From Venice with love

San Francisco glass artist David Patchen practices 'old country' technique with modern flair

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COULD ANYTHING BE MORE professionally daring and romantic than traveling to a tiny Italian island to learn an obscure, 16th century tecnica artistica, then returning home profoundly inspired and jumping headlong into a career in glass art.

That's David Patchen's story and, lucky for us, he's sticking to it.

The San Francisco artist practices the ancient and complex art of murrine, which originated 4,000 years ago in the Middle East, and revived and perfected by glassblowers on the Venetian island of Murano since the early 1500s.

Patchen was a marketing and technology professional in 2001 when he started glassblowing after a five-week class at the Public Glass studio in San Francisco.

"I took this up as a hobby, and I just loved it," he recalls of the gradual transition to fulltime glass artist. "I wanted to sell enough just to pay for my hobby."

Patchen's customers and fans, which have included rock star Elton John and Southwest Airlines founder Herb Kelleher, help pay for what has grown from a pastime to a career as one of the most celebrated glass artists in the U.S.

Today, Patchen—54, a native of New Rochelle, New York, and married father of two small children—piles up commissions for single glass pieces that fetch high four-figures, and much more for a multi-piece series.

"You've really got to have a lot of skill to do what he does," marvels one frequent customer, art collector Chris Keck of Cary, North Carolina. "I mean, he doesn't just make these in one day."

Even if they don't comprehend the mind-bending physical and technical challenges of making murrine, art lovers easily appreciate the results.

"What I love about David's pieces is they are so detailed and yet they create a sense of calm," says Sonya Pfeiffer, owner of Elder Gallery of Contemporary Art in Charlotte, North Carolina, who has hosted demonstrations by Patchen and sold several of his works.

"Our clients especially love his bold use of color and patterns, as well as the shapes," says Dani Montague of Montague Gallery in San Francisco. "I think David's work is beautiful and playful. He has developed a truly distinctive style."

Of course, like Rome—and a piece of murrine—the artist that is David Patchen was not built in a day. That aforementioned style is the product of authentic training plus an unusual mindset and other tools—but some observers saw the potential years ago.

Steve Roseman "had been blowing glass for a few years" when he met Patchen at Public Glass and the two resolved to assist each other's art.

"We flailed around a lot together, just learning things," Patchen says of his friend, who hasn't blown glass much in recent years.

"He certainly wasn't the Dave Patchen we know of today," Roseman recalls. The difference, he observes, is that most glassblowers "hit a wall and they can't overcome that wall… There are very, very, very few people who are able to push past the level of just basic skills."

Roseman says the partnership ended partly because he "didn't want to be holding him [Patchen] back," as Roseman could recognize the tools that would make his friend so successful, especially a unique personal aesthetic and phenomenal dexterity.

"His physical skills are extraordinary... He's also exceptionally clearheaded when it comes to his business skills," Roseman noted. "You put it all together and it is just perfect to something like glass."

"He's also very driven. That was one thing that was very apparent."

To better understand Patchen's journey to international success requires an explanation of the age-old techniques the two men were practicing.

PAINSTAKING CRAFT

Roseman was doing what is known as cane glasswork, which involves cutting long rods of clear or colored glass called, of course, cane. Murrine takes that a step further when the artist cuts the cane into cross-sectioned tiles, and then organizes them into patterns to fuse together.

Patchen practices both techniques, and both require two people working in tandem during the hot glasswork.

"It's kind of a dance between two people, coordinating not only their physical presence in the space and how they move about the shop, [but] timing their movements and timing the heat of things," Patchen explained.

"The assistants I employ are all really skilled, capable glassblowers [themselves]," he adds, noting, "Nothing happens by accident in this line of work."

After those introductory classes at Public Glass "kind of kicked it all off," Patchen has learned blowing and murrine techniques largely by doing, but also in reviewing seminal books by master blower Ed Schmid—and, of course, from that trip to Murano.

The island is still ground central for murrine, and the memories of watching its artists do the aforementioned 'dance' still resonate for him. Patchen made his weeklong sojourn to the Mediterranean in 2004 at the invitation of local artist Afro Cellotto, whom he had connected with through a Glass Art Society conference that year.

"I just kind of sat there and watched…I learned a ton just watching for a week," Patchen recalls. His hosts spoke little English, but he remembers being amazed at the way the artists "super calmly" executed the complex process "while cursing at each other and drinking beer."

"It was kind of osmosis, that's how I learned," he suggests. Regardless of the language barrier, he knew the Italians were unlikely to offer much by way of instruction.

"Those guys took it to a whole different level, but they were notoriously secretive in terms of [explaining] the complexity and technique," says Patchen, noting that this attitude is not uncommon in the art world. "Everyone wants to guard their technique because they think it's key to what they make."

What they probably couldn't have taught Patchen, even if so inclined, is the almost instinctual feel for handling molten glass in the precise manner required to make murrine.

"You have to be able to understand the glass. The different colors handle differently," art collector Chris Keck says of what he learned watching the San Francisco artist demonstrate the process at Elder Gallery. In Patchen's case, Keck says, his "feel for the temperature is unbelievable."

INTRICATE DETAIL. Above: Five amazing and varied close-ups of Patchen's work. "What I love about David's pieces is they are so detailed, and yet they create a sense of calm," says gallery owner Sonya Pfeiffer.

ART OF GLASS. Top right: David Patchen in his San Francisco studio during the blowing process, flattening a piece by quickly rubbing and squeezing it between two large cork paddles. Top left: Patchen (right) with assistant Michael Patton. Above and right: Five examples from Patchen's 'Ellipse' portfolio—a form the artist calls "elegant explorations of flattened forms evocative of river stones and the range of graceful elliptical shapes..."

"You have to be able to read the temperature, not only how it's hot but where it's hot," Patchen explains, noting that the glass has constantly changing heat at different levels internally than externally.

"Its properties change from second to second. That's what makes it so maddening when you [first] start working with glass," he recalls. "It's a really quirky material. To be able to understand it is really a lifelong process."

Gallery owner Sonya Pfeiffer says just showing people Patchen's book that illustrates his process, "clients and customers are just blown away."

"Everybody's mouth is agape by the time we finish," she laughed. "I've had people say, 'I totally understand now why this is so valuable.'"

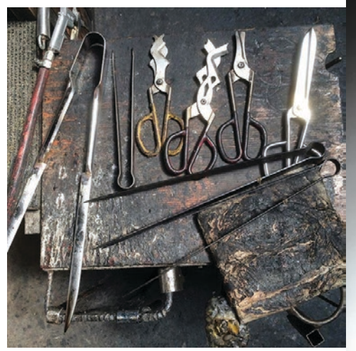
After watching Patchen's demonstrations at Elder Gallery in 2018 and '19, she adds, "People understand all the thought and time that goes into it."

"I appreciate the people who make these things because I know how difficult it is," says Keck, a retired research chemist who numbers eight Patchen pieces among his collection of ancient Chinese vases and 60-plus works of art glass. "I think it's just amazing. There's hardly any bubbles in his glass. That in itself is hard to do."

The North Carolinian said he first saw the artist's work online at Artful-Home.com, and then he purchased the glass over a period of several years.

"I looked at his pieces there and I said, 'Wow, these are unbelievable'… because I'd never seen that before," he recalls of Patchen's murrine. "It's more intricate and more detailed than the other glass I have."

"I think that's what most impresses people: he's so meticulous," agreed Pfeiffer.



FINE FOGLIOS. Top left: Patchen with assistant Ian Whitt in the studio. Top right: Among the numerous tools of the glass production trade. Center row: Five examples of Patchen's fascinating 'Foglio' series—"a three-dimensional canvas for highly patterned and detailed compositions…," he says. Above left: The 'Dewdrop' design. Above right: From Patchen's 'Bloom' series, which he says is influenced equally by assorted life forms as well as by a geode he has owned since childhood.

THE ARTIST EVOLVES

Actually, Patchen's most recent pieces are even more exacting. When Dani Montague first noticed his glasswork a few years back, she made a mental note to keep an eye on his career.

"He definitely got my attention as an emerging artist," says the gallery owner, adding, "I've definitely watched him grow and emerge over the years."

"The first pieces I got, they're cool but not as intricate," says Keck, noting that his Patchen pieces tell a story: "It's like an evolution of his glass."

The artist has been somewhat strategic in managing that evolution though. He has been exploring eight different forms, and is reluctant to expand that number as he continues to find other possibilities to explore within those eight.

"I kind of want to establish each form thoroughly. I tend to keep [it] pretty simple with forms," says Patchen, whose weekly work routines also help regulate the development of his art. Some of it is spent in more mundane tasks of packing and shipping to customers. Some is spent exploring patterns with the glass tiles.

"I might have a pattern sitting around for a couple of days while I kind of ponder what I want to turn it into," he admits, noting that the hot work he does in his rented studio space at Public Glass is so physically taxing, he limits it to Tuesdays and Fridays.

"There's no creativity in the hot shop; you just try to execute what it is you want to make," says Patchen. Occasionally, he travels for his work—for demonstrations or, less often, for an installation like he did on cruise ships in Germany last fall for a series he calls 'Dewdrops.'

"That series is really amazing," Pfeiffer remarks, seeing the influence of modernism on 'Dewdrops.' With regard to mid-century modern, she added, "That is an era that speaks to me, so maybe that's why that piece particularly speaks to me."

"The forms are modernist in that they're clean lines, simple forms," agrees the artist. "They're not cluttered, they're minimalist."

Another series with modern influence that Montague especially likes is called 'Bloom,' which Patchen says is influenced equally by assorted life forms as well as by a geode he has owned since childhood.

"It's gone in a lot of ways I didn't expect it to go…It kind of evolved as something combining a sea creature and a flower."

"He has a really unreal way of tying the natural world into his pieces," says Pfeiffer, expressing a preference for the "ethereal calmness" inspired by Patchen's use of blues and greens. "I think when he is working in those colors, that is really when it's so contemplative."

Ironically, Patchen says his own studies of color theory left him with, at the very least, a prejudice against certain shades of hues.

"I very quickly realized I never want to see another primary color," he quipped, noting their preponderance in items like flags and athletic uniforms. "It's awful, contrasty stuff!"

"Occasionally I see something in the fashion world where I like the way they used certain colors," he says of one source of inspiration for his work, effusing, "I see color as something that is challenging, and I love that challenge!"

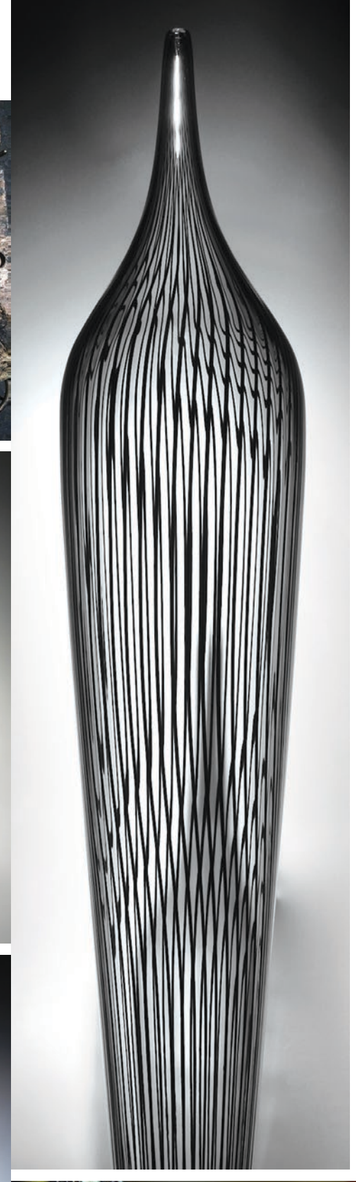
Patchen continues to rise and meet that challenge, even this year, as he waited for Public Glass to finish maintenance of furnaces and other infrastructure critical to his work, which the studio chose to tackle during this year's shelter-in-place period.

"I still find it incredibly flattering when someone likes something I made and wants to pay money for it," Patchen says modestly.

His admirers certainly aren't surprised. "He's taken classic Venetian glassblowing techniques and found modern ways to use them," says Montague. Just as noteworthy, she adds, "He found a passion that he has turned into a career as an artist, which I think is really impressive."

Impressive, yes—one might even say daring.

Additional photography: Jason Wertheimer; all images courtesy David Patchen Handblown Glass



TALL COOL ONES. Above: Four examples from Patchen's elegant 'Parabola' series—"an exploration of spheres and variations that elongate or compress the form." Top right: From the artist's 'Piscine' series. Left: Snipping away during the trimming process.

"A lot of his work is organic in its design, where you see dynamic, flowing curves," says the San Francisco woman. Regarding 'Bloom,' she says, "It was very innovative with that design, the way David has the pattern and the colors [concealed] from inside out. It's very distinctive to him."

"'Bloom' originated as kind of a study in contrasts," Patchen recalls of asking himself, "How can I [hide] something beautiful inside?"