

GLASS



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Cappy Thompson's Fabled World

Ron Glowen

The Fox and the Grapes (1991), painted stained glass, 24" x 24".
Collection: John H. Hauberg.
All Photos in this article by Michael Seidl.

An antiquarian spirit resides in the painted glasswork of Seattle artist Catherine (Cappy) Thompson. The notion arises not only because Thompson employs the styles, motifs, and content of certain historical and cultural eras, notably medieval and folk styles and forms, but also in the sense that her aim in art is to express similar attitudes conveyed in the holistic terms of those eras or contexts—community purpose, the merging of artistic and spiritual faith, and the presentation of visual modes of instruction and guidance. The antiquarian notion resides in Thompson's preoccupation with the traditional materials of stained glass and glass-vessel painting, and in her application of imagery (or a style of imagery) derived from sources such as the early medieval illuminated manuscript, the late medieval woodblock print, and the Gothic cathedral window. Thompson's narrative images complete the historical scenario, excerpted from ancient fables and parables, biblical episodes and

allegories, and medieval sciences such as alchemy and teratology. The choice of subject matter, the particular mediums and treatments of glass utilized, and the artistic sources that are referenced, all speak of a non-hierarchical merging of art and craft as hallmarks of a bygone age.

An enduring paradox in art is the unexpectedly vivid and often fanciful kinds of images that were created during times when art was a highly controlled and governed activity. Theologians may have determined the exact disposition of Byzantine mosaics, Islamic illuminations, or Romanesque stained-glass windows, and yet an expressive vitality seems to burst forth in the glorious use of energetic line, radiant color, and narrative detail in the drawings of anonymous scribes and tilemakers. It is that vividness, vitality, and purity of feeling that Thompson seeks in her work, while acknowledging and maintaining the connection to history and tradition.

Thompson regards drawing as the most important element in her work, whether in the medium of stained glass, which she worked in exclusively from 1975 to 1985, or in the current series of linear drawings painted in enamels on blown-glass vessel blanks. She models her drawings from such sources as Persian and Indian miniatures, northern European woodcuts, painted church windows, book illustrations, and historiated calligraphy, as well as folk art. She is fascinated both by the humble purity of expression conveyed in these images (often produced as articles of spiritual faith) and by the eccentricity of form—odd perspectives, awkward distortions, even a sort of proto-cubist reconfiguration of figure and space. Often, her sources also provide the narrative component as well. Her favorites are *Aesop's Fables* and the Mughal Indian versions of the *Fables of Bidpai*, moral tales with animals as the main characters.

Thompson has also employed her assimilation of older-style graphic mannerisms and motifs to subjects and themes of her own invention, while still referring to sources ranging from Greek archeology to Mexican folk art.

Born in Alexandria, Virginia, in 1952, Cappy Thompson attended Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington, where she received her B.A. in 1976 in painting and printmaking. A summer job in 1975 at a production stained-glass studio in Olympia was her introduction to this craft medium. When her painter's sensibility to reflected light and nuance was dramatically awakened to the brilliance and directness of pure optical color and light, she decided to combine the two mediums. Unfortunately, no one was available to instruct her in the traditional applications of painting on glass, so she taught herself by trial and error.

Thompson's first works in stained glass, done between 1975 and 1977, were derived from Japanese *ukiyo-e* woodblock prints. The design modes of woodblock printing and leaded stained glass are not dissimilar in that both are primarily composed of broad areas of flat color and thick contour line. The *nishiki-e* or "brocade" patterns of drapery were recreated with sandblasting. A commission in 1978 to execute a window design of the Virgin of Guadalupe resulted in Thompson's first glass painting using the *grisaille* technique (a process of laying down a wash and removing paint with dry brushes), and devising, for the first time, her own imagery from traditional sources but retaining its essential symbolic and narrative characterizations. In terms of ethical credo Thompson's next major work has had a continuing effect on her subsequent oeuvre. Her interest in mythology led her to investigate the artistic traditions of various world cultures, and from a Persian miniature she executed a large stained-glass window of a fable, *The Battle of the Crows and Owls*. The image seemed to her to

powerfully express the nature of conflict, and instilled in her the desire to relate her own ethical and humanitarian feelings and values. The summation of her "apprentice" phase was yet another complex stained-glass panel, *St. George and the Dragon*, in which she felt she had begun to master the traditional technique of fired-enamel painting on glass. In the fairly short novice-to-master progression in the early days of the American studio-glass movement, Thompson had, by 1984, acquired sufficient expertise and reputation to be invited as an artist-in-residence at the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood. She returned to Pilchuck in 1988 and 1989, teaching glass painting. The domination of hot-glass object makers at Pilchuck, combined with the atmosphere of experimentation, innovation, and marketing, would have a decisive effect on Thompson's work. Around 1985 she began to paint on milky translucent vessels, eschewing color altogether. The new format freed her from the restrictive reliance on commissions and the larger speculative investment of time and materials that went into stained-glass production; now she could explore ideas in a more immediate fashion. With the initial elimination of color (Thompson didn't like the washed-out look of fired enamel colors after working with the brilliant intensity of colored glass), these new works relied entirely on the graphic power of her drawings and the judicious use of *grisaille* matting. Painting a see-through circumferential surface presents a new set of factors, complications, and references. Whereas the stained-glass works were kept within or near the transcendent aims of the medieval church window, the vessel imparts different conditions and metaphors. It demands greater involvement with the surface contours in order to visualize the whole; the front, sides, and back must visually connect, and the element of temporality is introduced as the image must be "read" while rotating or circumambulating the form. Further complicating the picture is the *pentimento* effect of viewing the reverse side through the frontal image and of viewing the outside and inside of certain vessel shapes simultaneously. These compositional difficulties are ameliorated by the rather charming cinematic effects induced by the translucent surface and the act of visual rotation.



***Troubadour* (1991), enamel on blown glass (grisaille technique, reverse painted with transparent color), 21" x 14" x 14". Poppy view at left; figure view at right.**



Top:
Water Carrier
 (1991), enamel on
 blown glass
 (grisaille technique,
 reverse painted),
 19" x 11" x 11".

Under the Roses
 (1991), 8 3/4" x 13
 1/2" x 13 1/2".

Bottom:
Tree Keeper
 (1991),
 10 1/2" x 13" x 13".

The Lion Tamer
 (1990),
 22" x 15" x 15".

Forget-Me-Not
 (1991),
 23" x 13" x 13".

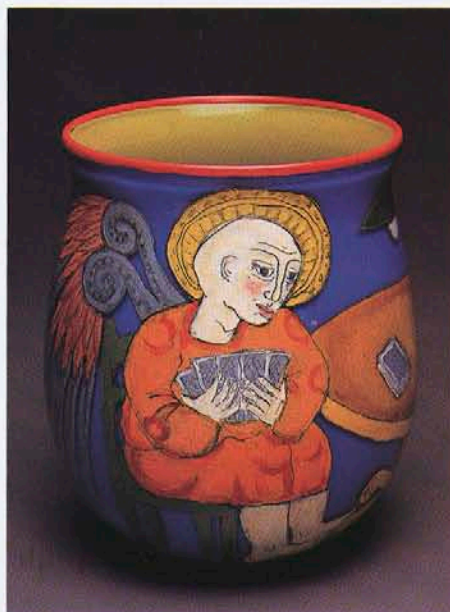






***Angel Riding a Dragon* (1991), opaque enamels on blown glass, 12" x 12" x 12".**

***The Poker Game* (1991), opaque enamels on blown glass, 12 3/4" x 11" x 11".**
Collection:
The Corning Museum of Glass.



Ron Glowen is an art critic based in Seattle and teaches art history at the Cornish College of Arts. He will become the new editor for the *Glass Art Society Journal* later this year.

The round format allows Thompson to include more elements of a narrative into a single work. Recently, Thompson reintroduced colors into her designs, softened by the milky glass and adding a decorative flourish to the pieces. The figures—gaudily costumed jesters and musicians—and the garden flora swell to engulf the entire vessel form. The imagery has the look and feel of handtinted German woodcuts of the playing-card variety. She has also completed a new body of work painted in more intense enamel colors, in an almost impasto roughness, on the outside of layered, opaque blown-glass blanks. In these works, Thompson has adapted the figural style of Mexican folk art for a series of works on angels and devils in fables of her own invention with a more playful spirit, such as the two protagonists playing cards. A visit in 1989 to a glass workshop in Czechoslovakia resulted in a new format of deeply etched and fluidly mottled background surfaces on translucent colored vessel blanks, creating a marriage between drawing and vessel. However important the visual and compositional elements are to the vessel work of Cappy Thompson, the content of the imagery is her major focus. Feeling a “prime directive to express a caring for and love of the earth,” her most recent vessel paintings are replete with references to growth and nurture as well as admonitions of waywardness and destruction. Thompson is not a didactic moralist; she admits that her work walks a fine line from being regarded as sweet and sentimental.

Her reverence and respect for creatures great and small, and the quaint manner that she deploys in depicting chivalrous animals and humans, might seem more appropriate for the pages of a children’s book than the surfaces of gallery-bound art objects. Yet in the cultures and times that Thompson draws her inspiration from, there were no hierarchical distinctions between art forms. All were engaged in the same function of offering narrative instruction and ethical guidance. A message is framed by the manner of vehicle in which it is communicated; thus, the glass assumes a metaphorical function for the fragility of human and natural relationships. Above all, the medium, the style, and the subject matter represent for Thompson models for human sincerity of feeling and expression. Like a medieval apprentice, Thompson sought to master the traditions before stepping forward to advance her own esthetic and ethical perspective (she is

now creating her own mythopoetic narratives, such as her recent work *Sea Song*, in the style of medieval imagery.)

Thompson’s antiquarian spirit and style forces us to examine the validity of restoring seemingly outmoded forms of expression within the context of contemporary stylistic usages. Her imagery falls outside of the usual dichotomous consideration of artistic impulses and attitudes, such as Apollonian versus Dionysian, classic versus baroque, and cerebral versus expressionistic. Nor does it seem properly “postmodern” in the quotation of styles and modes from the past, formulated in a pastiche of ironic juxtapositions. Thompson is aware of the potential of a mannered sincerity exuding from her continued use of medieval illustrational styles. Yet she persists, not only because the style seems to fit the intimately populist nature of her narrative content, but also because it expresses her own feelings of an indebtedness to an apprenticeship workshop tradition.

The formulation of her work has in fact been the product of the workshop atmosphere. She is quick to give credit to friends in the glass community who have encouraged and challenged her work, and to the spirit of generosity that is a hallmark of the contemporary glass movement. When she began to paint on glass, techniques were still being guarded in secrecy. Now she is recognized among the leaders in this particular field of glass art.