

# Andrew Jackson Pollack Designs

— by Colleen Bryan

Andrew Pollack is a young artist making glass in New Orleans, Louisiana. As such, he buoys the hopes of the glass industry in a place where aging baby boomers drive an older demographic. Likewise, he represents the hopes of a city striving to reclaim her vibrancy after a devastating hurricane. Pollack and his ilk demonstrate strength, resiliency, creativity, and commitment that defy despair. And sometimes, simply walking forward is the path to recovery. Talking with Andy about his experiences and his projects offers some broader insight into what draws younger artists to choose glass as a medium.

## Choosing Glass

Andy Pollack's parents were involved in the arts and gave him an orientation to art and to creating. His mother was an art teacher and owned a pottery business. His father was a lover of music, art, and food. Andy felt the imperative to make his own place as an artist using self-chosen media and forms.

Andy asserts that he was definitely a pyromaniac when he was younger before his parents redirected his alarming behavior toward creation. When he was fourteen his mother bought a basic beadmaking set. He first saw glassblowing while visiting his mom who was taking a class at the Penland School of Crafts, and it was there that he gained his first formal introduction to lampworking. Andy's subsequent studies at Penland and Corning encompassed a range of techniques that included architectural glass, fusing, and slumping under the tutelage and direction of masters such as Lucio Bubacco, Brian Kerkvliet, Paul Stankard, Robert Mickelsen, Loren Stump, Roger Parramore, Andrew Brott, and Bandhu Dunham. The attraction of lampworking rested in its portability, requiring only minimal up-front investment, characteristic low overhead, and the fact that it can be done at home and supports high-detail design.

Pollack moved to New Orleans for college and began taking classes at the New Orleans School of Glassworks and Printmaking Studio. Since they did not have a beadmaking teacher at the time, he soon was recruited to teach a beginner's lampworking class. As he broke each process down into steps and explained the reason underlying them, Andy found that the self-conscious discipline required in teaching served to reinforce and strengthen his own understanding of the processes. Andrew also raised thousands of dollars in donations for equipment and materials, learning the ins and outs of a functioning nonprofit institution.

## Choosing Forms, Finding Themes

Through the next decade, Pollack found lampworking to be an excellent medium for expressing the natural world. "It demonstrates how fragile the natural world is and supports an appreciation for that fragility."



Man and nature coexisting is a recurring theme in Pollack's work. "Particularly in these environmentally tentative times, lampworking can take us beyond the glass tree to suggest what we should be thinking and how we should be relating to nature itself. The grand oaks and wrought iron line the streets of my city, symbolizing the balance between man and nature. Will they be able to coexist, or will one encroach upon the other until it is extinguished? In Louisiana we are losing our wetlands—important habitats for plants and animals that have no other home. Nature may have to reassert herself and rebalance the equation in order to survive man's desire for permanence. Our state bird was only recently taken off the endangered species list, but its habitat is still being lost at an alarming rate."

Most of Pollack's work is functional in design (goblets, candlestick holders, and decorative craft items). He draws a great deal of inspiration from the city around him. "New Orleans is a very ornamental city with strong French, Spanish, Native American, and Acadian influences. The city is full of architectural elements such as wrought iron, birds, and trees. Many of these design elements are incorporated into my artwork."

Italy has a long history of Jewish glassblowers, the tradition of which Andy taps in his work. Some of the Italian masters were Jewish craftsmen fleeing persecution elsewhere. Pollack has established a line of glass Judaica that includes menorahs, Kiddush cups, mezuzahs, yads, and jewelry. His newest line incorporates lots of birds and branches, wrought glass, and critters reminiscent of his beloved city. "By doing my lines of functional items at lower price points, I buy myself time to do my larger sculptural pieces for a different market."

"From the outset I was inspired by and in awe of glass. Appreciating the medium before becoming a glass artist informs my decisions about product lines and helps me maximize both personal satisfaction and profit. You always have to balance what you want to make with cost and profit. If I could do anything I want, I'd spend all my time making large sculptures, but I recognize that I have to adapt to the market by making items across price levels and broadening my customer base."

“I make a lot of commission work and particularly enjoy helping other people translate ideas they have in their minds into objects that please and excite them.” One of Andy’s friends recently asked him to make a series of commemorative items for her wedding. The couple chose a Dia de los Muertos theme, and their need was so specific that they could not have had it had they not known a lampworker. Pollack designed a cake topper, earrings and pendants for the bridesmaids, bracelets for groomsmen, and goblets for the wedding toast. “My friend was thrilled, and I loved doing it. They’ll be looking at those goblets on their mantel for the rest of their lives, remembering their wedding day with joy. That makes me happy in turn.” Now Andy is busy working on goblets for his own wedding, scheduled for Spring 2010.



### Gathering Strength from the Storm

Pollack usually works alone and only brings in assistants rarely, as they are needed to fill orders. He notes that the task is made easier by the plenty of good glassblowers and crafters in New Orleans. He knows of five or six glass studios, two or three of which are private ones like his. “After the hurricane, the *Times-Picayune* wrote a story featuring the glass artists in the area and noted that we didn’t lose a single one in the aftermath of the hurricane.”

Music, food, and artists are central to the melting pot that makes New Orleans recognizably New Orleans. The city affords sweeping and substantive overtures to draw and keep its artists, providing free health care for them and charging no sales tax on one-of-a-kind original works of art. The New Orleans Arts Council is very active and administers a substantial grant from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Andrew has operated his studio in the Big Easy since graduating from Loyola University in 2001, but he acknowledges that the 2005 hurricane served to galvanize and motivate him and other artists around the region. The experience itself was a gauntlet for everyone who lived in the devastated region, but it also provided an opportunity for exploration that crystallized and tempered his commitment to the city. “We evacuated for what we anticipated would be a few days, first to Atlanta and then to Scottsdale, Arizona. It was eight months before we could come back to New Orleans.”

Pollack remembers the sustaining generosity of many in the glass community during those difficult times: A lot of glass companies sent tools and glass, and he borrowed a torch so as to continue his

work while in exile. The Rosen Show donated free booths to people who were assisted by the Craft Emergency Relief Fund (which, in turn, offered no-interest loans and grants to help bridge the catastrophe). Andy remembers the artists at Hans Frabel Studio in Atlanta particularly as incredible friends and mentors during that time.

“During the New Orleans diaspora, we were inundated with new experiences and places and people. That allowed us to seriously think about whether there was somewhere else we might want to go. We considered Penland, which offered us a place to stay and work. In the end, my fiancé and I decided that we wanted to be back in New Orleans. This city inspires my artwork. She’s a native and a musician and songwriter, and we both love music. In these respects, New Orleans is a world unto itself. Even now, there is still a lot of recovery work to do. But we are resilient and surviving, and I wouldn’t choose to be anywhere else pursuing my art.”

Once home again, Andy and his fiancé experienced a surge of determination that furthered both their art and his business. “I finally moved my studio out of the collection of rented, leaky sheds that formerly housed it and stepped forward to buy a more professional space where I can work. Our residence is connected to my studio, which is a 1,000-square-foot converted apartment with torches for classes, four kilns, and a big pile of glass. Our neighborhood is in Uptown New Orleans, an area within walking distance of music clubs, bars, and parades. We know all our neighbors, and they are very supportive of artists in their community. We rent units out to other artists—one a famous drummer, another a glass artist and an art school graduate. The house is located in the Magazine Street Galleries Cultural District, which allows me to have no sales tax and gives tax incentives to renovate existing buildings.”

The new space is large enough to accommodate Pollack’s goal of eventually expanding the gallery, teaching, and shipping space. He looks forward to the day he can eliminate glass being tracked through his residence by separating the space. In the meantime, the couple enjoys sponsoring their own little artist commune in the middle of their reviving and cultured city.

“Getting serious, buying a house and studio, becoming engaged to my fiancé—all of this made me see my glasswork more as a business than as a hobby. I realized that this was what I really wanted to do. The terrible tragedy of the hurricane brought opportunity for me and many of my friends. It opened doors like the Rosen Show that would never have happened previously and focused our attention on our city and our art. The experience infused my work with a greater depth of feeling, inspiration, and quality.”



## Strategies for Success

All glass artists must find ways to address the high overhead required to stock and maintain a glass studio and the challenges of stirring customer interest and sustaining price against the erosive forces of market saturation. Pollack acknowledges these difficulties and adopts an eminently practical philosophy in addressing them.

“You have to adapt to the environment as it changes. You have to be willing to explore every opportunity. I work quite a bit with the Web. I have a new website where I show my work but do not sell directly through it. It encourages people to contact me for commissions and shows them a portfolio of the kinds of things I’ve done. I’ve tried ETSY.com; they have some great items for sale there, but you can’t tell much about their quality. I close more sales through Facebook than through ETSY. Primarily, I use a combination of galleries and retail shows to distribute my work, and I find that people really appreciate handmade craft and the experience of meeting the artist whose hands produced the work. They want to support the artists they meet at local festivals and exhibitions.”

The young artist from a generation reared on interactive immediacy especially values the quick, undiluted response associated with direct sales. “Seeing the end buyer at retail shows gives me immediate feedback on design flaws, color preferences, and price points. This response lets me tailor my work straightaway to better address customer needs or wants. It also builds name recognition, and people come back again and again to buy future work.”

Pollack estimates that 90 percent of his work goes into homes or personal offices. At present, he is working on a nine-by-nine-foot wall installation of lampworked, fused, and slumped glass leaves for the local Jewish Community Center. “I want to increasingly pick up commercial projects that allow me to continue creating art for art’s sake. Commercial pieces represent just another basket for the eggs.”

Andy also teaches in an effort to further diversify his business. After twelve years teaching at another venue, he recently began teaching lampworking classes through the newest nonprofit studio in New Orleans, the New Orleans Creative Glass Institute (NOCGI).





The artist is quick to make the most of any occasion to meet other people in the industry or expose his work to galleries. “I try to take advantage of opportunities such as the GAS conference to showcase my work to broader audiences.” In June 2010 he will open in conjunction with the Glass Art Society conference at the Kavair Forge and Gallery in Louisville, Kentucky.

For the past four years Pollack exhibited at the Rosen Show. “It costs more than \$5,000 for me to do each show, between getting myself and my work there, setting up a booth, and taking a week away from my studio.” The potential payoff is worthwhile, since the biannual Rosen Show generates new accounts and fills Andy’s production calendar for six months through the next show. Much of the benefit is unquantifiable—introducing him to prospective gallery customers and friends who later visit him in New Orleans, exposing his work to museum shops and commissions.

“The best thing I learned from the Rosen Show was the necessity of focusing and creating a signature product line. My Judaica line did well there, because not many other people were doing anything similar. I found my niche through that show, and it gave me leads on galleries for later follow-up.” While Andy has chosen not to exhibit at either the February or the August Rosen Shows in 2010 due to his wedding, he is confident that a future year will bring another opportunity.

Andy’s work shows locally through RHINO (Right Here in New Orleans) Gallery, a co-op where he shows his glass and works a few days a month. “Gallery sitting gives me a chance to catch up on computer work and to follow up on e-mails and phone calls. That way I free up my time in the studio to focus on creating.”

In the final analysis, Pollack brings tenacity, practical commitment, and conviction to the table. “We’ll weather the storm of the tough economy and market saturation. Obstacles require hard work. Those who can’t make it will drop out. But there will always be a demand for handcrafted, well-crafted art.”

**PGQ**

Visit [www.ProfitableGlass.com](http://www.ProfitableGlass.com) for more insights on how Andrew Pollack is learning to deal with the business side of being a glass artist.



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