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Forged by fire: Glassblowers take crafting to a whole new level

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FORGED BY FIRE

GLASSBLOWERS TAKE CRAFTING TO A WHOLE NEW LEVEL

Samantha Handrock, 22, went to Art Mart her freshman year, and became intrigued by the glass displays that were on sale. Upon learning they were made by Iowa State's student glassblowing club the Gaffer's Guild, she decided to join. However, joining the Gaffer's Guild is not an easy process. First, you are placed on a waiting list, then, after typically a year of waiting, you take the beginner's class. After the class, you are finally officially a member. Dues are $90, which might sound expensive, although it's more reasonable when you take into consideration all the equipment required. In contrast, to rent out a professional studio could be as expensive as $50 per hour. Handrock was luckily a freshmen when the Gaffer's Guild came into her view, so she was able to pounce on the opportunity and has now enjoyed more time involved than most members, whose awareness of the club came later in their college experience. The reason there is a waiting list in the first place is because the guild can only take 16 to 20 people a semester. The reason for the cap is the space where the studio space can only accommodate a small amount of people. Once you have stuck around the waiting list, taken the class and learned various safety precautions, you are initiated and the glassblowing begins, which is an art to say the least. Asking how glassblowing is done is sort of like asking how someone cooks — there are many ways to glassblow and many different objects to blow. Handrock says the process varies. "It depends on what you're making. Let's say with a blow piece, a more typical piece, you start with a blowpipe," she says. Then, they put glass on the end of the blowpipe and proceed to blow a little bubble to begin the process of shaping it. Once the glass of this first stage has cooled, she explains, the glass blower will splash some color onto their piece. After ensuring the size of bubble they want, it is time to blow and shape it, blow and shape it, and repeat until satisfaction. The actual shaping of the glass can take anywhere from ten minutes to 4 hours — it all depends on skill level and complexity of the piece. After shaping, the glassblower takes a jackline, which is like a pair of huge tweezers meant to manipulate the glass, puts the line in the neck of the piece, and cools it by putting water on it. Then they take a metal rod called a punty, which is tipped with hot glass, and use it to transfer the glass work. The glassblower attaches the punty to that end of it and breaks it off at the neck of the piece, which is called a transfer. "After the transfer," Handrock explains, "the piece will then go into an annealer, which is kept at 495 degrees celsius, and it is kept there to cool and prevent any stress fracturing that could occur."

The studio, which was located in the old part of Sweeney hall, is unfortunately gone as they will soon begin demolishing the building in order to put up the Student Innovation Center in its place. Handrock laments, "We are going to be down three years until they get this new building put in." January of 2020 is the planned opening of the Student Innovation Center, where they will eventually be able to rebuild their studio. Until then, the club is not necessarily disbanded, but the lack of studio certainly poses limitations on what can be done as far as glassblowing. Current members can travel to nearby studios that are a few hours away, where they can continue to hone their skill and practice the craft. They will also be holding occasional meetings where they watch videos and discuss items concerning the guild and glassblowing. 

When the studio was down to its few remaining days open, Handrock expressed her desire to fit in as many hours of glassblowing as possible before the doors were closed. "I've been sacrificing my sleep so if I can only get into the studio at six in the morning I'll be blowing glass at six in the morning," she remarked. She added that the studio in this few days was bustling with a fervor tinted with a feeling that time was running out.
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