

GLASS ART

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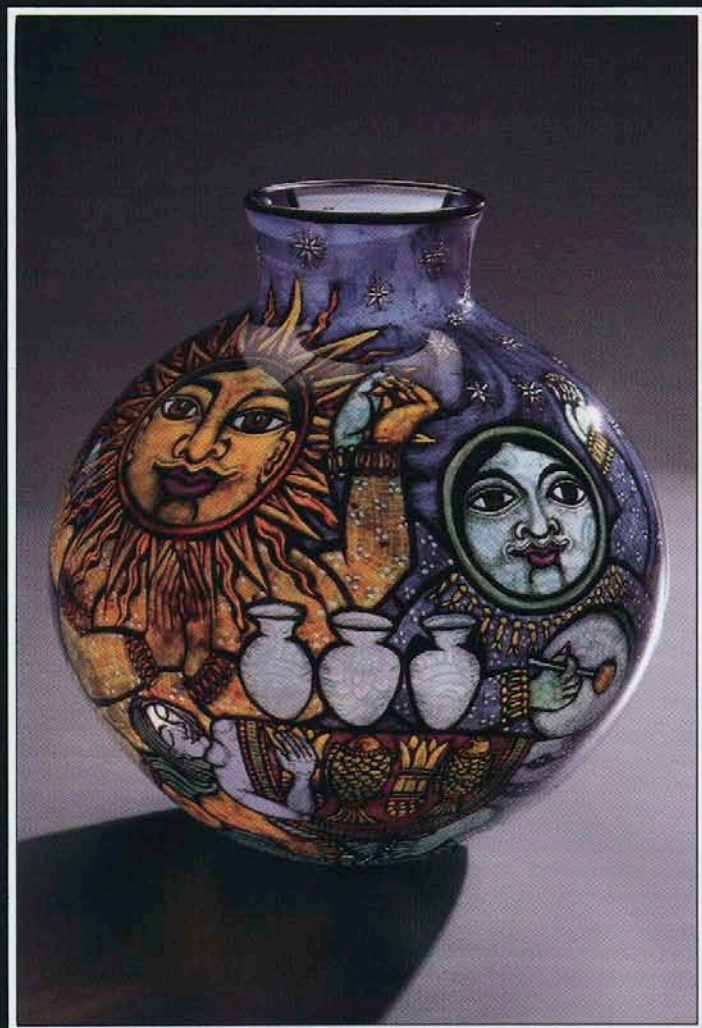
Cappy Thompson:

Narrative, Mythopoesis and the Vessel Form

by Shawn Waggoner



Cappy Thompson. PHOTO: Russel Johnson.



"I Receive a Great Blessing from the Sun and the Moon: I Will be an Artist and Walk the Path of Beauty", Cappy Thompson, 16" x 15 1/2"d, 1995. PHOTO: Michael Seidl.

Using a process for painting stained glass windows developed in the Middle Ages, Seattle artist Cappy Thompson creates intelligent "picture poems" which marry mythology, folk styles and self-expression. Her use of the vessel form lends an ethereal luminosity to her narrative and gives her stories a place to live. Her painting style, in combination with the metaphor of the vessel, results in lush, feminine works which inspire a childlike "magic" reminiscent of hearing a fantastical fairy tale.

Born in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1952, Thompson grew up in Seattle and attended the Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where she received her B.A. in 1976 in painting and printmaking. Basically self-taught artistically as well as technically, Thompson's first professional exposure to glass came in 1975 when she worked for a small studio in Olympia. For several years she learned and worked in solitude until her reputation brought her to the attention of glass artists Charles Parriott, Therman Statom and Dale Chihuly. In 1984 she moved back to Seattle and her subsequent exposure to artists at Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington, led her to painting on vessel forms.

Thompson has taught at Pilchuck and Penland, and her work is part of the public collections of The Corning Museum of Glass, Corning, New York, The American Craft Museum, New York, and The Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, Hokkaido, Japan, to name only a few. Her work will be exhibited in a one-person show at Leo Kaplan Modern in New York, in June 1997 and can also be seen in a national tour beginning in 1998 of "American Glass: Masters of the Art", sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution. She is also represented by Habatat Galleries in Boca Raton, Florida, and Grover/Thurston Gallery in Seattle.

The following is a conversation with Thompson about her aesthetic inspiration, her painting methods and her walk down the path of beauty.

GA: Can you trace the steps you took on the path from stained glass to the combination of paint on three-dimensional glass vessel forms?

CT: I came to glass as a painter and printmaker in 1975 when I began working in a stained glass studio as a summer job. I was attending the Evergreen State College, and it was suggested that I do an internship at the studio researching glass painting.

Stained glass is an inherently beautiful and powerful material for image making because it incorporates the physical experience of light. Where a painted surface reflects light, a glass panel transmits it directly.

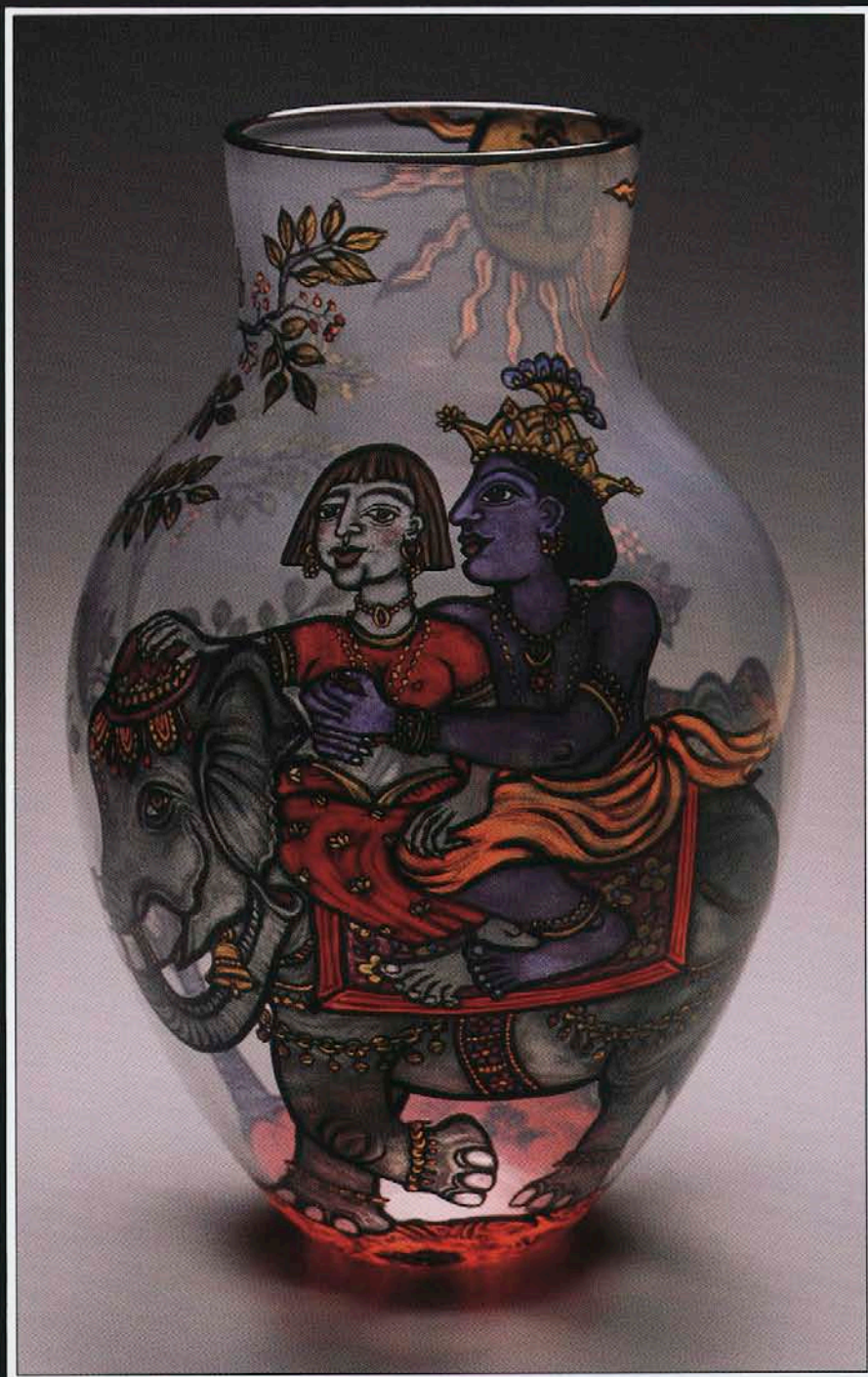
I had a tremendous loyalty to stained glass and worked in it nearly exclusively during those first years. My friends who were glassblowers convinced me it would be a good idea to paint on glass vessels. Flora Mace gave me a vessel one day and had me paint an image on it. Soon after I painted a large bowl, and I realized how interesting it was compositionally, especially considering the fact that my work is pictorial narrative. And here was a little environment in which a story could live. At that point I knew intuitively what the three-dimensional form would bring to my work.

GA: Did you learn to blow glass at that point?

CT: I'm not a glassblower; that requires a completely different set of skills. In the beginning, my glassblowing friends gave me pieces to paint on. And then I bartered until the work started to sell. I'm now able to commission vessels I've designed from Ben Moore in Seattle. He has an incredible crew of people working with him; Dante Marioni and Rich Royal have made pieces for me. Billy Morris made the first group of blanks for me as a favor.

GA: Did you harbor reservations about this new method of working?

CT: Not reservations, but I thought my work in stained glass was very good, and there weren't many artists pursuing it as a medium for expression, for painting. I loved stained glass, but once I attempted painting on vessels, it didn't take long to make the transition. It allowed me to do more work and develop my drawing because the pieces took less time to make than stained glass. And it allowed me to paint three-dimensionally. You could see



"Lord Krishna and Me", Cappy Thompson, 17 1/2" x 11"d, 1993. PHOTO: Michael Seidl.



"Three Queens", Elizabeth I, Cappy Thompson, 15 3/4" x 14"d, 1996. Commissioned by J.C. Penney for Beverly Sills, recipient of the Juanita Kreps Award, 1996. Depicts three of Sills' roles from Donizetti operas. This view is Queen Elizabeth I. PHOTO: Michael Seidl.

through the transparent glass vessel, so the composition would shift depending on your point of view.

GA: What was the perception of painting on glass when you began, and how has that evolved over the last 10 years?

CT: Early on, I had the feeling as I applied for public stained glass commissions that people didn't know what they were looking at; it wasn't in keeping with the perception of contemporary stained glass. I knew the work was appropriate and of high quality, so I couldn't understand why juries weren't responding to it except that it wasn't in the language of what they thought of as stained glass. But in my vessel work, the Medieval style of painting went beyond historical vase painting in content and actually helped develop an audience.

There weren't very many artists painting on glass in this country when I started, though there was a continuing lineage of European glass painters -- Erwin Eisch, Ulrica Vallien, Patrick Reyntiens, Hans Gottfried Von Stockhausen, Albinus Elskus. As the studio glass movement was taking off here, the blowers were at the forefront. Being introduced to Pilchuck and that community was how I discovered other artists working as I was in traditional fired paints -- a vitreous powder made from metal oxides, mixed with a media, painted on and fired to fuse the paint to the surface of the glass. There's still only a handful of artists using this method, although our numbers are growing.

GA: Your area of the country, the Pacific Northwest, is home to a community of talented, prominent glass painters.

CT: Yes. Walter Lieberman, Charlie Parriott and Dick Weiss, who are good friends of mine, were some of the first people in the area to take this on as a life's work. Another dozen artists have joined that community which feeds the quality and energy of the group. Because Pilchuck is nearby, there are other types of painting being explored such as the techniques inspired by David Hopper's Paradise Paints, which allow you to paint on a graal blank and case over it. And then of course there's Bob Carlson and Ginny Ruffner who are painting but not with fired processes. The painters bring content to glass. We all help one another through mutual interest, and all the work is positively affected by that.

GA: Can you describe your process?

CT: The style of painting I've developed over a number of years is called grisaille technique. It involves a subtractive process with dry brushes. It's the

only way to achieve that gray tonal appearance in the painting. This is the same process that I used on stained glass. The enamels are made from metal oxides and are fluxed with a low-melting lead glass. The paint fuses to the surface at the same temperature at which the lead glass melts, which is 1100 degrees F.

I begin by drawing directly on the outside of the vessel with a black marker, letting the composition develop on the piece. I mix the paint, and trace the drawing from the bottom up. I work on a light table and lay the vessel on its side, so I'm working on a horizontal surface inside the vessel. The handles of my paint brushes have been cut to fit inside. This first layer is called tracery. These black lines give the work its Medieval quality.

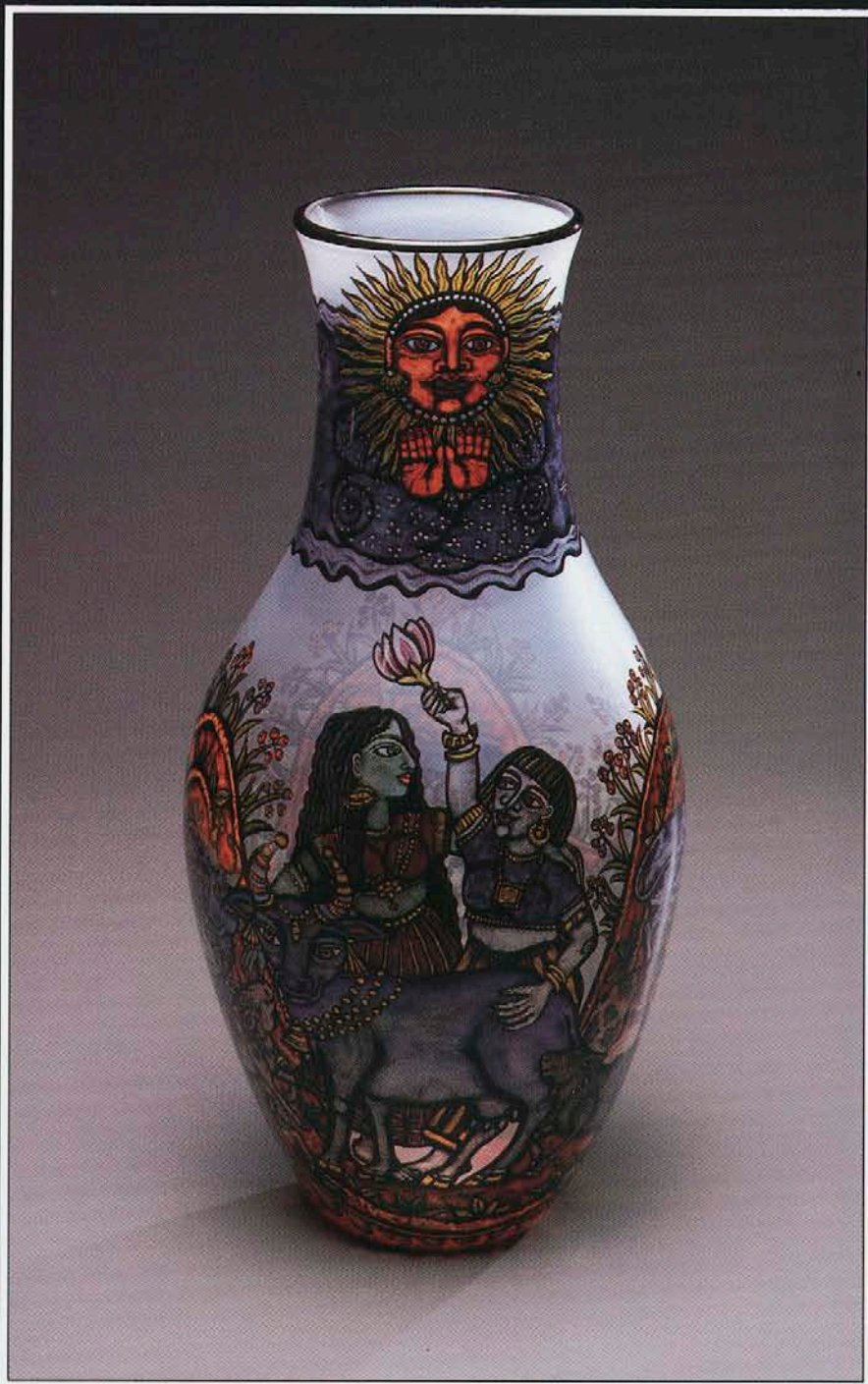
The second layer of paint is called the matt, a wash of gray paint which is applied evenly over the entire surface of the drawing. The highlights are removed with dry brushes -- stipplers and scrubs. Stipplers are bristle brushes shaped into a dome by burning over a candle. They leave a dot pattern. Scrubs are flat bristle brushes which have been trimmed and burned. They leave a line pattern. This removal of paint gives texture and volume to the drawing. I remove the paint from all the background areas, very carefully clean the vessel and fire it a second time.

I fire to 1100 degrees, which is high enough to slump the pieces. You're on the verge of disaster, but with the use of an electronic controller the kiln is programmed to ramp slowly to the annealing temperature of the glass, then quickly to the firing temperature of the glass paint, and quickly back down to the annealing temperature where you soak the piece and slowly bring it back down to room temperature.

Then the colors are applied. I'm working with transparent colors which change significantly when fired. First I do a watercolor rendering of the image to see how I want the colors to appear. I make notes, take Polaroids and apply the enamels to the piece accordingly. In some cases I layer enamels to change, enrich or blend a color. I usually fire twice for color. Thus each piece requires a minimum of four firings.

These vessels are meant to be artworks, not functional objects. Because the transparent enamels are fluxed so heavily, the lead glass is soft. Direct contact with water will break down the enamel over a period of time, but in theory these works should last for thousands of years if cared for properly.

GA: What inspires the narrative in



"Adoration of the Cosmic Cow: The Goddess Parvati Leads Me to a Deeper Understanding of the Feminine Principle", Cappy Thompson, 23" x 11"d, 1995. PHOTO: Michael Seidl.

your work? How are your themes conceived?

CT: I went to a lecture last night where Swedish glass artist Bertil Vallien said, 'I'll tell you where my work comes from, but I'm going to lie, because most artists don't really know where their work comes from.' And I think there's some truth in that. Artistic creation is a mystery.

I've always been interested in and made work that is narrative, whether in panels or vessel form. Over the years I've studied images that I've had a strong response to. I've thought about the creation of my personal aesthetic experience -- the perceptual impact, followed by an emotional response, which may turn into a sense of wonder -- magic even -- in looking at certain images. For me this starts as a reading of the image, then recognizing a story, or making one up for myself, given the visual information within the work.

My emotions are stirred by such things as naive, symbolic drawings, flat perspectives, and dream-like qualities found in primitive painting and in outsider and folk arts. Magic is in the wildly imaginative mythic figures, jewel-toned landscapes, and anthropomorphised animals of Persian miniatures and Indian painting. This experience feeds my imagination and nurtures my soul.

I believe that I had this same kind of experience hearing fairy tales as a child. In my work I'm aspiring to create this experience for the viewer, to be emotionally transported by a story, and to resonate with its meaning.

Several years ago my work took a departure from earlier compositions, which often were based on existing mythology and folklore or had fewer symbols and simpler messages. I recognized that certain images were personal icons -- symbols with which I closely identified and which had begun, almost involuntarily, to populate my work. Certain pieces became "picture poems" that directly reflected my inner life. I began consciously to incorporate aspects of my personal life into my work, beginning with my dog, whom I started to paint as a way of dealing with his aging. Next I myself became a character in the narratives, along with friends and family members. Soon I painted scenes from a new mythology in which I appeared with my favorite Hindu deities.

The work of the last several years has become an exploration of world spiritual traditions, with elements from my dream life and meanderings of my imagination. I think I've ventured into the realm of mythopoesis, or myth-making, where symbols, icons and images drift to mind,

assemble into picture poems and take on a complex life of their own.

GA: What is more important to you as the artist -- the paint or the glass?

CT: The imagery is paramount, and developing the narrative is my primary focus. The perfect ground for this narrative work, however, is the transparent glass vessel. The vessel is a container, a bounded surface with interior access. This allows the vessel to become a world or microcosm, a body or self, and a room or space. These metaphors support and reinforce the narrative. The transparency of the vessel allows you to see the surface narrative, into it, and through it. The circumferential form of the vessel allows you to circumambulate the story, to move through distance and time. Adding this third dimension to the painting exponentially increases its potentiality. It allows the painting to become sculptural.

The narrative becomes the vessel's content, which is reinforced by the fact that the pieces are reverse painted, and therefore physically inside the vessel. Because the glass I use is translucent, the vessel gathers light, breathing life and spirit into the story.

GA: What inspired your piece "Adoration of the Cosmic Cow: The Goddess Parvati Leads Me to a Deeper Understanding of the Feminine Principle"?

CT: That piece is the marriage of two concepts I was studying. The first was a hexagram from the I Ching, which spoke of the image of fire, of radiant nature clinging to or resting on something -- the sun and moon clinging to heaven and the grass resting on the earth. It said, "Care of the cow brings good fortune." This reminded me of a reference in Vedic -- early Hindu philosophy -- to the divine feminine as the Cosmic Cow, Aditi, a feminine principle which embraces the universe, is greater than it, and from which everything evolves.

My vessel depicts the double image of fire as undulating hills revealing their volcanic core and as the sun blazing in heaven above. The landscape became the pasture for Aditi and a herd of 10 cattle, the number of perfection. Wanting to personalize the vessel, I added myself with Parvati, one of the highest feminine deities in the Hindu pantheon, known as the Daughter of the Hills. In my vessel she tends the sacred herd and serves as my spiritual guide.

GA: Your piece "Three Queens" was a commissioned work, correct?

CT: Yes. I was asked to design an award for J.C. Penney Company's Juanita Kreps Award. In its fifth year, this award is presented to an American

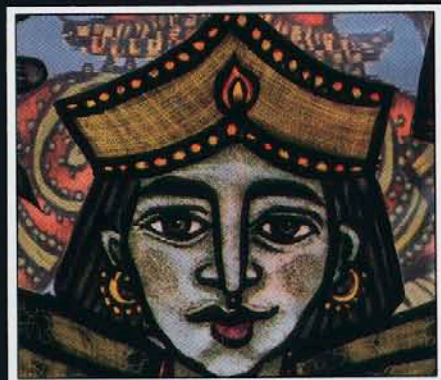
woman of merit. Last year I made a piece called "Celestial Guardians" for Sally Ride, the first woman astronaut. This year Beverly Sills, the opera star, was the recipient. Making this piece was especially enjoyable because I love the costumes of opera. I interviewed Sills' agent as to what roles were important to her and ended up painting three from Donizetti operas -- Anne Boleyn, Mary Queen of Scots and Elizabeth I. The vessel shows three views, the one presented here being Elizabeth I, the only performance in Sills' own estimation which she sang flawlessly.

GA: Much of your work is self-referential, such as the piece "I Receive a Great Blessing from the Sun and the Moon: I Will Be an Artist and Walk the Path of Beauty".

CT: I had been thinking and reading about the effects of the sun and the moon. They're powerful images that archetypically pervade everything. This piece is about my fate. If you look through the three little vessels hovering above me, you can see through the interior to lotuses floating in the cosmic ocean behind. The water is the subconscious which I tap to make the work. It's the sacred sea which is in all of us. The piece is about how wonderful it is to have this life and be an artist.

GA: Though each piece tells its own story, is there one general message you try to convey with this work?

CT: I'm on the path to beauty. When the goodness of an object's form and content grabs your attention, arouses your emotion and involves you intellectually -- that's the experience of beauty. Seeing something beautiful is good for you. I try to create that experience by designing and painting vessels which, in my own way, affirm the beauty of life, of love and of spirit. ♦



ON THE COVER: "The Fire God Agni Blesses Me for the Purposes of Glass Making", Cappy Thompson, 17" x 13"d, 1994. PHOTO: Claire Garoutte.