

AMERICA'S CUP

To the disciples of Lino Tagliapietra, the traditional goblet is the consummate test of skill; its pure, essential form a Holy Grail of glassblowing. Twenty-five years since Lino's first workshops in the U.S., the story of how the goblet—or "cup," as it's called in the U.S.—changed American glassblowing is still being written.

BY ANDREW PAGE

Dante Marioni,
Cup Box, 1997.
Blown glass,
plexiglass.
H 24, W 12,
D 12 ins.

PHOTO: ROGER SCHREIBER
COURTESY: THE ARTIST





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DANTE MARIONI

In high school, Dante Marioni had no plans to follow in the footsteps of his father, Paul Marioni, the California-based sculptor who works in painted, blown, and cast glass. The two had always been close, but a career in glass didn't inspire the teenaged son. "There was a whole funky thing going in the '70s, a soft, loose, and goopy style," says Dante. "Glass was mayonnaise." Dante had, of course, played around with the blowpipe, but he was more interested in becoming a professional motorcycle racer.

That all changed in 1979, when he drove up to Pilchuck with his father to help load some equipment the elder Marioni was borrowing from the school. Walking through the basement of the Pilchuck Lodge, the 15-year-old glimpsed a set of impossibly fine blown wineglasses that stopped him in his tracks. Dante examined the pieces closely.

"They looked almost machine-made, but they clearly weren't," he says. "I was immediately intrigued by that, the effort to make something by hand that was perfect."

It was work that Lino Tagliapietra had blown during his very first summer teaching at Pilchuck. Because the maestro was back in Murano by then, Dante's first meeting with Lino was not face-to-face, but an encounter with his work—demo pieces that had been stashed in the basement. But the effect was profound. Perfectly proportioned, the unforgiving forms blown absolutely on center spoke to Dante in a way American glass art never had.

"I guess I'm hardwired to appreciate something like that, but I immediately jumped into it," says Dante, who credits the patience of Ben Moore, Richard Marquis, Dale Chihuly, and his father, for supporting him when he was "just a pesky kid" hungry for knowledge and experience. Dante began to come to Pilchuck on his own, and, after graduating high school in 1982, didn't go on to art school but took a job at the Glass Eye Studio in Seattle, where he made production glass during the day so he could practice making tumblers after hours.

In 1983, Lino Tagliapietra spent two weekends doing a project at Glass Eye when he noticed Dante's intensity. "Make seven years' worth of goblets with the same assistant," he told the 19-year-old, "and you will be able to make anything in glass." Dante became intrigued. His single-minded focus on the goblet as the form that embodied all the lessons of glass technique began to spread to other young glassblowers drawn to the athleticism, grace, and poise the goblet demanded.

But it's not a "goblet" in American parlance. Though making one requires precision and a delicate touch, the American glassblowers who embrace the wineglass downplay any suggestion of fussiness or pretension. They call the form, simply, a "cup."

As Lino began to spend more time in the U.S. at Pilchuck and other glass programs, his reputation began to grow among young blowers inspired to pursue the Muranese wineglass that Lino preferred: It was simple, unadorned, and made up of discrete elements—the foot, the stem, avolio, and bowl itself—which are joined with a hot glue bit to create a single, flowing object.

Through Lino, who had apprenticed in the time-honored system in Murano, Dante and others found a direct connection to traditional technique. Yet Lino also embodied something radically new: a full-fledged maestro willing to share. This wasn't the first exchange between American studio glass and Murano; Moore, Chihuly, Marquis, and others made now-legendary pilgrimages to glass houses on the tiny island starting from the 1960s, and brought back varying degrees of Venetian techniques. But Dante and a new generation of glassblowers, including Jim Mongrain and Michael Schunke, were able to study at Lino's side here in the U.S., where the maestro was willing to teach in a way profoundly different from the incremental advancement typical in the Old World. Intoxicated by a newfound sense of freedom and possibilities for personal development, Tagliapietra didn't employ fellow Venetians but always made a point of doing demos with promising young blowers he met in the U.S., creating an unprecedented hands-on learning opportunity.

"The difference between myself and other people who came here was that I always used American people to work with me," says Tagliapietra. "And, later, they became my assistants. This way I had a chance to learn from some of them. I tried to give a lot in my demonstrations, but the U.S. gave me the opportunity to make a different style."

Jim Mongrain says there was always extra pressure when assisting Lino. "In Italy, he was used to working with some of the best assistants," says Mongrain. "Of course you don't want to screw up, but inevitably you do. He was always very patient, though. He was a great teacher." Working exclusively with American assistants limited the complexity of the goblets Lino was able to demonstrate, a fact that would have a powerful effect on the style of the American goblet, which has remained spare and restrained, with none of the baroque detail that is common in Venice.

While Tagliapietra was intoxicated by the freedom of the U.S. glass scene, his disciples were hungry for the kind of rigor and disciplined technique he embodied. "The first time I watched Lino blow glass, it was pretty obvious that it was a whole other level of understanding," says Michael Schunke, who had become intrigued by glassblowing while an art student at Tyler. "It was the result of thousands of years of people passing things down to one another."

OPPOSITE

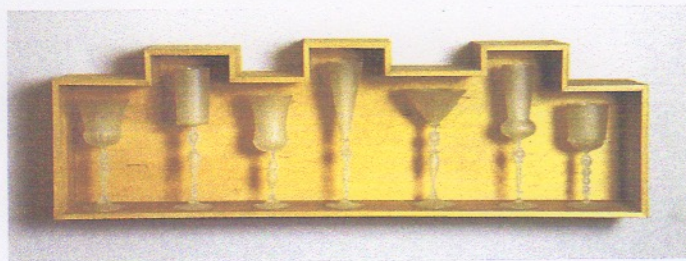
**Dante Marioni,
Cup Shelf, 1999.
Blown Bullseye
glass, wooden case.
H 96, W 24 ins.**

PHOTO: ROGER SCHREIBER.
COURTESY: ANDREA AND
CHARLES BRONFMAN

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**Dante Marioni,
Cup Shelf #5, 1996.
Blown glass, wood
box. W 40 1/2 ins.**

PHOTO: ROGER SCHREIBER.
COURTESY: CHAP AND
EVE ALVORD





LEFT, OPPOSITE
James Mongrain,
"Solid Series,"
2005. Blown glass.
H 11 ins. (tallest)

PHOTO: RUSSELL JOHNSON

Like Dante and Mongrain, Schunke said that watching Lino inspired him to spend decades refining his cupmaking technique even though there is a limited market for cups, and they are rarely encouraged by glass programs at the top art schools.

As those in art schools soon found out, making neo-traditional work is not a way to endear yourself to your professors. "I consider Bruce Chao a friend," says Schunke of the director of RISD's glass program, where he took courses through a Tyler exchange program. "But he was really pushing conceptual sculpture. And I didn't want to acquiesce. Our teacher-student relationship was not altogether pleasant."

Mongrain studied glass at MassArt, where his professor Alan Klein pushed him to move beyond traditional gobletmaking. "He wasn't against it," says Mongrain, "but he wanted me to do something that hadn't been done before. The professors there would encourage me to be more expressive and artistic. A lot of what Alan taught me, I still think about."

Yet Mongrain began going into the glass studio after it officially closed at 11 p.m. to continue to perfect the goblets that had been so strongly discouraged in class. When Klein found out, he told the night watchman not to allow Mongrain in after hours, yet the student found ways to sneak in and blow at night. Then, one day, Klein opened an annealer in the studio and discovered it was full of Mongrain's surreptitiously made goblets, and was furious. But even this didn't stop Mongrain. "The only way he knew I was in the studio was seeing the stuff that hadn't been there before, so I started making goblets and then bonking them off, back into the furnace," says Mongrain. "I'd look at them for five seconds, and that was it. You learn so much more about proportion and the process by making them."

Blowers like Mongrain make thousands and thousands of goblets until they can create one so light that it looks like it might float off the table. For some, the quest to make the perfect goblet borders on obsession. In 1992, Mongrain attended a Pilchuck class where Lino made 100 goblets. "I videotaped him making every cup," says Mongrain. "I've got a copy that I still watch. That was an extremely important tool for me. Watching it over and over allowed me to remember those subtle little moves."

The only way to make a goblet is to practice (Dante calls cupmaking "playing scales"), and even for a maestro, it requires a significant warm-up period. "In some ways cups are the most difficult things to make," says Lino. "When you start again after some time, you can't make them right away. It takes a couple of weeks of working just to clean the hands before you can do something nice, with the right proportion and lightness. But first you have to clean the hands."

Instead of bearing down, it's about letting the glass go as it takes shape. "The form is about tightness, but making one is about being loose," says Dante. "The minutiae, the detail in how you put them together. You're tense and focused, but it's about the opposite feeling in your fingers."

"Try and make it like you don't care so much even though it's the most important thing in the world to you at that moment," advises Schunke. "That's the skill you're trying to acquire, that sense of relaxation."

There's always a competitive aspect to cupmaking, and the consummate test of skill begs the question of who is better than the others. But it's an unspoken challenge in the U.S., where there's a sincere camaraderie among the top practitioners, one reason perhaps why American glassblowing technique has improved so quickly. Dante and Mongrain have both taught extensively, openly sharing their discoveries and techniques. Total openness has allowed an American style of goblet to emerge—and diverge—from Venetian methods. In Venice, few glassblowers have the luxury to pursue the same level of perfection as an American blower, so contemporary Venetian goblets may display some slight flaws that would be unacceptable here. And some techniques are different. For example, in Italy, the avolio is now typically made as two parts, with half formed on the stem, the other half on the cup, and the two pieces are joined.

"American gobletmakers follow my technique," says Lino. "Now in Venice, they change it a little bit and make a two-part avolio." In Venice there is also a wider variety of gobletmaking, more "bit work" or sculpting of decorative elements which adorn the vessel like jewelry, ribbons of glass, or sculpted animal or dolphin forms at the stem.

Throughout history, goblets have varied in style, from heavily enameled to clear, from ornament-encrusted to absolutely pure, unadorned forms. Yet it was one style in particular that grabbed the imagination of American blowers—the simpler and purer form. This type of cup, where the emphasis is on the fineness of the vessel, is what Lino taught in his demos, and his influence dominates American cupmaking, a testament to Lino's singular impact, but also to the fact that this simplicity fits with contemporary styles better than goblets from other eras. The cup that Mongrain and Dante and Schunke are after is a direct descendant of the essential glass of 16th-century Venice, the product of a unique period of history.

"Elaborately gilded and enameled glass had made Venice famous among the aristocratic families of Europe by the 15th century," says Sheldon Barr, a glass dealer in New York City who specializes in Venetian



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JAMES MONGRAIN



Michael Schunke,
Goblet Grouping,
2004. Blown glass.
H 8 to 14 ins.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST

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MICHAEL SCHUNKE

glass from the 19th century. “But fashions changed. The passage of sumptuary laws in 16th-century Venice forbade ornamentation and ostentation in public life. So gondolas were painted black and dark cloaks were worn over fancy clothes outdoors. Venetian glassware, too, reflected the period’s demand for simplicity.”

Styles changed again and ornamentation returned to glassware in the 17th century. The Napoleonic invasion in 1797 and the Hapsburg occupation until the mid-19th century virtually stopped glass production. When Venetian glassblowing was revived in the 1860s, all styles were brought back into production, including the simple 16th-century style now known as “Essential Glass,” that is, glass reduced to its bare essence—unembellished, extremely light and thin-walled, pale-colored, and transparent.

“Since it was the beginning of the machine age, there was no tolerance for flaws of any kind,” says Barr about the 19th-century rebirth. “Beginning in 1866 Murano’s maestri began to create the most sublime examples of Essential Glass. A young glassmaker, Giovanni Seguso, soon excelled all others. He was perfection personified. It’s hard to imagine anyone surpassing or even equaling his production.”

Barr sees parallels between the American cupmakers and classical musicians or dancers. “When you hear Yo-Yo Ma play a piece of music written 200 years ago and his performance is overwhelming and his technique is fantastic or you see a great dancer, who may be dancing a centuries-old ballet but is jumping higher and more beautifully than anyone ever jumped before—you venerate them for doing it,” says Barr.

“People might laugh when you compare a glassblower to a cellist or to a dancer, but it’s a very legitimate comparison. They’re dancing with glass, but to a tune that no one recognizes—most people don’t even know that 16th-century essential goblets exist.”

While a true 16th-century goblet may fetch \$20,000 or more, the market for contemporary hand-blown goblets is not large. To sip wine, oenophiles prefer mold-blown wineglasses, which have an icy purity, from companies such as Riedel. More science than art, these cups supposedly optimize the bouquet of different wine varieties yet offer a sterile perfection to the eye. Though delicate, they are soulless. The



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LINO TAGLIAPIETRA



free-blown goblet, in contrast, is an ode to the hand, each goblet only as good and as perfect as the human who made it at that point in time, a record of 20 minutes in the hot shop and 20 years of dedication. Glassblowers know this, and drink from their work. "Wine tastes different in a hand-blown goblet," says Lino. "It changes everything to drink from a cup done by the hands. For this reason, the goblet has a great future."

But few of the goblets sold by galleries are actually used to drink from. Dante sells groupings of goblets arranged on colored shelves, the power of each individual cup amplified by repetition, the highly contrasting background accentuating the forms. But he is just as likely to give away an individual goblet as he is to sell one, and he has focused his gallery output on large-scale works which magnify the techniques, such as his signature oversized vases: "It's all about glassblowing," says Dante. "I wanted to push what I could do." Mongrain sells his cups, but half of his time is spent working on architectural commissions where he puts his finely honed skills to use. Michael Schunke focuses on what he terms "production" for upscale department stores, though he had 18 goblets on display at SOFA Chicago and they nearly sold out.

"Goblets sell at between \$300 and \$400 on average," says Kaiser Suidan, director of the Next Step Studio and Gallery in Ferndale, Michigan, which exhibited Schunke's work at the 2005 SOFA. "The majority of people I was selling to were going to put them on the shelf, not use them. At that price point, they attract a lot of younger collectors who might not be able to afford some of the more expensive pieces."

While there is little doubt that American glassmaking has made a quantum leap in technical prowess thanks to Lino's impact, was this simply a skills correction, or is it led to radically new ideas that are advancing the studio glass movement?

"I think there's potential for breaking new ground," says Mongrain. "We're still at the dawn of it. It might be someone else who determines where it goes from here."

Jeff Mack, who spends days blowing Early American glass for visitors to historic Greenfield Village in Dearborn, Michigan, uses the hot shop on nights and weekends expanding the range of the American goblet. Among the top practitioners, he has traveled to Venice and attended courses offered by new maestri coming to teach in America such as Elio Quarisa or Davide Fuin. Mack is moving away from the dominant

Essential Glass aesthetic and toward more intricate ornamented "hot bit" work, sculpting decorative elements with molten glass.

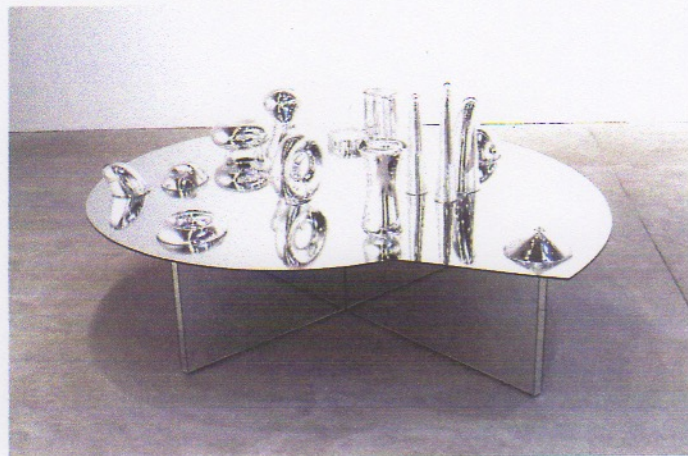
"Like Lino and everybody else, I take from the tradition to build on my own ideas," says Mack. "Glass just takes an immense amount of time to learn. You need to have the toolbox of skills necessary."

Others, such as Boyd Sugiki, employ Venetian techniques to make blown pieces that borrow iconography from other cultures, creating forms with bold new shapes and colors (see Reviews, page 65). Josiah McElheny has been using his own hand-blown glass vessels as a critical element in elaborately layered installations which are visualizations of historic anecdotes. McElheny meticulously blows his pieces with an eye toward accurate historic details. Using reflective surfaces, he alters the vessels and their impact to give them added immediacy and interactivity with the viewer. McElheny's work has been shown at the Whitney and Museum of Modern Art. His work is a marriage of skill and content that would not have been possible without a devotion to traditional technique.

"Almost everybody serious about glassblowing goes through a period of fascination with cups," says Dante. "Some people get carried away with it. But it's not about cups. It's what you do with your ability to make a cup that's important." Since the 1990s, Dante's has been pushing the techniques to new extremes of shape, gesture, and color. He has taken the traditional skill set he honed making the goblet and pushed it into unconventional directions with oversized mosaic vases, assemblages of cups in bold colors, surgically precise reticello shapes, and tall pitchers with necks stretched to new lengths. "What's important is who can bring something to it that's creative. That's been how I've tried to do it from the beginning," he says.

The last word on the subject goes to Lino: "Before, with American glass, there was more idea than skill," he says. "Now, in some ways, there is more influence of skill over the idea. But it's fantastic when idea and skill can go together."

ANDREW PAGE is the editor of GLASS Quarterly. In Fall 2007, UrbanGlass in Brooklyn, New York, will host a symposium to examine the impact of cupmaking on American glassblowing, as well as an exhibition and demonstrations by some of those interviewed for this article. Email goblets@glassquarterly.com to receive details as they become available.



OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP

James Mongrain, "Solid Series", 2005. Blown glass. H 11 ins. (tallest)

PHOTO: RUSSELL JOHNSON

OPPOSITE PAGE, BOTTOM

Jeff Mack, Blue Ewers, 2005. Blown glass. H 8.5 ins. (tallest)

PHOTO: LESLIE PATRON
COURTESY: THE ARTIST

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Josiah McElheny, Landscape Model for Total Reflective Abstraction (III), 2004. Mirrored glass table with hand-blown mirrored glass objects. H 18, W 69, D 58 ins.

PHOTO: TOM VAN EYNDE
COURTESY: DONALD YOUNG GALLERY, CHICAGO