



UNIQUES

For Jampa and Dawa



My Love Affair with UNIQUES

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ISBN 978-87-999591-0-5

www.trollbeads.com

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UNIQUES



From time to time you hear stories of someone learning something that changed their life, and it can be hard to believe it is true - but that's exactly what happened to me: A few lines in a magazine led to an unexpected journey that would take me and my family to three continents - a journey that ended up making a real difference to so many people's lives, including our own.

Here's those lines I read in the members' quarterly magazine of the small Danish Tibet Charity organisation:

"If you really want to help people in third world countries to develop economically, you must teach them what it is that you are successfully doing."

When I read those lines an idea suddenly came to me: *"we can do that. At Trollbeads we know how to make glass beads. We know how to sell them successfully. We can teach them."*

Working with the design of Trollbeads, losing myself in the mysterious depths

within the spherical, planet like structure, I've often thought how it seemed as if one little glass bead contained a whole world. When we embarked on our first journey to Dharamsala to set up a glass bead workshop for exiled Tibetans, I had no idea how much truth there was in this notion.

I had no idea that this "charity" project would grow to span three continents and allow me to meet all these wonderful and talented people - true craftsmen and women from worlds so different to mine - how they would embed into every Trollbead, symbols, colours and patterns belonging to their part of the planet, their geography, their culture.

This book is the story about the people who were taught how to make glass beads - and ended up creating UNIQUES, taking Trollbeads in an entirely new direction, bringing joy and inspiration to thousands of people across the world.

Lise Aagaard



Surrounded by dense coniferous forest of mainly cedar trees, Dharamsala is a city in the upper reaches of the Kangra Valley. This is one of the centres of the Tibetan exile community in India.



A local hero in the Himalayas

In the small Tibetan refugee community of Dharamsala in the Himalayas of North India, social worker and member of the exile parliament of Tibet, Dawa Tsering is nothing less than a hero. Many exiled Tibetans in India have a hard time providing for their families. By setting up a school and nursing home, he has made it possible for parents to go to work – or try to find work – while education and care is provided for their children.

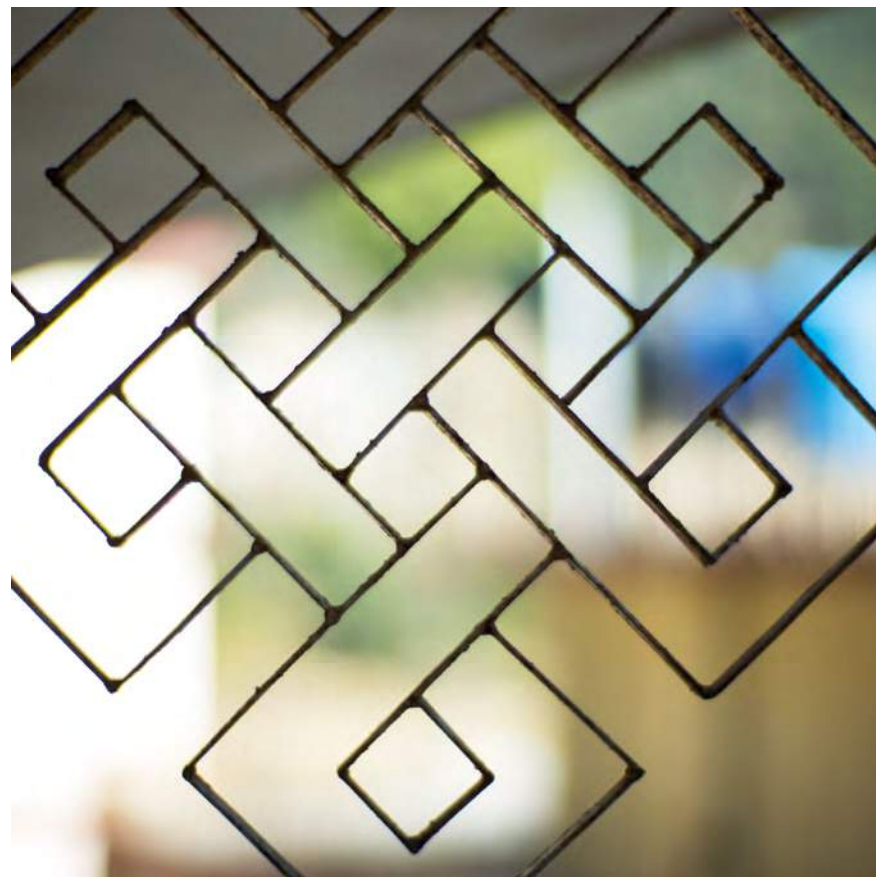
Dawa Tsering is one of those people who don't hang around waiting for somebody else to do what needs to be done. Just before our arrival, in the aftermath of a devastating earthquake, he could be

found digging in the debris with his own shovel rescuing trapped people from their collapsed houses.

I was first put in contact with Dawa Tsering through the Danish Tibet Charity organization. As the leader of a newly established 'Unemployment Society' in Dharamsala, Dawa was ideally placed to take on the responsibility of establishing a glass bead workshop - and running it afterwards.

My meeting with Dawa Tsering was where it all began.





Entrepreneur with a heart

Running the workshop on a daily basis, requires quite a strong and fantastic personality. And for sure, that is what Jampa has. With a strong and entrepreneurial mindset and most importantly, with her heart in the right place, she has been running the business from the beginning. She challenges the glassworkers and help them to make everybody be at their best, always gentle and with a smile on her face. Indeed, Jampa is a role model to most.



Jampa - a warm and gentle woman – always smiling.

Setting up the first workshop

To get the workshop started we provided what's called a "soft loan". This means that if the business does not make any profit, the debt doesn't have to be repaid; and if the business turns out to be a success, the invested money has to be repaid and then transferred into other self-sustainable projects.

Having packed our suitcases with clothes, toothbrushes, glass burners, protective glasses and other personal tools of the glass workers' trade, my family and I soon found ourselves on a plane with a long haul ahead of us. One ton of glass rods, tables, chairs, tools and instructions of how to set up the workstations had been shipped off to Dharamsala ahead of us, and Dawa and his crew had already been busy for while.

We got off the plane in Dharamsala to meet a world very different to the one we came from, blessed with a rich culture of spirituality, art and handcraft.





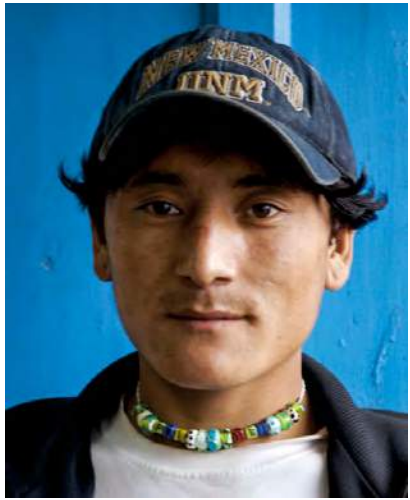


Learning the craft

It was our plan to educate 8 students in the art of glass bead making. On our arrival, 25 very hopeful, unemployed men and women turned up. There was no way we could or wanted to choose, so the team decided to teach everybody for two days and then pick those most qualified for the job. If the workshop turned out to be a success, we would establish more workstations later. 12 people, 8 women and 4 men were selected for further training.

After 10 intensive days of training, the first glass bead workshop was ready to function as a self-sustainable unit, owned and run by the Tibetans themselves. For the first six months, we supported the workshop with training and a fixed salary for all workers. We considered this the training period, where the new glassworkers honed their skills to become glass artists. The idea was that, after six months, they should be ready to sell their glasswork locally and to make glass beads for Trollbeads.





The glass workers are a wonderful mix of men and women – all with their own story and background.







Unexpected cultural differences

The room that housed our workshop was beautiful but without the luxury of running water and heating. Water had to be carried in from the street in large buckets and electricity was only available one day of the week. Fortunately, we could do without it as only gas and oxygen is needed to create glass beads.

After two valuable days of our stay in Dharamsala had passed, the results were not promising. Two of the new students called in sick; other trainees practiced for only a few minutes, then they would turn off the burner and wait for more instructions.

But there was absolutely nothing wrong with their work ethic. What we encountered was simply a cultural difference: Accustomed to a scarcity of resources, the Tibetan trainees had an ingrained respect for not wasting any materials. They were also not accustomed to working with a more casual 'hit and miss' approach. To improve the production flow, it was down to us to figure out new ways of teaching the skills they required.



The first break through

Our trainees showed great enthusiasm, working hard to learn their new skills. On the 8th day they began to get the hang of it. With only a day and a half left to our scheduled departure we began to see some good results. The pace increased and we could see how they were working with the glass in a more confident and relaxed way. It felt like a real breakthrough and everyone was genuinely excited.

Finally, leaving the icy winds of the Himalaya Mountains and our newfound friends in good spirits, we were convinced that the project was well on its way.

Getting a bead on quality

Back in Denmark, about a month later, Trollbeads received the first package of beads. They didn't look good. The beads were round enough, but nearly all of them were flawed in one way or another. We simply had to provide more teaching – this time via email. But back then the workshop didn't have a computer - the glassworkers had to visit the local Internet café to check their mails, which was not something they remembered to do every day.

After a couple of months though, the quality of the shipments got better and better. Within half a year, we had come to a mutual understanding of what defined a quality bead.









The first group of glass workers with Lise Aagaard.





"In the past, I thought that feelings could be expressed only on paper or in music. Now I have discovered a new way."
Jurgita Bacevičienė



“A Tibetan nun passes me quietly, while intoning her mantra. In the background a poster of a pop singer brings me back to reality. Western culture is also present in Dharamsala. The contrast leaves me with a surreal impression.” – Lise Aagaard







The Dharamsala workshop is spectacularly located just beneath the kindergarten and school, with a stunning view of the green slopes of the Himalayas.





Raising her protective glasses to see the result of her work, she carefully inspects every little detail.



Ambitious plans

The bead workers in Dharamsala were set up with a workshop where they could produce beads, and a shop on the high street to sell them. The plan was that they would produce beads for the Trollbeads collection, and when they were up and running as a local business, they could sell beads to the locals - and the tourists visiting the city that was home to the exiled Dalai Lama.

Running a workshop as well as a shop turned out to be a rather ambitious project, with too many new things to handle at the same time. The Tibetan glass workers were happier and more comfortable with just supplying beads for Trollbeads. In the end they closed the shop and focused their work on the Trollbeads collection, producing beads from patterns we sent them from our Danish headquarters.

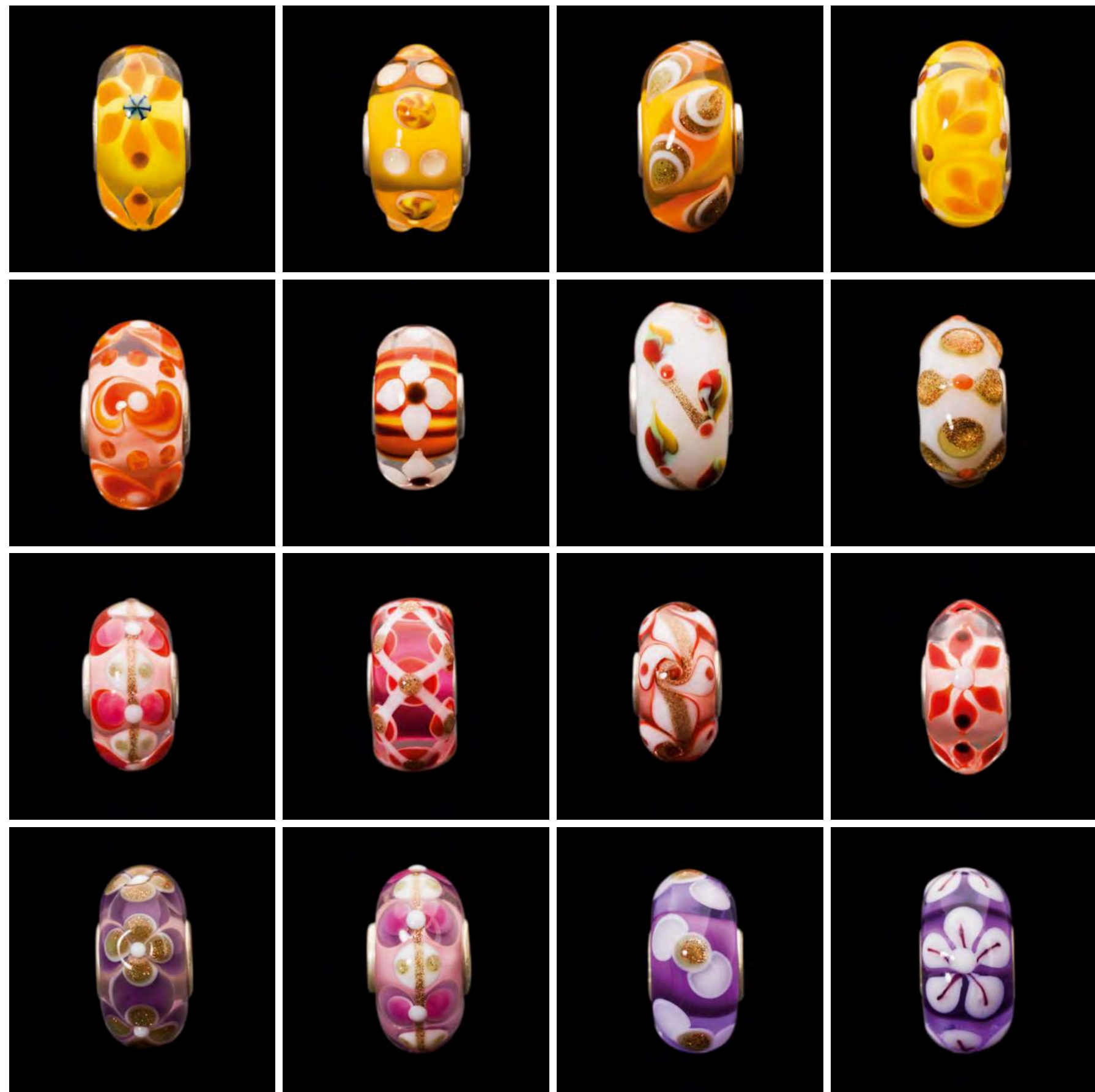
Let creativity rule!

The Tibetan glass workers sent us beautiful work, but the colour schemes seemed to have a life of their own. They matched the patterns with great precision and skill, but they didn't always follow the colour scheme specified by the designs. When asked why, the glass workers simply replied: "when we run out of one colour we just use another until we get the right colour back in stock." With glass sourced from Italy, half way around the planet, it could take time to get stocked up if rods were not ordered in time.

So we were left with lots of perfect beads, but in colours that did not match the products in the collection. Beautiful artwork was literally piling up in the Copenhagen office, so we made a decision: "let creativity rule!"

That's how Unique Beads were added to the collection.







Tashi, Dhundup and Dolma are originally from Tibet, but now live in Dhramsala – home of their spiritual leader Dalai Lama. In their time off, they love to sing and dance and daydream about Tibet, about herding cattle...

“I used to weave carpets, chupas and aprons. I also love birds and their beautiful feathers. These are the inspiration for the colours I use in my bead designs.” – Tsultrim Dolma







A ripple effect of success

Commitment, talent and hard work made it possible for the Tibetan group to pay back the loan within a year and a half. Now, for more than a decade, they have owned and run their own business. Their achievement has inspired other people in the community to take the leap and the bead workshop has supported the start-up of several small self-sustainable businesses, including a dairy and a tailor's shop.

Since the beginning with the first workshop, we have been back at least every other year to visit. It has been a tremendous experience to see the workshop develop in both talent and numbers.

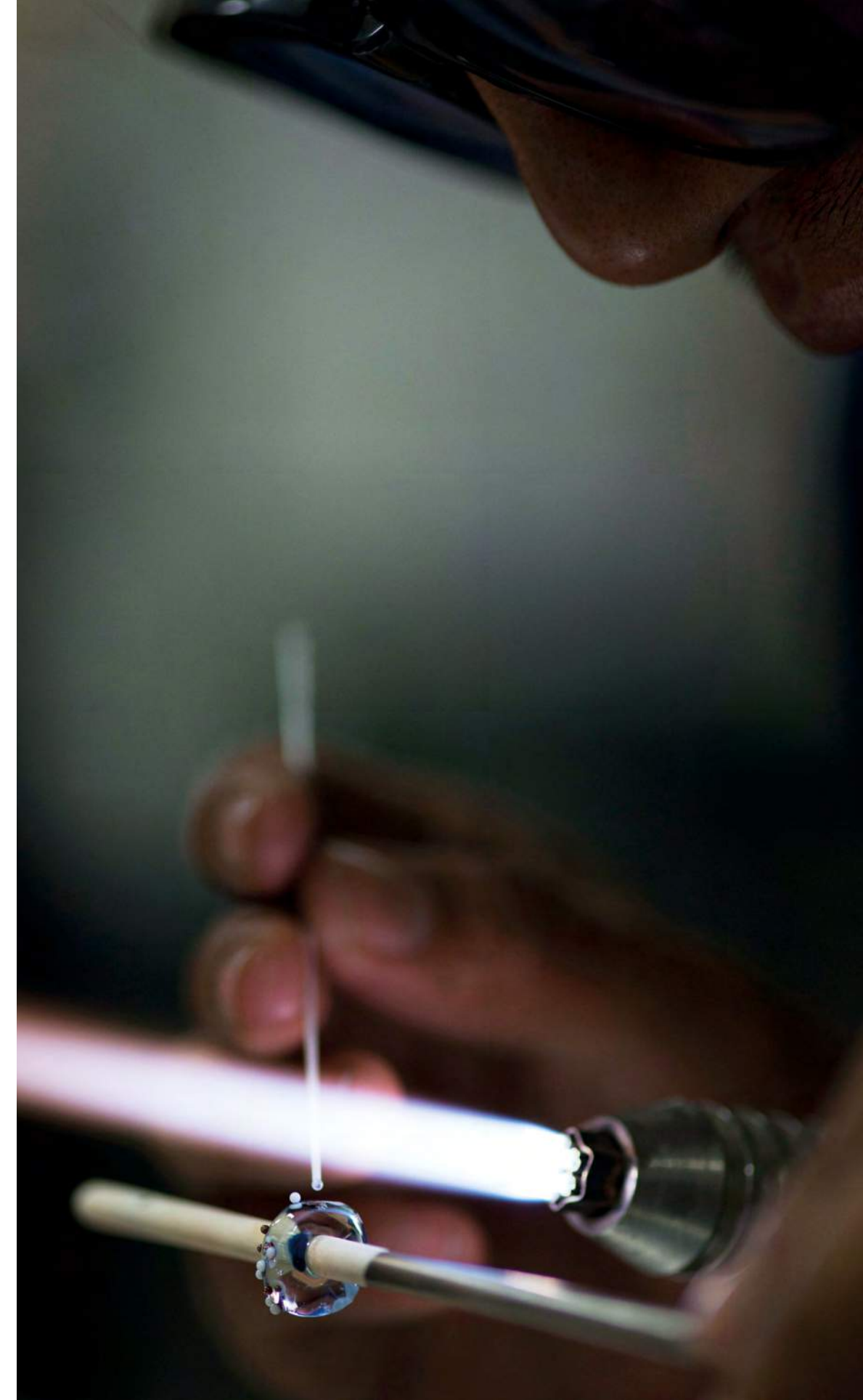
The people that were not chosen the first time round joined a little later and were soon trained and employed. During the first ten years of its existence, the workshop has provided jobs for around 270 people, making it possible for them to support their families. Today, more than 60 people earn their living and provide for their families working at the Dharamsala bead workshop.





Over the years, the Tibetan designers have developed their own styles, incorporating their cultural heritage with exquisite skill and creativity. The demand for their breathtaking work is growing every year.





Working with glass you have to know your material. When designing glass beads you play with optics. What you see and believe to be square is in fact circular. The illusion is created with numerous dots that appear as rectangles or stripes.

Glass melts at some point between 600 and 800 degrees Celsius, depending on the colour. This means that there may be a difference in temperature of more than 100 degrees Celsius from one colour to another. Each colour behaves in a different way. Some colours will gravitate towards the centre of the bead, others towards the surface.



In the beginning the Tibetan workshop only designed Uniques. Now the workshops also contribute as designers to the Trollbeads collection.

Passing on the baton

Excited and encouraged by the success of the Dharamsala bead workshop, we decided to try the same concept in a different place.

Basant Gupta and his wife Neetu Guptawere, both from India, were good friends and colleagues of ours. Together we opened a new workshop in Jaipur in 2009. In this new workshop, we wanted to have a special focus on challenged people in special needs of a job, whether it was for physical, psychological or social reasons, and we wanted at least half of them to be women. We wanted to assist them in getting out of a difficult situation in their life.

With an already well-functioning workshop in Dharamsala, north India, we decided to tap into the knowledge and expertise we had built up there. Jampa, from the Tibetan workshop, characteristically opened her arms to the project. Neetu and Garima - our first employee in the Jaipur workshop - travelled 500 miles to Dharamsala for their first crash course in glass bead making.

In the meantime, we began hiring more women in Jaipur. We had no problem gathering a team of talented people who simply had the misfortune of being from poor backgrounds, or finding themselves in a difficult situation because of a divorce or having lost their husbands. These women were facing a grim future, but they were quick to learn the art of glass bead making and soon able to provide for themselves and their families. The Jaipur workshop was up and running in no time, sending beautiful beads to us in Copenhagen.

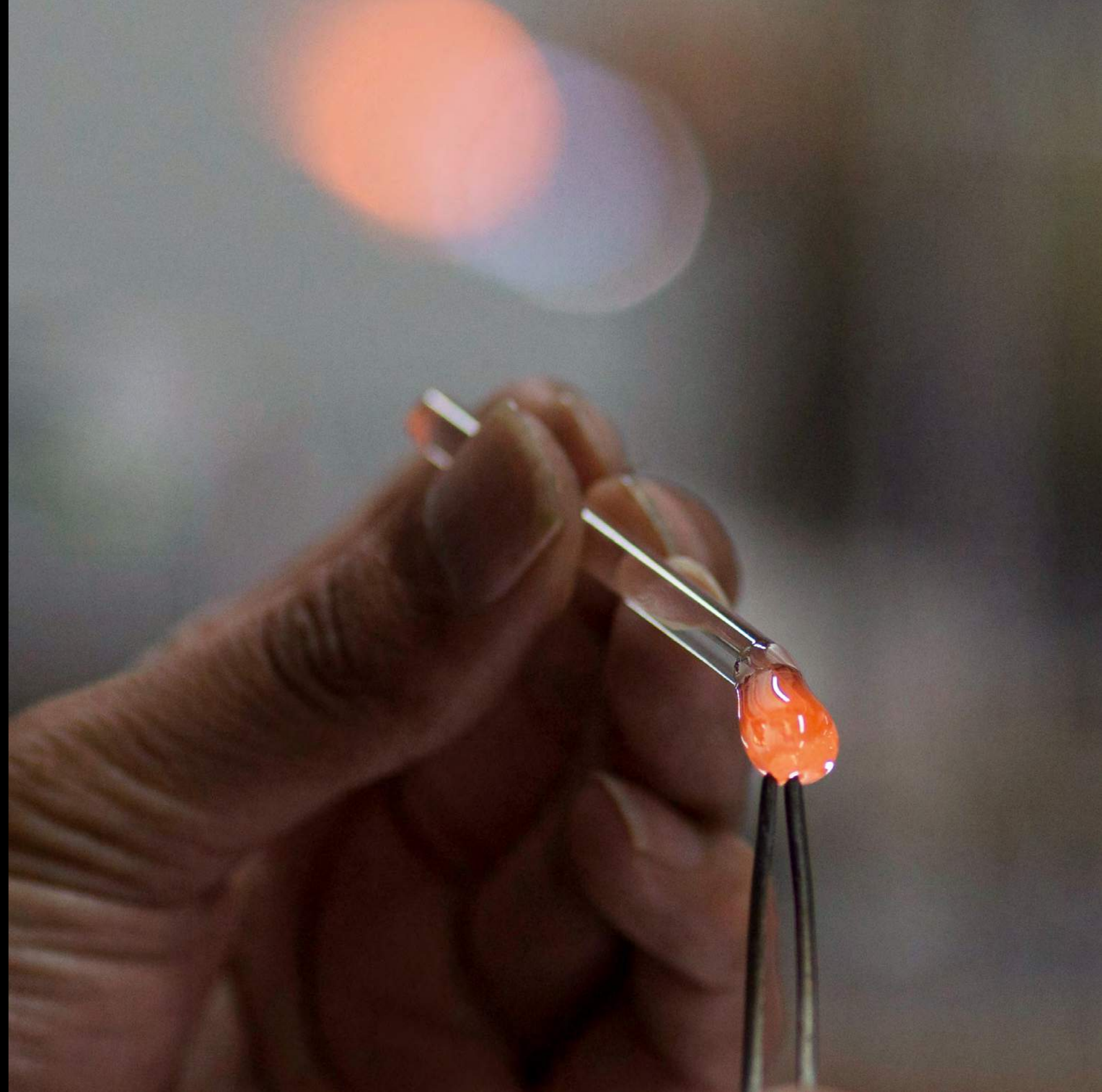






"Running water never grows stale. So you just have to keep moving. I believe in love, courage, persistence and faith. I think laughter is the best medicine and that life should be lived to its fullest."

- Neetu Gupta





“Our workshop produces beautiful beads and provides respectful and creative work for women in need.”

– Basant Gupta





"Despite its humble size, a glass bead contains a world of details and colour, reflecting the magnitude of nature." - Lise Aagaard





Glassmaking demands precision and timing. You need to know your glass. You cannot control glass like you can metal, which you can hammer, pull and stretch. If you make the slightest mistake with glass, it is visible and irreparable.

All glass beads are handmade in front of a red-hot, open flame. A normal glass bead from Trollbeads contains 10-15 steps in the creation process. Uniques contain up to 100 steps! These are truly small pieces of art.







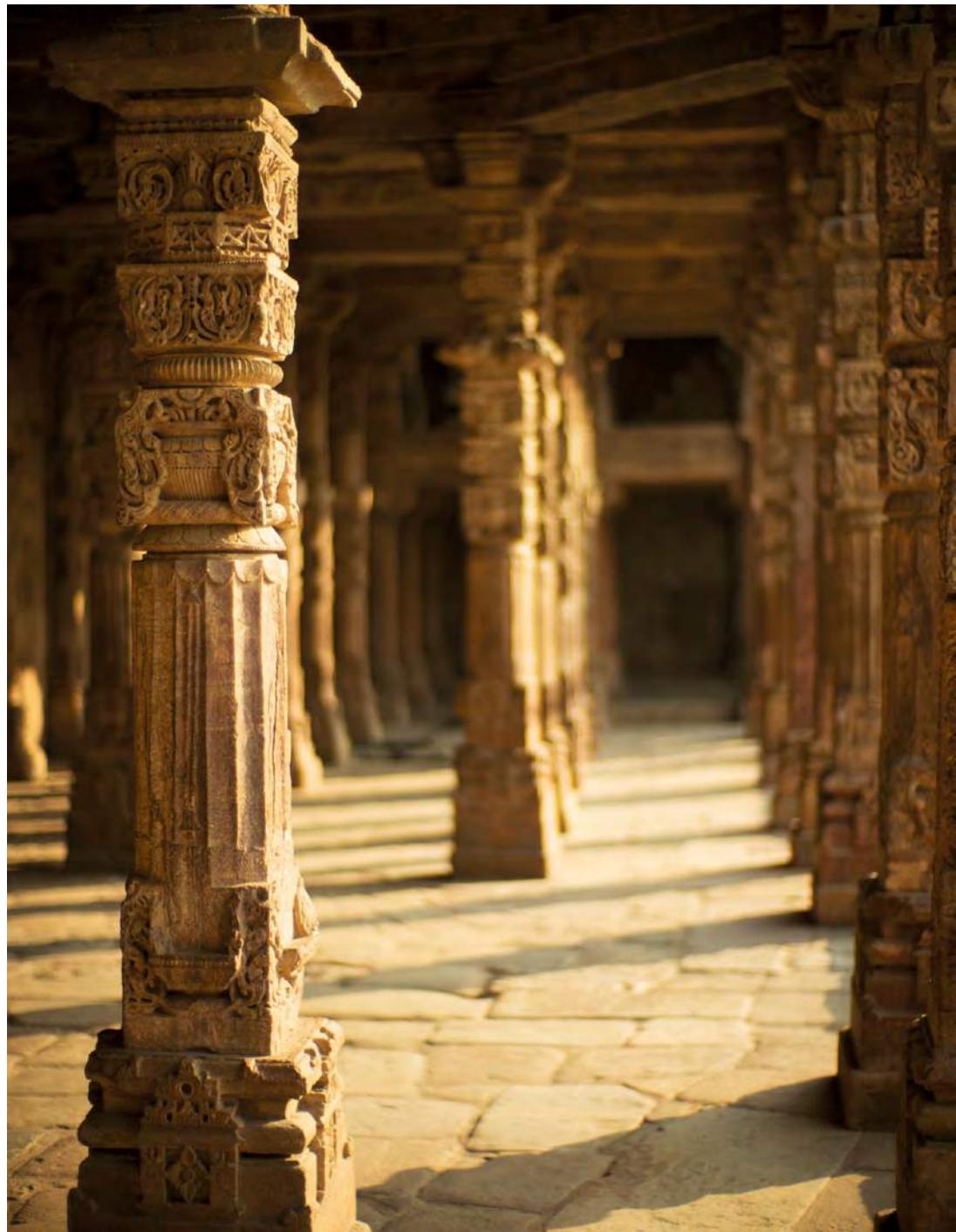




“In Tibet there was no opportunity for me to study when I was a child. At the age of 20, I thought I was too old to go to school. But I got the chance to learn glass bead making and was employed in the workshop. My husband has health problems, so this job means everything to us. Things are going well now.”

– Tsultrim Dolma











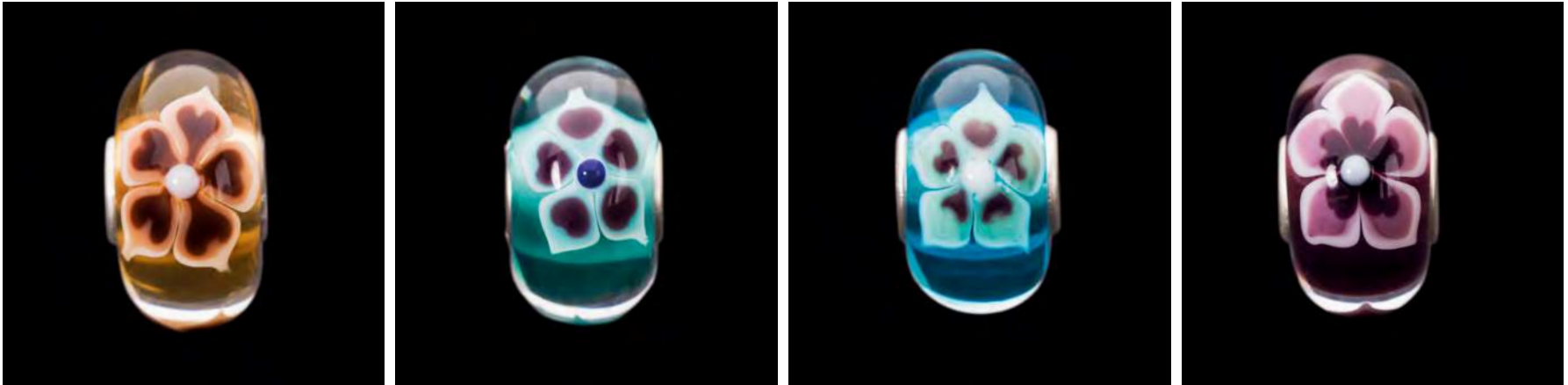
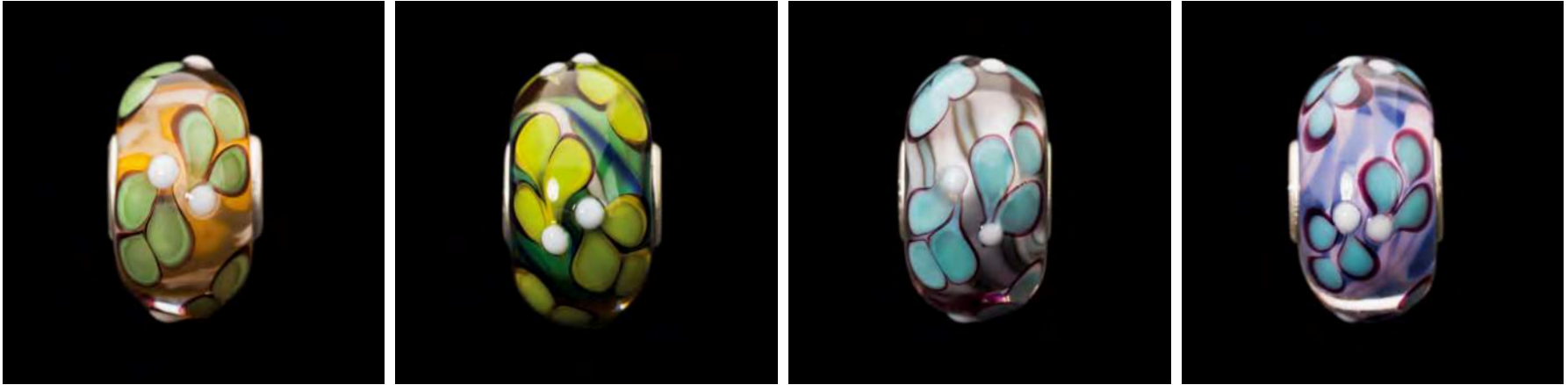
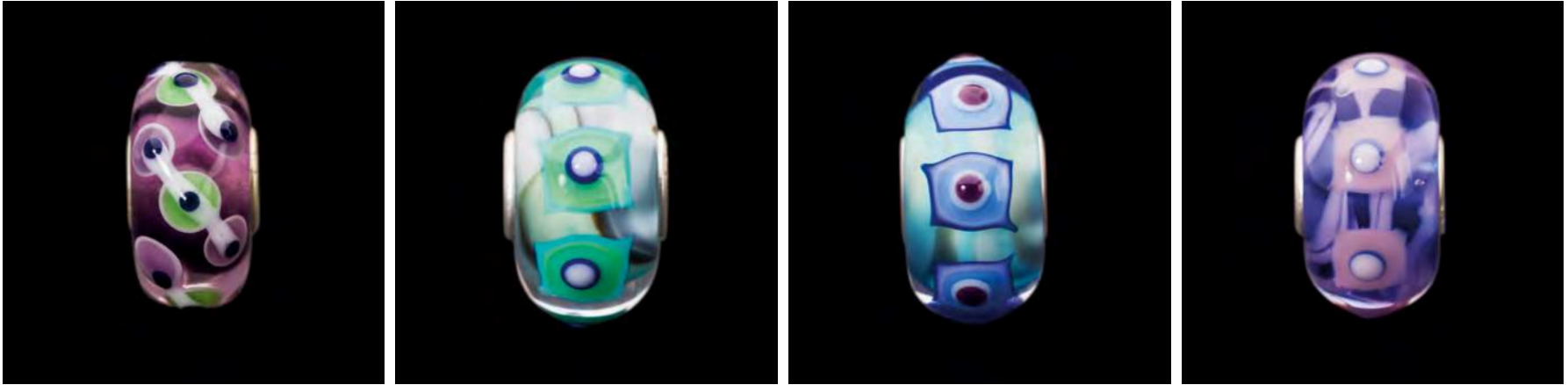
All workshops came from different starting points, with different goals and different purposes, but they all share the same vision: to provide work for people who may have an extraordinary need for it.





Since glass was invented thousands of years ago, it has never ceased to astound and inspire. There is something evocative, magical, even supernatural about the transparent material that starts out soft and malleable at high temperatures and becomes harder than metal as it cools. It seems almost enigmatic that a finished glass figure with its solid form still manages to retain fluid transparency.









On a new continent facing fresh challenges

Inspired by the same vision of self-sustainability, in 2010 my family and I packed our suitcases and headed to Africa. Here, on this huge continent with its stunning nature and wildlife, we made our way to Malawi - the country of smiles. Soon we were in deep conversation with Felix, a Malawian social worker.

We established the Malawi workshop on similar principles to the workshops in India. This time our workers came from an unemployed group of disadvantaged and challenged young people; some with health issues and some having lost most of their family to AIDS.

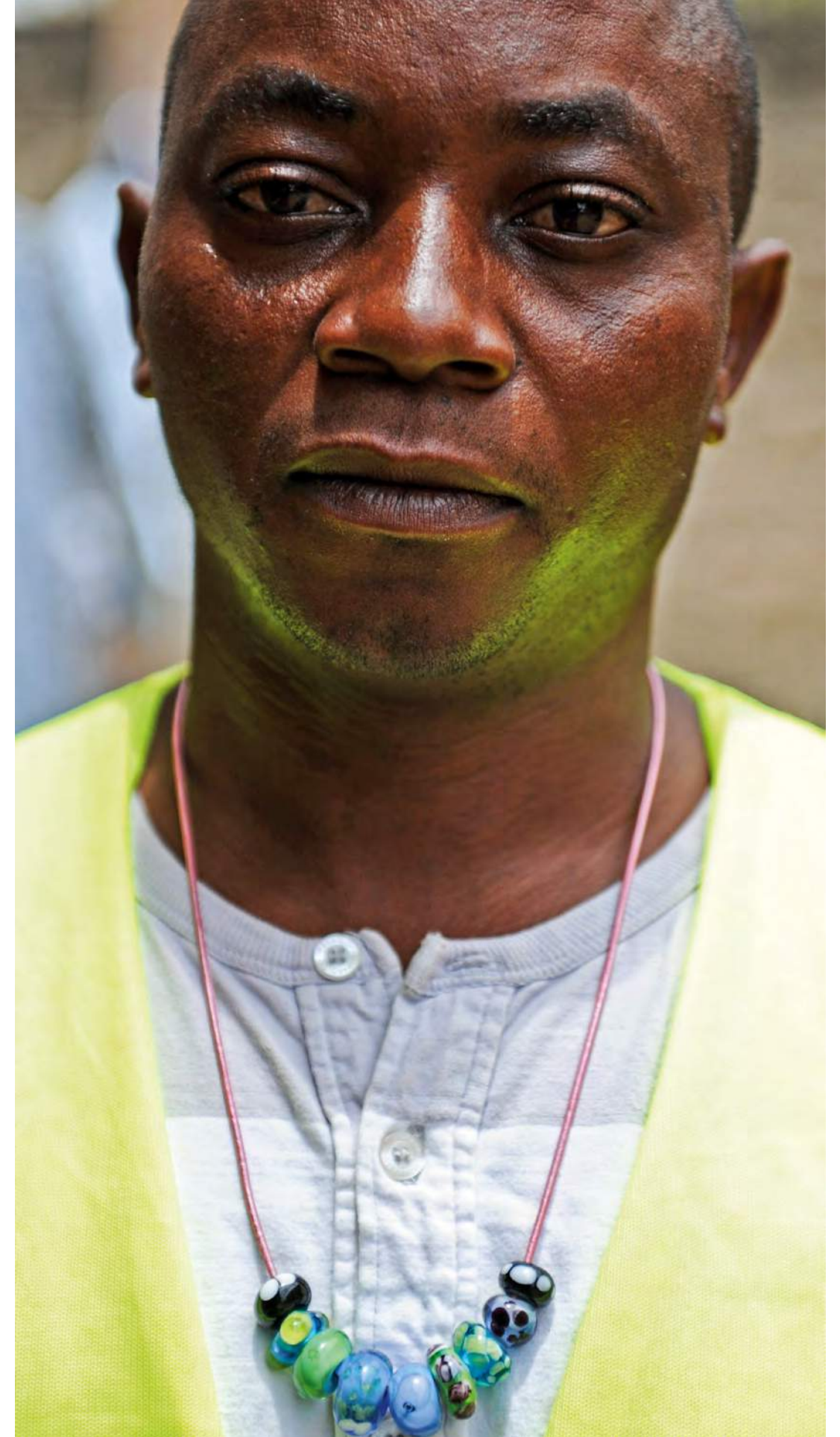
Just like in India, we gave a group of young men and women the opportunity to learn the artistry of making glass beads over an open flame. Besides providing financial backing for the project, our new staff was trained in all aspects of running a successful jewellery business.





Young, artistic and surrounded by an incredible mix of colours, the glass artisans of Malawi created very colourful glass beads. Each of the beads' inspiration can be found in the everyday lives of their designers; from the pattern of a woman's vibrant dress on the street, a combination of exotic fruits in the marketplace, or a particular flower in the savannah.









The Malawi workshop went well for a few years and the glass workers made great contributions to the Trollbeads collections. But what the glass artists had in creativity was somewhat lacking in management and the business never took off. As we had handed the workshop off to the Malawi group and had no influence in the running of it, there was nothing we could do about it. After a couple of years, the workshop in Malawi closed.



Dehradun – a valley of prosperity

In the Doon Valley between the foothills of the Himalayas, nestled between two of India's mightiest rivers — the Ganges on the east and the Yamuna on the west – Dehradun's historic location makes it an attractive place for both tourism and industrial enterprise. It is one of the fastest growing cities in India and is also the home of a large settlement of exiled Tibetans.

Kalden Chopel was part of the Dharamsala workshop for three years before his life path took him elsewhere. In the spring of 2012 he contacted me and suggested we set up a new workshop in Dehradun.

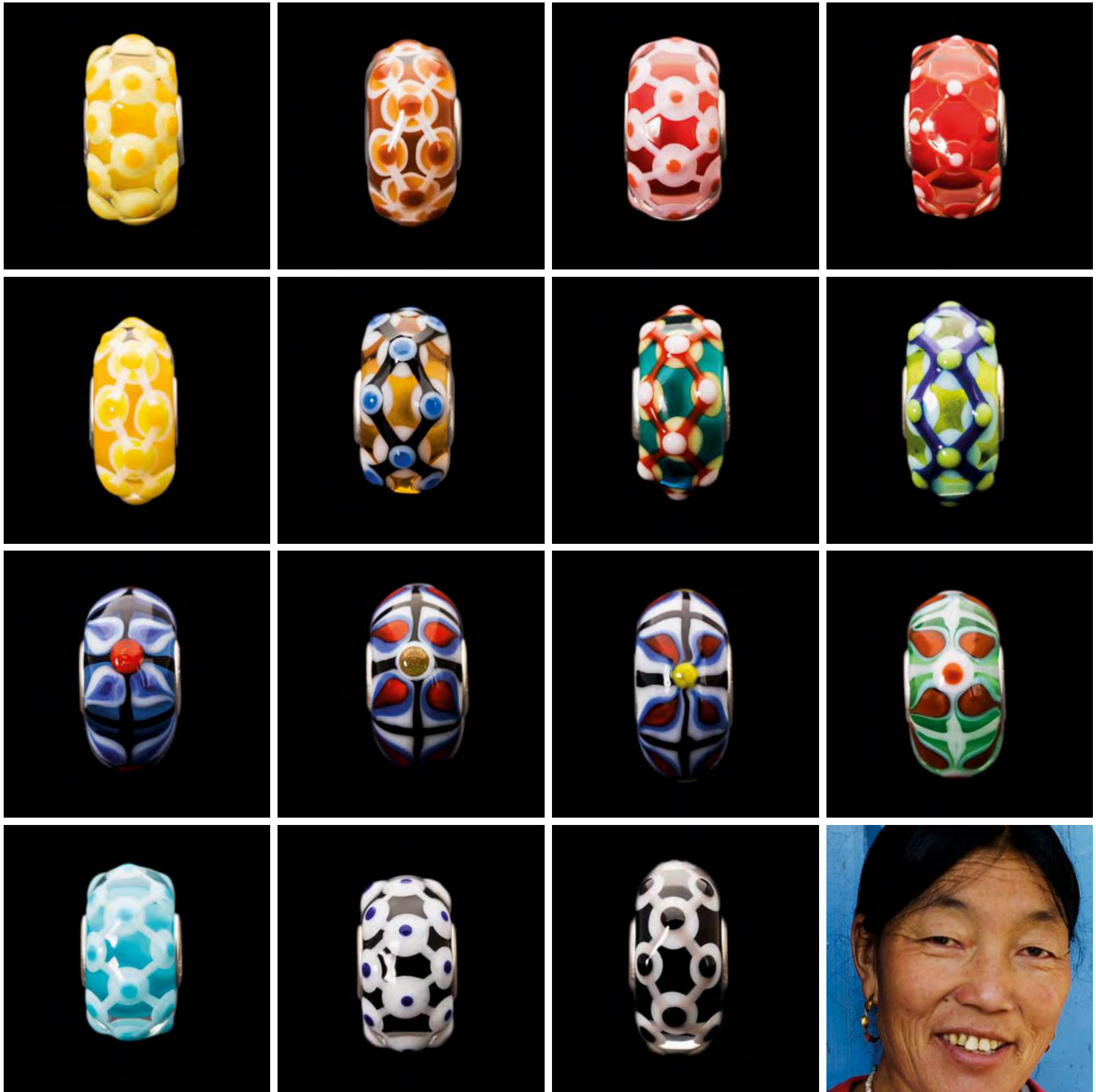
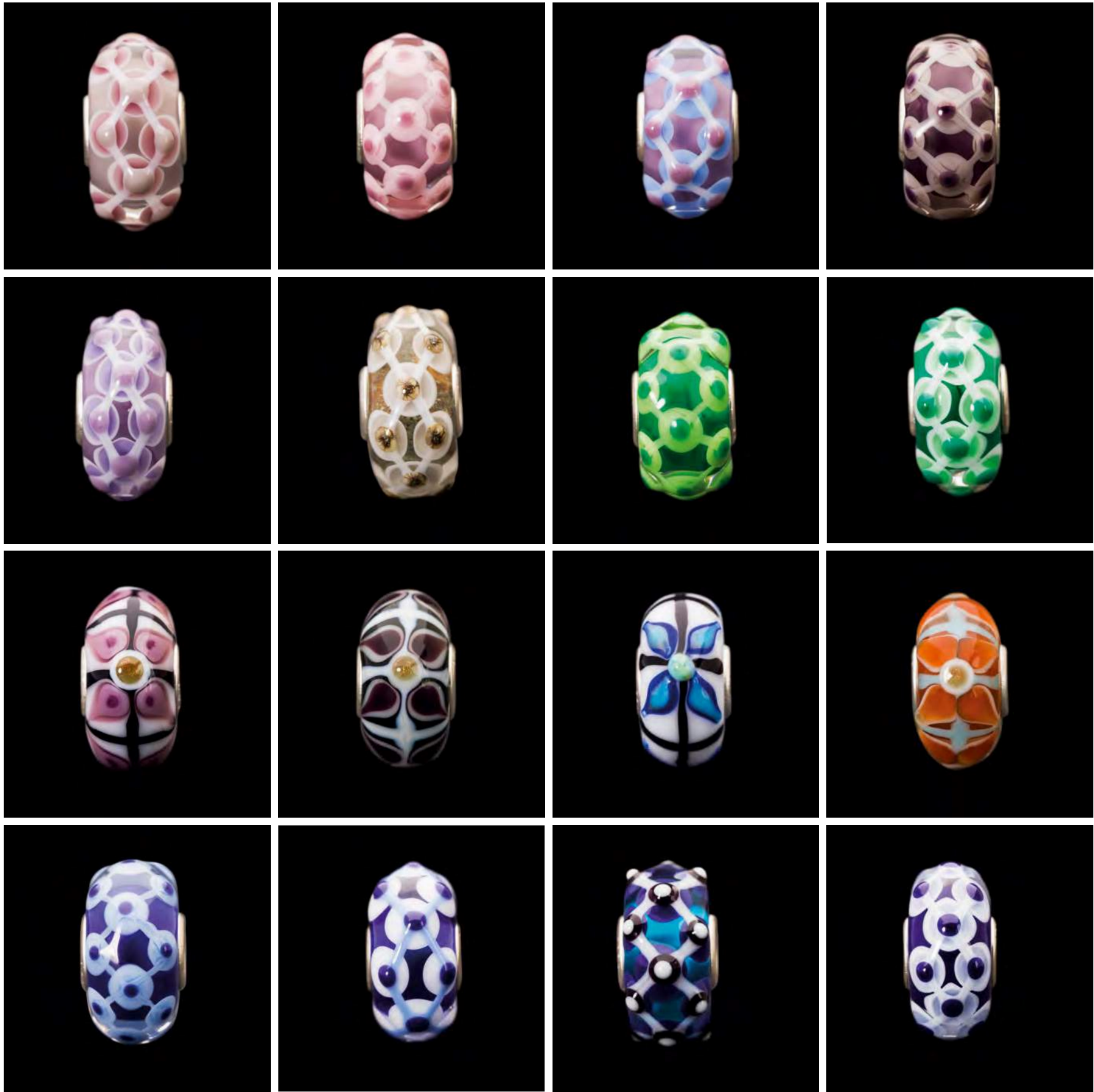
Doing well by doing good

Trollbeads' headquarter provided a soft loan. Together with Ngawang Tsultrim, Kalden put a team of glass workers together - this time mainly consisting of men from the community of exiled Tibetans in Dehradun. Most of the members of the team were physically disabled in one way or another, but this didn't deter them learning the art of glass bead making. As well as creating beautiful artwork, they were also able to create a future for themselves; a future which would not have been possible before.

Today, the Dehradun workshop has two managing directors; Kalden Chopel and Ngawang Tsultrim, and employs a team of 32 artisans. The workshop contributes to UNIQUES with beads echoing Tibetan art and ornaments, as well as the breathtaking nature of the Himalayas. These extremely gifted artists have also designed their own limited collection for Trollbeads.









Most of the glass used in the workshops comes from Italy. It is imported from Murano, an island close to Venice. For centuries, high quality glass has been produced here. Glass consists of a long list of chemical compounds. Silicon dioxide is the major constituent. The silicon dioxide is usually derived from quartz sand, while other components such as sodium oxide and calcium oxide are derived from soda and potash. The colour of the glass is also dependent on the substances added to the glass during manufacture. For example, a clear marine blue colour is achieved by adding copper.



Daily life sparks the imagination.

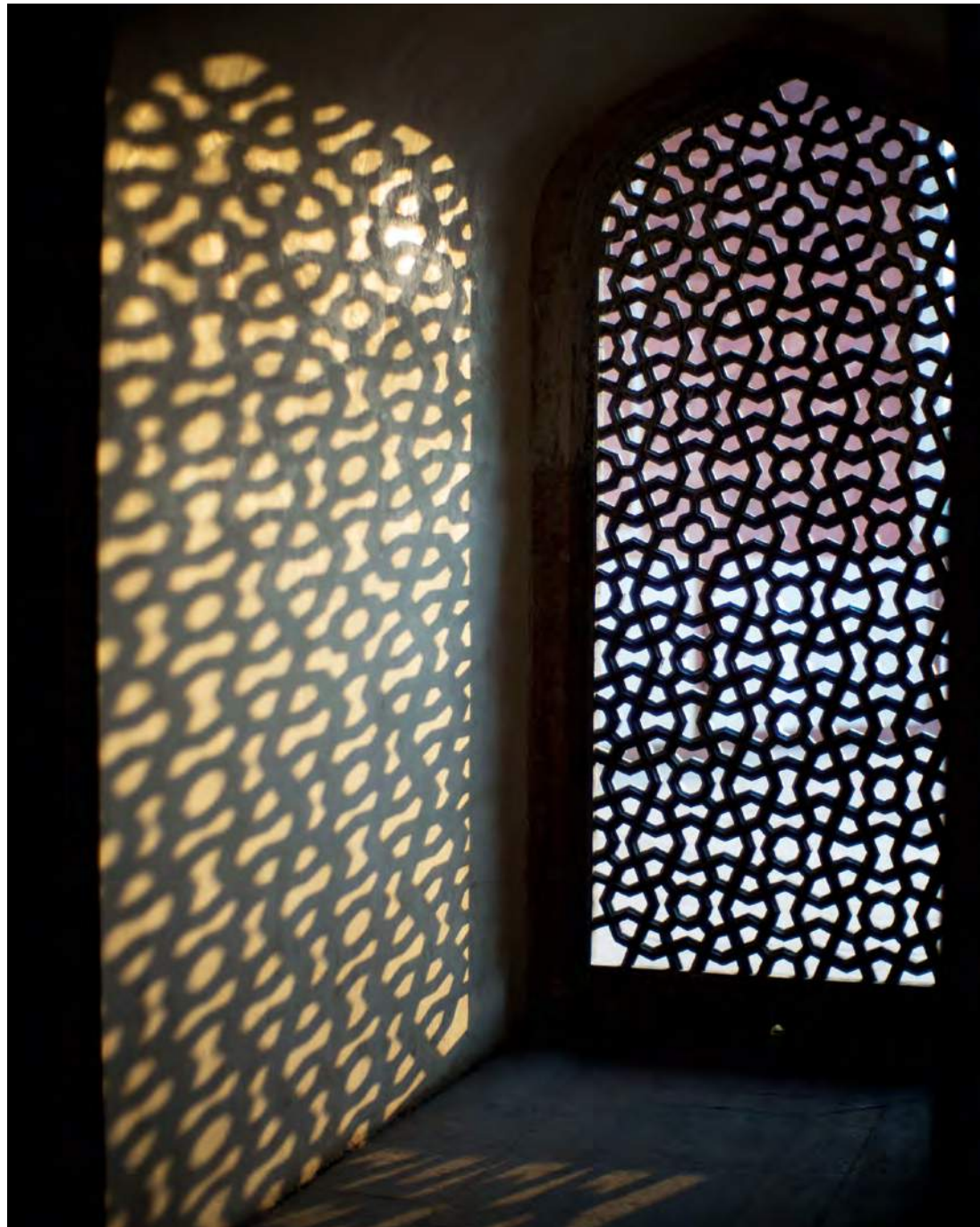


“I am a trained artist, but due to a heart problem and surgery I have not been able to get a reliable source of income. With the help of a friend, I learned to make glass beads and have now got a safe job in the bead workshop. I am so happy and I very much enjoy my work.”

– Tenzin Phuntsok







Spirituality is a major source of inspiration for the Indian glass artists and many temples or symbols can be recognized in the beads. Spirituality often transcends religions, and these traditions must be seen in the context of India's history.

When the glass melts, it rolls itself into a ball due to its natural surface tension; the same tension that causes a drop of water on a surface to become round. Every colour reacts differently and the designer can exploit this knowledge to create a variety of designs.





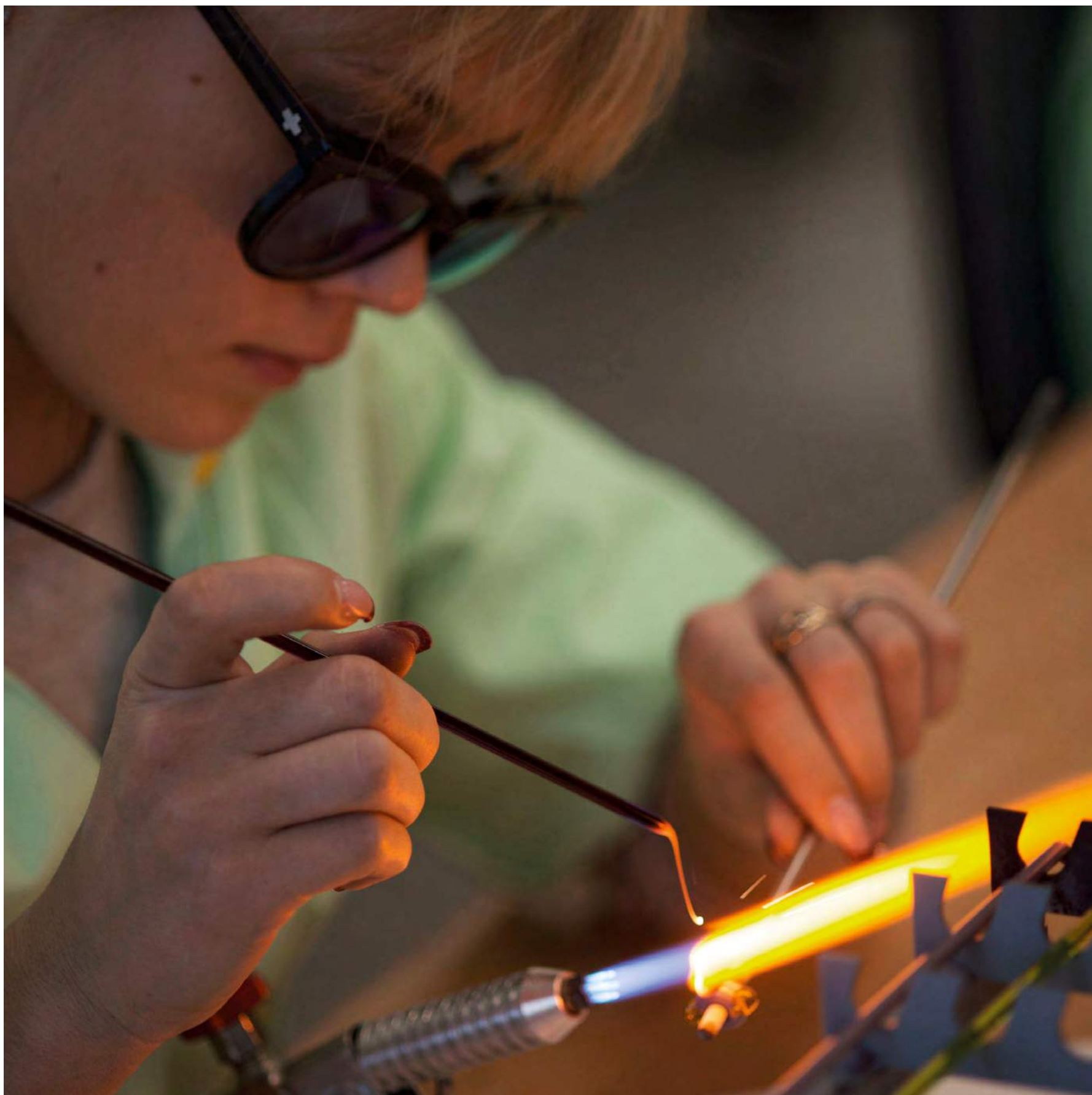


*Right from the beginning, the Dehradun workshop turned out glass art of very high standard.
Business is going well and in 2015 the facilities were renovated with shiny, new ventilation pipes.*

Glass is much harder than silver. Without the silver pipe lining the inside of the glass bead, it would soon wear out the silver bracelet.







Artisans growing into artists

Setting up our workshop in Lithuania was very different to India and Malawi. In Lithuania, the women were already skilled and involved in the production of glass beads for our Trollbeads' collection. But being artists at heart, they asked if they could have a chance at designing Uniques. We agreed immediately and have never looked back: The Lithuanian glass artists design stunning patterns. Taking a philosophical and expressive approach, they contribute to the Uniques collection with beads of exquisite beauty.





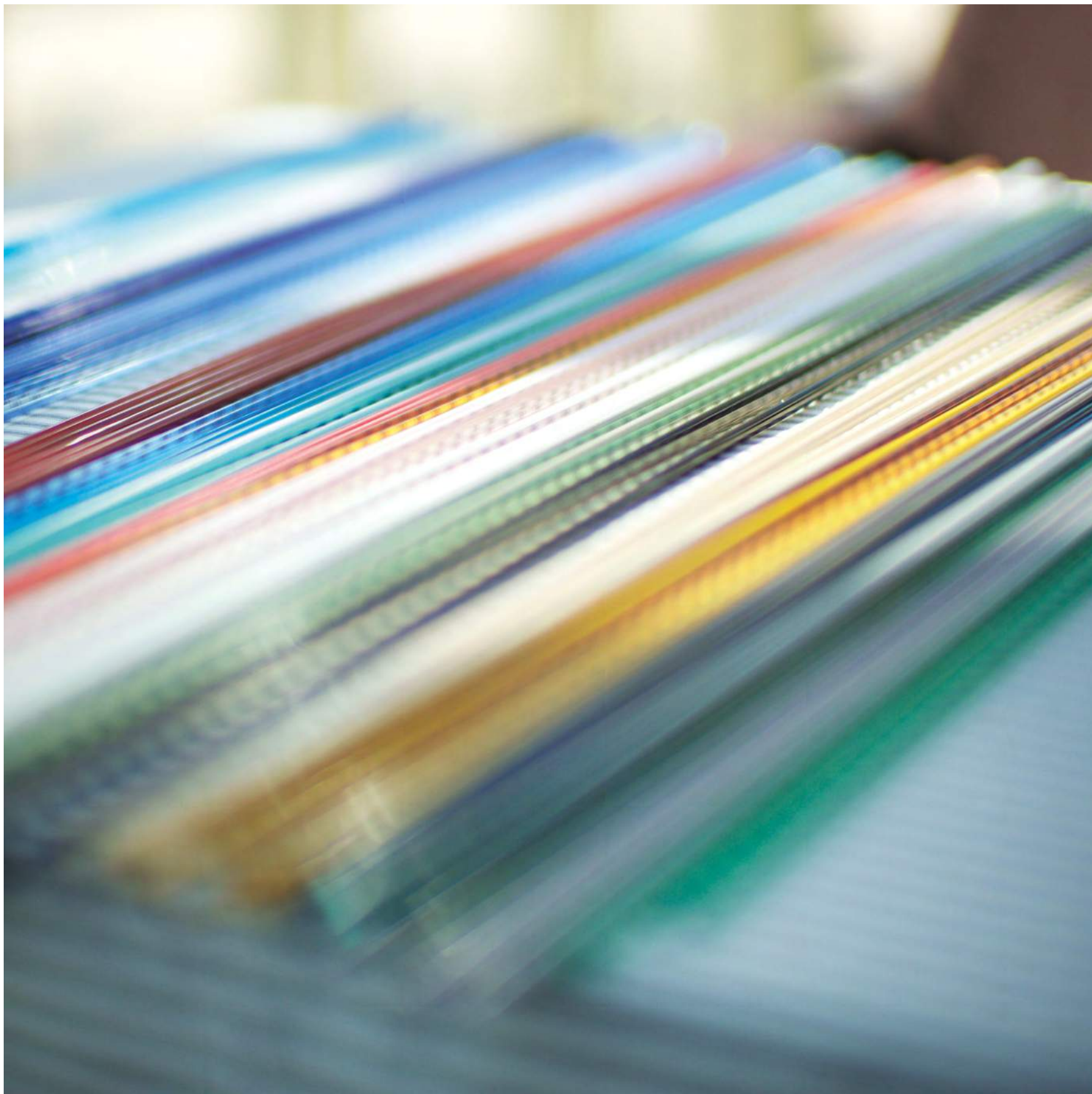
Nature, music, poetry of Lithuania

Inspiration comes from everywhere and everything, and the Lithuanian glass artists are very attentive to the environment that surrounds them. Each glass bead is unique, not only in its design, but also with its own history and personal interpretation reflecting their thoughts and feelings.



*“Flowers are my main inspiration.
Colours and shapes of flowers inspire
me to create beautiful beads.”*
- Dhondrup Lhamo





*"Inspiration comes when I am
working with the glass. I admire
the harmony of nature."*

- Nango Dromar





What started with a simple vision of helping people take care of themselves has transformed into a business for Trollbeads. Uniques are now some of the most coveted beads and are sought after by collectors all over the world. But for us it's still all about people.



Lise Aagaard is the founder of the Danish jewellery company Trollbeads A/S. The company was established in 1976 and is the originator of the beads-on-bracelet concept. Lise Aagaard started designing glass beads in 2001, and Trollbeads is now world famous for the enchanting way it plays with glass.

Lise Aagaard: *“I don’t consider the glass bead workshops a charity project. I had an idea of how we at Trollbeads could maybe make a positive difference - that’s all! Once a workshop was set up it was down to the people there to make it happen. And I am all in awe of their achievements. I taught them how to make beads, but the way they developed their skills and how they have used them leaves me speechless. They have taken Trollbeads to a whole new level and in directions I could never have imagined. Thousands of people across the world adore their unique designs – but their biggest fan is me.”*





ISBN 978-87-999591-0-5