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Marsha Vasiloff Abrahamson: *Artist of Light*

Profile by
Barbara Malinsky
Images courtesy
Marsha Vasiloff Abrahamson



Glass artist Marsha Vasiloff Abrahamson dreams in color. "Color is my glass which creates flowing beautiful windows that sparkle and sometimes tell a story. Glass is not just what I do, it's who I am. I feel that I was chosen to do this." Her muse is the glass itself. "It has light; it lights up; it's the only medium that

changes during the day from morning light through the afternoon and then when it's lit from the inside at night." Her passion and artistry are evident in every piece that she creates using this age-old art form.

Her home and studios in Old Lyme are a hive activity. One of the workspaces houses bins of sheet glass vertically sandwiched in the dark.

They're like dormant costumes, hanging languidly in a theater's wardrobe department awaiting an actor or actress to embody them bringing their personalities to life. The glass is lifeless until, like a magician waiving a magic wand, she retrieves a slice from the niche and holds it up to the light revealing its brilliance. Neatly organized, she knows where to find each one for its individual properties. Other work areas are used for drawing, glass cutting, painting, and assembly.

A self-described Westbrook Beach Girl, she began her professional life as a registered medical assistant at Yale Pediatrics in New Haven. Somehow, she was drawn to the Tiffany glass renewal movement in the 1970s. In 1972, she began working at The Chapman House in Old Saybrook assembling reproductions of his signature lamps. "There were seventy-five of us making lamps. We worked in all kinds of conditions; sometimes in forty-degree temperatures without heat but they were the best years of my life. It was like a little family;



we shared a common bond. I met my husband Tony there." Tony Vasiloff was a glasscutter.

Marsha and Tony shared their passion for art glass, a combination of translucent and opalescent pieces, intricately incised, and bound with copper foil and solder. Together they began to create their own designs. His untimely death at the age of thirty-six left her with two children to support and two choices – reentering the medical field or continuing to make glass. Fate made the decision for her.

When he was passing away, Tony told her that he was going to spend the rest of his life with



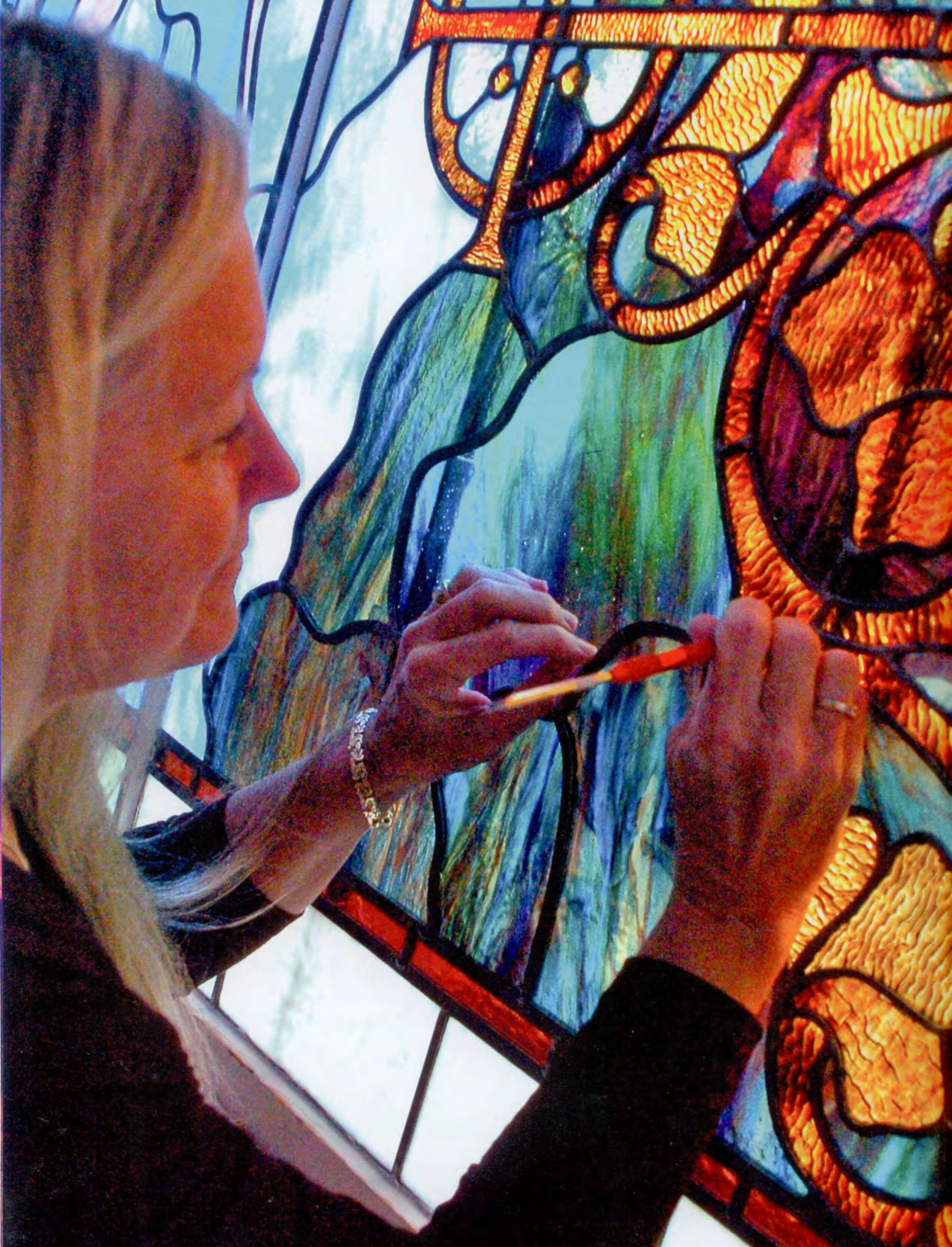




photo courtesy: Thd Day Publishing

her, inside her. "Even though I never took art, I feel like he entered me somehow; I began to draw just like him – Art Nouveau style with



flowing leaves, twists and turns, ribbons, and fluid hair which defined his work and my work. I use solder lines to create motion. This is what makes it art not craft."

The fabrication of an art glass piece is extremely laborious and technically

demanding. A window begins with a drawing or cartoon that is done to scale. The drawing functions like a dress pattern where each piece is cut out, traced onto a specifically chosen piece of glass, cut, numbered, wrapped with copper foil on all sides, and then soldered together to create the image. An analogy would be gluing each edge of a jigsaw puzzle together and then hanging it vertically. The copper foil technique was the invention of Louis Comfort Tiffany

(1848 – 1933) who created a new approach and aesthetic for making glass windows.

Several unique pieces grace her home. Two are round windows with sculpted flowers arching away from their frame in three dimensions, which she achieved by manipulation and kiln firing. Reflecting her love of the sea, others are embedded with shells; the nautilus radiating outward from the center with other oceanic forms incorporated into this singular design. A stunning floral window, which her husband Tony designed and that she completed, proudly takes center stage.

Vasiloff Stained Glass is a family affair. Her son Jesse, daughter Shauna, and husband Wayne have all helped in various capacities during the ups and downs of the business. The requirements of this process have kept her in great demand. She has created pieces for industry, private homes, restaurants, kitchen companies, high-end contemporary lamp manufacturers, offices, and institutions like the Elim Park Retirement Community in Cheshire where she created two,

ten-foot Tree of Life Circles and two, twenty-eight-foot biblical murals for the chapel.

"Over thirteen years, working with designers, tribal council members, and architects Vasiloff Stained Glass and colleagues fabricated over two thousand windows for Foxwoods Casino. My son had gone to Foxwoods and saw part of a twenty-eight-foot mural that he had worked on in the studio but, after seeing the entire display, he said, 'Mom, you should be so proud of yourself'. The memories of the constant mental and physical work – seven days a week,





a U-shaped channel, which holds the glass pieces together. The process resembles the copper foil method but differs in some ways. It begins with a drawing that is cut out with special scissors that subtract about one-eighth of an inch of paper allowing room for the lead. Pieces of glass are traced, cut, numbered, painted, assembled, inserted into the lead, which is soldered only at the corners, and then filled with grout. The image seen on the windows is from painting, which is made with crushed glass fused into the surface by firing in a kiln, as opposed to creating it through the glass pieces themselves.



sleepless nights, raw and painful hands - instantly melted away. I just smiled; there was no better compliment."

In the art glass community, her reputation as a perfectionist has brought her restoration work in recent years. Older church windows are made by an entirely different process using large sheets of glass held together by lead came,

She has become an expert in this area of glass-work as well. "As churches get older, the grout falls out and the lead softens from the sun." She has restored leaded windows dating from the 1800s for the convent building at The Cathedral of Saint Patrick in Norwich and for new windows for the church doorways. Other commissions include The Trumbull Congregational

Church, Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Meriden, and, most recently, the Resurrection window at The First Congregational Church in Westbrook that has a special resonance for her.

"I had a paper route in Westbrook when I was twelve years old and passed that church every day. I'd get a candy bar and stop and stare at that Resurrection window and say Wow! When I got that commission, I stood and stared and did a double Wow!" When we removed the window, we saw that someone - a carpenter or artist - signed it in 1894. They let me sign my name under it!" Installing the fifteen-foot,







shop, Studio Pizzol, in Milan, Italy. His wife has family in Niantic, Connecticut. When everything closes down for the summer in Italy, he comes here to help with her projects. She also learns a great deal from him because his family is on the cutting-edge of antique glass restoration.

There's a sense of glass kismet and pride about this latest project. The fact that she held it in such awe when she was a young girl and able to restore this inspirational piece has left her very gratified. "It's not just a job to me. I'm honored to repair these windows." For her, it



glass. As long as my fingers can move, I'll never retire. I don't know what I'd do."

One special quote remains her daily inspiration. "People, like stained glass windows, sparkle and shine when the sun is out but when the darkness sets in, their true beauty is revealed only if there is a light from within." Elizabeth Kubler Ross

Vasiloff's work can be seen at Simply Pearls and More, Westbrook; Lemon 'n Lyme, Old Lyme; Blue Moon Gallery, Guilford; and Venetucci Home, Westbrook.

For more information go to <vasiloffstainedglass.com> or call 860.434.9770.

five-hundred-pound piece was a challenge. The cost of the restoration was about twenty thousand dollars but the smile on her face as she is harnessed and flying across it, soldering the corners like an upside-down Michelangelo, is priceless.

Marsha was happily re-married in 1995 to Wayne Abrahamson who has become an expert glass-cutter in his own right and part of the installation crew. He has his own workspace and is currently working on the restoration of the Westbrook church. "Wayne knows that purple is my favorite color so he bought my crew purple hard hats." Her signature color, she also has purple extension cords, purple tape measures, purple buckets, and purple staplers. "If it comes in purple, I have it and you know it's me."

Assisting her along the way is master craftsman Fabio Pizzol. Fabio and his family are experts in window restoration and have a

seems like things have come full circle.

The artist who estimates that she has wrapped enough copper foil to reach California is thinking of slowing down. Can she? "It's definitely a labor of love and there are only a few of us in this area still working with



