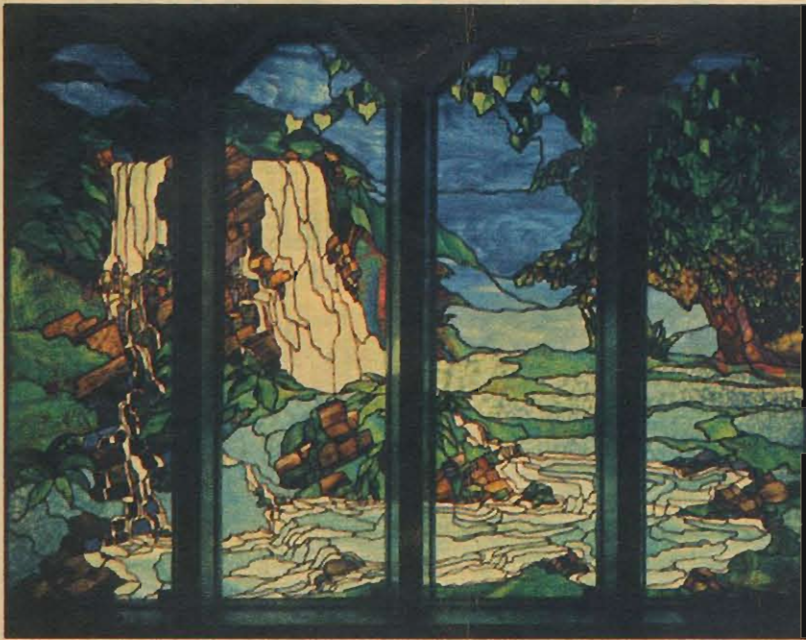




CLASS GLASS

BY ERIC HOFFMAN



Tucked away between a red-wood grove and an apple orchard on a nine-acre farm in Bonny Doon, 12 miles north of Santa Cruz, is the exclusive studio of Bonny Doon Art Glass. Bonny Doon may be tiny, but there's nothing small-time about its stained-glass company: Founder-owner John Forbes has been paid as much as \$130,000 for a single commission.

Over the past few years, Forbes has tackled a myriad of subjects: Church windows, Tiffany-style designs, antique cars and even sorcery. His patrons come not only from Beverly Hills, Santa Barbara, Monterey and Sausalito, but New York and Atlanta.

Until the turn of the century, stained glass was chiefly a European art form. Since medieval times, it has traditionally appeared in churches and cathedrals. The windows were characterized by colored transparent glass, simple geometric patterns and lead lines that crisscrossed the glass. The details were painted on by hand.

By the 1900s, Americans were beginning to abandon tradition in favor of innovation. In this exciting atmosphere, Louis Tiffany and John LaFarge, America's two most daring glass designers, combined opalescent glass with imaginative design, often with secular themes. They broke further with tradition by making lamp shades, and their new designs became known as Art Glass. Despite widespread public acceptance, fine craftsmanship and experimental use of design and color, Tiffany's works were viewed by most art critics as a bastardization of a sacred art form. Wrote a leading art critic: "Art Glass became profitable almost overnight. American churches and

continued

The stained-glass art of John Forbes, clockwise from left: A Bugatti race car seems to roar out of its frame. "The Waterfall" achieves a sense of dimension not usually found in the medium. A buffing technique was used on the Houdini mural to give it the quality of an oil painting. Sorcery is a popular theme with the artist

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GLASS

and homes burst forth in ugliness that was mockingly pretty or frankly horrid, as the fates assigned."

With the coming of WW I, the Victorian era that had patronized Art Glass ended abruptly. The technique remained a lost art until the cultural upheavals of the 1960s, when interest in Art Glass was revived. But the 50-year drought had allowed the high level of craftsmanship to slip away with the Victorian artisans, whose unwanted skills had died with them.

John Forbes was molded in the '60s, and eventually found his way to stained glass. It was an unlikely choice of profession. After a lackluster performance, he graduated from a Los Angeles high school in 1964. Forbes started college, but dropped out after a year.

For a time, he drifted around California, picking up odd jobs in places like Ojai and Santa Barbara. By 1967, he had found his way to the Haight-Ashbury. He enjoyed the excitement of the Haight. "We all felt joined in some kind of new moral force that would make the world better. At the time, there was a tremendous feeling of sharing. In a sense, we were awfully innocent."

For entertainment, he would go to the Fillmore Auditorium and watch the light shows. "I was fascinated with the use of color to create mood and entertainment," he recalls.

In 1968, the Haight began to turn tough, so Forbes returned to Los Angeles and visited his godmother, a woman whose advice he trusted. In a discussion during dinner, she directed him to a new course. "She convinced me that experiencing things like light shows was not the way to fulfillment. She kept saying I should find something I liked, and combine it with a goal I could work toward. That made sense to me."

Forbes returned to San Francisco with a fresh orientation, but no firm direction. Then, during a visit to a friend's house, he discovered a partially completed stained-glass window in the basement. Its owner had lost interest in the project, so Forbes took it over. "As soon as I worked with that window, I saw the potential to create the beauty that coincided with the joy I'd felt watching the patterns and colors at the Fillmore," he recalls.

Forbes moved to a farm in Bonny Doon, where he cut firewood to make ends meet, while voraciously consuming every book on stained glass he could find. Then he discovered Corinthian Studios in Saratoga. "They had a whole collection of Tiffany windows and lamp shades, most in need of repair," he says. "I took a chance and told them I could restore their windows. In truth, I didn't

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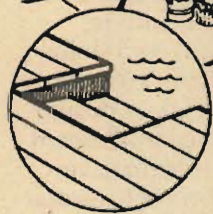
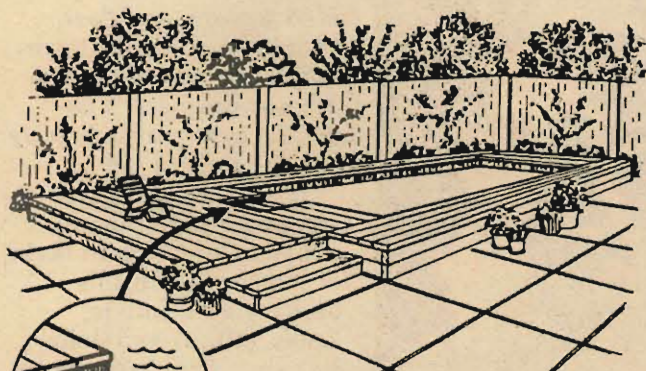
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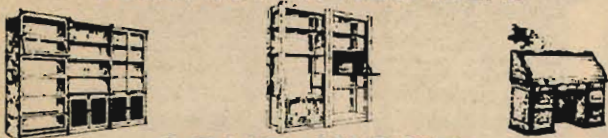
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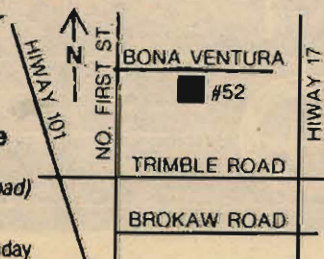


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GLASS

know if I could, but I ended up with a whole back seat full of Tiffanys."

By meticulously studying and working on those Tiffanys, he learned valuable lessons from the master. "Once I'd mastered the technical aspect, the most difficult part was matching new glass with original material."

For most of 1969-70, Forbes worked on restorations, earning about \$2 an hour. "It was OK, because a goal was emerging," he says. He decided to make windows as well as do restorations. "I knew I had the technical skill, but wasn't sure about design. Mike Leeds, an old friend who was a set designer for the movie industry, had been seriously injured when a set fell on him. He'd had it with L.A., so I invited him to lend his talents to glass while he convalesced at my place in Bonny Doon."

The Forbes-Leeds combination worked, and they landed a mammoth project. In 1971, Max Walden, owner of the Cooper House in Santa Cruz' Pacific Garden Mall, hired Bonny Doon Glass to install 1,500-square-feet of Art Glass. The commission included a beveled and stained-glass candy counter, a Victorian bar with 75-square-feet of beveled glass, and 1,100-square-feet of restored church glass canopies that serve as a roof to an outside gallery. The project took three years to complete. Leeds departed during that time, and Dave MacDonald, a 17-year-old, became apprenticed to Forbes. Today, 10 years later, Dave is a complete artisan and part-owner of the studio.

After the Cooper House assignment had been completed, Forbes was commissioned by Monterey restaurateurs Jim Nevis and Jay Pauly to do a series of "themed" windows for their chain of McFly restaurants. In the Sly McFly restaurant on Monterey's Cannery Row, the theme is classic racing cars. The traditional restriction of glass as a stiff medium has been overcome, and the cars actually seem to be moving.

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It takes hundreds of hours for Forbes and his six artisans to create one masterpiece, and there are bitter disappointments. For instance, after a year of 10-hour days, the last of 11 windows was installed in Sly McFly. Three months later, an arsonist's fire burned the restaurant to the ground.

"After the shock wore off, we made the windows again," says Forbes. And adds, with a smile of satisfaction, "Only that time, they were better." □

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