

# s o m e r s e t

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## TOUCH OF GLASS:

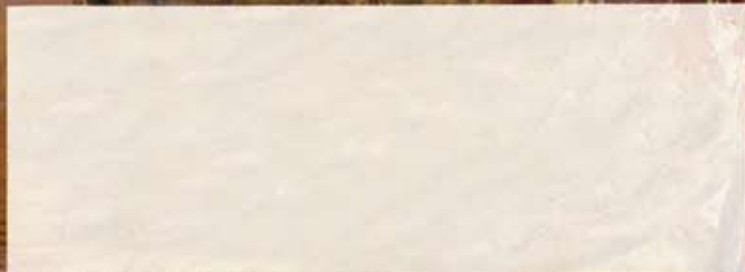
A Belle Mead  
glassblower's magic

## SUBURBAN RENEWAL:

Saving winter skin

## OUR TOWNS:

Washington's return,  
Festival of trees,  
Presidential golfers





# blown a w a y

*Written by Lee Stokes Hilton / Photographed by Kevin Griffin*

TO OBSERVE A MASTER GLASSBLOWER AT WORK IS A STUDY IN CONTRASTS: THE MAGICAL PROCESS BY WHICH THE ROUGH MIXTURE OF SAND, SODA ASH AND SILICA BECOMES BAUBLES OF SMOOTH, SPARKLING GLASS; THE DELICATE, FRAGILE WORKS EMANATING FROM THE SEARING HEAT AND THE ROUGH STRENGTH OF THE MAN. BUT BELLE MEAD GLASSBLOWER BOB KUSTER MAKES THE MAGIC LOOK EASY.



Some 13 years ago, Kuster signed up for a course in glassblowing at Bucks County Community College in Pennsylvania. He had a manufacturing business making large drum sanders for fine woodworking, and he'd never even seen glassblowing before, much less done it. Yet Kuster and glassblowing were natural partners from the beginning. Using his knowledge of manufacturing, he designed and built his own studio, Belle Mead Hot Glass. "Bob is a creative craftsman with the mind of an engineer," says his wife, Sheila, who now handles marketing and customer service for the business.

In the winter of 1992, Bob and Sheila braved a driving snowstorm to haul his first samples to the Philadelphia Buyers Market, a twice-yearly show for craftsmen selling to high-end galleries and gift stores. Even with the snowstorm, Kuster's works were a huge success. "We were packed," says Sheila. "We couldn't believe it."

Today, about 80 percent of Kuster's business is wholesale. Throughout the year, he ships his chandeliers, gift items and garden ornaments to some 600 gift shops and galleries around the country, as well as to high-end catalogue merchants such as Saks Fifth Avenue, Smith & Hawken and Gardeners Eden. But with the approach of fall, retail traffic

## Making the Magic

Kuster begins by heating the sand, soda ash and silica mix, which he buys in 50-pound bags, to a blistering 2,400°F. "At that temperature," says Kuster, "it's like water, so we have to cool it to 2,000° before we can work with it. At 2,000°, it's the consistency of honey." Using a steel blowpipe, he rolls a dollop of clear molten glass into a tray of crushed colored glass, called frit, to achieve the desired shade. Once the glass is blown, it must be slow-cooled overnight at 900° in an annealing oven to harden and strength.

Kuster. "I've learned a lot and I've brought back designs like the ones for the flowers — such as tulips, roses, and cattails — we make."

Some of Kuster's most elaborate works must be seen to be believed. He recently completed an 8 foot-high water fountain that is currently installed outside his studio; he produced a "Wall of Glass" for the Golden Globes



picks up as shoppers come looking for the shimmering glass holiday ornaments that fill the display area outside the studio.

Kuster makes annual trips to Venice and the Murano Islands in Italy, where he keeps up with the latest designs and techniques. "I watch the way they work with the glass," says





awards ceremony; and his collections of lighted "pods" (one hangs near the sign for his studio) resemble giant explosions of color. Kuster is perhaps proudest of his collaboration with a local organization, Hope for Hope, in which sales of his Star Sun-Catchers — deep-blue globes dotted with white stars — helped raise nearly \$8,000 to fund cancer treatments for a local middle-school student.

William Faulkner said, "The aim of every artist is to arrest motion, which is life ... and hold it fixed so that 100 years later, when a stranger looks at it, it moves again since it is life." Surely, Bob Kuster's magic brings art to life, and life to art. 🌸

### HOT GLASS, COOL

**COLORS:** *A sampling of Bob Kuster's pieces, top to bottom: blossom napkin ring, garden torches, "bag" votive luminaries, garden finials. Right, "beggar's purse" vase.*



### BELLE MEAD HOT GLASS

is open to the public from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. Monday through Saturday, but it's best to call ahead. All pieces are hand-blown by artist Robert Kuster, priced from \$15 to \$25 for bottle stoppers, \$35 to \$45 for paperweights and to more than \$1,000 for chandeliers. For the month of November, all items are sold at wholesale prices. The studio is located at 884 Highway 206, Belle Mead; 908-281-0802.

## GLASS ART: A BRIEF HISTORY

Humans have been working with glass since prehistoric times, when natural glass, such as obsidian, was used in the production of cutting tools.

**3500 B.C.** The manufacture of glass as art is thought to begin in Egypt, where glassmakers dip a mold of compacted sand into molten-glass, then roll it on a stone to smooth it and decorate it.

**25 B.C.** Glassblowing is introduced in Syria, and spreads with the Roman conquests throughout Europe.

**700 A.D.** Glassmaking develops as a thriving business on the Murano Islands in the lagoon of Venice, and Venice becomes the glassmaking center of the Western world.

**900** Stained glass begins to appear in churches.

**1100** Evolution of stained glass into "cathedral glass," in which the stain is incorporated into the glass.

**1271** Venice passes an ordinance that bans foreign glassmakers from entering and working in the city.

**1821** Hand-operated split mold is invented, allowing mass production of bottles.

**1850** Friedrich Siemens invents the tank furnace, which, with the split mold for bottles, effectively turns glassmaking from a craft into an industry.

**1890** American glassmakers of the Art Nouveau period expand on European cathedral glass by making a translucent, milky opalescent glass. During this period, Louis Comfort Tiffany uses stained glass in nonreligious forms such as lamps and windows.

**1930** Beginning of the Studio Glass Movement, which encourages production of glass as art.

**1960** A new, small-scale kiln and a new, low-melting-point glass open up even more opportunities for artists to work in the medium.