

Barbara Lewis – Torch-fired Enamel

By Brian Lynch

This is another in a series of interviews with Historic Kenwood artists as part of highlighting our “Neighborhood of the Arts” and our soon to be Artist Enclave.

How did you get started in your craft? (Using your media?)

I have a degree in ceramics and had been working as a potter for 15 years when I had two surgeries for a rotator cuff injury. During the period I was rehabbing my shoulder, I began making ceramic beads for my own jewelry and for jewelry designers. I began to notice something called “torch-fired enamel.” It reminded me of my pottery – it was very organic. I started looking for a place to learn and found Joe Spencer in Safety Harbor, FL. This was the beginning of an amazing journey.

What is your “method”?

The immersion process of torch-firing eliminates many of the steps associated with other forms of kiln firing and torch firing. A bead or pendant that would take 45 minutes to enamel using convention methods, takes a minute or two using the immersion process.



How has your work developed through the years?

My ceramics background has greatly influenced how I approach torch firing enamel. I’ve applied my understanding of firing gas kilns to firing a gas torch. Controlled over-firing and adjustments

to the oxygen level of the torch have become my trademarks. I am continuing to explore surface decoration through the use of decals, watercolor enamels, and enamel marking pens.

What would you call your style?

Rustic-romantic

What are the best and worst things about being an artist?

As an artist, we have a need to create. It's not a choice, really, but an undeniable desire. Being able to express yourself creatively is a gift. As far as the worse things, those things would have to include the business aspects of being an artist, such as pricing your work, marketing, and recordkeeping.

What has been inspiring/influencing your work lately?

I love to play in the studio, where there's no judgment and no intention to produce. This exploration leads to "happy accidents" that I incorporate into my work.



Who are your favorite artists in your field?

I love the work of Anne Havel, Deborah Lozier, and Maria Phillips.

What is your favorite customer quote or story?

Teaching is one of my favorite things to do. I had a married couple take one of my workshops. In walked this behemoth of a guy with a long ponytail wearing a Harley jacket. He looked like he had just walked off the set of the "Sons of Anarchy." During the workshop he made the most delicate pairs of earrings for his two daughters for Christmas, which is not an easy thing to do because it requires matching pieces. He was a delightful guy, a gentle soul. It taught me a valuable lesson about preconceived notions!

What is your favorite piece of art or fine craft that you own?

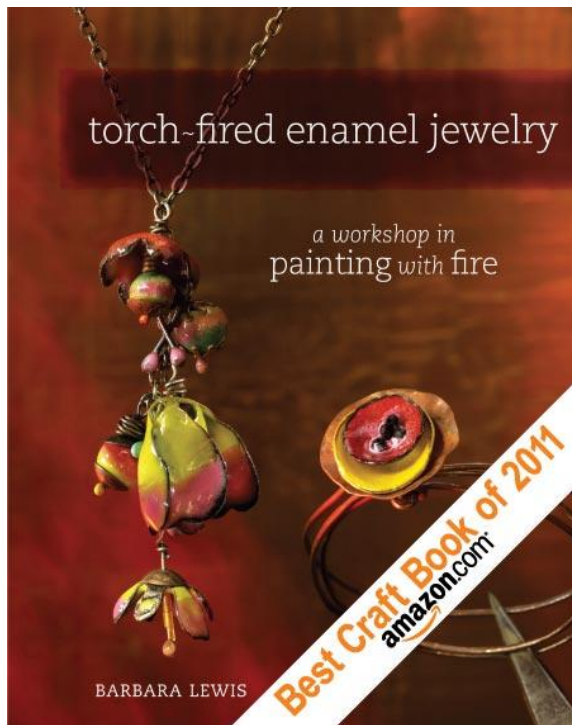
It would have to be a small slab plate by Mary Bowron. It's a simple plate, but the color of the clay with the pooling of the celadon glaze and fly ash created from the wood firing makes it very lovely. Mary's studio is an artwork in and of itself with cypress walls and flooring.

What advice do you have for aspiring artists?

Try to stay true to your aesthetic. The work is very process-oriented. It's not like you can reread the chapter again and be smarter or more ready. You have to enjoy the process or you'll make yourself miserable. Try to look at your work through the eyes of an innocent. Do not judge your work – just do it!

The Painting with Fire Studio is located in the Grand Central District at 2428 Central Avenue, St. Petersburg, FL 33712, where we teach the immersion process of torch firing enamel in our state-of-the-art working studio. You'll also find metalworking and jewelry-making tools and supplies, finished beads for jewelry designers, and some unique handmade jewelry, including our *Just Sayin'* jewelry with quirky and modern expressions, like *OMG!*, *LOL!*, and *Oh, no she didn't!* Hours: Monday-Saturday 10 am-6 pm, (727) 498-6409, email:

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