

## ***‘Wow! That’s beautiful! I have to do something with that.’***

An afternoon workshop was enough to fire Fons UytdeHaag’s passion for making glass art. He had just retired from a senior position in a global vaccine company and suddenly had ‘a sea of time’ to explore new horizons. After several decades of working primarily with his brain, thinking up new ways to protect people from viruses, he wanted to create beautiful things using his hands as well as his head and heart.

Fons grew up with a deep appreciation of craftsmanship and artistic creation. His father was a master painter who specialized in church restoration, and the young Fons loved to leaf through his father’s books of religious art. “Initially, the naked angels may have been the attraction,” he says with a smile.

On leaving school he flirted with the idea of becoming an actor, but soon switched from drama studies to veterinary science. This led to a PhD in viral immunology—the study of immune responses to viruses—in which he built a long and successful career.

Meanwhile, he nurtured his interest in art through books and dreamed of one day making his own creations. He seized his chance after retiring from full-time work at the end of 2011. The choice for glass art was made almost by default: “I can’t paint or draw, so when I stumbled across an introductory course in glass making, I thought I’d give it a try. And I was hooked right away,” says Fons.

“Glass is a wonderful medium—fluid and solid, flexible and fixed,” he explains. “In its molten state it’s a dancing, dangerous, almost sensual thing. It’s possible to direct this dance towards the fixed form, if you are skilled and experienced enough. For a beginner like me, there’s so much to learn. That’s part of the fascination.”

Looking at Fons' blown glass art works, it's hard to believe he is just starting out in this field. He points out that he made them with the assistance of highly experienced craftsmen, whose technical guidance he will need for 'many years to come'. But the conceptual and emotive power of these objects is extraordinary, and Fons can take full credit for that.

## **Opening the mind**

He draws inspiration from the things that interest and excite him: nature, science, travel, humanity. He is fascinated by the human brain—by the way it works, its relationship with behavior and evolution, and its capacity to free people from the limits they impose upon themselves. One of these constraints, as he sees it, is religion. Fons is in full agreement with the atheist British scientist Richard Dawkins, who argues that religious faith 'teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world' and all too often inspires violence or oppression.

Fons explored these themes in what he considers to be his first real artwork, a modern triptych in glass that counterpoints the altar pieces of early Christian art. In three connecting glass panels he focuses first on religion, then behavior and finally the brain—a splendid neural network that echoes an abstract landscape by the Dutch artist Mondrian. The third panel presents an image of hope: the power of open-minded thinking to transcend limits and usher in the 'days of miracle and wonder'.

Fons had a deeply personal motivation for creating this work. "My daughter decided to convert to a conservative form of Islam. That was a shock for me. Making the triptych was my way of trying to work through that experience and make some sort of sense of it."

This process led him to a new belief in the liberating potential of art. "If you educate children to appreciate beauty and creativity, they might be less likely to embrace narrow beliefs," he reflects.

## **Natural beauty**

In January 2013, Fons made his first trip to Africa, which he describes as the 'cradle of evolution'. The beauty he experienced there made a deep impression and unleashed new sources of creativity. In Kenya, he was captivated by the nests of weaver birds: spherical chambers with a rough, spiky exterior and smooth, cushioned interior. "I thought: 'Wow! That's beautiful! I have to do something with that,'" Fons recalls. He came home and conceived his first blown glass artworks: organic, bulbous forms bound by copper wire.

These are mysterious and strangely moving works, evocative of constraint and possibility, of fluidity and stillness. They also display Fons' apparently intuitive grasp of how to use contrasting colors, textures and materials to great aesthetic effect.

The trip to Kenya brought Fons into contact with the Masai, who impressed him as "proud people with a very beautiful, ancient culture". His glass 'Masai dolls' in vividly colored robes are an exuberant celebration of this culture, but they also raise questions about cultural identity and transition.

## **Technical evolution**

Fons' passion for glass is as much about exploring new technical skills as new ideas. He started off learning to 'paint' on a flat plate of glass using colored glass powders and a fusion technique. Then he progressed to courses in sandblasting, sand casting and kiln casting of glass. Now he's working with master Gert Bulee to learn as much as he can about glass blowing, as fast as he can. In his latest works he is using all sorts of metal meshes, which in combination with blown glass result in objects with fascinating structures and unexpected color combinations. "It is the unpredictability of the process, the reactions of the metal mesh with the hot glass and the chemical reactions occurring, that

fascinates me most”, explains Fons. “As soon as the object comes down of the cooling oven it’s no longer mine”.

## **The why of WOW!GLASS**

Fons is very modest about his creations. But he has received so many positive reactions from the people who have seen them — “most importantly from strangers, who can be more honest!”— that he decided to find a way to share them with a wider audience. That’s the idea behind WOW!GLASS and this website.

“If people want to buy something I’ve made, they can,” says Fons. “But my primary goal is not to sell my works. I am doing this to try to make the world more beautiful for myself, and possibly for others. I hope that by showing other people my artworks, I might inspire them to think, or create, or contact me for a chat. It’s an invitation for dialogue.”

Profile by Andrea Dingemans, independent journalist