



The Glass Menagerie

THIS NOVEMBER, LEGAL RECREATIONAL POT IN OREGON COULD CHANGE THE FUNCTIONAL ART GLASS INDUSTRY by Alex Notman

PHOTO BY TRASK BEDORTHA

The godfather of glass pipes works in a bus down by the Willamette River — make that a 1940s bus and a semi trailer outfitted with several workstations. Inside the bus, torch blazing, Bob Snodgrass focuses on a golden glass mushroom inside a pendant.

“I’m been working more than 20 years trying to figure out how to do the gills,” Snodgrass says, pushing and pulling rods of molten glass over the flame. “And I just got it together.” Tubes of colored glass poke out like stalagmites from every surface of the bus. Overhead, silver vents are covered with stickers stating, “I miss Jerry” and “Support Local Glassblowers.” One bumper sticker says “Thank Bob for your Snoddy.”

Thank Bob, indeed. Snodgrass put Eugene on the world map for functional glass art (i.e., pipes) more than three decades ago. He’s the artist behind the first Grateful Dead head piece. Under his pioneering flame and tutelage, the Eugene-Springfield glass scene in the 1990s became like Montmartre in the 1890s or Greenwich Village in the 1960s

— a place where artists flocked, a hub where innovators rubbed shoulders and ideas spread like wildfire.

But perhaps you didn’t know that. Perhaps, when you think of the local glass industry, you don’t think of artists but of the Drug Enforcement Administration sweeping through Eugene in 2003 as part of what is still the largest drug paraphernalia raid the U.S. has ever seen — Operation Pipe Dreams. Images of federal agents in navy jackets carting stacks of boxes out of local smoke shops and warehouses are still imprinted on Eugene’s collective memory. Of the 55 nationwide arrests, including comedian and pot advocate Tommy Chong, two were in Eugene: entrepreneurs and artists Jason Harris and Saeed Mohtadi, owners of Jerome Baker Designs, one of the largest functional glass manufacturers in the world at the time.

The bust sent a chill through the glassblowing community, a chill that has yet to completely thaw. In reporting this story, several people refused to speak to *EW*, several more didn’t return phone calls and still others insisted on anonymity. Those who did agree to talk made it crystal clear that any products made or sold were strictly for tobacco use by adults only.

Operation Pipe Dreams may have temporarily pushed the community underground, but it didn’t kill it. The local multimillion-dollar industry has recovered to numbers much greater than pre-bust, in both dollars and artists.

In the last decade, the country has seen a cultural shift in attitudes about cannabis and with a petition headed to the November ballot, Oregon could become the third state to legalize recreational marijuana use. If Colorado and Washington are indicators, a green rush is nigh with a potential flood of “ganjapreneurs” and “green” tourism, meaning big business for ancillary businesses like functional glass art.

In a gold rush you want to be selling shovels; in a green rush you want to be selling pipes, or the glass to make pipes, right? Some aren’t so high on the possibility. Eugene’s glass throne may have been usurped not only by competition from other states like Colorado, but other countries and industries as well.

The Alchemists

As recently as 2013, *High Times* magazine declared Eugene as the “undisputed capital of glassblowing.” Dave Winship, Eugene’s president of Colorado-founded Glasscraft, one of the largest glass distributors in the country, is not so sure.

“Denver is slowly taking over,” he says. “Right now everyone is moving to Denver because it’s legal and everyone can smoke weed and make pipes.” But, Winship notes it is Snodgrass who made Eugene “the center of the universe for glass pipes.”

Ask any pipe artist and he’ll tell you that it begins and ends with Snodgrass. Since first picking up a torch over four decades ago, Snodgrass has taken on dozens of apprentices and taught upward of a thousand students from all over the world. He has been flown as far as Japan to do glass demonstrations. His business, Snodgrass Family Glass, boasts 12 employees.

Originally from the East Coast, Snodgrass, 68, picked up glassblowing or, as he prefers to call it, lampworking, in Ohio in 1971. Before long, Snodgrass headed west with his wife and family, hitting up Grateful Dead shows where he pawned his glass marbles, figurines and pipes.

“We came here in ’90 and there were three glass blowers in town,” Snodgrass says, sitting in a desk chair in the bus, his ginger cat Hilary weaving around his feet. Originally the Snodgrass clan only planned to stay the winter but, he recalls, “my friend says ‘Well, Eugene has better herb,’ and here I am.”

A self-described inventor, Snodgrass stumbled across a game-changing alchemy: fuming. “The accidental discovery of silver fuming making color raised the bar on lampworking,” he says. When sprayed into hard glass, Snodgrass discovered that silver nitrate and gold chloride change colors as the inside of a pipe blackens. In other words, the more you smoke a fumed pipe, the prettier the colors become.

“It becomes dazzling when it’s done right. It’s real magic,” Snodgrass says. The technique made Snodgrass a pioneer, catching the attention of both the conventional glass art and functional glass art worlds. “That’s when I really started to learn as much as I could so I could teach somebody and be informed.”

At that time, 1991, Jason Harris, who later formed the doomed glass empire Jerome Baker Designs, was just a curious kid at the University of Oregon. He had heard about Snodgrass and the two met at a Grateful Dead show.

“A few people used to come over to my house and watch,” Snodgrass says. “Jason Harris, the fellow that started Jerome Baker, he was the most enterprising of the bunch. They’d come over and watch and hang out and we’d party and get a lot done.” Snodgrass remembers Harris asking him to come see the makeshift glass studio in the garage of a house Harris shared near campus.

“They had three torches and like seven guys lived at that house,” he says. “Nobody knew what they were doing but it was the blind leading the blind. They were having a ball. All of sudden there’s 20 guys over there at the university trying to be glassblowers. From then it just kind of exploded exponentially.”

Eugene and Springfield’s pipe glassblowing community mushroomed from three people to hundreds. Stores began popping up selling specialized tools. Meanwhile, Winship was entering the scene from the other side.