

# Focus On...

Chris Blade

Chris designs and makes bespoke art glass, frequently inspired by his extensive travels as a photographer. He was recently appointed Manager of the Glass Studios and Glass Production facilities at the National Glass Centre, Sunderland.

## HOW DID YOU START?

I guess I came to what I do via a fairly traditional route: a Foundation Course in Art & Design, a three year BA in Glass (at Staffordshire Polytechnic in Stoke on Trent) and a two year MA in Glass at the prestigious Royal College of Art in London. After graduating I enrolled on a six-month business course specifically targeted to support creative business start-ups. They helped me develop a realistic business plan which I then used to apply for a grant from the PYBT (Princes' Youth Business Trust) to help establish my business. I founded my first studio in the South Bank Craft Centre, in a railway arch next to the Royal Festival Hall and moved four years later to a warehouse studio in Rotherhithe, London.

## WHAT WAS THE DRIVING FORCE BEHIND SETTING UP YOUR OWN BUSINESS?

A strong desire to be creative and to see my designs for glass and stone furniture produced. After graduating from the RCA in 1987 I quickly realised that the most realistic way to achieve this was to establish my own business and produce the work myself.

## WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT WHAT YOU DO?

For many years I developed and refined my craft and design skills and gained valuable experience. Due to the effects of the recession in the early 90s I became a lecturer, eventually running three Higher Education Courses in Three Dimensional Design & Commercial Interior Design. This enabled me to learn an incredible amount about other materials, processes and disciplines, some of which fed back into my creative work when I had the time. I was passionate about equipping young designers with the business, design and problem-solving skills and flexibility necessary to give them a realistic chance to make a reasonable living as self-employed designers or in the incredibly competitive employed sectors.







A few years ago I felt the need for a change and to engage with my creativity once again. I left the security of my lecturing career and travelled to some of the remote parts of the world. I used the opportunity to develop new work using a glass blowing process called 'graal'. I worked with Australian glassmaker and friend Tim Shaw in Adelaide, Australia, refining the processes, and then developed it at a glass factory in Istanbul called The Glass Furnace where I taught classes too. Working with a team represented a radical departure from the belief I used to have that I had to make everything myself. Now the production of the outcome was more important, and the techniques I required so complex, that I had to use highly skilled glassmaking teams, sometimes up to four people at a time, to assist with the production of the work. Around this time I met my partner, fellow glassmaker Katya Filmus, and went to live and work with her in her studio in Jerusalem. Despite being one of Israel's foremost glass artists and lecturers Katya wanted to pursue her creative studies and decided Sunderland offered the best postgraduate courses in the UK. At the same time I was offered my current job as a Senior Manager at the National Glass Centre, University of Sunderland managing the glass design, production and glass making enterprise activities at the centre.

#### WHAT INSPIRES YOU?

I am a passionate traveller, photographer and paraglider pilot. The glass made over the last few years has been fuelled through my passion for travel. I was invited by the British adventure travel company Dragoman to work with them over a period of four years as an adventure travel photographer. I visited some of the most amazing and remote places including Outer Mongolia, Siberia, Russia, Tibet, much of China, most of the 'stans and much of Africa, bringing the memories and influences back with me and allowing them to inspire some of my glass designs.

#### WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY WORKING ON?

Currently I am project managing an exciting commission for Glenfiddich whisky as part of a £1m re-branding campaign. They wanted our help to develop large glass sculptures to crown highly unusual 'point of sale' display gondolas in up to 21 major international airports. These sculptures are stylised representations of the iconic Glenfiddich logo of a stag's head. Cast using 50kg of lead crystal and taking nearly three months each to make, the first three of these exquisite and complex sculptures were recently unveiled at Heathrow Terminal 5, Frankfurt and Dubai airports. Up to 18 more

will be produced over the next two years. The complete manufacturing, casting and acid-polishing process can be seen at [www.chrisblade.com/glenfiddichstaghead](http://www.chrisblade.com/glenfiddichstaghead).

#### WHAT IS THE BEST THING YOU HAVE MADE AND HAS IT BEEN DISPLAYED OR USED ANYWHERE PROMINENTLY?

The Glenfiddich project is probably the highest profile project I have worked on. A few years ago I produced a kinetic sculpture for a roundabout in Arundel, Sussex consisting of 18 stainless steel birds floating six metres above the road. Other memorable projects include one to redesign and build a Craft Shop in the Royal Festival Hall and a contemporary fireplace for a house in the Royal Crescent, Bath.

#### WHERE DO YOU HOPE TO SEE YOUR BUSINESS GOING IN THE FUTURE?

To develop the incredible resources of the National Glass Centre glassmaking studios into an internationally renowned and respected glass production centre able to undertake and advise on a wide variety of projects using glass. We intend to continue to support the North East glassmaking craft industry by providing artists with access to some of the most comprehensive glassmaking resources in the UK. Furthermore we intend to continue to offer the public and visitors the opportunity to turn their hands to glassmaking - whether a day one to one glassblowing experience or evening classes in a wide variety of glassmaking processes. Check out the NGC website to see what's on [www.nationalglasscentre.com](http://www.nationalglasscentre.com).

#### WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT THE NORTH EAST?

The people and the countryside.

Chris Blade 07956 369 730 [www.chrisblade.com](http://www.chrisblade.com)

