



### **Collection Focus: Frances and Michael Higgins**

January 31 – October 12, 2024

*Art glass may now be the rage, but when we started out, you couldn't sell crafts of any kind. The practice of craftsmen making a living by selling their wares was practically unheard of in the Midwest.*

—Michael Higgins

In the late 1940s, contemporary glass production was given new energy as Frances (1912 – 2004) and Michael (1908 – 1999) Higgins reinvigorated the ancient practice of glass fusing. Capitalizing on the post-World War II interest in bright colors and abstract patterns, the Higginses produced mostly functional items sold through major retailers and worked with glass companies until they formally established their private studio in Illinois. Frances and Michael's partnership—both personal and professional—seemed to fuel their creative energy, and they devoted their lives to creating a seemingly endless array of plates, bowls, dishes, vases, and more.

Their emphasis on functional work follows in the vein of artisans working with glass for centuries, while their innovations revived historical practices and brought glass fusing to a modern audience. Their interest in a historical technique aligned them with studio glass artists who were looking at the history of glass conceptually and technically. Even though the Higginses did not describe themselves as "glass artists"—in fact, they preferred the phrase "designer craftsmen"—they were very aware of how glass as a practice was changing as they were developing their business.

Frances and Michael met at Chicago's Institute of Design (now IIT Institute of Design) in the 1940s, where she was a student and he was the Head of Visual Design. They left the Institute after marrying in 1948 and began building a business—out of their home—right away. By all accounts, Frances' interest in working with glass was the catalyst for experimenting with the material. Interested in glass fusing, she introduced Michael to the idea, although she typically side-stepped taking credit for this. Glass fusing—which pre-dated glassblowing as a technique for working with the material—involves joining pieces of glass together at a high heat.

In simple terms, the Higginses maximized this process by adding color, design, and pattern to layers of glass using materials that would not burn up when fired. As makers of hand-crafted objects, they were producing one-of-a-kind pieces; as makers of product lines, they also had to figure out repeatable designs and forms that they could make in multiple. At one point they were working 14-hour days, seven days a week, in order to fulfill orders for Marshall Field's, Bloomingdale's, and other large retailers.

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A sampling of works by the Higginases reflects how the couple capitalized on the possibilities of their chosen medium. Their embrace of fused glass gave them the opportunity for technical experimentation while also giving them a hallmark. As fused glass was not the technique of choice for most contemporaries working with the material, it was a specialty. The Higginases made the most of this circumstance—building a life and career out of their creativity and prowess as business people.

The Higginases seemed to have a knack (and an eye) for choosing colors and patterns that would complement the changing dynamics of popular culture interests, and they would modify their repertoire as needed. Certain forms—dishes, plates, bowls, and ashtrays—became standard while others gained attention through a timely introduction to interior design. For example, Rondelays were fused squares and circles that could be interlocked in a customizable “do-it-yourself system of hanging and fastening.” In essence, they formed a sheet of color and pattern that could be suspended in front of a window or within a room. Their designs often played with abstraction—particularly the boomerangs, starbursts, and amoebas—of mid-twentieth-century design. They also incorporated images such as birds and butterflies, as well as striped, wavy, and “mod” patterns.

Working “jointly” encompassed a range of practices including, sometimes, working independently. Frances tended to favor a “drawn” technique with designs created in enamel. Michael would often piece together a layout of colors and shapes to form an abstract or figural design. On occasion, they would each contribute to the design motifs of a single piece. Their working strategy reflected an overall successful model of a collaborative operation, as they had a loving and supportive partnership that echoed their non-studio life. As is typical of collaborations—where individual strengths tend to dictate task distribution—Frances and Michael gravitated toward independent strengths and then pulled everything together as a unit.

RAM’s archive of work by Frances and Michael Higgins offers a taste of what the couple accomplished—their efforts impacted twentieth-century glass production as well as art commerce and interior design. The archive adds dynamism to RAM’s glass collection as a whole and expands the context for understanding the range of possibilities with the material. And, last but not least, this work now shifts from being what a couple built their lives around to something people enjoy interacting with—as collectors, museum-goers, or both.

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<https://youtube.com/watch?v=WRanXvdTuGw>