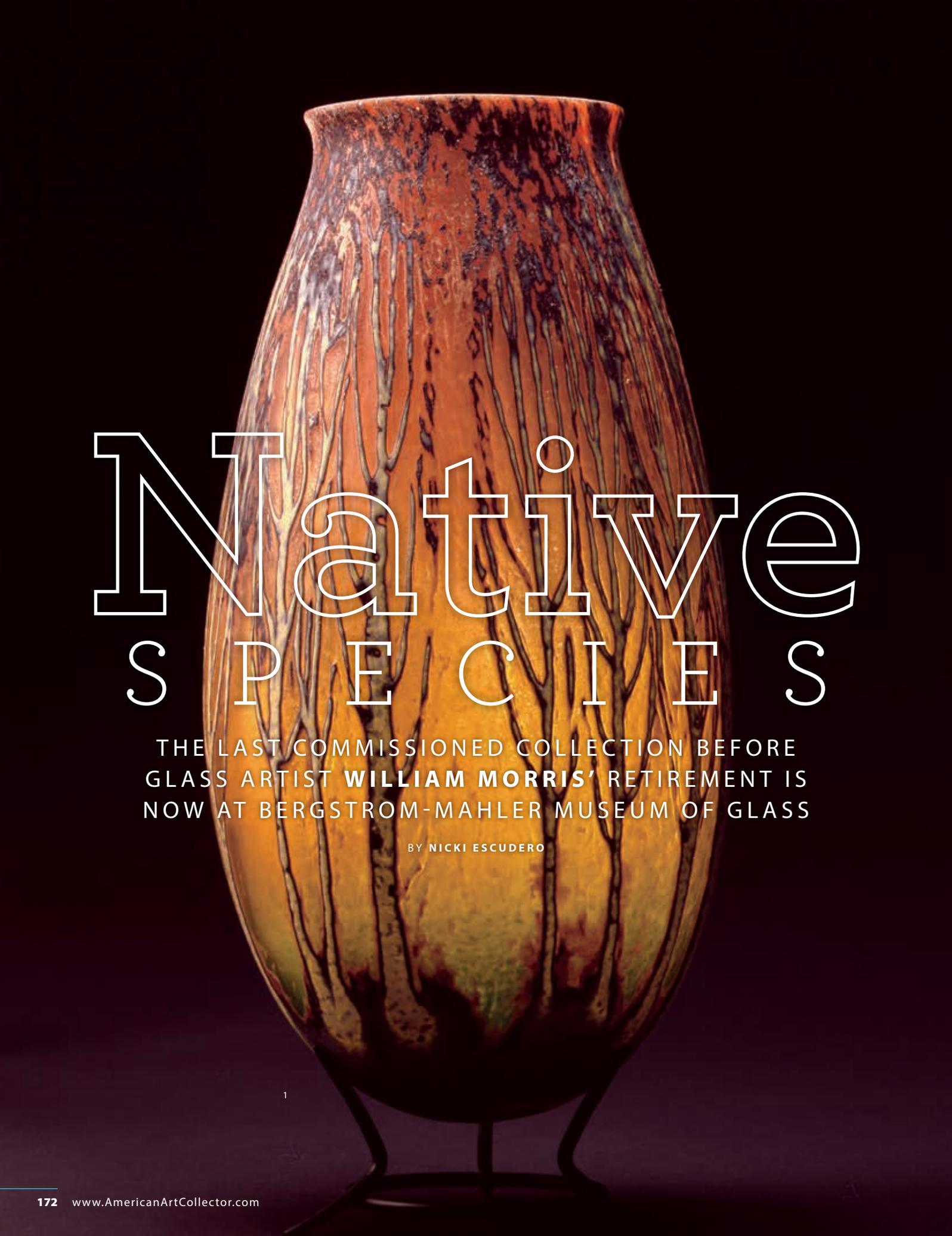


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 AMERICAN
art
COLLECTOR



*Also Showcasing
Glass, Ceramics & Wood*



Native

SPECIES

THE LAST COMMISSIONED COLLECTION BEFORE
GLASS ARTIST **WILLIAM MORRIS'** RETIREMENT IS
NOW AT BERGSTROM-MAHLER MUSEUM OF GLASS

BY NICKI ESCUDERO



1
Native Species: Vase with Poplar Tree Grove, 2004.
Glass, 15 x 7½ x 7½"

2
Native Species: Long-necked Vase with Wrens and Berries, 2004.
Glass, 10¼ x 8½ x 7½"

For more than 25 years, William Morris spent his time in front of the fire, as a pioneer of the glassblowing movement, founding his own studio after working with legend Dale Chihuly. His work is found in museums around the world, from the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art in Japan to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. He's considered by many to be one of the best American glass artists, yet in 2007, he said goodbye to the facilities, resources and infrastructure the art form demanded and is now enjoying a life of surfing, spearfishing and carving stone and wood on the shores of Hawaii.

"I'm very happy in my life here," says Morris, 57. "It's pretty isolated here, and I kind of like it. It's a very different life, a lot simpler, a lot less impact."

Morris continues his maker lifestyle, donating carvings to nonprofits or giving them away. A lifetime nature lover, he says he wanted to be near the ocean, and while he greatly enjoyed his glass work, it was time for a change.

Morris' legacy continues to live on in the nearly dozen galleries who continue to represent his art, and through the last major body of work he created before retiring, a collection commissioned by collector George

Stroemple in 2004. The collection, titled *Native Species*, is currently at the Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass in Neenah, Wisconsin, and is a 38-piece assortment inspired by nature, with influences from oriental ceramics and Japanese pottery.

Stroemple's initial interaction with Morris, whom he refers to as Billy, was a meaningful one, as he was introduced to Morris while Morris was the head gaffer for Chihuly in the early '90s, when Stroemple was acquiring Chihuly work for his collection. When Morris had his first exhibition, Stroemple visited Morris' home in Stanwood, Washington.

"The story goes that William's sculptures were laid out in an old barn, and when George walked in, the sunlight was streaming in through the spaces between the barn siding," says Linda Tesner, curator of the traveling *Native Species* collection and exhibition catalog, and director of the Hoffman Gallery of Contemporary Art at Lewis & Clark College in Portland, Oregon. "George knew William had a unique vision, and he was interested in his career from the start."

Stroemple acquired Morris' installation *Cache* and commissioned the first piece from Morris' *Canopic Jar* series—one work from the series fetched nearly \$300,000 in a 2013 Bonhams auction. After spending time devising the theme and researching source material for the *Native Species* collection, Stroemple discussed the collection with Morris a year before he began working on it.

Both Morris and Stroemple reflect on the creation process for the *Native Species* collection fondly, as it involved motorcycle rides and hanging out at Stroemple's eastern Oregon home, with trips to Steens Mountain and the Cascade Range. Morris said he would hardly do commission work for anyone else because of the preconceptions of how collectors wanted work to look, but Stroemple always showed enthusiasm for how the final product would manifest.

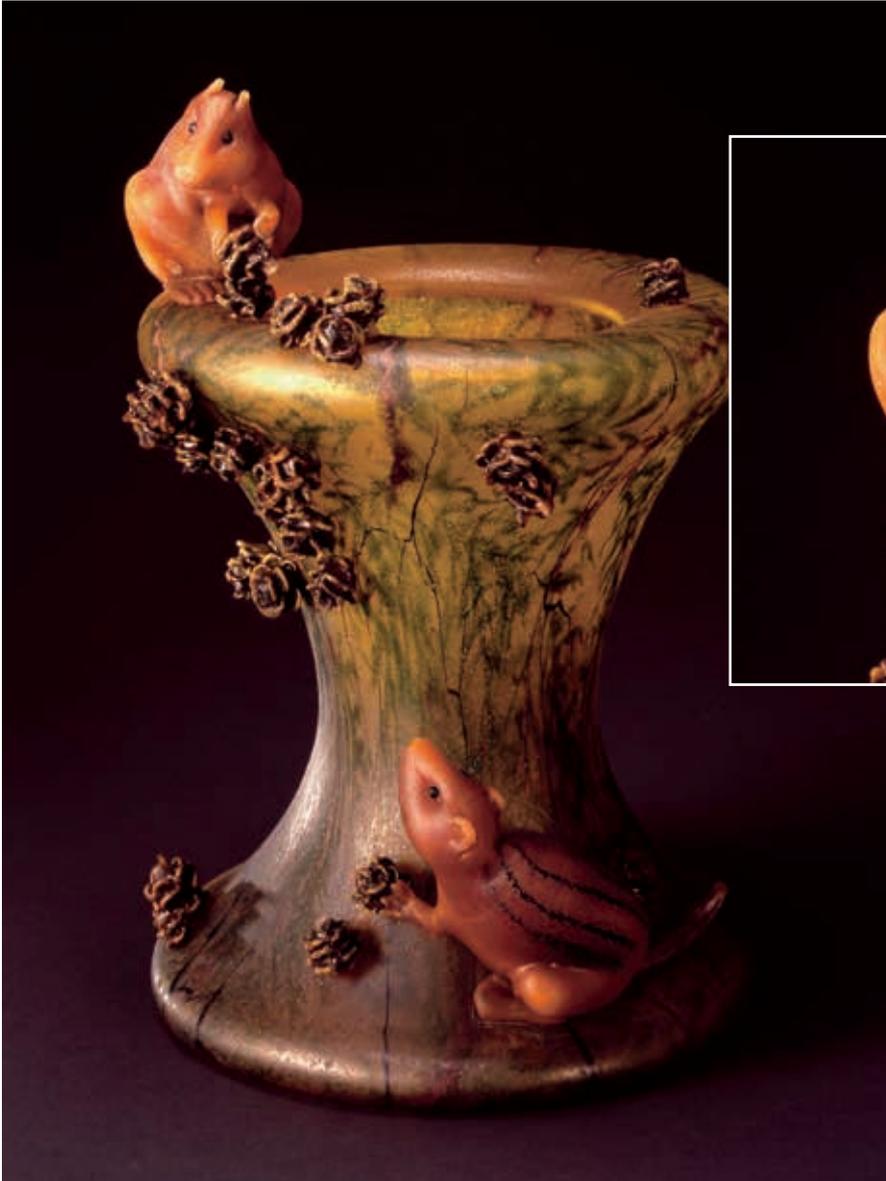
"I had had enough experience with



3 William Morris creating work for the *Native Species* collection. Photo by William Wright.

4 George Stroemple, left, watches William Morris, right, create glass art for the *Native Species* collection. Photo by William Wright.





5
Native Species: Vase with Cedar Boughs and Golden-mantled Ground Squirrels, 2004. Glass, 14¾ x 10¼ x 9⅝"



5

commissioning artists that I knew whenever you collaborate with an artist on ideas, you envision something in your head about what the final work will look like," says Stroemple. "And, of course, every time, the artist comes up with work that bears little resemblance to whatever I might have thought up. This is one of the compelling things about a commission, that the artist takes your ideas and interprets them in his or her own way. In the case of *Native Species*, the results were better than anything I ever imagined."

Stroemple says whenever he enters a commission or acquires a major series, as he has with Chihuly and fellow glass makers Lino Tagliapietra, Vittorio Costantini, and James Mongrain, he always tells the artist part of his commitment to them is to allow the work to be shown, to help the artist's career. Bergstrom-Mahler is the seventh museum to temporarily house the *Native Species* collection, something the museum is pleased to bring to the public.

"This exhibition links beautiful art and the vision of the artist, exposing us to what someone gains by immersing themselves in nature," says Jan Miranda Smith, executive director of Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass, "and then uses that imagery to transform the experience into the realm of a universal connection."

The collection is notable for the incredibly innovative aspects of glass art made by Morris, including hot sculpting and scavo surfaces, Tesner says, as well as the obviating of qualities most people associate with glass—sparkle, shine and saturated

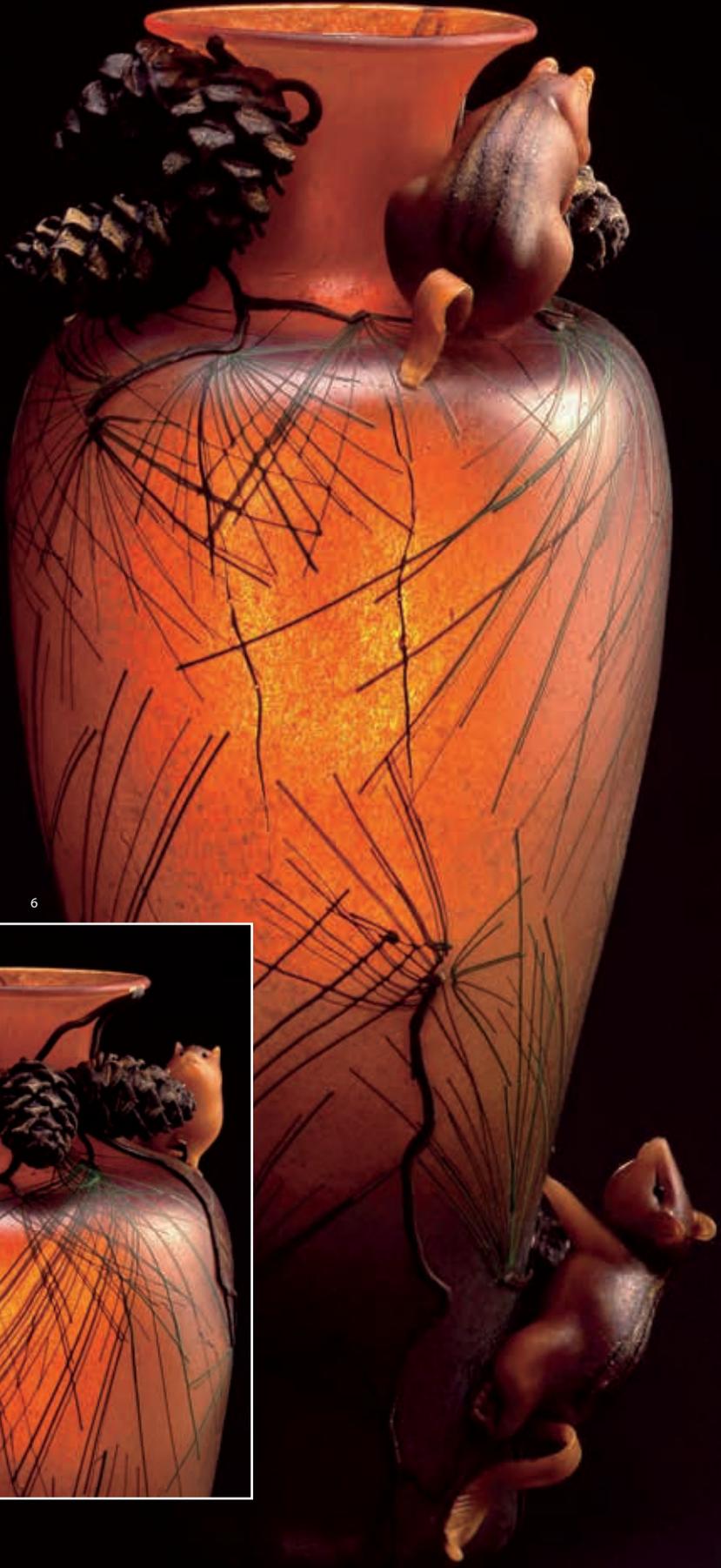


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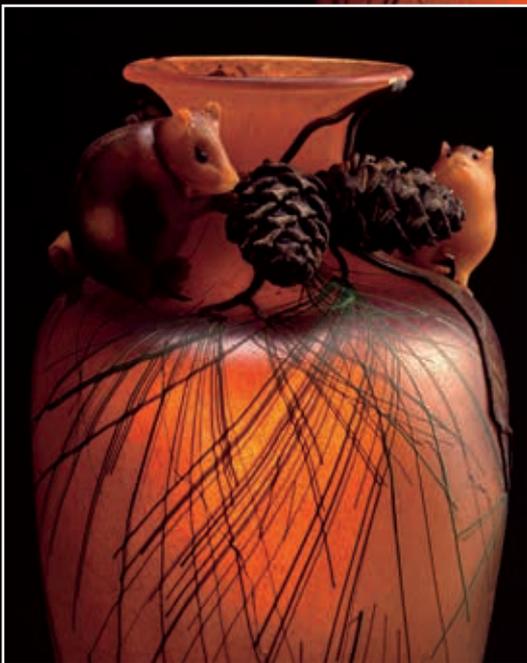
6
*Native Species: Vase with
Ponderosa Pine Needles
and Golden-mantled
Ground Squirrels, 2004.*
Glass, 23¾ x 10¾ x 10"

7
*Native Species: Vessel
with Cedar Boughs and
Cedar Cones, 2004.* Glass,
7⅞ x 9⅞ x 9⅞"

All works are from the
George R. Stroemple
Collection. A Stroemple/
Stirek Collaboration.



6





7

colors—in order to create the feeling his work might be archaeological artifacts. It is qualities such as these that make Jonathan Wood, owner of Abmeyer + Wood Fine Art in Seattle, proud to carry Morris' work.

"While William Morris' ability to sculpt glass is inimitable, much of the power of his work comes from his ability to orchestrate mystery," says Wood. "Often feeling as if unearthed from the archaeological record, there is a primal and intrinsic quality in his sculpture that pulls from a common thread of humanity. By tapping into this collective unconsciousness and attempting to create new objects inspired by specific cultures, places or epochs, Morris harnesses a universal energy that draws you in."

Another gallery owner carrying Morris' work, Lewis Wexler of Wexler Gallery, calls Morris one of the greatest living American artists in the field of contemporary glass, and says Morris' skill

as a glassblower is unparalleled.

"He is able to create glass sculptures that capture the very essence of the natural world and the indigenous civilizations that have inhabited it," says Wexler. "Since his retirement, many of these pieces have entered the secondary market and have retained their value—a true testament that his work continues to appeal to established collectors and those just beginning to collect contemporary glass. I am certain that, in the future, the desirability of collecting Morris' work will only continue to grow."

While Morris admits he "kind of dropped off the face of the earth" since his retirement at the age of 50, he still hopes viewers of his work, including the *Native Species* collection, are interested in it, enjoy it and are surprised by it. He calls nature "the one truth" and says the collection was a thoughtful exploration of his, and Stroemple's, passion.

"With anything, you always want it to resonate in a pure sense," Morris says. "If

it helps people observe and see the world and appreciate the preciousness of nature and the world we live in, it's something to be recognized and valued and respected."

And for those remotely interested in the glass medium, Stroemple says Morris' work is a must-see.

"Billy's contribution to glass art as sculpture—as opposed to vessel-making—represents a sea of change in the history of the studio glass movement," Stroemple says. "If one is interested in the history of studio glass, Billy's work represents a pinnacle of achievement." ●

WILLIAM MORRIS: NATIVE SPECIES

WHEN: Through September 6, 2015

WHERE: Bergstrom-Mahler Museum of Glass

165 N. Park Avenue, Neenah, WI 54956

INFORMATION: (920) 751-4658,

www.bergstrom-mahlermuseum.com