

A Garden in Glass

by: Jill Culora



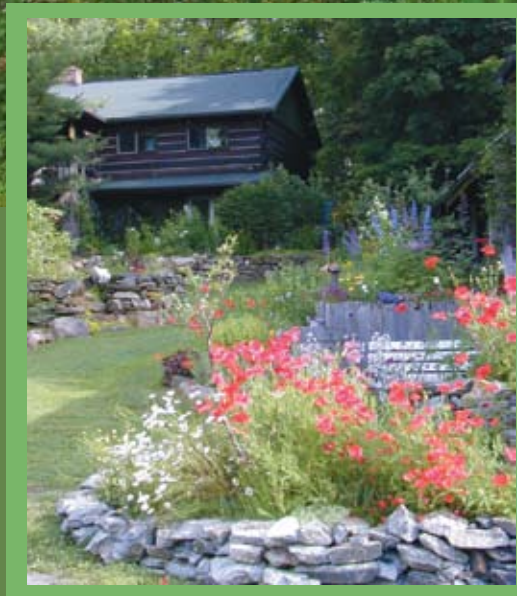
*t*he dark shadows of naked tree branches intertwining on fresh fallen snow catch Susan Rankin's eye. For a moment she marvels at the scene that encircles her – like being encased in a wire basket. She then begins to think about wire baskets. Where did they originate? Who used them – and why?

The answers to these questions all lead to a series of glass art forms for Rankin, a Canadian glass artist based in Apsley, Ontario. The source of inspiration for her wired forms is not unique for Rankin, whose other work – Epergnes, vine, flower and scroll vases, all originate from ideas found in combining natural elements with history.

Her latest pieces – the Garden Columns, which showed at the Galerie Elena Lee in Montreal, Quebec throughout this past October – resemble lupines, but are engrossed standing eight and nine feet tall. Designed to be displayed outdoors, Rankin says the columns incorporate the element of light through multiple layers of glass and are magnificent in the winter months.



*Susan
Rankin*



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“It’s an object for the garden that extends and holds the spirit. And the pieces interact with nature,” she says. “In the winter, the ground is all white and smooth. The sunlight has an effect on the columns, and the snow lands on them.”

This is a special joy for Rankin, who purposely lives in the spectacular Precambrian shield region of Ontario – known for beautiful hardwood forests, but short on a summer growing season. Rankin addresses the issue of having a love affair with her garden in a frigid northern climate by incorporating the garden’s magic in her glasswork.

She’s careful to accurately depict the vegetation – some petals might be bent or wilted or not fully opened. “They are flowers that are in the moment,” she says. “They have gestures. They’re not perfect and they’re not all the same.”

Rankin creates each flower on the pipe, pinching and snipping each petal out. She places the flowers in the kiln while she works on the vase. When she’s happy with the shape of the vase, she begins to adhere the flowers, vines and petals using torchwork. She says she likes to “pile on” the flowers, to “over-decorate” the vase, resembling the lushness and abundance of a garden setting.

In a unique step, she sandblasts the exterior to soften the look. “It’s funny because I work with glass, but I don’t like the shiny aspect of glass, because

gardens aren't shiny." Instead, she denies the glassiness to give the piece a "crawling in dirt" feel. Within the flowering vine vessel series she uses black enamel and in a final step, she adds painted detail before she seals the vase.

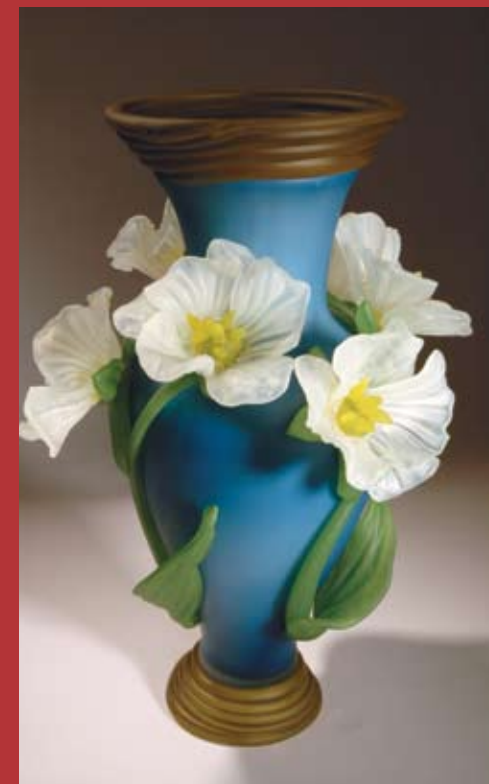
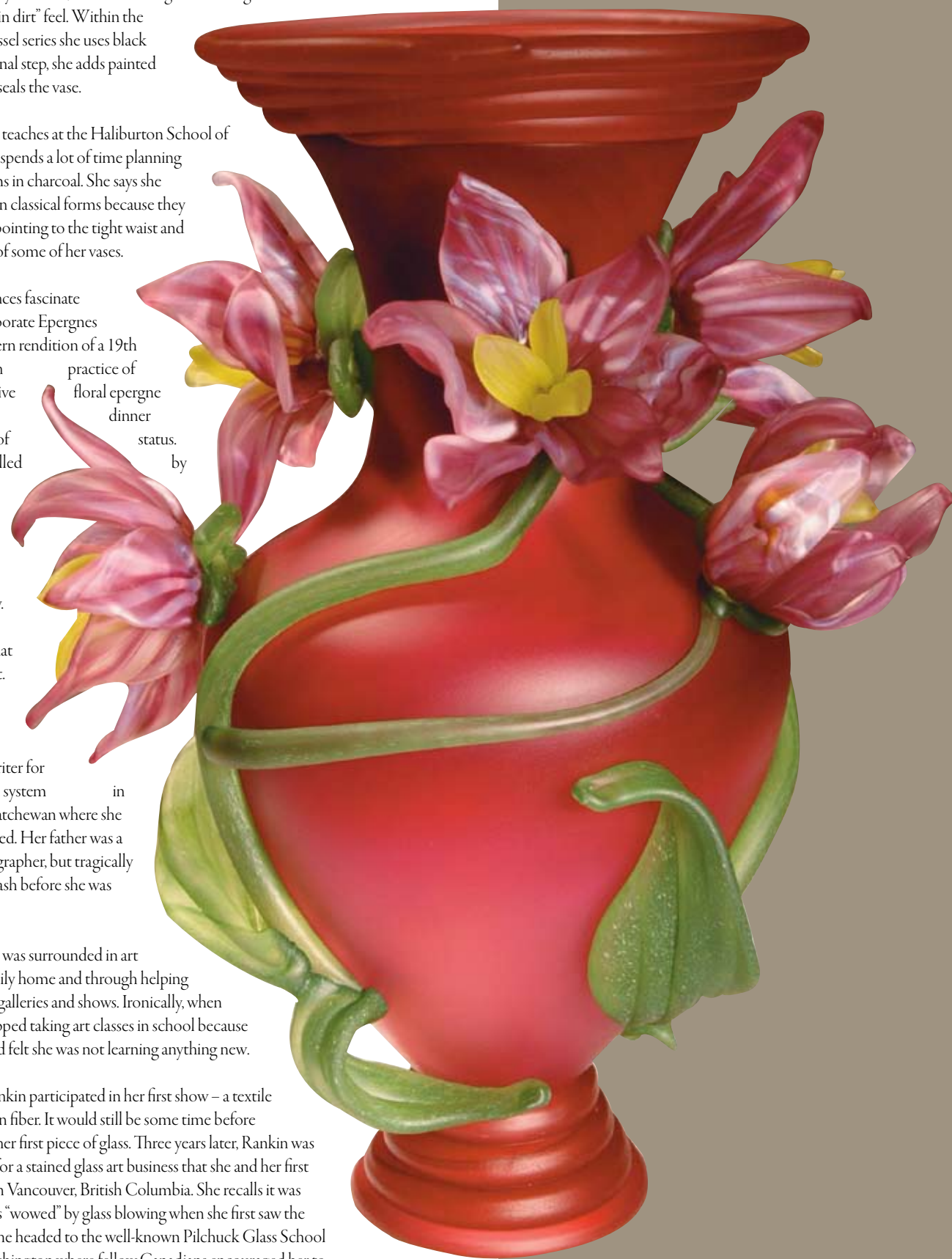
Rankin, who also teaches at the Haliburton School of the Arts, says she spends a lot of time planning and drawing forms in charcoal. She says she finds inspiration in classical forms because they are very sensual, pointing to the tight waist and broad shoulders of some of her vases.

Historical references fascinate her – like her elaborate Epergnes which are a modern rendition of a 19th century Victorian practice of placing a decorative floral epergne in the center of a dinner table as a display of status. She is also enthralled by the history of glass, the chandeliers and the florals, which she incorporates in her work today.

It's no accident that Rankin is an artist. Her mother is an accomplished painter and art curriculum writer for the public school system in Moose Jaw, Saskatchewan where she was born and raised. Her father was a successful photographer, but tragically died in a plane crash before she was born.

Rankin's early life was surrounded in art – both in the family home and through helping her mother with galleries and shows. Ironically, when fourteen, she stopped taking art classes in school because she was bored and felt she was not learning anything new.

At seventeen, Rankin participated in her first show – a textile show – working in fiber. It would still be some time before Rankin handled her first piece of glass. Three years later, Rankin was drawing designs for a stained glass art business that she and her first husband shared in Vancouver, British Columbia. She recalls it was there that she was "wowed" by glass blowing when she first saw the art. Before long she headed to the well-known Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood Washington where fellow Canadians encouraged her to





head to Sheridan College in Toronto, Canada. After graduation, she took up a three-year artist residency at the famed Harbourfront Centre in Toronto.

Since then, her work has appeared in numerous solo and invitational exhibitions and in collections across North America, including the Corning Museum.

She works with her assistants, Blaise Campbell, Sally McCubbin and Jay Olason, from her studio near Apsley in central Ontario, alongside her second husband Brad Copping, a glass artist she met while at Sheridan College.

The couple take time each summer to attend workshops and collaborate with other glass artists. Allowing time to play has always provided turning points in Rankin's work. "We always take something new away without having any preconceived ideas. It's all about exposure and interacting with people that inspires new things," she says.



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One promising aspect of creativity she is facing now is in working with a larger number of assistants. “I just increased the number of assistants and I’m having to learn how to manage the team differently. I’m not sure where this will take us, but it will certainly increase our possibilities.”



Rankin says for her, glass blowing had seduced her. “It’s the magic of the dance - the rhythm and the fluidity of it. When you can make it look easy, effortless and beautiful, you and the material are really one – like a musical masterpiece.”