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ANTIQUES In Flemington, A Touch of Glass

By Carolyn Darrow

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FLEMINGTON LOUIS IORIO, who will be 100 years old on Nov. 22, has lived to see the brilliant stone-cut glass he made at the turn of the century become highly prized. In his lifetime, Mr. Iorio has turned out a vast number of pieces, using 4,600 patterns. About half were of his own design, and many are listed in catalogues simply as Iorio.

Brought to New Jersey as a child from Northern Italy, Mr. Iorio has lived in Flemington since the 1880's. As a young man, he became an apprentice at the Empire Cut-Glass Factory here; as its last employee in 1916, he took his final pay in glass-cutting equipment.

Mr. Iorio continued to cut glass at home, although the demand for it diminished as the cheaper pressed glass became more popular. In the Depression years, he fell back on the family craft of making fireworks — his father was a pyrotechnician — and the family also took to operating the only taxi in town.

Glass-cutting by Mr. Iorio then was done for fun. He used anything he could get his hands on, including jelly glasses, and made only an occasional sale.

Until last year, Mr. Iorio cut glass on the wheel from memory, using no patterns. These days, he is content to read his newspaper, come down from his second-floor room for his meals, and, from a rocking chair, boss his son, William, who runs the Iorio Glass Shop behind the family's big white house on South Main Street.

William Iorio, a first-class glass artisan in his own right, manages the workshop, showroom and repair shop in the long, low building behind the house. The sales showroom is a small museum, its shelves filled with glass made by three generations of Iorios — Louis, William and two of William's sons.

From one of the display cases filled with antique and modern glass, William Iorio removed a large, cut-glass fruit bowl. "This was made by my father in 1906," he said.

The bowl, finely cut, requires a magnifying glass for full appreciation. The design is a hobstar within a hobstar within a hobstar; the hobstar is a 32-pointed star whose lines continue into the interior to make a geometric pattern.

Mr. Iorio then picked up a small candy dish that had been cut in the early part of the century. "Most people don't know that cut glass came in colors," he said.

The blue center turned to green at the outer edges, again representing very fine work. "I've turned down a lot of money for this, but to me they are irreplaceable," Mr. Iorio said.

He then moved to several cases filled with antique glass from his extensive collection and which he is selling.

Fit for royalty were six each of dessert plates, fingerbowls, sherbets and goblets of French Baccarat crystal. They were priced at \$300 a half-dozen, with the set going for \$1,200.

Dating to about 1860, these clearcrystal pieces had been copper-wheel engraved with many small flowers and flourishes that were then overlaid in gold.

“In time alone today, it would cost \$300 to make each piece,” Mr. Iorio said.

Looking for a vase? On hand was 10 inch tall Mount Washington (a New Bedford, Mass., glass company) Burmese vase priced at \$435. It had a plain shape and long neck, and its color changed from an opaque dull yellow at the bottom to an opaque grayish-pink at the top.

A Tiffany gooseneck vase almost a foot tall and with a large squat base — it reminded one of a coiled snake about to strike — had a pulled thread of gold (snake-like again) against a background of iridescent cobalt blue. This turn-of-the-century piece is \$3,600.

Also for sale at \$2,900 each were pair of cut-glass oil lamps that William Iorio says the King of Hawaii gave to an American attorney in 1890. He believes they were made in England.

The lamps have three cut-glass sections. The bottom section is fluted with starred squares, the font is a strawberry diamond pattern and the semicircular glass shade has a cane design. The base, trim and long scrolled handles are of bronze doré.

William Iorio is a slightly built but dynamic man who walks with a limp. He had polio as a child.

“I have about 8,000 camera slides on glass and its history,” he said. “I give lectures. My own personal collection contains glass from 1500 B.C. to the present day. I'm self-taught as a glassblower, copper-wheel engraver and glassmaker.”

He is known for his copper-wheel engraved glass (in Steuben style) and paperweight vases. The vases, made of layers of glass with glass flowers in between, cost several hundred dollars.

Several years ago, William Iorio built a furnace and a kiln for his two sons, making even the firebrick himself. They, in turn, developed into first-rate glass-blowers, turning out art glass in 32 colors.

Father and sons are able to emulate any style and finish, including Steuben, Durand and Tiffany. Glasswork done by the Iorio family is included in the collections of the Corning (N.Y.) Glass Museum, the State Museum in Trenton and the Wheaton Museum in South Jersey.

Ric Iorio is the primary glassblower, with his brother, Robert, working part-time between shifts as a state trooper. With enough advance orders, the furnaces are started up four or five times a year to run a month at a time. Iorio art glass is sold in galleries in Philadelphia, New York, the Middle West and Germany.

The Newark Museum sends its repair work to the Iorios, and William said that he was a couple of months behind in his other glass and lamp repair work.

"I smooth out chips, recut patterns, drill and rivet," he explained. "Each repair is individual. I charge \$15 an hour." He also does glass appraisals.

The Iorio Glass Shop is on South Main Street, just south of the Route 12 circle. It is open from 11 A.M. to 5:30 P.M., Monday through Saturday, and from noon to 5 P.M. on Sundays. The telephone number is (201) 782-5311. ■