

Chapter 22: Place-Based Podcasting: From Orality to Electracy in Norfolk, Virginia

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1. “The Glass Age” by Danielle Thornhill and Star LaBranche

In this podcast episode, “The Glass Age,” Danielle Thornhill and Star LaBranche explore the understated arts culture in Norfolk, with specific attention to the Perry Glass Studio (<https://chrysler.org/glass/>) in the Chrysler Museum of Art. Does the nature of glass mimic the nature of Norfolk? Listen to find out.

Listeners interested in seeing photographs of the art Danielle and Star describe later in the podcast episode might check them out on the Chrysler Museum of Art’s website:

- Woman in a Pergola with Wisteria, Tiffany Studios: <https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/6389/woman-in-a-pergola-with-wisteria>
- Twenty-Four-Light Candelabrum by Compagnie des Verreries et Cristalleries de Baccarat: <https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/35676/twentyfourlight-candelabrum>
- 7.3.2011 by Josepha Gasch-Muche: <https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/57590/732011>
- CB w/ L, T and pickles (The cheeseburger, curly fries, plate, coke, with ice and straw) by John Miller: <https://chrysler.emuseum.com/objects/63451/cb-w-l-t-and-pickles-the-cheeseburger-curlly-fries-plate>

Transcript

[background music: “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy”]

Charlotte Potter: I would go so far to say that we are living in the Glass Age. There was the Bronze Age, you know, there was the Iron Age. I really do think we’re living in the Glass Age. We’re giving people a way to start to look at the material around you in a different way. I mean, you drive down the street looking through glass, you’re literally looking through glasses. And you wear them on your face. If you’re holding up a camera, you’re looking through a lens made out of glass. If you’re going to cinema, you’re seeing an image projected on a wall through a lens, which is glass. When you look in the mirror, that is glass. And I think, once people start to recognize that glass is all around them and used in all these different ways, it brings an awareness.

[music fades, sounds of glass clinking, then birds chirping]

Star: Okay, this is Star LaBranche and I’m here with . . .

Danielle: Danielle Thornhill.

Star: We are at the Chrysler Museum of Art and we are about to take the candy dish glassblowing class at the Perry Glass Studio. So what are you most excited about?

Danielle: It is my first attempt at making glass, so I’m excited by the whole thing, actually.

Star: Awesome! Do you have any expectations?

Danielle: I expect not to actually hold the hot glass, I expect not to drop it, and, uh, I expect making awesome dish.

Star: Awesome, awesome.

I’ve taken a glass class before. I did colorful floats class, and it was super fun. The way they set up a class is they first get you into a group, and they show you exactly what they’re going to do; they actually make the object right in front of you, and they tell you

what your contribution is going to be. And you get to pick your own color, and they have lots of colors to choose from. You can pick all kinds of greens and blues and yellows. And then you actually get to blow the glass, and they will form the glass themselves. That's the really hard part. they let you do that the easy part.

So they let it cool down in the kiln, and then you pick it up a few days later, and you have your piece. And we're gonna do the candy dish today, so I'm very excited about that.

Danielle: Yes.

Star: So I'm thinking I might do a candy dish for my mom because her birthday is coming up. I'm not entirely sure yet, but I think I might. So you're keeping your candy dish?

Danielle: Yeah, my little sister's birthday was yesterday, and I'm thinking about spoiling her if my—you know—if I like it that much and I love her that much, I'll give it to her, but, you know, I might keep myself if it turns out good.

[birds chirping]

Star: Awesome. Awesome. So we're gonna go take this class, and we will see what happens.

[at studio, ambient noise, almost industrial; the following dialogue has static in the background]

Male speaker: So you've been here before?

Star: Yes.

Danielle: No.

Voice: Good, I like a nice mix of people. Well, for you guys have not been here, welcome, and welcome back to you guys that have. The best place to stand will be just about right here, cause I'm going to hand you the pipe with the glass on the end.

["Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy" resumes]

Danielle: *[to listener]* After we took the class, our interests were piqued, so we decided to find out the history and the composition of glass. We were so excited to learn more about glass, so we sat down with . . .

Charlotte Potter: Charlotte Potter.

Danielle: She is . . .

Charlotte: Glass Studio manager and programming director.

[sounds of glassware clinking]

Charlotte: Glass is a magical material. It's called an amorphous solid. So, there's other more solids out there in the world like wax or sugar. So people who blow sugar, that's a very similar kind of material. Essentially what it means is on a molecular level, if you're looking at something solid like a crystal, it's an organized structure. But if you look at glass, it is complete unorganized on a molecular level. So, essentially, when you look at it through a microscope, it looks like it's a liquid even when it is solid. It is both things at once. It is liquid and solid. It is amorphous solid. So just on a basic level, it has its own state of matter, which is really incredible. It's comprised out of sand as well as soda ash, which is a flux—and that flux lowers the melting point of the sand—and lime, and the lime is the stabler that makes sure the sand and the soda ash are kind of copacetic with

one another. And when you bring all of that up to a temperature of about two thousand degrees and melt it down, you get something called glass.

Okay, so glass has been around for thousands and thousands of years. There's naturally forming glass. There's things called fulgarites, which is when lightning hits the sand. There's obsidian, which is volcanic glass. There is this crazy thing called a sea sponge, which is this weird invertebrate that lives at the bottom of the sea that creates these, like, sort of cages around themselves out of glass. There's tektites, which is like moldavites. There's trinitites. So there is all these naturally forming kinds of glass. So that's been around for hundreds of thousands of years, right. Maybe millions of years.

In terms of man-made glass, it's about four thousand years. So the guess is that there was probably a fire on a beach somewhere. And then after the fire had, you know, melted, started to melt down the glass, people started to realize, oh, we can do something with this. The very, very first pieces that we've seen are from sort of Egyptian area, Egypt, Mesopotamia, at about 2000 BC. So some of the very, very first ways that glass was used about 4,000 years ago would have been things like beads. That would have been something that would have been, like, easy small piece. But also there's these really interesting containers over in the Chrysler Museum collection, which are core-formed pieces of glass, and it's a really interesting process. They were very small, maybe two inches high, and they were used mostly for medicinal purposes or cosmetic purposes. So it would contain things like perfumes or salves or ointments, or even things like black eyeliner. So it was definitely for the rich. It was definitely something for people who could afford something like that. And the way that they made it was really fascinating. They would take animal feces and shape it into a form and then wrap that sort of core with glass on the outside, and slowly cool it down and then remove the animal feces. And they'd end up with a hollow container.

And that—then about 50 BC. they figured out how to blow glass on the end of a tube. And then they did away with all that core forming and animal feces stuff, which is great. It's a wonderful invention.

Okay so. There's some major differences between each glass and modern glass. First of all, from an industrial standpoint when you think of light bulbs or things like that, they're all made mechanically using machines. What's kind of interesting is that what's happening in our studio here is not very different than what would have been happening with the Romans in about 50 BC. The primary difference for us, anyway, is the fuel source: They would've been using wood, and we now use gas. And then like a few other little inventions, like the hand torch, is something that they wouldn't have had. So it's funny because in some ways the industries are vastly different in that everything has become mechanized, but in our studio everything is still handmade so it's not that different, frankly. And essentially what we try to do is show people as true as we can, kind of, yeah, what was happening in 50 BC. And we can do that through what's called, like, off-handed glass blowing, as well as different processes like slumping and fusing, which we haven't gotten into yet, but that was also something that would really happen at that time.

Okay, so something is fusing is when you take a piece of glass—I guess, slumping, more to the point, is something the Romans were doing a lot. So you take a piece of glass—so they'd probably like pour it out on a table or something and make it like a disc, and then they would take that disc and put it over a mold and melt it over the mold, essentially slump it into the mold to create a dash, and it actually predates blowing by a little bit. So

if you look at the whole historical line up, it is core forming and then slumping and then blowing.

There are many different kinds of glass. For modern times, the two primary kinds that you typically hear about is soft glass and hard glass. Soft glass is the stuff that we're blowing with on the floor. Hard glass is Pyrex, so, you know, those cooking containers that you can put in your oven. So if you were to take some of our glass and put it in your oven and try to cook a casserole or something, the piece of glass would explode. It would be getting too hot too quickly. The molecules would be expanding and contracting, and it would crack. But Pyrex was invented essentially because it is able to withstand those high temperature differences. It also melts at a higher temperature. So those are the two primary kinds of glass that are used.

There's a lot of different kinds of glass, even more than what I mentioned initially. For instance, there's this new stuff called gorilla glass that was just invented, which is essentially the thing on your iPhone. [*sounds of tapping finger on iPhone screen*] And it is the thing that can crack. There's this new stuff called willow glass that was just invented. It can actually bend, um, and withstand all kinds of different kinds of, you know, pressures applied to it, almost like a plastic. So in historical times or like ancient times, let's just say, glass actually wasn't as stable. The stabilizer that I mentioned early on, that lime, they haven't quite gotten that recipe perfect. So not all of that glass is stable. In fact, there are pieces in our collection when you walk through that sort of look iridized on the surface, and that's because it's—we call it actually sick glass. It's glass that has been buried in the earth, and the water has gotten, seeped into it, and it's actually starting to make it unstable.

That said, it will still last for thousands of years. But that's one of the beautiful things about glass, is that it is both like liquid and solid. It's elastic and it's brittle. It's really captivating and it's really humbling. It's definitely one of those materials that has a lot of dualistic qualities, which can be really useful if you're an artist and you're trying to talk about things like fragility, 'cause the second that you see something made out of glass, you think, well, that's fragile. That's what I think we're all familiar with.

For a very long time—400 AD-ish—the Venetians started to kind of take over the glass industry all around, and they were—almost like one of those birds that was isolated on the Galapagos Islands and sort of evolved into something like the dodo bird, these Venetians became extremely good glassblowers. However, their glass recipes were a little bit yellow or a little bit green, and there was this, um—it was of the fashion and people start to realize that what they really, really wanted was a perfect crystal clear glass, and that was actually to mimic or to emulate cut crystal. So eventually they figured out how to create something called lead crystal, which is when you put a little bit of lead in the glass, and that is what is what made it true clear. They have since scientifically figured out how to make almost all glass very, very clear, but initially it was the lead that enabled them to get that very clear glass.

[*back at studio*]

Voice of class leader: Before I hand it to you guys, I am going to cool it on this pipe cooler so it is not warm when I give it to you. Notice how I always have to keep turning. If I stop, gravity is going to take hold and make it fall to the floor.

Star [*to listeners*]: Now that we have a better understanding of what glass is, we talked about how glass directly impacts Norfolk.

[sounds of glasses clinking; subtle music starts and continues playing as Charlotte speaks]

Charlotte: I think that one of the really exciting parts about having an opportunity to develop the Perry Family Glass Studio was that it was a completely blank slate and we were able to create anything. And because there was not a studio in this town prior to just four years ago, we were able to kind of recreate everything. So we picked some of the best parts of other institutions—what they've done their programming, things like new demos. Um, but then we were really able to tailor it to this community. And I think the things that make it different is that Norfolk is weird. Norfolk is a strange place. Um, in a good way. And programs like the third Thursday performance art series really set us apart from other institutions. We're the only of its kind, actually, in the world. And so what was so great is that I think that Norfolk, um, for better or worse, was sort of starving for something like that, and it filled a really interesting void and started to become this catalyst that made people come out every single month to sort of experience the magical qualities of glass and sort of the performative qualities of glass. And I think that that inertia, that excitement, sort of spread out into the Neon district and was able to help catalyze that project as well.

We didn't start out with lofty goals, but we're really thrilled to see the trickle effect and the impact that it's had on the community.

I think what makes glass so important to Hampton Roads started in 1608 with a little place called Jamestown. Um. Glass was America's first export. It was also its first failed industry. *[laughs]* 1608, these people came from Europe, and they attempted to sort of develop glassmaking, and they all, they all starved. It didn't go well for them, and it's an extremely hard industry to get off the ground. It involves science and chemistry, a lot of technique. So they did, they did have a few things that they exported, but very quickly, it complete failed.

So I think that we owe it to the traditions of glass to have this heritage here, and what I always sort of love is that I think the Chrysler is bridging the history and future of glass. We try to sort of be on the cutting edge by, you know, discussing the performative qualities of glass, but at the same time we're holding true to the heritage that this is where it was born. Glass was born in this area in America.

So my favorite part of working at the glass studio is truly the community and the people that we get to, um, work with. There's incredible talent in this area. There's also a huge amount of people who have moved here specifically for jobs at this institution, which is exciting. So we're creating this whole, you know, kind of new community of young artists that are making and living and working in Norfolk, which is exactly what one would hope is that a place like this brings new jobs.

So I think it's those people and then every person who walks in the door that we get to come share and sort of explain what glass is, the that's what is my favorite part of being here.

I think there's like this myth that glass is extremely hard. In some ways that's true. I mean it does take a long time to get good at blowing glass, but there's other really accessible ways of working with the material, things like stained glass or fusing or painting on glass or mosaics. Or even flame working. And so I always suggest that if somebody is curious or interested, there's always going to be a class for them. If you're uncomfortable standing on your feet, we won't put you in a blowing class, we'll put you in a class where you get to sit down. I think just walking through the door is the first step,

coming and seeing one of our noon daily demos. Um, that is going to start teaching you about glass and different glass processes. And every single noon demo is different, so it's not like you'd be coming back and seeing the exact same thing. But we have really quick classes that are just an hour. We have classes that are two days. So it's about people's availability. But there really is something for everybody.

I like to think that we do a little thing called edutainment. *[laughs]* So, um, a little bit of education, a little bit of entertainment. So I think the kind of opportunities it brings this region is, is A) it's a free, it's a free activity you can do with your family or your friends, which I think is really important. Glass is one of the most important materials to this moment in time, so we hope to bring more awareness to that.

[Back to glass studio]

Instructor: Hold them up to the light and see how that plays with the colors. Then we'll pull them out so that they're a little closer to you to work on.

Danielle [to listeners]: Now we know about what glass is in general, we sat down with a glass artist to talk about making glass art.

[sounds of glasses clinking; subtle music]

Robin Rogers: My name is Robin Rogers, and my official title here is assistant manager at studio, slash studio technician. So I've been working for the Chrysler Music slightly longer than the glass studio has been open to the public. We opened to the public November 1 of 2011, and my start date was August 15, 2011.

Sculpting glass is similar to glass blowing in that it's really the same process, uses the same tools, but typically when you think of blowing glass, and this is just very—typically you think of symmetrical forms. *[indistinguishable due to poor audio quality]* or something that's pretty symmetrical. As soon you start to go asymmetrical, it becomes sculptural.

I particularly like to sculpt animal forms, draw inspiration from nature. So the way that I work with the glass is using metal tools because you obviously can't touch it—different metal tools to grab it and shape it and form it. So working with glass is something that you can do by yourself, but you can certainly do a whole lot more when you have other people, assistants helping you. Your assistants need to be very skilled and trained and practiced in what you're doing. Here at the Chrysler, we're very lucky to have a team that helps me and my wife make our work and collaborate. They are volunteers that come in, and they basically help us.

What you need to know before sculpting glass? Don't touch it. *[multiple people laugh]* Two major sides to sculpting glass, I think. Number one is getting your material to do what you want it to do, which comes with experience and knowing how hot you need to get something, or what colors are gonna behave in what way. Material knowledge that you have to bring to it. But then the other side of it is the sculpture side. You need to be able to envision the form in your head. You need to know what the proportions are, what it will look like in order to successfully execute a sculpture. So that comes from, me personally, years of drawing—you know, a painter, a drawer, just observing, and I make my pets out of clay, at home. It's a lot easier to work a design out in quiet. The glass is challenging in lot of different ways, so knowing the form and being able to move it towards what you're trying to create—those are the two things. Knowing the materials and then being able to put it together.

Sculpting glass uses pretty much every blowing glass tool for the most part. You need to pick up blowing glass tools. But there are some kinds of specialized tools in sculpting that I use. For instance, we do a process called inside sculpting, where sometimes we blow a bubble, and we open up the end of the bubble so that you can insert a tool into that opening, and then it'll heat a certain area of the torch, and then we have these long curving tools that go in and push the bubble from inside out. So that's a specialized tool that you typically use, for blowing vessels or something.

So there's a lot of different types of glass that you can work with. For the most part, we use what's called soda lime glass. That's what we melt in furnace here. But we also do some work with a different type of glass to blow. So if it's glass that you melt on a torch, and it moves differently, behaves differently, and it has its own advantages and disadvantages. But for the most part, we work with soda lime glass. Right now, we're working on continuing the series that we've been doing for a while now. It's a series of anthropomorphic forms, human slash animal forms. We made a blue jay today. A lot of times, we kind of tailor our work for where it might be going and get inspiration from it. So, for instance, we have show coming up, it's in Texas, in Dallas, Texas, so we're making a longhorn cow. We made a Texas owl for that show and a few other kind of Texas-related things.

[*music*]

[*back at studio*]

Instructor: She's melting the color back into the heater. It'll kind of fall up and then smooth out and when it comes out it will look bright orange.

Star [*to listeners*]: Art inspires everyone in one way or another. When we went to the Chrysler Museum of Art to see the glass exhibits, we were very inspired by the pieces there and decided to write about them. So here are some short pieces about different glass objects that you can see in the Chrysler Museum of Art and how they inspired us.

[*piano music begins and plays as Danielle and Star speak*]

Danielle: Twenty-Four-Light Candelabrum, Baccarat, France.

Star: . . . I was impressed by, like, its size.

Danielle: Yes, it was bigger than I expected, and there was so much minute details. Like, I kept wonder, like, how long did they have to spend on that to get that good of detail? And you're right, it is big, and you told me it was, it had electricity. I saw something that nice, and I can't help but picture the houses it could have been, if it was royalty or if it belonged to just every average Joe. I thought of chandeliers, but they're yellow. Their light is kinda tarnished and old. I mean, they're still pretty, but this one was just so bright and skinny too. I was, like, wow, this is gorgeous.

[*glasses clink*]

She's so clear, frosted and elegant. She could have belonged in a French palace keeping Parisians company as they entertain the royalty. She may have been the only light source Dracula could stand, keeping only he illuminated as he bid the trespasser welcome. Chandeliers are pretentious in their muted light, climbing high to avoid the crowds. She stands at eye level, blunt in her radiance, daring you to look elsewhere. Chandeliers wear prom dresses, she wears a wedding dress.

[*piano music shifts in tone*]

Star: Woman in a Pergola with Wisteria, Tiffany Studios.

I chose this piece because it's very strongly connected with the memory that I describe in it. The memory I have is very vivid and every time I go to the stained-glass window, that's what I think about. For me, it shows how the art connects to our lives and it becomes a part of our memories.

[sound of glass clinking]

It had been one of those days; I woke up feeling stressed out instead of refreshed, everything had gone wrong up until that point, and by the time I arrived at the museum I was shaking. But I knew where I wanted to go. I wanted to see the stained-glass window. Sometimes, I go to Chrysler on hectic days and just sit in front of the window. It makes me feel so calm; the woman is so beautiful, and the light that shines through her is just stunning. I always feel at peace seeing her there. This day was no different. I made a beeline for the window as soon as I checked in at the front desk, I sank into the bench in front of her and just stared. Relief flooded my veins; I knew it was going to be okay. Well, maybe not okay, but I would be able to deal with it.

Sitting idle is something I don't really know how to do, on top of the fact I never really have time to do it. So it is only about a minute before I remembered I needed to send an email and grabbed my phone. I hadn't gotten any emails in the past few hours, and when I refreshed my inbox, I was flooded with messages. One particularly caught my attention. It was from a freelance writing company I applied to work at, and for some reason the subject line contained the word congratulations. I opened the email and stared at it in utter shock. The essay I had submitted a few days ago had been accepted. I was hired. I remembered sending that essay. I was almost in tears when I hit the submit button because it felt so utterly futile. I'd been submitting my writing everywhere, and all I heard over and over and over again was, I'll pass, not this time, not a good fit, or please submit again.

I ask myself why I was bothering, why I didn't just give up, but I hit that submit button anyway. Reading over the email, my jaw dropped. They probably proclaimed they only hired two percent of their total applicants—a terrifying number. I had never been in the top two percent of anything. I read over the email again in complete disbelief. Then I took a screenshot of it and posted it to Facebook with the caption "Oh my biscuits."

Then in front of the stained-glass window, I started to cry. I was so accustomed to that crushing sense of futility, it kept reminding me that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. I thought it was pointless to submit the essay. I thought for sure I would be counted among the 98 percent who weren't accepted. I thought it was pointless to try. I thought it was utterly silly to care. I thought I had wasted 500 words. But I did it anyway, not because I thought it would work, but because the idea of not trying was completely unthinkable.

[new piano music, quicker in tempo]

Danielle: Glass with wood. Josepha Gasch-Muche.

I think this piece is a little different than what most people would expect that would be one of my favorites in the Chrysler Museum, because one thing that caught my attention was it was so big. It was made of shards, you know. I didn't think that anyone could make something out of broken pieces of glass, but it was all that fit together and it—when you stood back and looked at it, it looked like a huge dandelion, but you could tell that it was made of hundreds of shards of glass. And it fits so perfect, and I wondered

about, you know, other pieces, those glasses belong to? Were they trash? And it made something different that was just as beautiful as anything else in the studio.

[glass clinks]

The project is finished, completed, polished and named. One piece two long sticks out, superfluous, a blemish, ruins harmony, removed to preserve, cast aside, jagged element that doesn't belong, alone, away from dream, transparent in its grief, needs of the one. More projects finished, delinquents removed, needs of the few, serrated pieces band together, purpose, needs of the many, blooming misfit flower, gleaming pointed petals sparkle, fragments transparent and their joy, no one is left behind.

[piano music shifts again]

Star: CB with L, T and Pickles (The cheeseburger, curly fries, plate, coke, with ice and straw). John Miller.

So the cheeseburger that I talk about in this poem is one of my favorite glass pieces and one of my favorite pieces in the Chrysler Museum of Art. I wrote this poem after I was on a date to Chrysler and I was telling my date, "Oh, when we go upstairs, there's this glass cheeseburger that you just have to see." And we go upstairs, and it's gone. So here I am, wandering around, talking about a glass cheeseburger, and there's no glass cheeseburger. And I'm sure I looked completely ridiculous, even though my date was very kind about it. So I wrote this shortly after that happened.

[glass clinks]

[recites poem]

I seemed to have lost the burger along with its fries and coke

It's not the glass gallery

It's not the modern art gallery where I remember seeing it

how could I have lost a gigantic glass burger

certainly someone would have noticed it wandering the streets

it would've attracted some attention

I wonder where it's gone

I hope it's safe and still delicious looking

I hope it's happy

[music ends; back at studio]

Instructor: This is important because if I were trying to blow a bubble while it is still molten, the temperature would be uneven, and it would blow out really quickly out of one side and not on the other.

[birds chirping, upbeat music starts, narrators return to addressing listeners]

Star: Okay, so we just finished our class. What do you think?

Danielle: Oh, it was great, it was great. *[Star laughs]* It was so much fun. It was hot.

Star: Yes. Very very hot. Those kilns get up to, what, five thousand degrees or something, like, crazy like that.

Danielle: Yep. My skin *[inaudible]*

Star: Yeah, exactly. I feel my skin is very dry right now, but don't you feel like [*Danielle agreeing in background*] the adrenaline pumping through your veins right now, you just feel like you can do anything?

Danielle: Yes. I could make like three more.

Star: Oh, I know. It is so much fun. So much fun.

Danielle: I chose awesome colors. Looks great.

Star: Oh, yeah, let's talk about colors. So I did white background with green polka dots. And what did you do?

Danielle: I did a white and yellow swirl.

Star: Awesome. I can't wait to see what they look like when they're cool and ready. And it's gonna be fantastic.

[*birds chirping, glass noises, music overlays*]

[*back to Robin, in studio*]

Danielle: Do you have a favorite piece that you've ever made?

Robin: Um, my most favorite piece that I've made is probably going to be the next one.