

Annie and the American experience



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Ann Morhauser, founder of Annieglass, shows a piece named "Tiburon," which was inspired by a shark fin. The piece will be on display at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art in Washington, D.C., beginning July 4, 2006.

Art + Artists 2000 1.31.05 Annieglass founder Morhauser to exhibit at Smithsonian

By ROGER SIDEMAN

OF THE REGISTER-PAJARONIAN

For years, local artist Ann Morhauser has brought her art to the dinner table. Soon, her elegant glassware will be enshrined on display at The Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington, D.C., which houses the nation's first federal art collection and dedicates itself to artists whose works are considered "windows on the American experience." You wonder how three different ceramics teachers could have flunked her in high school. Such is the American experience.

Yet Morhauser is a remarkable example of an artist who has successfully reconciled the well-known commercial rigors of the art market with the creative spirit that drives her work.

Morhauser remembers one morning when a burst of that spirit stopped her cold while on her way to a business meeting.

"I was out the door of my studio in my dress clothes when I passed the clay mold for a very large bowl I'd been working on and just couldn't get rounded enough or smooth enough," she said. "Frustrated, I stood above the 60-pound mold and I got carried away with a two-by-four. I pounded and pounded this thing with the studio staff sort of standing around in amazement."

"This is better than the original!" she said to herself, surprised by the outcome.



Tarmo Hannula/Register-Pajaronian

Teresa Zolar holds up a gold-leafed glass plate on Tuesday at the Annieglass retail store on Harvest Drive in Watsonville.

The result was her "Aquamarine Pleated Bowl" — emphasis on "pleated" — which is now in mass production.

The Annieglass studio in Watsonville is the birthplace of Morhauser's glass designs, which are sold in more than 600 high-end stores and galleries throughout the United States and can be found on dining tables at five-star hotels from London to Shanghai.

Throughout her more than 20 years in business, celebrities such as Robin Williams, Barbara Streisand, Jennifer Aniston and Oprah Winfrey have entertained using her pieces.

Given all her prominence, it's hard to believe Morhauser designed her first plate "on a lark," as she said in an interview.

See MORHAUSER, page 2

MORHAUSER

From page 1

She was introduced to glass-blowing at night, under a full moon on a beach up the coast past Santa Cruz, in what she refers to as the defining moment of her career.

"This guy with long hair had a portable glass furnace on a trailer bed and the glass was glowing in the night at 2,200 degrees," Morhauser recalls. "I was hooked and it's been an addiction ever since."

In her sprawling 16,000-square-foot warehouse studio, amid 22 ovens and a busy staff of 40 people, Morhauser describes with a bluesy coolness how her works come to life through a process called slumping, in which standard windowpanes melt over a ceramic mold. When heated at high temperatures, the glass, decorative metals and colors fuse permanently to the mold, making it chip resistant and dishwasher safe.

Her works are described as surprising, stately, wildly colorful or humorous — and always memorable. The Annieglass store in Santa Cruz could easily be the dining mess tent for a troupe of court jesters and circus clowns.

A mother of two and advisor to chefs and restaurateurs, Morhauser is also significantly tied to Jacob's Heart, a group dedicated to improving the quality of life for children with cancer and easing the burden faced by their families.

Once a month, young terminal cancer patients visit an upstairs room at the Annieglass studio for playtime with an art therapist. Each year's Mother's Day sale benefits Jacob's Heart.

Morhauser also donates to a wide variety of community organizations including the Boys and Girls Club, Autism Education Network, Mothers Against Drunk Drivers and almost every local school.

When it reopens in July 2006, The Luce Center at the Smithsonian museum will display two pieces from Morhauser's "Shell Series." The exhibit will display more than 3,000 works of art including contemporary crafts, 18th- to 20th-century painting and sculpture, folk art, miniatures, medals and medallions. The museum will tell the stories of each object and artist through the use of computer kiosks and hand-held personal digital assistants. It might show footage of Morhauser at work in her studio or giving a lecture.

One of the two museum pieces, titled "Tiburón," resembles a shark fin, which, like most of Morhauser's work, is an abstraction of forms found in nature. Its rippling, textured surface, frosted finish and pale aqua coloring suggests the flow of water.

"That texture is from my fingerprints," Morhauser said. "I put my heart and soul into this piece. I really went out on a limb on this one."