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Bubble glass items are Pairpont's specialty. These clear glass decanters and glass make an exquisite addition to the home bar. ERIN C. HEALY PHOTO/CAPE COD TIMES

blown glass

‘JEWELRY FOR THE HOME’

BY SUSAN CURTIN



Brothers Jeff and Gary Tulman specialize in turning around struggling companies. They've returned Pairpoint to its illustrious roots, focusing on signature items for the home and high-end custom projects, such as chandelier lighting.

ERIN C. HEALY PHOTO/
CAPE COD TIMES

If you come upon a shimmering ball of glass with a series of symmetrical bubbles in it, you're probably looking at a piece from Pairpoint, the oldest maker of decorative glass products in the United States, located in Sagamore. Their signature "bubble ball" is a recurrent motif in many of their items, appearing in candlestick holders, on the base of cobalt blue vases, in cranberry glass tableware and separately as a classic paperweight. The 175-year-old company, which began in Boston and moved to the Cape in 1970, was recently purchased by brothers Gary and Jeff Tulman, who are re-launching Pairpoint for today's discerning homeowners and interior designers.

"People who know glass certainly know Pairpoint. It's the Tiffany's of glass. For generations, it was collected and proudly displayed in homes," Jeff said. "We hear it all the time. 'I remember seeing this in my grandmother's dining room!' These pieces take people back to their childhood."

Over the decades and many changes in ownership, the brand had become "diluted," according to Jeff, focused on producing lower-priced items such as cup plates and sun-catchers. Though these gift-shop items appealed to many people, they changed the perception of the company from that of an artisan of exquisite high-end objects to that of a production company making the same things all the time...which could barely cover costs. That's when Gary and Jeff stepped in.

"The owner had passed away and his widow did not want to run the business. We saw a unique opportunity," Gary said. The two specialize in turning companies around and they shared a love of the Cape. He and Jeff grew up summering here; Gary already lived on Cape and Jeff, who resides in the Boston area, committed to coming down several days each week.

There were rumors that the company was closing, which the brothers viewed as another part of the challenge. "We were not familiar with Pairpoint and its

illustrious history – we almost didn't understand how broadly known as it used to be. So this became the focus of our effort: We believe Pairpoint deserves to be recognized the way it was for generations." Gary said. "Not only is the company not closing, it's being re-invigorated."

Jeff elaborated: "This was a perfect situation for us. We're passionate about this company's amazing history and pedigree. We want to reintroduce the name and let people know what goes on here. So many people appreciate this story.

"In home design, what's old is new again. There is so much technology in our lives now that a lot of the art involved has been overlooked. We feel that's the most important part: the combination of original design and practicality. For example, look at our bar ware. Our products stand out among others."

But it was necessary for the company to evolve, Jeff said.

The brothers brought no expertise

in glass blowing to the company, but they quickly learned that they shared a common vision with the staff. "We wanted the same thing and decided to go through this process together: to bring Pairpoint back to a level where it was once so appreciated. The guys have once again become so proud of the products they produce. And as owners, we have been awestruck and inspired by them.

"To let them experiment and surprise us with what they are producing is a treat every day. Our philosophy has been to let them design, try, fail, try again. Things break – it's glass! We talk about their ideas and how the market might respond to something then we go for it. Sometimes it takes a number of tries, but they get it every time, eventually. They want this as badly as we do," Jeff said.

The two found that people are more than happy to spend the money to have a Pairpoint piece, "because it represents the highest quality craftsmanship and attention to detail, which you don't get

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JEFF TULMAN

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from a machine-made piece. They appreciate the Pairpoint one-of-a-kind cachet," Gary explained.

"When you hold a piece from Pairpoint, you're holding a piece of history, and we view ourselves as stewards of that story," Jeff said. "We realized when we purchased the company that we not only got the Pairpoint name, but we also got the dream team: a staff of seasoned artisans committed to excellence. Many of these guys are second-generation artisans who've spent their entire careers blowing glass here at Pairpoint. They're using techniques and equipment that go back over a hundred years. We are excited to let them create, experiment and re-interpret the company's classic designs for a contemporary customer," Jeff said. "And they're excited, too."

The shop floor is viewable through a long wall of glass located in the store. It looks like something out of a Dickens novel: burly men wearing aprons and using blowtorches, fire ovens with open flames, a fine dust in the air than dims the cavernous room, and ancient-looking metal tools and molds of every shape and size. The glass-blowing tours have been featured as one of the few free things to do on Cape Cod, and the Smithsonian Channel recently visited to make a documentary.

Pairpoint pieces are on display in New York's Metropolitan Museum, as well as the Fine Arts Museum of Boston, and the New Bedford Museum of Glass. They are sold at Tiffany's and Shreve, Crump & Lowe, and many institutions call on Pairpoint to design special awards and trophies. The builders of high-end yachts and hotels are among their recent customers, who are collaborating on custom lighting and chandeliers from Pairpoint.

Gary: "We have been gathering feedback from interior designers, architects and builders. There's a tremendous opportunity to get into the home in more practical ways. We're revisiting our lighting history with lamps and chandeliers, and also with knobs, pulls and bar ware for the home, beautiful things that can be used every day."

"Not only are the glassblowers

excited about doing high-end pieces, but when we speak with designers, we are always stunned at how excited they are to be collaborating with Pairpoint. To market themselves alongside Pairpoint is compelling for them," Jeff explained,

because there's a great pride in association.

There are also the Pairpoint collectors who make requests for unique items. "This is what we most love doing, creating something specific for that specific customer who

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has the budget to get exactly what they want created from Pairpoint," Jeff said. "We have loyal customers who come here from across the country – it's like a pilgrimage – to see it operate, and talk to us about the pieces of Pairpoint they have in their family. Sometimes they want to meet the artisans. It's a special place."

All Pairpoint items are handmade right here in the U.S., while the direction of the industry is decidedly machine-made products from overseas. "Some of these pieces take hundreds of hours to make. Now that we understand the difference, we have to educate the contemporary customer," Jeff said.

He picked up two matched items to illustrate the point: "These are called cornucopia vases – notice the rich blue vase atop a glass ball. These hadn't been done in many, many years—their shape, style, blue color is unique. This is something that a collector envisioned, and our guys produced it. It took three people to make each vase. We were wowed by it – the controlled bubble in a ball base, and the cobalt blue color. That's a Pairpoint signature." Another feature to look for is the "ribbon" of color inside some of the bubble balls.

The organization is comprised of just 11 people, and one of its best known artists is Anne Ross, who uses richly colored powdered glass in her original designs.

Gary and Jeff see Pairpoint as a company steeped in artistic tradition, evocative of yesteryear but re-awakened for the 21st century. "We make jewelry for the home," concluded Gary. "That's really our niche."



Glass-blowing artisans Guy Maxwell (beard), Samuel Mendez (black hair) and Iain Ross (in the background with short hair) work at creating beautiful "jewelry for the home." BRIAN MALLOY PHOTOS