

* Reprinted from “Glass Art” Magazine

Creating a New Art Glass Movement Framework Encasement

By Debbie Tarsitano

Over the past few years there has been a renewed interest in framework encasements, referred to in the past as lampwork paperweights. Many new glass artists want to learn the intriguing techniques and eagerly seek instruction, as well as necessary equipment. There is a growing group of artists who would like to make encasing framework their expression in glass.

In looking for information and instruction these artists are overlooking something valuable. Their growing interest lacks an understanding of where encased framework art came from, and even more importantly, where it is going within the art glass field. Once you learn to encase your designs, your challenge is to find acceptance by the art glass world and sales outlets for your work.

In the last 60 years of resurrecting the encased framework art form, there have been steps forward, but these steps have been small, and slow. There are critics who properly observe that paperweight artists have excellent technical skills yet lack really innovative designs. To overcome these criticisms, which are sincere, new artists need to explore bold new approaches to encased framework design. New visions will create new challenges and new challenges will lead to a fresh re-birth of the field. The idea that “it all has been done before” is limiting and untrue as you can see from the history of the art form.

Paperweights made in the 19th century captured floral designs, reptiles and milifiori canes in very traditional Victorian styles and primarily encased them in a globe of clear crystal. The artists of the 19th century generally produced their work in a factory setting as an aside to producing other useful glassware. Paperweights were production items, unsigned by individual artists. Compared to artists today, little or nothing is known about who specifically created the designs and what motivated their artistry. Even the factory often did not sign the work and collectors have come to identify work by the motifs and glass types used.

In a nineteenth century society with fancy desks and paper, paperweights were functional, a standard part of a desk set as well as decorative tokens given as objects of esteem. There were a few exceptions; factories would occasionally produce a commemorative or special work to demonstrate their best capabilities and secret techniques. Today such special works are the rarest of the rare and all antique works are in museums, dealers’ hands, or private collections.

Traditional antique paperweight designs primarily included flowers, reptiles and fruit, along with arrangements of milifiore canes. Except for a few antique examples of square plaques, paperweights were round. Centering the design was very important, and almost all designs were prisoners of this idea. This concentricity rule - that designs had to be

centered - restricted variety in design motifs as artist struggled for tightly balanced, harmonious designs that fit in a small round space.

Antique paperweight collectors set an early standard for what was expected in a successful design from artists. Today many collectors consider centering an important value point in acquiring antique paperweights. An un-centered design cuts market value in half. Badly placed bubbles also severely cut the market value of a piece to collectors. The collectors' emphasis on technical perfection therefore led the 20th century artists to place greater emphasis on encasement quality than on innovative design. The established market demanded that artists not sacrifice quality for the sake of a more dramatic design or message.

Following the heyday of antique paperweights, in the mid 20th century, artists began creating work relying somewhat on updated versions of antique traditions. Between 1920 and 1950 factories were still making paperweights in the US, Murano, China, (Peking glass), Czechoslovakia and France.

A new paperweight movement started in the 1940's. Pioneer in glass and dean of the American paperweight revival, Charles Kaziun, resurrected the field in the 1940's. Kaziun set new artistic standards for encased framework paperweights; working from his small Massachusetts home studio Kaziun beat a path that all contemporary artists followed. Other artists in America began to open small home studios. These artists introduced several differences from the past: (1.) Individual artists made the work in private studios, (2.) Encased framework was usually the only type of glass art produced in the studio. (3.) Artists built and owned their own small studio usually at their home, in a garage or basement. (4.) Artists either created the equipment needed by hand or picked up items here and there. (5.) Artists worked alone or with one assistant. (6.) Unlike the artists of the antique genre, 20th century artists always signed and sometimes numbered each piece with their name and date. (7.) There was no instruction. Left over information and working materials filtered down from the earlier century. Retired artists also shared snippets of information or provided references materials written long ago. Twentieth century artists had to figure things out on their own through costly and often disappointing trial and error.

Many collectors did not know very much about what they were buying and knew even less about how paperweights were made. Unlike other art glass forms; the mystery of paperweight making was an intriguing part of its mystique like that surrounding a magician's repertoire. Once artists figured out the process for themselves, few shared it in order to preserve the intrigue.

Until 1955 paperweight collecting was totally unorganized. Most collectors bought antique paperweights, which at that time were plentiful and affordable. In the early 1950's Mr. Paul Jokelson, an avid antique paperweight collector and importer, founded the Paperweight Collectors Association. Mr. Jokelson promoted paperweights and created a forum where new artists like Kaziun could show and sell their work and collectors could get together and learn the history. Mr. Jokelson wrote and published books documenting the field, giving it historical credibility.

Many other artists followed Charles Kaziun in the 1960's and 70's still laboring under a blanket of secrecy about how they created their work. These artists based their designs on the proven formula: round, clean, bubble-free, centered designs still ruled.

Following another antique tradition, many twentieth century artists made multiples of the same design. Collectors liked being able to own popular designs, which further encouraged repetition. Consequently the economics of making multiples created the income needed to run a studio. The major problem was that repetitive designs did not allow the art form to be valued as fine art. Repetition of design kept paperweights a part of the past, to be viewed as craft by the fine art field.

Individual artists were not factories, producing their art was very expensive so repetitive designs were purely an economic choice by artists and dealers. This formula, which worked economically, unfortunately conflicted with the standards of the art world. (If the paperweight revival had pursued individual, one-of-a-kind works of art, the development and progress of encased flamework would have been staggering. The result would be rapidly changing and developing designs.)

By the late 1970's antique paperweights had become very hard to find and the multiple contemporary work filled the gap. Now in the year 2002 antique paperweights have vanished from the market and are found only in a few specialty galleries and at auctions. With the onset of the modern makers, a fresh supply was readily available all the time to perpetuate the field as the antiques disappeared into museums and private collections.

By 1976 about a dozen artists in America were creating what they referred to as "lampwork" paperweights. Due to twenty years of promotional effort by Paul Jokelson, the Corning Museum of Glass, and other paperweight dealers, thousands of people were collecting antique and modern paperweights in an organized fashion. Paperweight auctions by large auction houses such as Sotheby's and Christies sold primarily antique paperweights using modern work as a warm up in the first 10 to 20 lots of each auction. Higher value was still placed on antique paperweights as modern artists struggled to create their own niche.

By the 1980's some paperweight makers grew tired of traditional formats and work formulas and began aspiring to make fine art. These artists began to play with shape as well as expanded design ideas that went beyond the restrictions of antique motifs. Although traditional work remained in demand, these adventuresome artists moved away from multiples of the same designs and toward individual artistic expressions. Leaving behind repetitive designs also left behind their economic benefits. Fewer more individualistic designs moved these artists away from the antique dealer market and toward art galleries as sales outlets.

It is long since there was a useful need for paperweights. We now live in a paperless society. It is a long time since paperweights were considered inexpensive decorative baubles to be left on desks. In the 21st century glass artists now have new choices: to make individual works of fine glass art. Some modern paperweight artists have stepped beyond the traditional with serious designs at prices equal to contemporary art glass. Now, many fine galleries choose not to carry work that is too reminiscent of the antique and not innovative enough to appeal to fine art collectors.

In addition to design size is an issue. Some critics say that larger scale pieces have greater credibility in art glass circles than small scale encased flamework. On the other hand, thousands of collectors like the intimacy of paperweights because of their small size. Gay Taylor, Director of Wheaton Village in Millville, New Jersey and the sponsor of the Wheaton Glass Lovers' Weekend says; "I have always felt that collectors love

paperweights because, unlike other forms of glass art, collectors can hold them in their hands and experience them in a way that other glass forms can not be experienced”

It is true, paperweights and framework encasements can be held and enjoyed in ways that other forms of glass cannot. Why should small size limit the acceptance of works within the art glass community? What about beauty, emotion, meaning, form? Is it all about size? Large or small, the collecting experience is the same in both cases, just enjoyed in different ways. The intimate glass creations of framework encasements invite the beholder into the art to connect to mental and emotional dimension of each piece. Collectors hold the work meditatively and explore the design. Smaller size seems too shallow a criticism for serious art lovers to accept.

The time has come for artists to build a strong modern field that should be called “encased framework”. Just as Dale Chihuly departed from the style of Louis Comfort Tiffany and Galle, modern encased frameworkeers can transcend fashions of design and shape to bring their art to a new higher level as full members of the fine art community. To reach high art status, create greater expectations in your designs. Comfortable tradition is no longer an option; explore your own new ideas, depart to a higher level. Encased framework is a relatively new form of glass art dating only from the 1840’s. Compare this to blown and other art glass forms, which have been around for centuries.

All art forms have evolved from a starting point. Like cave paintings to the Sistine Chapel of Michelangelo and Picasso’s works, art is growth, in concept and design, large scale or small.

Encasing framework is a growing segment of fine glass art. The field now needs to be defined by richer content and more depth of emotion in the work. Challenge yourselves by making work that conveys your own important message and become a part of the movement to expand and elevate the field of encased framework for the 21st century.

Debbie Tarsitano Design Studio

www.debbietarsitano.com

P.O. Box 488

Westford, Ma. 01886