

# Saara Gallin

## A Personal Appreciation

*By Ellen Mandelbaum*

Last week my friend Saara who is 92 said, “I’d still rather find out ‘what if’ rather than write about myself.” What did she mean, “What if?” and if I could save her the time and write about her, “why not?” Here it is:

What if? her whole journey in stained glass has been an adventure. Like most of us it started with the dazzling discovery of stained glass. She studied, explored, gained mastery and friends along the way. The picture window in her kitchen is filled with glass made by a wide variety of friends. At conference auctions I saw her bid the price up until she got what she wanted—a piece by Tony Glander, a terrific self-portrait by Linda Lichtman, for example. Each one has a story she explains as we sit at a round table near the window. “I have breakfast, lunch and dinner with my friends.” and her glass that she made for other people connects her to them. She told me warmly, how delighted she was to receive a Christmas card from Kim Saffer who had purchased a screen 41 years ago saying she was still enjoying it. Saara’s glass was like her ambassador keeping the friendship alive for her. “Connection is so important. My glass connects me to people.” Some of her work is personalized with parts of the glass design representing a particular person, or personal theme.

Like many of us Saara began her career nowhere near glass. After teaching swimming, she worked in her husband Martin’s successful law firm in the south Bronx, one of the poorer sections of New York City. She fell in love with stained glass when she took a hobby class at the Young Men’s Hebrew Association (YMHA.) She was off! Later studying with master glass workers Maurice Heaton and Sydney Cash, she learned many techniques that enabled her to make her glass more sculptural. They noticed her talent and gave her the precious gift of personal attention that helped her develop her personal vision.

Indeed, her process seems alarming. She begins a piece with no drawing, without a cartoon, but makes it up as she goes, inventing 3 dimensional units out of fusing, slumping, who knows what else, and glue. She became expert at all of them. Many of these were major efforts requiring the security of a stable basic structure, often a circular metal frame. She placed her trust in the hands of Mike Vira, a wonderful craftsman who would go on to make her frames and stands and whatever structure was needed. She swears by his skill and is fiercely loyal to him and several others who consistently helped her over the years. Saara worked with Vira to create an intricate fountain for the 2015 American Glass Guild (AGG) exhibit in Washington DC. She publicly credited him and invited him and his wife to the reception to receive appropriate praise. Others received her rave reviews, like Steve Halpern who helped her with photography, and all matters digital. She liked to recognize the contributions of those who were often ignored and found depth where you wouldn’t expect it. She told me a rule of thumb—when you meet someone—“don’t assume you know who they are.”

*Starry Night*, 7” H: circle 36” diameter, 2 ½” depth.  
Antique glass, kilnformed glass, adhesives, 2016.  
Photo: Saara Gallin

Her loyalty is firm. When Saara brags it is usually not about herself but about the achievements of someone else. I have been a beneficiary of her generosity. She has praised my work often, “You know I’m not just making ‘nice nice.’ I really like what you did” and “from the first moment I saw your work I knew it was special.” More very good advice: “Make something good and be sure you hire a good professional photographer, so you have the best photo possible. Send it to a magazine and they will publish it.” That worked. My stained glass began to be recognized. And “Write! You Ellen, you can write. Make sure you write.” (Here I am.) What a gift this has been to have had her generous support.

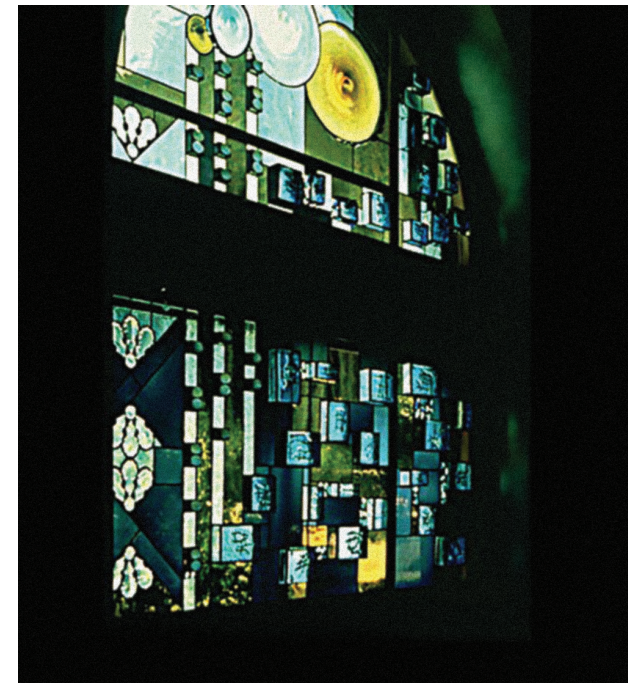
Saara herself increasingly received recognition and greater achievements. Here a few of my personal favorites among her achievements:

- One of the most memorable was Saara curating an exhibit at The Corning City Hall. She didn’t just curate it, she conceived of it and built it from the ground up. She invited me to drive up with her to meet with officials discussing her idea. “It won’t happen all at once, Ellen. You have to take it step by step.” So, step by step it became a wonderful show: “Light: Glass, Lead and Paint, International Conferences on Environmental Glass.” Thus, in the city where The Corning Museum emphasizes blown glass, she made a place for the stained glass industry to be acknowledged.
- Saara made an Eternal Light made for the ark doors that I had designed for B’nai Shalom Congregation, Potomac, Maryland. Similar pieces are held in important collections.
- *Feminine Principles: Works in Iron, Fiber and Glass at The Center for Jewish History.* She had a room to herself. Most significant to me was her glass on the biblical theme of the Woman of Valor. honoring “...the significant, although quiet voices of the women who define themselves by producing rather than consuming... women who succeed in their career goals (despite impediments which are always present.)” One of these featured in the work was her daughter Dr. Pamela Gallin Yablon, surgeon, mother of four, pregnant in her ninth month getting ready to perform surgery.\*



*Tears for the Vanishing Coral*, 16" x 16" x 2 ½". Collage using mirror, antique glass, real coral, 2018. Photo: Steve Halpern

- A solo show at Sarah Lawrence College, and most impressive, in 1999 a one-person show at The Ezair gallery on Madison Avenue. This is the hope of many fine artists in NYC, a Madison Avenue show.
- Several architectural commissions including a large window on the facade of the Simpson town house on the upper west side in New York City.
- *Tears for the Vanishing Coral* “I am in perpetual mourning for the worldwide loss of our coral reefs!!! she says. “In this work I have attempted to represent this sadness.” Many small clear glass jewels suggest tears while Megan McElfresh’s kiln formed glass suggests underwater grasses. It includes an “actual piece of coral (white-because it is dead coral—dating 1970.)”
- One of her best recent works is a circular piece that stands in her home today in front of a large window with a view of rocks and trees. She tells a story of how she was able to acquire a cache of authentic original tiffany jewels from Frederica Fields. You can see them enhancing areas of antique turquoise glass. By using adhesives, no lines of lead or copper foil mar the quality of openness and light.



*Simpson Town House*, 7' x 6' wide-kiln formed antique glass-copper foil technique, 1985. Photo: Leland Cook

Saara Gallin and I became friends at a critical time in both of our careers in glass. I was in an early stage and profited from her faithful encouragement while I could encourage her as an artist. Early on I visited her in her gracious split-level home in Westchester, just north of New York City. I encouraged her to turn her garage into a studio, an unlikely choice in her conventional suburban neighborhood. Many remember meeting her at a conference. Like myself, she has been an enthusiastic member of both The AGG and the SGAA. I can see her at a reception standing upright speaking intently in the middle of the younger artists around her. She came to almost all the conferences until the pandemic. For a while she’d bring her husband Martin who’d sit politely on the side until he started an interesting conversation himself.

She developed a feeling for design on her own, but in an unconventional way. How she worked was something of a miracle. I was surprised to learn that she didn’t start with a design but made it up as she went. That was her way of drawing. She did not predict what the final work would look like; no sketch, no presentation drawing, so trust was required between herself and her client. Her study with Maurice Heaton and Sydney



*Beersheva Eternal Light*, kilnformed antique glass cone. Top width 13" dropping to point 10". Total height with chain 23", 2006. Photo: Steve Halpern

Cash gave her the basics of using the kiln to work with glass. She developed the skills to make it her own. Her unique glass art was developed by imagination and experiment. “what if?” That is her mantra now. With a series “Rejects and Jewels” she gives herself permission to revisit scraps and interesting experiments left over from earlier work.

So, what did “what if?” mean to her? “I hope to continue working in glass as long as I breathe. The challenge of attempting to make what I see in my mind’s eye is one of the special joys of existence.”\* At 92 she is continuing.

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\* Waggoner, Shawn. “The Feminine Principals of Saara Gallin’s Glass Art,” *Glass Art*, Nov/Dec 2007