

Carpenter



**Enamel
Center**

NO. 4

***CARPENTER ENAMEL
CENTER***

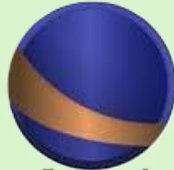
JUNE 2026

Monthly Newsletter

Carpenter Enamel Center – Newsletter No. 4

This month's newsletter is a very special one. We have the privilege of featuring a story written entirely by our very own Tom Ellis. In his own words, Tom shares the journey that shaped his life in enamel, the people who influenced him, and the community he continues to help build. It is an honor to bring his voice directly to you.

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EVERYBODY HAS A STORY BY TOM ELLIS



Here is part of mine. At 10 or 11 years old, my family went Christmas shopping at Rike's department store in Dayton, Ohio. I found a mass-produced cloisonne compact for my mother. It was a beautiful enameled daisy motif and only \$2 or \$3. I didn't know about enamel at the time but felt this object was special. That was my first run-in with enamel that I am aware of.



Finding My Path at the Folk School

Years later after high-school, I got a job at the John C. Campbell Folk School in Brasstown, NC in 1974. One project was to remodel a garage and laundry area into an enameling studio. Maggie and Gus Masters had been teaching enameling at the school beginning in the 1960s. They were members of the Southern Highlands Craft Guild. After we set up their equipment and materials they demonstrated a firing. I was hooked! They were looking for an apprentice and I began working with them in the evenings. Eventually they became directors of the school and gave me the title of 'resident enameler' managing the school's enamel studio. I developed a small line of jewelry and enameled giftware which was sold in the school's gift shop. This lasted eight years. My responsibilities were to maintain the studio, order supplies, and correspond with both guest instructors and students and to teach some of the workshops and assist guest instructors. I ordered enamel from Thompson Enamel when the Thompson family in Highland Park Illinois still owned and operated the company.



John C. Campbell Folk School



A Scholarship, a Workshop, and a Magazine

A good friend and mentor Lynn Gault who was a well-known potter and sometimes enameler paid for a full scholarship for me to attend Bill Helwig's lead-free enamel workshop sponsored by Ceramic Coating Company at Arrowmont School of Arts in Gatlinburg, TN in 1981.



Current "Masters Enameling Studio,"
John C. Campbell Folk School



Numbered Charter Subscriber Certificate

In the workshop, Bill told us about a new magazine, Glass on Metal, with himself as editor and Woodrow Carpenter as publisher. I became a charter subscriber.



A Job at Thompson Enamel

A few years later I had left the Folk School and was living in Wilmington, Ohio with family. I had a small enamel set-up and was auditing art classes at Wilmington College while driving a cab part time. I had continued subscribing to GOM and in 1984 an ad appeared saying there was an employment opportunity at Thompson Enamel for someone with experience in enameling. I called right away and an interview was scheduled.



Ceramic Coating Company

A couple weeks later, I went to Ceramic Coating Company in Wilder, Kentucky. I met Woodrow Carpenter, owner and ceramic engineer and Martin Hanson, division manager of Thompson Enamel who also was a ceramic engineer. After a twenty-minute conversation, Mr. Carpenter gave me the job on the spot. I thought I would be working with Bill Helwig but learned Bill had left the company. My job would consist of working on the magazine with Woodrow as well as being his assistant in product development and manufacturing.

That might sound impressive, but the reality was the making-by-hand many thousands of crayons, acrylic enamel paint colors, and many other products. Making crayons is no fun; hot wax pumps were always stopping up. It was difficult work, but I was making materials I enjoyed using.



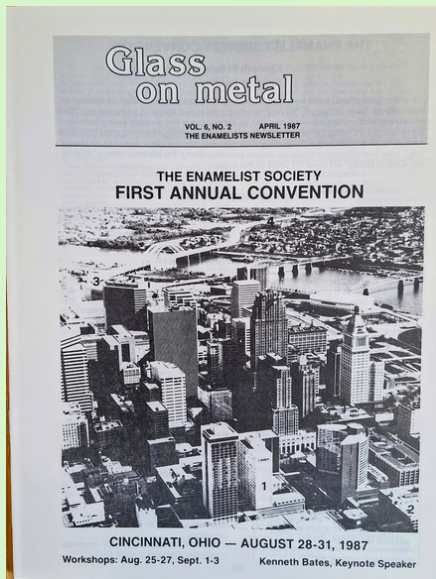
Tom:
Hands-On

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The Birth of the Enamelist Society



First Enamelist Society Convention
Announcement, 1987



Cincinnati Enquirer Sunday insert, 1989

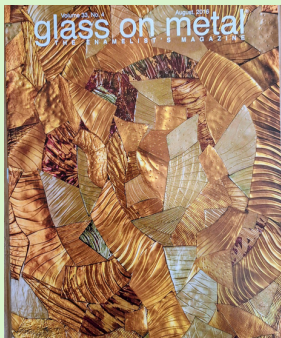
I also worked with Woodrow and Martin on the development of the non-profit Enamelist Society in 1986. This was Woodrow's idea of an extension of the magazine. We organized and held the first Enamelist Society Conference in 1987. It was one of the largest Enamelist Society conferences with around 220 participants from all over the US and many countries. There were student and member exhibitions, Woodrow Carpenter's Enamel Collection, an invitational exhibition at the Taft Museum, an international juried exhibition at the Sarah Squeri Gallery (170 pieces), and an educational display with books and enameled objects in the downtown branch of the Cincinnati Public Library. It was such an exciting and inspirational happening. I think people were so eager to meet and talk shop to other enamellers from diverse places that they would have been just as excited had we held the event in a barn!



A Life-Changing Illness



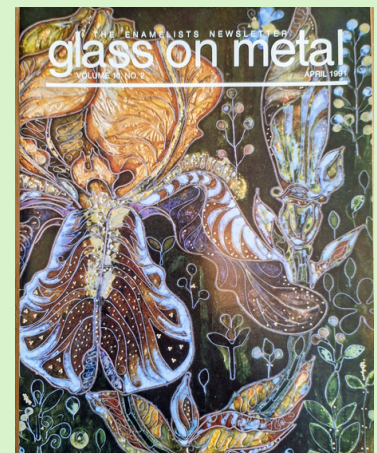
First issue
of Glass on
Metal,
January
1982



Last issue
of Glass on
Metal,
August
2016

In late December 1987, I came down with Guillian Barre Syndrome. After having had the flu, I had trouble with my legs giving way if I bent my knees. An emergency room visit and spinal tap led to being diagnosed with GBS. In a few days I became completely paralyzed from the neck down and partially from the neck up. I could move my eyes. I was on a respirator for two weeks until my lungs began working again. My stay in the hospital lasted four months. Woodrow Carpenter kept me on the payroll the entire time. I was very fortunate to eventually make close to a complete recovery regaining my ability to walk and talk.

During my recovery, there was a lot of time to think. I decided to write letters to my favorite enamel artists even though I did not know them. I would ask them if they would consider contributing articles or anything enamel related we could use in the magazine. I dictated the letters to my mother. One was to Margaret Seeler. I thought of her as an enamel rock star through her book 'The Art of Enameling'. She wrote back and said she too had spent time in the hospital recovering from heart surgery. She was very happy to contribute articles on enameling and her work. She ended up being one of our most generous contributing writers over the years until her death. She was a speaker at our 2nd Enamelist Society Conference in 1989.



Detail of enamel
wall art by
Margaret Seeler



Decades at Thompson

Working at Thompson became an education itself. This is my 42nd year. In the early 1990s, Bill Helwig came back to work at Thompson. I worked with Bill for 19 years and almost 30 years with Woodrow.



Continuous Smelter in operation at Thompson Enamel



Ohio Valley Enamel Guild

In the early 1990s, Woodrow Carpenter also founded a local enamel guild that began as the Cincinnati Enamel Guild but later was changed to the Ohio Valley Enamel Guild as members were from Northern Kentucky, the greater Cincinnati area and cities north of Cincinnati including Dayton, Ohio. This Guild has been well attended through many years and still going strong. There are always good programs on some aspect of enameling.



Presentation at Ohio Valley Enamel Guild (OVEC)

We meet the first Thursday of every month from 6:30–9:30 PM at CEC. The first meeting is free; membership is \$60 per year. We feel like a family, complete with a December potluck.



Travel, Teaching, and Family Connections

Working for Thompson I've had several opportunities to travel and promote the use of Thompson lead-free enamel. I have taught many workshops across the US and in Canada, Venezuela, Trinidad and Australia. I feel any enameler traveling should investigate whether there may be local enameling groups where you are going. Someone who represents an enameling group, guild, or school might be able to connect you with local enameling exhibitions, museums, or public art. For me, this made for a much more immersive experience.



Enamel Workshop Participants,
August 2019

There are two other members of my family who enamel. My older brother, Tim Ellis, makes the Floral Wafers that Thompson sells and his son, Scott Ellis, owns e-namels.com. Scott is a distributor for Thompson lead-free enamel and sells vintage Thompson and other brands of lead bearing enamel.



The Gift of Community



Cloisonné
Workshop
Piece

The most important gift I have received from being involved with enameling is all the incredible people I have met over the years through phone calls at Thompson; people who have taken workshops; all the enamellers, artists from other art forms, and educators who I have worked with through producing Glass on Metal; the people I have met at enamel conferences; and now online connections. Enamellers are a community I am grateful to be a part of. I have always felt that enameling is one of the good things in the world. With its ancient history, physical and metaphysical appeal, I am attracted to its colors, the ability to reflect light off precious metals, working with heat, glass and its inherent beauty.

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To the Present

I had both hips replaced this last year and am now starting to see the benefits and getting back to being mobile. Joanna Maehren, owner/manager of Thompson Enamel has been most accommodating giving me ample time to recover.

I am teaching in-person workshops at the Carpenter Enamel Center in Bellevue, KY and will be teaching an online workshop for Pocosin School of Arts in October 2026.



Visual Effects in
Enamel

-

Materials and
Procedures
Workshop



Looking Ahead

Preserving the world of enameling is work that extends far beyond storytelling. Woodrow Carpenter devoted his life to collecting, researching, and developing knowledge about the craft, and much of what he documented exists nowhere else. Today, safeguarding this irreplaceable material rests in the hands of a small group of dedicated volunteers who keep the museum and the Carpenter Enamel Center moving forward.

One of the most vibrant pieces of Woodrow's legacy lives on through Glass on Metal magazine. For decades, it served as the heartbeat of the enameling community, capturing techniques, artist profiles, innovations, and stories that enriched the field. These issues remain an invaluable resource for artists, collectors, and anyone curious about the craft. We are fortunate to have a limited number of original issues available for purchase. Once they're gone, they're gone. You can explore them [online](#) or in our museum store. Bringing one home not only gives you a rare piece of enameling history, it directly supports the preservation of Woodrow's legacy.

As we continue sharing the stories and connections that are part of the enameling world, we also want to speak about the work happening behind the scenes. The Carpenter Enamel Center is maintained by only a handful of volunteers who manage the museum, care for the collection, and keep our programs moving forward. Their dedication is remarkable, but the scale of the work requires broader support.

If you believe in the importance of preserving enameling's history and ensuring its future, we invite you to consider supporting the CEC this month. Your contribution directly strengthens the center at a time when community investment truly makes a difference.

You may make your contribution [here](#), or follow the link below:
<https://carpenterenamelcenter.org/donations>