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Fashionable fusion

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Fashionable fusion

Bellevue: Artisan, 90, stays innovative in field of glass enamel

BY HOWARD MCEWEN | ENQUIRER CONTRIBUTOR

When jewelry makers want to decorate a brooch, wall plaque or ring with colored glass, they come to a 90-year-old man in Bellevue.

Woodrow Carpenter learned about glass enamel at the University of Illinois.

"I was given a scholarship from the Illinois Ceramics Engineers. I accepted it, then went to the dictionary to see what that meant," said Carpenter.

ADVERTISEMENT He has no trouble describing it now.

"Glass enamel is vitreous enamel that is formulated so that it will be compatible to be fused with metal. We sell it to jewelers as a powder with the consistency of sugar. They then put it in a furnace with the jewelry to fuse it to the metals," he explained. Probably the most famous examples of glass enamel are the decorations on Faberge eggs.

During his college days, Carpenter was a lab technician for professor A.I. Andrews, a specialist in glass enamels.

"He became a mentor and got me jobs during the summer at various plants," Carpenter said. The relationship steered him from ceramics toward glass.

After graduation, Carpenter went to work in the research department of an industrial enamel plant that made new coating.

In 1954, he came to Cincinnati to work for Barrow Sign. Before the age of plastics, many storefront signs were made from porcelain enamel.

After work, Mr. Carpenter would go home and make jewelry enamel in his basement as a hobby.

In the late 1950s, he moved his hobby to the basement of Rockwood Pottery and had employees working there during the day while he worked at Barrow.

Eventually, Carpenter left Barrow to form his own firm - Ceramic Coating Co. in Wilder, which made glass-lined steel reactors, while continuing his glass enamel business that catered to jewelers.



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Dennis Alexander, supervisor at Thompson Enamel, in Bellevue, pours molten glass onto a metal table for cooling. Once cooled, the glass is ground into a powder for later use in the enameling process.



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Woodrow Carpenter

In 1981, he purchased his only rival, the Thomas C. Thomson Co. of Chicago.

He kept their name "because they had more customers than I did" and moved the operations to Northern Kentucky.

He sold his coating business, and was forced to relocate the enamel business to Bellevue when construction of I-471 started.

Today, Thomson employs about 25 people to supply jewelers with decorative glass.

At an age when many of his peers have been retired for decades, Carpenter remains active. He said retirement hasn't entered his thoughts.

"I never considered I was working. This is what I like. I come in six days a week. I run experiments on weekends in my basement at home," he said.

Following a lifelong habit, he and his wife, Irmgard, swim every morning before breakfast in their indoor pool in Cold Spring.

"Today while swimming I thought of something new and couldn't wait to get here to try it," he said.



ZOOM

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The group employs about 25 people to supply jewelers with decorative glass, seen here.

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