

# FINE ART VS. DECORATIVE ART?

## MAINE AND NEW HAMPSHIRE ARTISANS JOIN THE DEBATE

There often is a distinction drawn between “decorative art” and “fine art.” Decorative art, such as ceramics, furniture, jewelry and textiles, is meant to be beautiful as well as useful, whereas fine art – including paintings, sculpture, drawings, watercolor, graphics, and architecture – is considered to be created for aesthetic purposes and judged for its beauty and meaningfulness.

Wherever you fall on the spectrum of your definition, my opinion is that fine art is in the eye of the beholder. Artwork that engages and excites the viewer – that entertains

an “emotional touch point,” that “speaks to me,” is my fine art. We’re all entitled to our opinions.

I also believe art – notice I didn’t specify “fine” or “decorative” – hinges definitively on the creative process. If the artist or artisan grows, refines and fuels their passion for their art and craft, then that’s their expression of art. And even more importantly, I’m sure it’s not bestowed upon me to answer the age-old question about what’s fine art and what isn’t. I’ve studied art history in the past and it appears difficult to historically ascertain

what is going to be great on a historic scale and what isn’t. Heated battles ensued, for example, over whether the Impressionists were creating fine art ...

The good news is no matter what is being created there are those who believe artists and artisans work is fine art. So, along those lines, here is a group of artisans who probably fall into the “decorative art” definition, but who’s, in my opinion, creativity and final expression of their work falls into “fine art.” You decide.

A handful of artisans whose studios and homes are in Northern New England are featured below. The variety of work produced is endless. The subject might be canvas cloths for floor or wall coverings, fused glass, finely carved corbels, wrought iron metalwork, ceramic tile, woodworking furniture pieces, mosaics and stained glass windows and the list goes on.

Artisan Annette Kearney, based in Portland, Maine, was well-known for her colorful Matisse-inspired majolica tiles and mosaics. Her business thrived as she worked with designers, architects and home owners across the country creating custom shower tiles and back splashes.

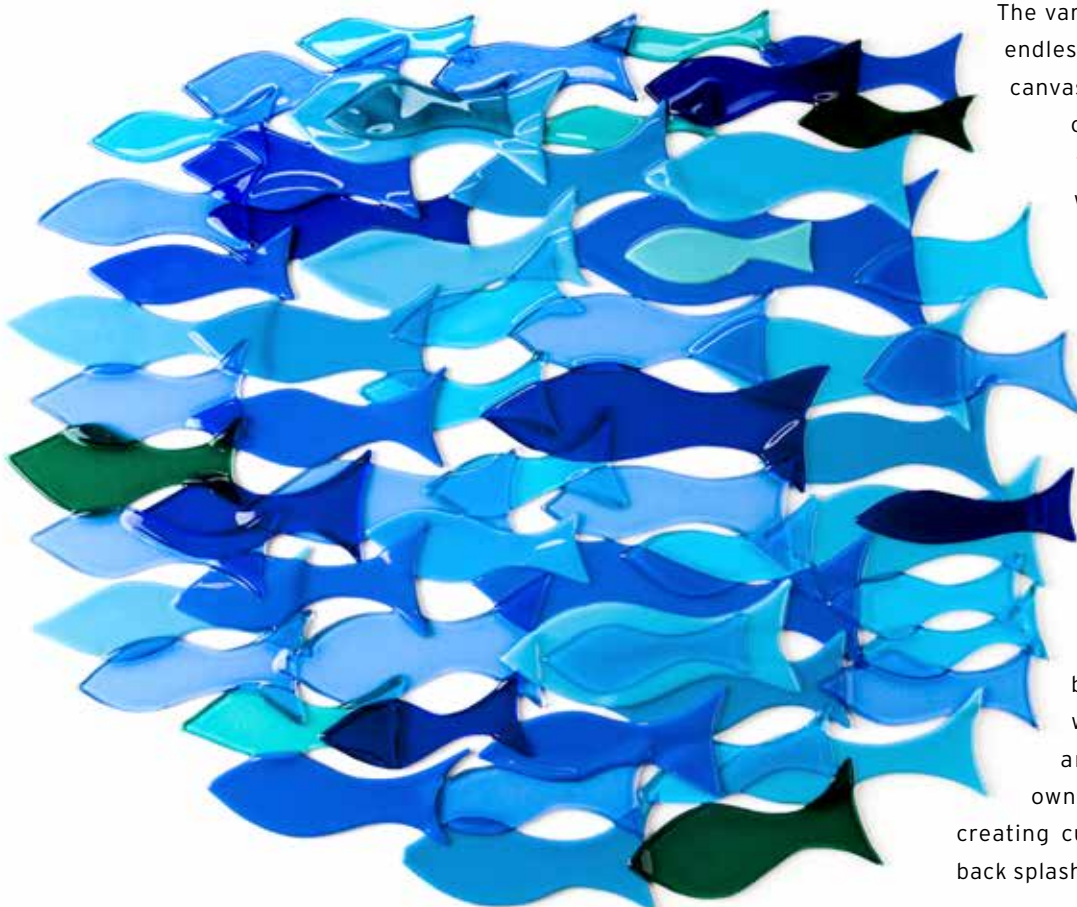
### BUSINESS

**DON FELIX**

**ELLEN FISHER**

**WENDY HAMMER**

**ANNETTE KEARNEY**



Ellen Fisher, *Swimming Toward Wellness*, 2012, fused glass, Karosis Fisher Glass.

But after the 2008 recession hit, her work took a different direction. Her longtime fascination with fused glass and the convenience of a kiln in her studio took her excitement of making glass into painterly, abstract, free-standing panels and her craft in a new direction. The coalescence of life circumstances and creative opportunities served as the incentive for Kearney to study the science of fused glass. The magical experience of working in three layers, cutting and collaging the glass, firing it and then 18 hours hence unveiling a brilliant shimmering glass panel emerging from the fire has since fueled her creative juices for many years.

"A good artist," she said, "must be a good craftsman, and a good craftsman must be a good artist."

A New Hampshire seacoast resident, Wendy Hammer, uses mixed media such as metal, glass and stone. She creates



home décor items based on organic forms and materials: utilitarian objects for entertaining and everyday use along with outside installations. Hammer is also highly recognized for her jewelry line. Her skills are diverse with a broad knowledge of metalsmithing and stone-setting techniques – all of which translate into organic renditions of elegant candle sticks, jewelry and many one-of-a-kind creations.

Much of her inspiration comes from the New England landscape. Her lifelong connection with art – its history, design and creation – has evolved into her passion for metalsmithing. She uses various found pieces along with the techniques of gold and silversmithing, glass flame working and bronze casting.

Like most artisans who carry the spark of creativity and excitement about their craft for decades, Hammer challenges herself with new materials and techniques. As long as she is creating, she said, she is learning. And that's the key to her sustained passion for her work. She combines materials and she fabricates by means of casting, soldering, piercing, forging and cold working. Hammer's wish is that her art conveys an ever-evolving relationship with the environment. Her hope is that it translates as simple, undisturbed and graceful.

Hammer has wrestled with the "artist vs. artisan" argument and said, "My works evokes strong connections with my customers. In that manner, I am an artisan in that what I make sits in one's home to fulfill a purpose." She creates with the purpose of functionality and the desire to adorn interiors.

A craftsperson of a different ilk, Don Felix, is a coppersmith who has his studio – well, a well-appointed garage he's taken over for his work-

ABOVE: Wendy Hammer, *Vessels*, bronze, stone.

BELOW: Wendy Hammer, *Candelabra*, bronze, wood, stone, glass.



space – in New Hampshire on the Massachusetts border. As a young man of 15, he began to help out as an apprentice in a friend’s family weathervane business many decades ago. As time went on, he wanted more of a challenge than using pre-cast molds, so he experimented with handmade weathervanes and sculptures.

Felix’s love of nature and wildlife eventually took him in the direction of shaping animals, grasses, birds of prey and ocean mammals. His reputation expanded over time and he began getting requests to reproduce antique weathervanes which had worn down over the years and needed replacement. He’s designed and crafted a Fordson tractor,

a Wright Brothers airplane, trains, a hotrod, a schooner and one of his favorite pieces: a replacement for a fire station in Indiana of a horse-drawn fire wagon.

A decades-old member of the prestigious League of New Hampshire Craftsmen, Felix finds the yearly fairs at Lake Sunapee, New Hampshire a golden opportunity to connect with customers and understand what they like, what they want and what sells.

Felix considers himself a fortunate man because he’s made a living with his art. But the artistry itself remains his primary motivation. He’s pleased that he has made a living creating weathervanes, sculptures and light sconces of lasting value and beauty, but leaving a legacy that bespeaks of his beloved New England is just as valuable to him.

Occupying the enviable geography overlooking the Cape Neddick River in York, Maine, Ellen Fisher’s studio feeds her soul with expanses of green meadows and a bright glint of the river in the distance. It is these surroundings, coupled with her love of the outdoors and the seacoast, which serve as a perpetual catalyst of inspiration for the pieces of colorful, decorative and functional fused-glass pieces she creates.

Her travels, experiences and time spent living in various stimulating locations – especially the Grenadines – have years later become a springboard for Fisher’s designs. Her work tends to cross the line between functional and decorative art. Her Bequia bowls add a splash of energy and pop of color to the table as the Caribbean Sea and sky colors soothe our souls, while her “Nubble Frost” series of rectangular dishes mimic the steely blue-gray or aqua of the distant water or the vivid red of a sunset.

Less functional is a school-of-fish sculpture in bright blues and greens that mounts on the wall – or better yet – on a window, so natural light streams through. Her works in a myriad of shapes, colors and designs of hand-cut glass have helped her to stay the course as she faces life’s challenges.

Her work – as do the works of other artists and artisans mentioned in this piece – borrows from both “fine” and “decorative” art definitions.

However you may feel about this discussion, don’t miss out in exploring the vast beauty of art that’s out there, regardless of how you might define it.

**| Linda Chestney**

Annette Kearney, *Sunset*, fused glass panel, 2014.

