Art is always evolving, changed by the artists who create it; art can display an artist’s understanding as well as the unique influences in their lives. Nearly every artist is influenced by his or her own culture and history. It is also very common for art work to represent an individual’s interpretation of world history and culture. Renowned artists such as Fritz Dreisbach, Richard Lalonde, Paul and Dante Marioni, Martin Oliver, and Catharine Thompson all take inspiration from various world cultures and histories when creating their art.

Paul Marioni (b. 1941, Cincinnati, OH) is a well-known glass artist for whom culture and human nature have been an important influence; they have a strong presence in his work. Moreover, he has often referred to his great inspiration in interviews and articles. In a series by Marioni that depicts tribal face paint and human adornment, he starts by heating the glass, he then takes a small amount of molten glass and places it into metal molds in the shape of faces. After the glass has taken the shape of the faces, Marioni blows through the blowpipe expanding the glass to the desired size. Even though his art pieces are not in the realist style, the influence of human nature is evident in his work. Marioni’s art is known for portraying distinctive interpretations from several world cultures. Marioni’s art plays with the concept of human nature, but he is always very careful to refrain from including too much of his own opinion in the imagery. He believes that the theme should be neutral enough that the viewer would always derive their own interpretation from the piece. While Paul Marioni’s work focuses on human nature, his son Dante Marioni focuses on more historic representations.

Dante Marioni (b. 1964, Mill Valley, CA) is greatly influenced by Mediterranean culture. He was introduced into the art of glass blowing at the age of nine by his father and trained in the centuries-old style of Venetian glassblowing with some of the masters of contemporary glass art. Marioni’s Mediterranean inspiration is evident in a majority of his art. Kylix, for example, is clearly inspired by ancient Greek and Roman pottery. The piece is an interpretation of a wine vessel that was used by ancient Greek higher classes. Marioni’s work conveys a personal representation of his cultural and historic inspirations. Inspired by ancient cultures and their artworks, Marioni adds his own style by elongating aspects such as the necks of his vases. He does this to push the limits of form and the limits of the medium.

Both artists’ renditions of their cultural inspirations attest to the idea that many artists’ work is created with certain cultural or historic references aspects in mind. Paul and Dante Marioni are two artists in the WSU Museum of Art collection that represent different styles of interpretation of world history and culture.
Gravity pulls everything. It is one of the most widespread occurrences in the universe and it has a profound effect on many artists’ work. As these artists combat the forces of gravity, nature is represented by many forms, including life. For eight artists in particular, process is unmistakably the most important aspect of forming a finished piece. While pioneering glass art for decades these contemporary masters have pressed, pulled, painted, and twisted their molten materials into natural forms. Among many artists bringing their exceptional work to the WSU Museum of Art’s collection are: Dale Chihuly, John DeWitt, Joey Kirkpatrick, Flora Mace, Flo Perkins, Ginny Ruffner, Alex Sisler, and Bertil Vallien.

Dale Chihuly (b. 1941, Tacoma, WA) has led the Pacific Northwest with his fundamental and expressive glass works. Chihuly comments on his Baskets series, “You begin to form glass with fire, with gravity, with heat with centrifugal force.” Inspired by the baskets of Northwest Indians he began to play with these forces and had a creative breakthrough. Through ongoing experimentation, the Baskets evolved into the Seaforms; a series that Chihuly said could become an endless body of work. During the process of making his Baskets glass is removed from furnaces and spun about allowing for flaring or sagging; with a Seaforms glass is removed from the furnace and blown into a ribbed mold before it spins wildly into a new form. The molten glass takes on new forms, drawing the eye in every direction with flowing and crossing lines. Where would glass art be in America and internationally, without the mind of Chihuly and his pursuit of gravity and fire?

However, some artists choose to fight the influence of gravity in whatever way they can. Two minds and two pairs of hands are often better than one. Flora Mace (b. 1949, Exeter, NH) and Joey Kirkpatrick (b. 1952, Des Moines, IA) have used this to their advantage for decades to create a vast body of collaborative work. With a desire to paint in three dimensions the Fruit series was born, creating small and large blown glass sculptures. Mace and Kirkpatrick’s Fruit Still Life is an appreciation of the visual qualities of life around us. As each fruit is blown with a team of four people, fine crushed glass powders are applied to create various textures and tonalities. Their work pushes the definition of “painting,” as no traditional paints are utilized in their fruits. Such realistic renderings are unique to these masters; continually captivated by nature – from trees, to birds, to tasty food – life is their ultimate inspiration.

Nature is the most bountiful source of inspiration. Gravity has pulled it all together. Those that understand it and truly grasp it in their hands command it, yet others oppose its will. Glass comes from the Earth, solid and bland and transformed by artists into objects of light. Chihuly’s Baskets are influenced by Native Americans, cultures one with the Earth; while Kirkpatrick and Mace represent life born from the Earth. Without these creative minds working their materials tirelessly, never willing to give up the glow of fire and the beauty of glass, the WSU Museum of Art’s collection would not be possible.

Abstraction is a large umbrella under which numerous artists fit. These artists have diverse styles, processes and meanings behind their work. Since the turn of the 20th century, artist’s explorations of self-expression through abstraction have contributed to art movements, in particular: Constructivism, Minimalism, and Abstract Expressionism. Many glass artists in the Museum of Art further these movements while bringing their own ideas to the mix. Susan Glass, Peter Houk, Steven Rolfe Powell, Richard Royal, Anna Skibska, and Toots Zynsky create glass art that use color, movement and shapes to visually communicate their individual message to viewers.

Often abstract forms speak to the personal metaphors or areas of personal interest developed during an artist’s lifetime. “When I hear music, it translates into color.” The process of giving the vessels movement – like music – makes it dance. Toots Zynsky (b. 1951, Boston, MA) lays glass threads in a rhythmic pattern then heats them in a kiln. They fuse together and she bends them into vessels to give movement.

The rhythm of her pieces appear like songs that make you feel what she felt; just like a song. The repetition of bands of color make the glass dance and move as it sits on a surface. She uses these colors to show emotions and exposes them to viewers. Her sculptural glass vessels need to be experienced from all sides to be taken in their entirety.

While Zynsky is inspired by music and color, Richard Royal (b. 1952, Bremerton, WA) concerns himself on personal metaphors and relationships. His glass sculptures vary in form. Many of his works highlight two-colored elements that join in the middle. This visually expresses the powers of personal bonds. The works of Zynsky and Royal offer two examples conveying two distinct approaches and concerns. Each of the artist represented by this theme, however, explores personal motives for creating abstract works of glass art.

Artists use different materials to reach the shared goal of self-expression. While some are intrigued by the natural world, others are inspired by raw human emotion and seek to express these interests through material combinations of glass and stone or metal. Sonja Blomdahl, Jeff Crandall, Michael Angelo Menconi and Lino Tagliapietra all address form, shape and a combination of media in different ways.

Integrating the written words to the fragility of glass and the arcane strength of stone is uncommon in glass art. However, the written word is central to and a source of inspiration in Jeff Crandall’s work (1951, Boston, MA). Not only does he include lines of poetry in his Orbs of Influence series, but he also mounts the orbs on large slabs of stone, thus combining media to creatively entwine his love of poetry and the natural world.

Conversely, Sonja Blomdahl (1952, Waltham, MA) concentrates on the form of an object. Her vessels embrace the visual power of color, light and the relationships they have with the elements by which they were made. Her work explores the duality of emptiness and containment; the ability of an object to simultaneously hold and to be empty. Crandall and Blomdahl are two examples of approaches used by artists to explore the power of form, shape and relationships in the medium of glass.