

CARRYING A TORCH

GLASS FITS LIKE A SLIPPER FOR ARTIST ROBIN HOLT

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Glass artist Robin Holt is unabashedly a dog person. She is an avid supporter of rescue animals, and her poodle, Finnegan, and two Malteses, Phoebe Trixie Bell and Griffin Hans Tyrion, serve as constant companions in her home art studio. Awakened at early hours of the morning by glass design ideas and titles for pieces, Holt would find herself firing glass beads while the moon was high in the sky, her dogs at her feet.

Thus, her business, Moondog Art Glass was formed. Her first doggy art companion was a rescued bearded collie named Eli. They met when he starred in a Young Actors Theatre production of "Annie" many years ago, playing the part of Sandy the dog and winning her heart. After passing away from old age, Eli is remembered by Holt every time she dons her floral iris necklace.

"I was making this series when I knew he was sick," says Holt. "He wasn't suffering but he was very tired. It's not typically what I normally would make but these were the last beads I made when he was living, lying on the floor beside me. So I strung them up because I knew I'd wear them no matter what and I do."

Holt's work has been shown in many local festivals and art shows such as LeMoyné's Chain of Parks where she has been juried and accepted for the past seven years. She has won awards in Pensacola and Panama City as well as Daphne, Alabama, and annually participates in Tallahassee's Market Days and Tallahassee Nurseries' Artisans in the Garden events. This year she's looking forward to being a part of the "Just One More" Holiday Art Show in downtown Dec. 10-11, which will give attendees the opportunity to get in last minute shopping from over 70 artists alongside continuous live entertainment and hand-on activities.

"It's a great way to end the season," says Holt. "I usually start torching on Thanksgiving morning and will work for a week solid for my yearly home show, but would always have inventory



TOP: Glass bead necklace by Robin Holt. PHOTO BY ROBIN HOLT ABOVE: Local glassworker Robin Holt creates a focal bead. DEMOCRAT FILES

left over. I love that this show is perfectly named and I'm excited to bring some new mermaids I've been working on."

Holt hungered for creative outlets growing up in Wakulla County's rural Smith Creek, her mind concocting possibilities in pinecones and rocks. Though her grandmother made arts and crafts projects and her aunt was a talented seamstress, Holt didn't have any art teachers or family artisans to guide her. Instead, she wrote poems, short stories, and song lyrics to keep her hands moving at the rate of her imagination, and eventually she discovered stained glass mosaics long after she completed school and moved to the city.

Mosaics work with cold glass, cutting, puzzling, and adhering them to paint a picture with each colorful bit and piece. However, after many years of making glass art, Holt wasn't completely satisfied with the tedious grout-in process that accompanied the medium, so she turned to flame, or lamp-

work, melting and making glass beads. She took classes with Susan Frisbee at Glasswork by Susan at Lake Ella for many years learning about techniques and glass safety. Recently, Holt realized the root of her fascination with glass in a childhood memory of waiting for Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Cinderella" to air on her black and white television set.

"I would sit there and wait until they showed that glass slipper," describes Holt. "I was fascinated by the way it sparkled, and I still love transparent glass. Even when I did mosaics, I didn't want to use broken pottery or tiles; I only wanted to use glass."

When Holt's glasswork expanded beyond her kitchen, she and her husband built a home studio where she could organize her equipment. She lovingly calls it the "Torch Chamber," as it stores her propane and oxygen-fueled torch, stockpiles of stained glass, and imported glass rods from

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Glass

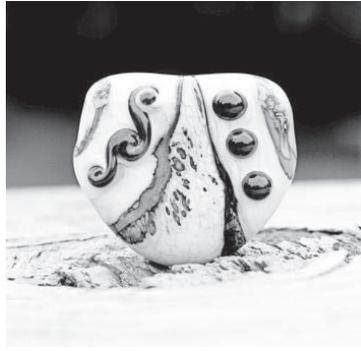
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Italy. The factory that makes the glass she purchases recently closed down after 40 years, so Holt is always on the lookout for more and often urges customers to not hesitate if they like a piece due to the ebb and flow of supplies.

Her most complicated bead takes up to eight hours to craft whereas simpler beads take only a few minutes. With focal beads like her "If A Deserted Island Were Stranded On You" series, the many layers of sand, water, sky, a palm tree, and a seashell demonstrate the intensive micro-scale process. Prior to firing beads, Holt's preparation involves mixing glass to make colorful canes, or long rods, that will be utilized later. Next comes wrapping molten glass around the mandrel, a long stainless steel rod coated with clay so the glass can slip off easily.

"I'll pick up the ivory color, which is my sand, and then pick up turquoise for water and periwinkle for the sky and that will be my canvas," explains Holt, using her deserted island bead as an example. "Then I'll pick up the green cane and start painting the palm tree with that glass. Once it's done it goes into the kiln to cool down slowly over several hours which takes all the stress out of the glass."

Holt even has gravity at her disposal, at times holding her mandrel still instead of spinning it constantly so that



ROBIN HOLT

Mistake horse bead turned out to be a favorite.

the glass droops downward to shape asymmetrical beads. Sometimes she takes tweezers while the glass is in this pliable, putty-like state and twists spirals into the bead. An internet search bar is often her closest companion and main source of inspiration when thinking up new designs, and Holt often leaves some of her more one-of-a-kind beads as singular creations, which she sells in a basket at arts shows for other jewelers to peruse and purchase.

She names her style as both whimsical and elegant, sophisticated techniques and compositions making each series of beads unique since she doesn't like making designs that she's seen before. Holt's palette consists of ivories, turquoises, blacks, and transparent colors, though she says earth tones



tend to be her best sellers. One of her most purchased pieces called "Saving Terefe" is named for her niece's adoption story, bringing home her son, Terefe, from Ethiopia. The beads are made out of stained glass and natural, earthy colors with a special reactive glass bringing a metallic sheen to the surface under the torch's propane flame.

"She changed his name to Henry but she was going to save a child and I thank him for that inspiration," smiles Holt. "I never thought I'd be a jeweler, but I love making beads. I like to stretch my imagination a little bit, too."

From hummingbirds to cat's and dog's faces, Holt enjoys playing with humorous and quirky statement pieces. She's made a mermaid wearing a rubber ducky and a multitude of other beach themed beads that has her leaning towards renaming her business Moondog and Mermaids. Her "Hollow Beach" series is exceedingly popular at the shows she participates in — a hollow, transparent bead that she fills with water, sand, and seashells.

Outside of sharing her artistic creations, Holt seeks to cultivate others' creativity with her beaded beauties. She's always welcoming new faces to her booth, and encourages budding glass artists as well. Holt emphasizes

If you go

What: "Just One More" Holiday Art Show
When: Saturday, Dec. 10, and Sunday, Dec. 11
Where: Downtown Ponce de Leon and Bloxham Parks between Adams and Calhoun St.
Cost: Free
Contact: For more information, call Allen Thompson at 850-224-3252 or visit tallahasseedowntown.com

safety for those interested in making beads or jewelry, such as working in a ventilated space and investing in the proper torches and eye protection.

Holt recalls how her own talent was born out of a hunger to make something special and believes everyone has something similar to offer if they learn how to fulfill those creative needs. Even when she's not torching, Holt has continued to write and added a blog section to her website, and believes that trial and error make for the best instructors.

"When I'm making a bead and do something wrong, I'll take it out of the kiln and realize I love it," states Holt. "I made a horse bead one time that was so bad that I decided to melt the design and used gravity to let it droop. It turned out to be one of my favorite beads and is in my personal collection. Some of the worst mistakes that I make while I'm working turn out to be some of my best work."

Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture (www.tallahasseearts.org).