

Renaissance Glass

by Kim Blagg

New England, known for its architectural charm, historical landmarks, and spectacular autumn displays, could provide no more ideal setting for the textures and vibrancy of art glass. Layer this with the creativity and enthusiasm of Mark and Kathleen Frank, and you'll understand why their customers return time and time again.

Renaissance Glassworks, Inc., makes its home in Nashua, New Hampshire—a small town near the border of Massachusetts. Eight-hundred square feet of retail space greet customers, and they are well-stocked with glass gifts, jewelry, ornaments, and garden art as well as supplies, glass, and tools for the hobbyist. An additional studio, separate and not immediately visible, provides workspace for commissions and the projects they create for ready sales, all from their original designs.

Renaissance offers a collection of classes for its customers. Mark relates, "Since we are in an area with lots of high-tech companies, we get a very diverse group of people in our classes. They range from professionals who need a hobby to reduce the stress in their lives, to homemakers who need a night out. Most of them are middle-to-upper income but range in age from the 20's to retirement." The store is situated near a busy intersection, giving them their best advertising.



Kathleen and Mark were married only one year when they began their business. Kathleen had worked in various New Jersey glass studios prior to their marriage. Upon moving to New Hampshire, the couple found it necessary to drive long distances for glass and supplies.

Above, Mark and Kathleen Frank, owners of Renaissance Glass.

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Eventually, like so many before them, convenience and a waiting market spurred them into opening their own studio. Originally, only 375 square feet in size, their first significant commission required closing their shop, as every square inch of workspace was needed to complete the project.

Persistence and an unsuppressed enthusiasm for the business paid off. "One of our first customers to commission us for custom work has continued to be one of our best customers over the years," Mark says. "In their second home, they have commissioned us to do each and every window in their home—totaling 186 in all. They are all clear and beveled glass, most of them very simple in design, but still our best job to date. We have done work for Senator Rudman's home here in New Hampshire and the Wang Institute Library in Massachusetts, as well as many area restaurants and businesses. Right now we have a quote in on a job for St. Mary's Credit Union, which is the oldest credit union in the country."

The Franks' philosophy in growing their business is simple and effective. "We believe that if you treat your customers fairly, are honest, and offer them the best service possible, you can't lose. You will always have loyal customers who will return again and again." Like many of their peers, they face the ongoing challenges of competing with mail

order and the emerging Internet storefronts. "Although people rely on us and trust us for our service, many times they can find supplies cheaper online. We continue to try to offer the best service possible to offset the price difference. We think this trend will probably continue over the next years because the economy is declining, yet peoples' choices as to where to spend their money are constantly growing."

Sharing the stage with their compe-



utilize it as a large part of our advertising and promotion, as well as a sales tool in the future. We have been very successful selling our Foil Finisher® online – we get daily inquiries from around the world—and we hope to follow suit with some other items."

Changing locations has also spurred growth. "Our single most successful move was moving onto Main Street. The visibility is fantastic. Whenever we mention to anyone what we do, they immediately say they know where we are. Almost every day someone will come in and say 'I drive by here all the time and it always looks so pretty, I've been wanting to stop in!' Our store front is striking and it stays in peoples' memories."

Expansion has also included a larger work area and classroom, which has worked well for them. The added space and the installation of four large windows have helped improve the work area.



tion, the Franks have introduced a Web site, <http://www.renaissanceglass.com>, and credit it for bringing new customers their way. "Our Web site is fairly new and still changing daily, but we hope to



*Top and Center, windows by Renaissance.
Left, Mark at work in his studio.*

Expansion has not been limited to physical dimensions, however. Producing and distributing the Foil Finisher©, a burnishing tool for copper foil, has garnered significant response. “We now have many wholesalers distributing our product both nationally and around the world. We also offer them on the retail level individually through our Web site. We have some ideas for some other industry-related items that we’d like to offer in the future.”

There is no mistaking Mark and Kathleen’s enthusiasm for what they do. “We feel very fortunate to have been able to make our living doing something that we both love. It takes a lot of work and dedication, and it can be very rewarding—but it probably won’t make you rich.” The Franks feel that early on they undercharged on commissioned pieces. “We took jobs just to have the work, but now we know that people are willing to pay for the quality and creativity that they get from our work.”

Just as their own shop has evolved, Mark and Kathleen see a wide-open future for art glass. “We think that the art glass industry is really changing and growing and that it will continue. There are so many creative things you can do with glass—it is such a beautiful medium. More and more people are becoming familiar with hot glass and mosaics, etc. If we work at getting it out there and teaching people new techniques and sharing ideas and resources, there is unlimited potential for this industry.” **PGQ**

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