

Blenko to release commemorative annual birthday piece in June

- Lexi Browning
- May 14, 2015
- Photos by Tom Hindman/Daily Mail

MILTON — The Autumn Flame, an oak leaf laced with a golden amber and traced with the gradually fading tangerine red along the rim and base, embodies not only the unique skillset of Blenko Glass Company's production team, but an aspect of the state's natural beauty as well.

Standing about a foot tall, the annual Blenko state birthday piece is designed to pay homage to the state as West Virginia reaches 152 years of statehood.

To continue the tradition that began in the 1980s, only 152 Autumn Flame pieces are being released.

As production of Blenko's 152nd birthday celebration piece slowly comes to a close, anticipation is rising as the final pieces in this year's collection are manufactured and stored for their release.

Arlon Bayliss, retired instructor of glass studies and designer of each birthday piece for the last eight years, said creating a piece that represents the state and Blenko as a whole was more challenging than he expected.

"When I think about the theme of West Virginia or what's important to West Virginia, I think about the countryside or the people of West Virginia: things that are natural resources," Bayliss said.

Bayliss said though he was initially fixated on a tree shape for the year's design, after producing a model and sending it to Blenko, he settled for a leaf shape, which would translate easily into an off-center vase or bottle.

"Oftentimes leaves are curved or bent and they look like they're blowing in the wind, so I wanted to make the shapes lively and fresh and interesting, as well as the colors," Bayliss said.

Bayliss said the company chose to pursue a red instead of the usual blues and yellows; something rare for the state piece.

"It was a joy to play with Blenko's colors and to think about which color choice to make," Bayliss said. "Often for us the problem is not finding a good color but choosing from several good solutions, and we have to get really fussy about our choices."

"Blenko's known for our tangerine red," added Randy Rider, production supervisor. "We've never had — in 35 years — a tangerine piece."

Bayliss said this year's design was based on oak leaves, which account for 60 percent of the state's foliage.

Although Blenko does seek profit from the state pieces, Bayliss and Rider agreed that designing a "knockout" piece was the primary concern.

"Designing and making the West Virginia piece is a really interesting challenge because every year we try to make something that's different to the previous year," Bayliss said. "As the designer, what I'm trying to do is to show what Blenko is capable of. I try to show the variety of skills that the glass workers have."

In order to create each unique shape, the glass is first gathered from the furnace where it reaches a heated 2,100 degrees. Once the glass is heated thoroughly, it's placed into a hand-carved mold made of cherry wood.

The molds are placed then in water to prevent further burns. Each mold lasts for about 200 to 300 pieces.

The glass blower then proceeds to blow a modest amount of air into the stem of the glass to expand from the inside out.

“When the hot glass is blown into the mold, the glass blower has to be really careful about the distribution of glass so that it's got the right thickness and shape,” Bayliss said.

The glass is then taken off the rod and chilled with water around the top before the piece is cut. Lifted by the base by a second metal rod, the rod's glass tip balances the shaping piece.

Glass is then placed in the “glory hole” to be reheated and manipulated into the proper shape.

“Sometimes it requires bending, sometimes it requires tweezing,” Bayliss said. “Once the piece is finished, it can't just be put away. It has to cool down gradually from 1,000 degrees.”

The piece is then placed on a fork stick and carried to the Lehr, a special glass cooling kiln. Achieving room temperature takes approximately five hours before a sticker is hand-placed on a spot unique for each product.

Determining if the glass is perfect is a skill Rider has honed over his 35 years at Blenko, Bayliss said.

“It's a craft and a skill, and I love it,” Rider said. “There's nothing like Blenko.”

“Like a lot of highly-skilled people, he's always up for a challenge,” Bayliss said.

Rider recalled the day he started at Blenko with fondness.

“I interviewed that morning and went to work that evening. It was the best decision I ever made in my life other than marrying my wife,” Rider said.

Although every day is an adventure for Rider, he said he especially looked forward to Bayliss' visits and the challenges that followed.

“I wake up before the alarm starts,” Rider said. “He stretches my abilities and makes me better.”

Bayliss said one of the most motivating aspects of the entire project comes from the collectors' enthusiasm for their state and love for Blenko.

“I guarantee the day or the night before, collectors will be lining up and asking: 'What are you going to do for next year? What do you have in mind for next year?' And then they start telling us what they would like and they have their own ideas for what would be a good idea,” Bayliss said.

Bayliss added that the state's value of environment and wildlife were visible in all aspects of the operation.

“West Virginia really treasures its national forests. They're hugely important to the state and if it weren't for the trees we wouldn't have any of the wildlife or hunting,” Bayliss said. “The whole life cycle is rooted around trees.”

This year, Bayliss said Blenko would continue to release two additional companion pieces for the series, a trend that started two years ago.

The flattened Summer Shade, blown in Desert Green, and the Spring At Last, blown in Mountain Spring, a debuting shade, will cost \$55 plus tax.

The Autumn Flame, which will release on June 20, will be \$152 plus tax and is excluded from discounts and coupons. Each piece will be signed and numbered by Bayliss and company owner Walter Blenko and will be available at the Blenko Visitor Center. Customers must be present to purchase the Autumn Flame but may purchase the companion pieces offline at midnight on June 20.

PHOTOS



Arlen Bayliss looks over his designs at Blenko. Bayliss has been designing the commemorative statehood birthday pieces for eight years.



Designer Arlon Bayliss looks over samples of his design at Blenko.



Daniel Chapman, who has been hand making glass molds at Blenko for 25 years of his 37 years being employed at Blenko, carves a mold. He made the commemorative piece for West Virginia's 152nd anniversary this year out of Cherry Wood. 6



Arlon Bayliss' design is shown here, in the mold that the molten glass will be cast into.



The commemorative piece is fired at Blenko for West Virginia's 152nd anniversary.



Each Commemorative Autumn Flame is numbered and signed for West Virginia's 152nd anniversary.



Randy Rider, product supervisor, holds a numbered and signed commemorative piece for West Virginia's 152nd statehood anniversary he created.



The Autumn Flame, a commemorative piece for West Virginia's 152nd statehood anniversary, is displayed at Blenko Glass Company.