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photograph Robert Yimedge

# Heart of Glass

William Morris' work  
represents an inner dialogue

TEXT Meagan Ryan Stasz

William Morris talks to the camera while filming *Creative Nature* in August of 2006. Methow Valley, North Cascade Mountains.



## “MORRIS’ JOURNEY STARTED ALMOST 30 YEARS AGO...”

To experience a work of art by William Morris goes well beyond the visual. Provocative, mythical, powerful, elegant, luminous . . . the list of adjectives describing Morris’ singular combination of color and subject matter references nature, culture, archeology, sociology and more. The rich, luminous colors emanate a sense of belonging to another place and time while retaining a truly modern sensibility. Vessels and jars are reminiscent of ancient peoples and cultures from across time and around the globe. Otherworldly bird and animal figures adorn vessels, hang alongside tools, or simply stand alone. The effect can be ethereal or visceral, faintly humorous or deeply moving. Unlike his predecessors, whose exquisitely fluid, jewel-colored forms enhance the very fragility and delicacy of the glass itself, Morris creates for us a new visual language. His opaque presentation of subtle browns, deep reds and amber yellows introduces this new dynamic where the colors glow from within and the surface belies its true medium.

Looking back at his first experience with Morris, one Sun Valley collector recalls, “I first saw him in his ‘Pouch’ period and I thought the colors were what really attracted me . . . it looked much more interesting to me than what others (glass artists) were doing.

“It’s really magnificent,” the collector asserts. “What really got me was the color.”

With the glossiness removed, the glass itself takes on a new, deeper dimension. Absorbing light, this internal radiance heightens both the brilliance and subtlety of the deep rich colors Morris employs. Using colors and textures belonging to nature, these singular works of art resonate with something deeper and more meaningful.

With a sincere respect and appreciation for the natural world,

Morris has developed an intuitive connection with nature, one that has fueled the transformation of an art form. This respect and appreciation is reflected in the artist’s daily life, whether diving off the Kona Coast, paragliding over the Sawtooth Mountains, or working long hours in a glass hot shop in the woods. With humble beginnings as a truck driver at the renowned Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, Morris entered the phenomenal world of studio glass art almost 30 years ago.

With immense talent, a remarkable crew, and a compelling sense of the material, Morris became one of the world’s foremost glass sculptors in a relatively short period of time. He would continue to be the driving force behind the most compelling and engaging fine art glass until the surprising announcement of his retirement in early 2007.

Under the tutelage of glass luminary and Pilchuck co-founder, Dale Chihuly, Morris began a journey that would utterly transform the American studio glass movement. Witness to this remarkable evolution is Andria Friesen, owner of the Friesen galleries in Ketchum and Seattle. Over her 17 years with Morris, Friesen continues to find herself in awe of her role in bringing the highest caliber of fine art glass to the Wood River Valley. With an extensive list of museums and public collections worldwide, there is a Morris somewhere for everyone to marvel at and contemplate. Seattle, being the home of glass art in the Western Hemisphere, offers numerous opportunities to experience Morris’ work, including the Seattle Art Museum, Seattle-Tacoma International Airport, and The Pilchuck Glass Collection at City Centre and US Bank Center, to name a few. To experience a Morris up close and personal by simply walking down First Avenue in Ketchum is quite a privilege.

photograph Robert McKenna



LEFT photograph Chris Bierlein RIGHT photograph Robert Vinnege

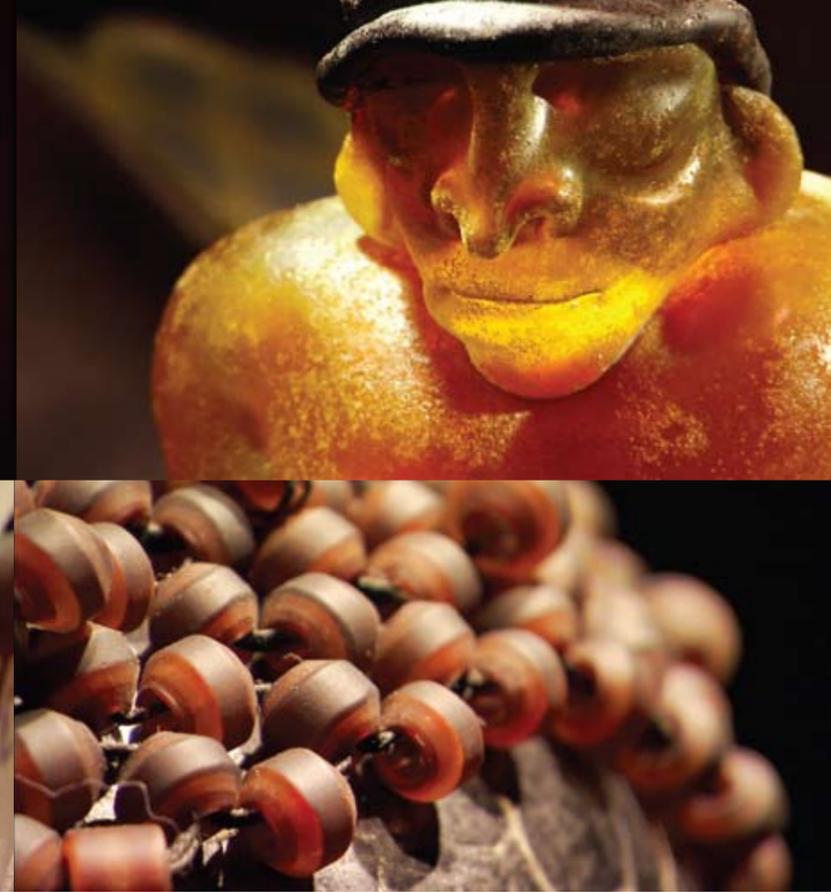
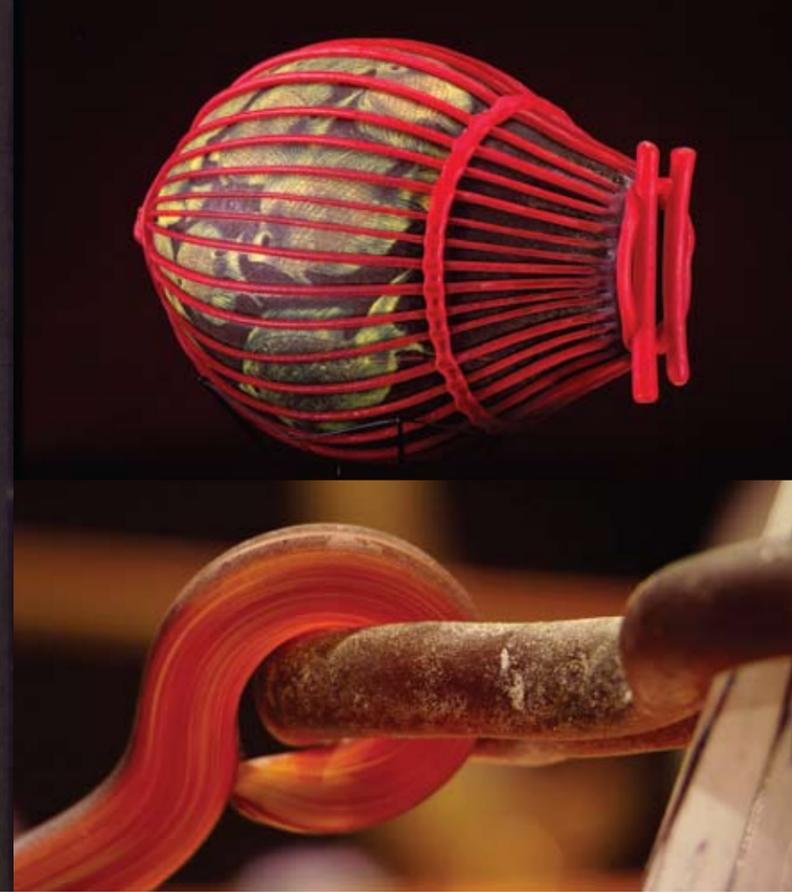
## FOREVER RECASTING THE MOLD

True to form, when the internationally-acclaimed glass artist William Morris elected to end his illustrious career, it was executed beautifully and conscientiously.

In April of 2007, gallery owners and collectors across the globe simultaneously received identical letters from the William Morris Studio. The message: Morris would no longer be a professional glass artist. In the words of Andria Friesen, owner of the Friesen galleries in Ketchum and Seattle and longtime Morris representative, the announcement was “handled elegantly and flawlessly, in true William Morris style.” All too often,

when the art world loses a visionary, it is in tragic terms—a career cut short, its greatness never to be realized. To walk away at the height of one’s career is simply never done. The exception is Morris.





## “GLASS BLOWING IS AN ANIMAL UNTO ITSELF—IT REQUIRES

Friesen explains the deep gratitude she has for Morris and his artwork. “For me, it is a two-fold privilege. First, there is the honor of representing this extraordinary career. Second is the opportunity to share this experience with the collector. Discerning art collectors are remarkable people and can be truly empathetic with the work on a profound and meaningful level.” With an exceptional collection of paintings, tribal artifacts, sculpture, and glass, one collector and part-time Valley resident relates how Morris’ work has greater significance and meaning. “Everything is so clearly from the Earth,” she states. “His work really speaks to me. This is the thing that always got me.” With this genuine power to transcend the visual, Morris’ work conveys a deeper reality that everyone can empathize with, if they choose to.

The desire to understand and identify with Morris’ works has fostered a great deal of general speculation as well as scholarly discussion over the years. For some viewers, there is an immediate desire to identify with and name the representational imagery. We can reference a particular culture or period of history and recognize things we know to have existed before. Representation or replication, however, is clearly not Morris’ intention. While fascinated and moved by other civilizations and their relationship with nature, the work is definitely not about imitation. Utilizing the familiar shapes of ancient vessels, tools and artifacts, Morris uses his imagination to compose and create the work of art. Working in constant motion, the glass can be instructive while being manipulated. Friend and colleague Joey Kirkpatrick describes the experience, saying, “You are watching somebody put expression

into the material of glass in such an extreme way that it becomes something more than glass.” It takes shape as it evolves into the finished work of art. Instinctively, Morris and his multi-talented team push the material to its limit, encouraging from the molten glass a response that will enable them to achieve their desired result. In certain cases, the glass will dictate whether their efforts were fruitful or not. There is a greater connection between man and nature at work behind these creations, one that enriches the senses and inspires the artistic. Through the magical alchemy of blowing, sculpting and engraving glass, Morris translates his knowledge and understanding into more familiar symbols, vessels, masks, and animals. The translation occurs in a most remarkable environment: the glass hot shop. A place of terrific heat filled with a sense of camaraderie, it is here the team members blow, shape, engrave and adorn in every journey from molten substance to stunning work of art.

Nothing brings this remarkable process to light more clearly than the recent documentary, *Creative Nature* made by Spot Creative, Inc., a New York-based production company. (See sidebar pg. 130). Making its debut at the Seattle International Film Festival in May of 2008, this beautifully shot and artfully edited film allows the artist to be himself—working, playing, living, experiencing. All that we know to inspire Morris is found here in these frames. For director/writer John Andres, also co-founder of Spot Creative, this film offered “a chance to explore not just Morris’ art, but his inspirations, and his human realities.” Juxtaposed with the high-energy, high-temperature ballet of movement with molten glass in

photograph Chris Bierlein

## SKILL, KNOWLEDGE, PHYSICAL STRENGTH AND RESPECT.”

the hot shop, the impact is total and complete. Whether fly fishing or bow hunting, the artist’s engagement with his natural surroundings is unabashedly complete. As Morris himself says, “I want to experience this world as immediately as possible.” And experience he does. The cameras follow Morris up a vertical cliff wall as the lifelong mountaineer discusses in the background the intricacy of vibrant green lichen on a rock. There is footage of Morris underwater on a spear fishing expedition that evolves into an intimate observation of shark behavior accompanied by the steady voice of the artist himself discussing fear and instinct. The physical strength and mental determination required to be a truly adventurous and avid outdoorsman finds a willing counterpart in the world of glass blowing. To be a hunter requires skill, knowledge, courage and a genuine respect for the animal you are hunting. Glass blowing is an animal unto itself—a molten, temperature-touchy beast that, to handle properly, requires skill, knowledge, physical strength and respect. These elements are shared, fueling each other in a unique and fascinating way in Morris’ work and lifestyle.

How these elements come together in a work of art is exemplified by an exceptional work called “The Antler Stack”. A towering, seemingly precarious composition of more than 100 individual, glass-blown, hand-sculpted antlers, “The Antler Stack” is literally awesome. Appropriately, it made its debut at Friesen Gallery in the 1990s and has graced a private collection here ever since. Visually compelling and engaging, “The Antler Stack” is imbued with a certain strength and power. The inclination is to think about the animals each antler would represent if,

indeed, these were real antlers. With their subtle ridges and opacity, there is a remarkable likeness to the real thing. These antlers, however, glow and mesmerize in a quietly unnatural way. There is something embodied herein to connect us, to remind us. We are fortunate to have an abundance of deer and elk living in the Valley. Though some may complain about their presence, these mountains and meadows are their domain. “The Antler Stack” compels one to regard this relationship and matter of coexistence. The ability to observe and contemplate is something at which Morris excels and a characteristic that offers us some insight.

The book by William Warmus, *William Morris: Native Species*, The George R. Stroemple Collection, also offers us insight into the person behind the blowpipe. Collaborators on an astounding 38-piece body of work based on native species of flora and fauna from across the Pacific Northwest, George R. Stroemple and William Morris are also very good friends. Together, artist and collector traveled and journeyed, absorbing sights and sounds, images of beauty and danger, and all the subtle details necessary for such an incredible undertaking. Stroemple writes in the foreword of the book, “He (Morris) collects experiences . . . crafting a lifestyle that allows him to do what he loves as both an artist and as a man experiencing the world.” It is these experiences that are both inspirational and informative. In preparation for this unprecedented collaboration, Morris found technical inspiration in the work of a French artisan whose use of layered glass in the 1800s was unparalleled. Warmus cites Morris as saying, “This is the first substantial body of work I have made with two and three layers of glass.”

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TOP LEFT photograph Robert Vinmedge additional photography Chris Bierlein

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# Heart of Glass

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Breathing life into centuries' old techniques is in keeping with the innovative and interpretive style of Morris and his team. The idea, as Morris states in *Creative Nature*, is to figure out "how to make the glass do what you want it to." The work speaks volumes for how well this concept has been absorbed and integrated into the Morris Studio. With this in mind, the *Native Species* collection could very well be the pinnacle of Morris' career.

In reference to Morris' career and his departure from glass, one collector inquires, "So what's he going to do?" Morris is learning to live a different lifestyle—one with all the activities and adventures of before, but without the obligations and commitments of the art world. He is free to pursue his love

## LIFE ON FILM

*Creative Nature* debuted in Ketchum at the Sun Valley Film Festival in September with director/producer John Andres in attendance. For those of you who loved it, or who missed it, the film is available in Blu-Ray Disc and DVD. Both will include the filmmakers' commentary (director, editor and cinematographer). A special 2-disc set will include deleted scenes and extras. Available at [www.CreativeNatureFilm.com](http://www.CreativeNatureFilm.com)

of paragliding and rock climbing. He can devote the time and energy to experiencing fully anything he wants to do, anywhere. He can absorb and reflect on the meteoric career he has enjoyed and be thankful for the tremendous people he has worked with along the way. To redefine one's life at the age of 50 seems an apt and appropriate task for someone who has spent close to 30 years redefining an art form. **SWV**

*Meagan Ryan Stasz is an occasional contributor to Sun Valley Magazine. Her main focus is the daily operation of her husband's sculpture studio and the rearing of their two children. This one-time member of the Friesen Gallery staff thoroughly enjoyed this opportunity to acquaint herself with the life and artwork of William Morris.*

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