

Breaking the Art Glass Ceiling with a Special Collection

Want to do something difficult? Try making an object out of molten glass. It will droop and pool like crazy, thick honey—honey at about 2,000°F.

Then, if you want to do another difficult thing, try being a woman glass artist. You'll still be working with a magical, ornery medium. But you'll also encounter many of the factors that lead women to depart from professions such as architecture, engineering, technology, and more—lack of recognition and community, schedules that can't flex for caregiving or child-rearing, and a work environment that can be prickly.

That's the current state of studio art glass today—a world of mind-bending creativity and beauty but also one with the reputation of being male dominated. The truth is more nuanced. Women, in fact, often dominate arts programs, where they enroll and graduate at rates equal to or greater than men. After graduation, though, the drop-off begins. Only a limited number of women and minorities go on to success in contemporary glass art.

Something happened, though, on March 3-4, 2026, to help change the picture. A group of women glass artists met at the Women's Leadership Center at Williams Bay, invited by Ann Drake. All had been selected to create art glass pieces for the Center. All came, ostensibly, to look at the spaces inside the new Center so that they understand their commission. Which happened: The day was full of walk-arounds, measurements, and dialogue about dimensions and deadlines.

But another thing also happened: A sense of community took root. Some of these women artists were meeting for the first time, despite working in art glass for decades. As they talked over dinner and while touring the Center, friendships began. And so did dialogue about networking—something that promises greater visibility and support for women in glass art.

"It was an inspiring couple of days because it's like what Ann created in another field that was male dominated," said Marlene Rose, a glass artist whose work is featured at the Center. "We're all sort of pioneers because a lot of glass sculpting didn't occur until the '60s."

Sisterhood in glass art has been slow coming. Glasswork dates back 4,000 years to ancient Mesopotamia, when

craftsmen figured out how to turn silica, soda, and lime into beads. Over time, glass took on different forms from tableware to soaring stained-glass windows. Throughout, cultural traditions plus the challenges of working with heavy equipment and molten glass kept women sidelined. In Murano, Italy, one of the long-standing bastions of glassmaking, the workshops were strictly a man's world. Women weren't allowed even to assist.

"This has definitely been a male dominated field just because of the physicality" of working in glass, said Rose. "Everything you do is hard and dangerous."

That started changing in 1962. The American Studio Glass movement kicked off via workshops hosted by the Toledo Museum of Art on glassblowing. Within a short time, glass gained a reputation as an exciting and versatile medium for artistic expression.

New ways of working with glass followed. Today, a piece of art glass might be carved, cast, blown, engraved, enameled, fused with other materials, or more—approaches that lower some of the physical barriers to creativity. Yet working in glass still requires significant expenditure for equipment and facilities. Bigger, more complex works also require the help of assistants, who may not welcome women artists into the "hot shops" where heavy equipment, intense heat, dangerous processes, and grime prevail. Younger, newer women artists often find their technique or ideas questioned.

"It can be lonely for women in the world of art glass, like a lot of technical fields," said Drake. "They don't necessarily have a way of networking. So, getting them together and starting to create a community is powerful."

Corey Hampson, owner and partner at Habatat Galleries, which is helping to curate the collection at the Center, sees what's happening as *avant garde*. "Other institutions aren't collecting with a focus like this," he says. "The WLC is using glass to tell its story. It's going to challenge people to think about art differently."

Rose agreed about the Center collection challenging limits. "I can't think of another collection like this," she said. "I love that Ann hasn't wavered on making it just women artists. It's utterly unique."