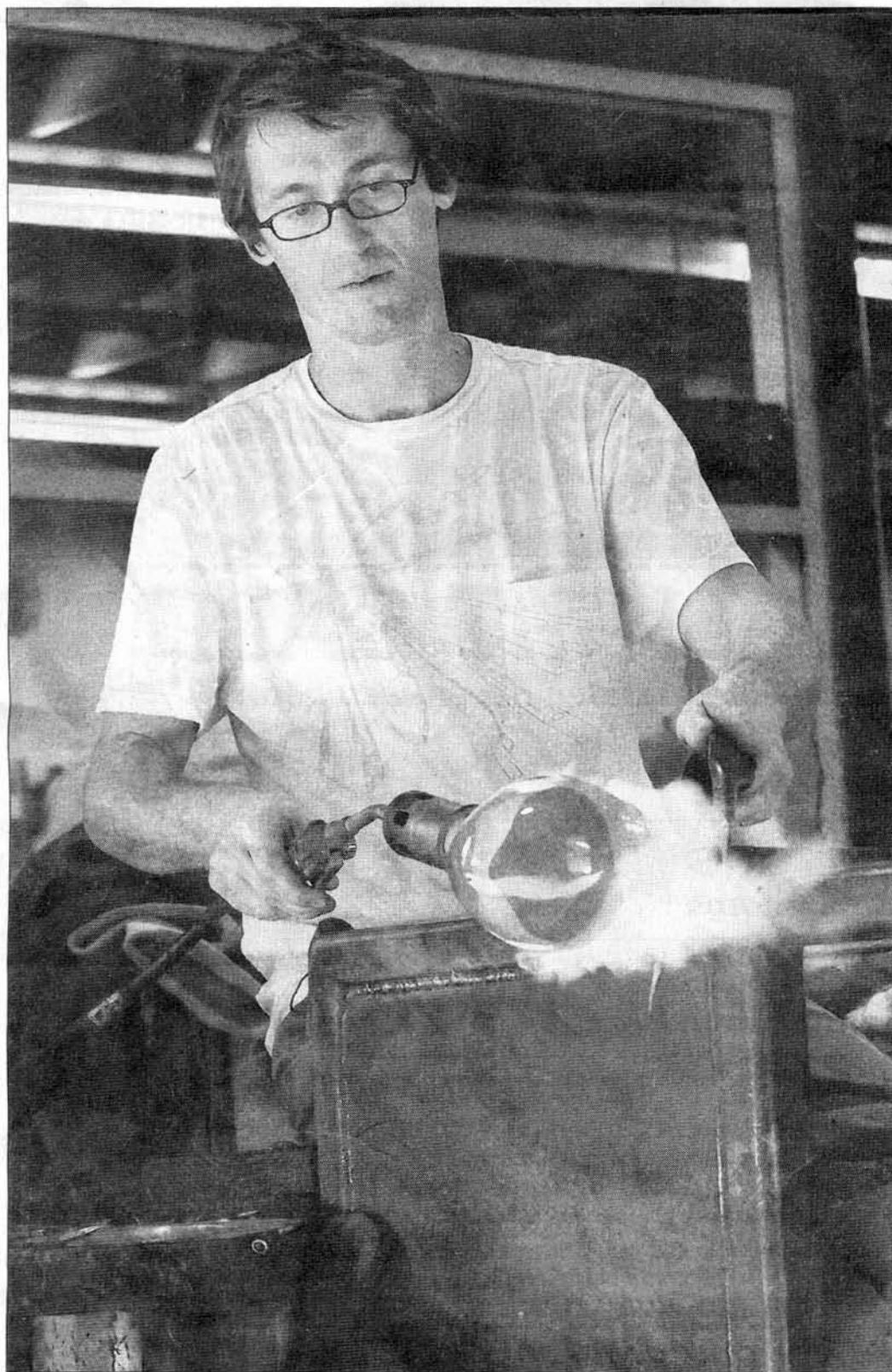


THE HOLIDAYS: 101 IDEAS

Handmade gifts fit for a first lady



Photographs by SACHI CUNNINGHAM Los Angeles Times

Glass-making artisan Caleb Siemon of Santa Ana found a client in Michelle Obama and her White House bees.

ZACHARY SLOBIG

Caleb Siemon peered into the gaping glow of the furnace and, with a few careful turns of his blowpipe, deftly gathered a fist-sized blob of molten glass, just as he has thousands of times. His hands, as leathery and cracked as a sunbaked saddle from 10 years of professional glass-blowing, work the pipe back and forth, over a smooth steel surface, massaging the 2,000-degree glass into one of his coveted pieces.

"We make vessels every day, and I oftentimes wonder where they are all going," he said in a moment of reflection at his Santa Ana studio. "Hopefully, they have all found happy homes."

Happy homes all over the world, as one recent order confirmed. It started with an unusual phone call from the Office of the Chief of Protocol at the U.S. State Department. A representative had seen Siemon's work on display at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery in Washington, D.C., and was looking for distinctive gifts for foreign dignitaries.

Siemon sent some images and went back to his furnace. The State Department soon got back in touch to say "Michelle" was quite pleased with the work.

"I thought, 'Wait a minute, you're not talking about Michelle Obama?'" he said. "I was almost speechless. The fact that the first lady was looking at images of my vessels — it was really a neat moment for me."

The Obamas gave Siemon's glass to heads of state during the couple's first trip to Europe last spring.

"I don't know who they were given to," he said. "Those are the kind of specifics that I



December sale

60 Caleb Siemon's United Glass Blowing studio is having its 10th annual sale this month. Test designs, samples, seconds, ornaments and pieces that are not part of the studio's current collections are discounted up to 70%. Glass-blowing demonstrations will be held too. Hours are noon to 8 p.m. Friday, noon to 4 p.m. Dec. 12 and 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. Dec. 19 at 3501 W. Segerstrom Ave., Santa Ana. Information: (888) 578-9504, www.calebsiemon.com.

latimes.com/home

Video: From torch to table

Times videographer Sachi Cunningham goes behind the scenes of Caleb Siemon's Orange County studio.

didn't push and they didn't reveal, and I was just honored."

A couple of months later, the State Department called again with another request. It wanted a batch of handblown honey pots.

"The first lady has been keeping bees, apparently, in the White House garden," Siemon said. "It was getting close to harvest time, and they were looking for some unique containers."

Glass pulled from the furnace looks and moves much like honey. Even the color, still glowing from the heat, is similar, Siemon said. He designed a simple, elegant vessel that showcased both the material and its contents. "We were inspired by the way the honey flows and the way the glass flows," he said.

The White House honey pots were part of a tea set that Michelle Obama gave to the other first ladies at the G-20 summit in Pittsburgh in September. When State Department officials called Siemon's design the FLOTUS gift, he wondered, "Should I know what that means?" Only later did he learn the Beltway acronym for the First Lady of the United States.

Larry Schaffer, owner of the L.A. design store OK on 3rd Street, has long sold Siemon's glass. Schaffer sees the artist as part of a new generation of Americans with a respect for traditional technique.

"So much of the craft movement is wacky teapots and feathered masks and horrible stuff, and yet there are these people like Caleb who are really honing in and have a refined sophistication," he said. "Caleb is looking back toward the more tight, more beautiful glass, not just letting glass do what it's going to do. He has learned this range of techniques and combines them in a unique and personal way."

Siemon found his calling at a summer art camp during high school, majored in glass at the Rhode Island School of Design and later threw himself into a two-year apprenticeship with Pino Signoretto, an Italian master on the island of Murano.

He considers his exchanges with the White House to be one of the high points of his career.

"As a craftsman, the ultimate compliment is if your craft can represent your country," he said. "There's no plans of visiting the White House," he said. "But I do want to taste that honey."

home@latimes.com