



Grace

Lampwork Beads & Jewelry



Merchant Spotlight By Alison Schmidt

Grace Ma is a San Jose, CA-based beadmaker/designer who originally hails from Beijing, China. She and her husband moved to the United States in April 2001 when he took a new job, and as it turns out, Grace took a new job herself. While she had worked with computers in Beijing, she was thrilled to take a more artistic path in the US as a lampworker. Grace says, “Bead making is much more fun!”

Getting Started

Until five years ago, Grace had no knowledge of beads at all. In September of 2002 she went to visit her sister in San Diego. While there, she went to a gallery that featured items by local artisans and saw some beautiful lampwork beads that enthralled her. She wanted to take some home, but she was surprised at the price.


She says, “These beads were so expensive! Eight dollars apiece!” She decided to buy them anyway, and soon she understood why a single bead could be so pricy.

Grace fell so much in love with the lampwork beads that when she got home she started searching out the materials necessary to make her own. It was difficult to get started because she knew next to nothing about the process, and certainly did not know the specific names and terms associated with it. Finally, she found a local supplier and purchased a simple torch, glass rods, books, videos, and DVDs. Next, she took classes from distinguished lampworker Kim Osibin, and found herself on her way to a new career.

Her Work

Throughout the years, Grace has developed a beautiful product and a strong work ethic. She finds it important to continue trying out new designs, and does not want to limit herself to a particular style. “When you think about a famous name, the image of the beads will show up in your mind,” says Grace, but she aims to keep her beads varied. She has some contemporary designs and some classic designs. This allows her to explore different techniques, which is a lot of fun for her, and the variety also attracts more customers.





Grace started her business working by herself, but soon she realized that she needed to hire help so she could keep up with orders, shows, and new designs. Although Grace still designs every bead herself, she has very carefully trained ten people to recreate her beads. She finds that this allows her more time to work with the torch. In a very short time, Grace has gone from strictly making beads to being a beadmaker, designer, trainer, and overseer.

The addition of staff allows Grace to travel to bead shows, which are an important part of her business because besides her website and eBay, shows are the only venues she uses to sell. Her beads can be found in 50+ stores around the country, and most of these business relationships were started at shows. In July 2004, she signed up for her very first: The Whole Bead Show in San Francisco. It opened the door to a whole new world, and her line can now be found at over thirty shows a year.

Inspiration

Grace finds inspiration in everything she sees. She always keeps her eyes on current fashion trends, and looks at people's clothing and handbags everywhere she goes. Colors and patterns particularly inspire her. She says, "One of my customers in Seattle had her nails painted turquoise, and she had added a little bit of gold leaf. I loved the color combination, so I put it in my beads." She also studies the natural colors and textures of gemstones.

Of course, Grace's favorite beads in the world are lampwork beads. "It's true art. I love the unexpected results, and I love the details. I appreciate the artists' hard work and skills," she says. In particular, she loves Kim Osibin's beads. Grace's former teacher was one of the first lampworkers to create beads with floral forms on them. She developed most of the techniques that are still in use today, and she taught Grace much of what she knows about colors. "Kim once had some glass rods made for her in



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custom colors, and she has really inspired me to mix colors and develop new looks,” she says. This inspiration recently led Grace to create a new color of green glass by mixing silver foil with blue frits (fused or partially fused materials used in making glass), which has become her favorite of her own beads.

Accomplishments

Grace is justifiably proud of her work. In just four years, she has built a successful business; however, it has been a tough road. Since she has a husband and a three-year-old daughter as well as ten employees, she has sacrificed much of her personal life in order to balance both her family and business lives. She works with her staff, makes beads, or goes to shows five days a week, and finds herself using any other spare time to complete little tasks like attaching price tags to strands.

“I am so happy with my beads. I always wanted beautiful, high-quality beads, and finally I have them. My designs are getting better and better compared to four years ago when I just started,” Grace says. The positive response she receives from customers adds to the confidence she has for herself and her business. She adds, “My parents wanted me to get an academic degree and find a stable job. Art is just a hobby in their minds.” Although she has strayed quite far from her original career in computers, Grace still feels that she has found a stable, respectable job. The biggest difference is that she can use the creativity she has always had but never got to use before. “I believe that after we’ve grown up, we know what we want, and we have the choice to do whatever we want. I love lampworking, so I just do it.”

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