After that starts the silvering.

Tell us a little about the silvering process.

On every ornament you have the open end that you have blown into. This is where the liquid is added. With a pipette you add the silver nitrate solution, swirl it around, and then add the ammonia mixture. Next I shake it up a little bit. Then you can see the reaction begin. First it gets a little bit gray and then darker gray, and then I put it in a pot of hot water. After seven or eight seconds I take it out of the water and shake it. When the reaction is finished I have a silver ornament like a mirror.

Then you put the ornament upside down on a nail on some wood, where you have dozens of nails standing in rows. Do you rinse out the chemicals with water, or do they just drain out?

It's distilled water with silver. This is the first solution. The second mixture is also distilled water, but with ammonia. No rinsing. The ornament must only get dry.

You have these big containers of lacquer. So that's next?

It depends on what the customers want. Most of a snowman is white, and that's why it makes sense to dunk the snowman in white color. So you have silver inside, then comes the glass, and outside is the white lacquer. Then it makes sense to paint the details after that. When you have a customer who says, "Oh, I want to have a silver bird," and you have not so much work and only silver this bird. You can paint it however you want with red, blue, any kind of color, then with gold glimmer, silver glitter.

So that's how they're made. Then you must take off the point and put on the cap.

After dunking the ornament into lacquer or after the painting, when it's dry then we cut it on the top and we make what we call the *hüchen*, the head. With that part, you can hang it on the tree. And it's finished. That's all!

You can see more examples of Michael Haberland's work at www.firelady.com.

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