

# Transitions: A Journey in Glass

By: **Bernard A. Drabeck**  
Photography by *Debbie Tarsitano*

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*I tell stories through glass, transforming my work over and over searching for the right images. The stories are about love, and how our lives and relationships parallel nature. Debbie Tarsitano*

I have known and admired Debbie Tarsitano [Figure 1] for many years - since the early 1970s, in fact, even before she and her father began their celebrated and beautifully productive excursions into the paperweight world.

For more than twenty-five years, she was one of the preeminent figures in the world of encasement. Her extraordinary paperweight artistry was celebrated by experts and collectors, not just because she was a woman in a male-dominated world, but because she was so good at what she did and so artistic in what she achieved.

For the past half dozen years, she has moved away from familiar paths into the creation of objects in pate de verre - another (and very difficult) area of glass production. How she has moved from her established and admired position in the world of paperweights into a new challenge is a remarkable story. That story is told in an exhibit mounted last fall at the Sandwich Museum of Glass. After the exhibit opened (to great acclaim I might add), I met with her at the museum to ask her what the show was about and what her journey in glass has been like.

**Ben: Where and when did the idea of the show come from?**

Debbie: I participated in a show called "Redux" last year at the Sandwich Glass Museum. Because of that show, Executive Director Katharine Campbell asked me if I



Figure 1: *Debbie Tarsitano in her studio.*

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would like to have a show of my own work.

**Ben: Was the Sandwich show originally conceived as a retrospective - showing the curve of your career in glass?**

Debbie: Yes, the plan was to show transitions and growth in my work from my paperweights to my current glass castings. I wanted to take the public through each phase of my work, showing how an art form develops.

**Ben: When did you begin the actual work on the show; what criteria determined your choice of pieces to be included?**

Debbie: I began working in the summer of 2012. I started by creating groupings based on design and technique. At the show entrance, I presented work from the 1970s. As viewers went around the room, they could discover how one design led to another.

**Ben: How long did the planning on the show and execution take?**

Debbie: I planned the show for more than a year. First, I made a layout of the show ahead of time so when it came time to place the work in the gallery we already had an idea of how it would look. Then I planned lighting and worked with the museum on wall colors. Installing the show took about a week - with lots of help from Curator Dorothy Schofield and the excellent and very helpful Sandwich Museum staff.

**Ben: First in the rooms, of course, we encounter your work in paperweights. What was it about paperweights that first attracted you, and how did the desire to produce paperweights develop?**

Debbie: I first saw a paperweight in a country auction in the late 1960s. I found it beautiful and intriguing. When I became exposed to the antique French paperweights at Christie's and Sotheby's I immediately fell in love with their fanciful depiction of nature. I met Paul Jokelson in 1975, which was a turning point; he introduced me to the PCA, where I learned about the rich history of paperweights. I began showing and selling my new work at PCA functions. Paul became one of my closest friends and supporters encouraging me to achieve my goals.

**Ben: How did that attraction resonate with your father--because you and your Dad seemed to develop side by side?**

Debbie: When I was a small child, my parents kindled my life-long interest in painting and sculpture by taking me on Sunday visits to New York art museums. Additionally, my

Dad and I were always very close and shared the same interests in gardening, collecting and art.

The whole family also loved auctions. My Mom Kathryn, Dad, and I were together at that first country auction where we purchased a paperweight. All of us were intrigued by what we had bought and my father particularly wanted to find out how this piece might have been made.

It helped that my father was technically oriented. He was a radio technician in World War II, one of those guys who can figure everything out and put things together using this and that from found parts and pieces. It really helped to be that way in the early studio days when you had to make your own tools. In the mid-70s, while I was studying art at Hofstra University, my father and I set up a primitive torch on a card table in our garage. It was difficult for us to find materials and equipment. We began by using a small welder's torch to melt Pyrex glass, which turned out to be tricky, without producing good results. Artist Robert Banford reached out to help me buy my first flameworking torch. Our friend, James Kontes, gave us some soft glass, which was easier to melt, and we immediately improved. From soft glass, we then moved on to creating work encased in optical crystal that we melted with large torches.

At first I modeled my work after nineteenth century antique paperweights, which I studied at the auction houses. Through trial and error we succeeded in achieving some skill in flame working floral designs in molten glass and encasing them, and thus created our first simple paperweights. By the time I graduated with a degree in Fine Art from Hofstra in 1978 I was working full time as a glass artist.

The art glass movement was then in full swing and we found our way within it. We were

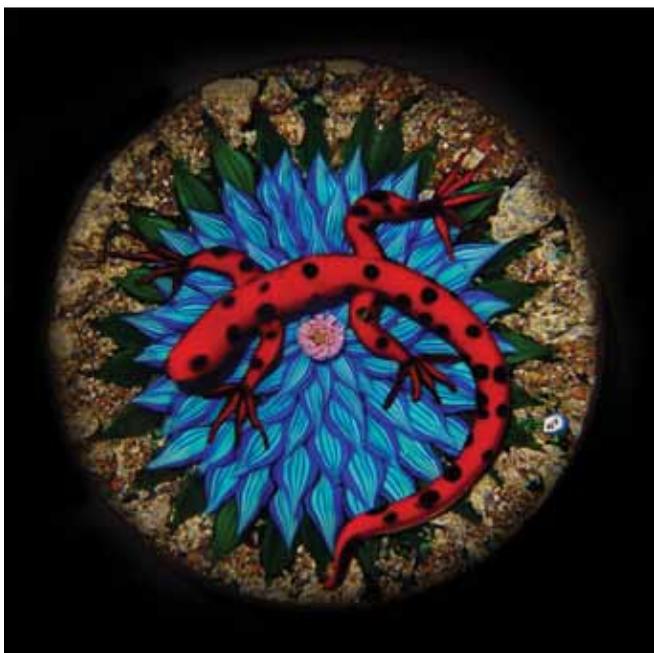


Figure 2: "Red Salamander on Blue Dahlia." Salamander by Delmo Tarsitano on dahlia by Debbie Tarsitano, all on a rock ground by Delmo Tarsitano. 2 1/4" diameter.

both up for the challenges and we helped each other to succeed. Our debut was at the PCA convention in Boston in 1977, and both my father and I found a home for many years in the paperweight community.

My father and I worked together from 1976 until his death in 1990, fourteen years, which seemed all too short. Dad made his own designs which reflected his lifelong interest in animals, fruit, and insect motifs. My own designs differed from his, concentrating on flowers, glass canes, and latticinio (twisted rods of colored glass). During the eighties, we made a few works which combined both our talents in one design. My very favorite such paperweight is my father's red salamander resting on my blue dahlia [Figure 2].

**Ben: Would you please explain what a compound paperweight is?**

Debbie: Compound paperweights have flame

work designs on two levels. The challenge in making a compound design is to fit one design over the second so that both can be seen in a double encasement. I began placing insects over flowers to create dimensional scenes. In some of my compound weights, you will see butterflies from glass artist Paul Ysart from Wick, Scotland. He gave me some of his butterflies to place over my dahlias and zinnias [Figure 3].

**Ben: Your collaborations with Ed Poore are brilliant and powerful artistic statements. How did they evolve?**

Debbie: I began to think about designing shapes other than the typical round paperweight to take advantage of the optical qualities of crystal. Working with Schott optical crystal, my father and I collaborated with master glass cutter Ed Poore of Sagamore, Massachusetts, to design optical cuttings. Ed Poore added masterful, intricate, hand-cutting to the exteriors of our paperweights. We called these brightly cut paperweights "plaques" [Figure 4]. The



Figure 3: "Summer Fantasy." Debbie Tarsitano purple dahlia with Paul Ysart butterflies. 4" dia.



Figure 4: "Be My Valentine Heart Plaque." Heart shaped flat plaque with heart canes surrounding flowers on dark blue fiber ground. 3" high.

"Passionflower" with waffle cut on cobalt blue is my favorite plaque. This piece was made the day my passionflower vine bloomed outside my studio.

**Ben: What were some of your principal collaborations with Max Erlacher?**

Debbie: In 1976 I met Steuben's master engraver Max Roland Erlacher of Corning, New York. At our first meeting I asked Max: "If I made a drawing, could you engrave it on the base of one of my paperweights?" He answered, "Yes," and thus began a long and cherished working relationship creating paperweights and plaques with important historical scenes and portraits with Max's engravings framed by my framework. Our collaborations began in the 1970s with simple subjects that progressed over time through 2009 to multiple plaques depicting personages and complex scenes, such as "The Witness to the Battle," "Anne Frank" (in which the flowers are made in a gingham pattern that reflects the colors of



Figure 5: "Anne Frank." Flat plaque with top thumbnail cutting the canal cutting the canal at the Anne Frank House engraved along the side. Portrait of Anne Frank writing in her diary, flowers same color as in her diary. Debbie Tarsitano design, Max Erlacher engraving. 5" diameter.

her diary) [Figure 5], and "The Outstretched Hand of Liberty."

The "Liberty" sculpture is large scale and depicts a story that most American families can identify with - the idea of coming to America. The sculpture uses marble and glass to tell its story. Helping in its creation were my father Delmo, Max Erlacher, Ed Poore, and the Vermont Marble Company. I dedicated this work to my grandmother Josephina and celebrated her life with her favorite holiday toast: "Peace, Good Health, and God Bless America."

**Ben: What was your principal purpose in using canes and latticinio as design elements in your work?**

Debbie: I began perfecting my own millifiori canes and latticinio and developed ways to use them in my designs, not as enhancement



Figure 6: "Paradise Lost." Plaque with latticino and millefiori elements.

around the design. The snakes, for instance, were made using only millifiori canes, and many other designs soon followed. Over time, I developed more than fifty styles of millifiori canes with different complex motifs. I began using my "artist's palette" of canes to compose collages that expressed ideas - as in the "Paradise Lost" collage [Figure 6]. A turmoil of canes and human profiles suggests the Southeast Asia Tsunami of 2004. Ed Poore hand cut a wave into the side of the piece, integrating the inside and outside of the design.

**Ben: Your collages are particularly rich and resonant. How (and why) did they become a medium for you?**

Debbie: After twenty-plus years of mastering many glass working techniques and themes, I began developing collages to tell stories through glass. These collages combine flowers and symbols in fanciful designs [Figure 7]. Within one of my collages, for instance, I created a world where bees climb into flowers growing on beds of ladybugs. In my work, I



Figure 7: "Dahlia Collage." A magnum red dahlia collage paperweight with heart canes and flowers on a pink fiber ground with ladybugs. 4" diameter.

made grasses of colored glass fibers; millifiori canes became hearts, latticino canes became flowers.

**Ben: How did the technique you call "line drawings in glass" come about?**

Debbie: After working with Dino Rosin, a glass maestro from Murano, I began making lens-shaped objects. I left the paperweight form to create a fresh shape in which to place my designs. Inside the lens form, I began creating what I called "line drawings in glass." To make them, I shaped fine strands of colored overlaid glass freehand while keeping the glass strand hot in a torch. This technique allowed me to design portraits in glass, while the lens shape gave me a much larger "canvas" to work on than smaller paperweights afford.

My first line drawing was "Madam X" [Figure 8] after the famous painting by John Singer Sergeant. "The Snake Charmer" was next, containing a profile of a mysterious siren jux-



Figure 8: "Madam X." Lens with flamework and encased portrait of "Madam X" with cane flowers and canes floating on a blue powder ground over ruby. Sandblast finish to back. 4" diameter.



Figure 9: "Twins." Lens with portrait of "Twins" in red profile on green powdered ground; cane flowers and snake made of canes. 4 1/2" diameter.

taposed with snakes made of millifiori canes. "Twins in red" [Figure 9] includes a line drawing of my friend the late Joan Dworkin and her

twin sister.

**Ben:** It is well known that the dahlia is your



Figure 10: "Lateral Drip." Lateral red blood droplet dahlia design. 7" long. Collection of the Corning Museum of Glass.

Figure 11: "Together and Apart." Two sculptures make one design. First - 2 line draw flameworked portraits with flowers and external batutto cutting. Second - 1 portrait flowers heart made of canes with similar batutto cutting. both 3 3/4" diameter. Cutting by Ed Poore.

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**signature flower. But what do you mean by a "lateral drip dahlia"? How difficult was it to master this technique?**

Debbie: This technique revisits my red dahlia, recreating the dahlia in sculptural forms that push the limits of hot-forming glass in a torch [Figure 10]. After more than thirty years of torch work, I had developed great control over hot, moving glass. This drip design, however, poses extreme difficulty because of the need to control the sculpting of the exterior molten glass so that its motion does not distort the molten glass flower inside the sculpture. This sculptural process takes planning and constant control over a large drip of molten glass while protecting the molten interior design. These drips were very challenging and exciting to make and they threw open the doors to creating entirely new shapes.

**Ben: What in your journey was the significance of the "small sculptures" you created?**

Debbie: This group shows how I combined all acquired techniques from previous years as well as several new ones - such as applying flamework and oil painted canvas to the exterior of sculptures [Figures 11 & 12]. I began building the design from the inside and continued the design onto the exterior of the work. I called this work "Small Sculpture" and dropped the term paperweight completely.

**Ben: What led you to attempt mastery of the very difficult process called pate de verre? First of all, what is pate de verre?**

Debbie: This is the definition I found: Written records show the Pate de Verre process dates to the second millennium B.C, possibly in Meso-

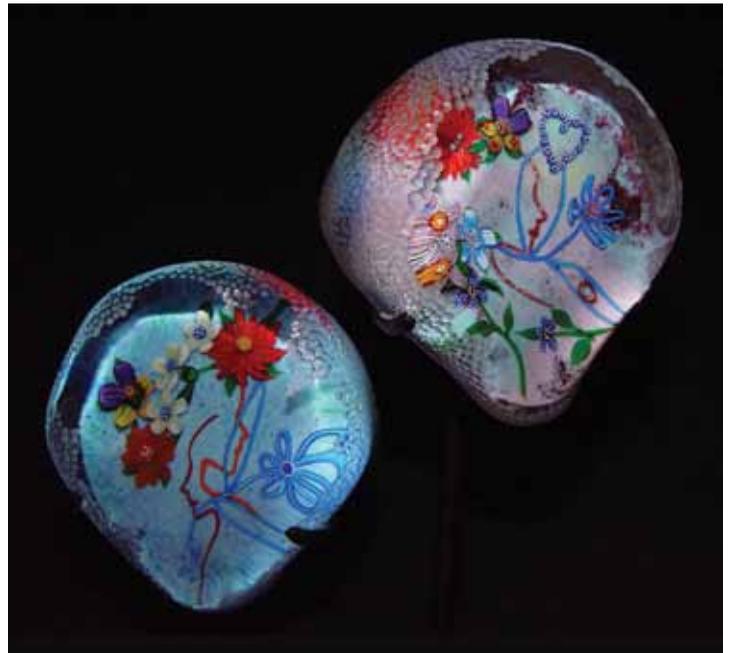


Figure 12: "Sapphire Bird." A bird sculpture with encased flamework and a painted exterior having a sapphire gemstone in the eye and other parts of the body. 7" long.

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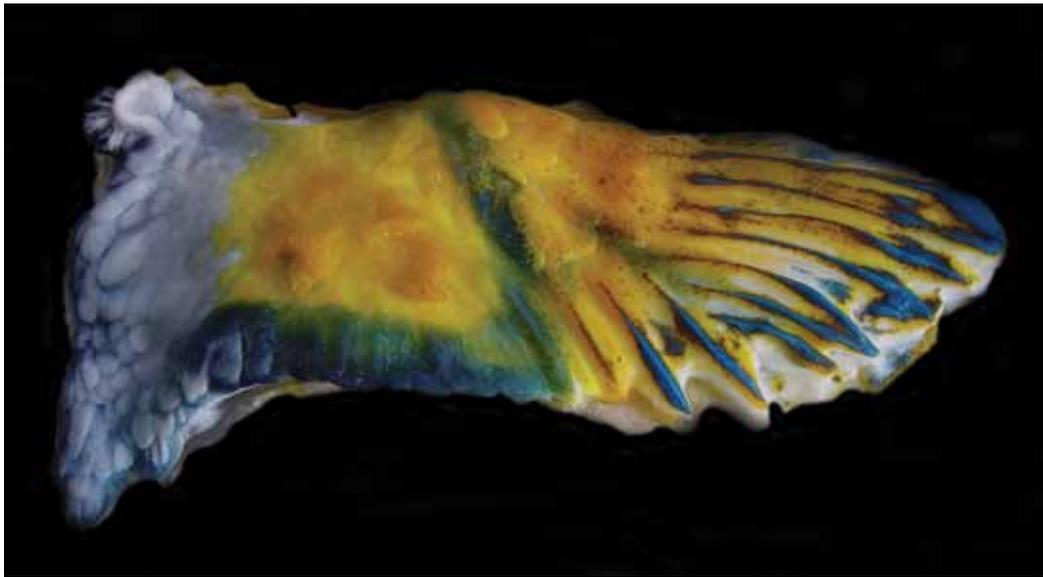


Figure 12: Pate de Verre "Wing Through the Storm." 40" long x 9" high.

potamia to produce jewelry and glass sculptures. Kiln casting involves the preparation of a mold that is often made of plaster or plaster mixtures. A rubber form is made from the original sculpted clay model and then used to make a wax version of the original clay sculpture. The wax model is then surrounded with a jacket of high temperature refractory plaster in a process known as "investment." After the refractory plaster hardens and dries, the wax is melted out of the refractory material using a steamer, leaving an empty cavity that exactly duplicates the original sculpture.

The plaster refractory mold must next be hand filled with layers of powdered or chipped glass. The heat resistant plaster mold is placed in a kiln with a funnel-like refractory opening filled with more solid glass granules or blocks. The kiln is heated to a high temperature, normally 2300 degrees fahrenheit (1400 degrees celsius); the glass melts into a liquid filling the mold. The molten glass must then be cooled very slowly until cold in the annealing process. The plaster mold is broken to pieces and removed, revealing the cast glass piece it had contained. Several days are needed to clean

and refine the piece using grinding and polishing materials. From start to finish, small pieces take weeks and larger works take months to finish [Figure 12]. Because of these challenges, pate de verre is not commonly found, but two important users of this technique include Daum and Lalique.

**Ben: How did you become interested in this very difficult and time-consuming glass-making process?**

Debbie: I was inspired by meeting and taking a class from artists Shinichi and Kimiaki Higuchi of Japan, famous for their pate de verre. I began to transform my work again, translating my designs into cast glass. Through months of experimentation on my own I learned by trial and error how to create molds from my clay models. I had to make many calculations for the kiln and learn how to make rubber and wax molds. I spent a lonely winter doing those experiments, in a form of trial and error that reminded me of how my father and I began so long ago, except this time I was alone. Perhaps because of the season, my work took on the organic colors of winter. I often would observe doves huddling together in the land-

Figure 13: Pate de Verre "Frozen Snow." 10" wide x 6" deep.

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scape waiting patiently for spring. This inspired "Frozen with Snow," a bird almost completely encased in ice [Figure 13]. "Life Cycle" [Figure 14] depicts the life of a bird from egg to its last remains. I wanted to portray the effects of the sometimes-harsh environment on wild life and yet show their endurance in an endless natural cycle.



**Ben:** Would you explain one of your works in this process - how you conceived the piece and the steps in creating it?

Debbie: The three pate de verre cast glass pieces in "Life Cycle Puzzle" [Figure 14] represent one idea. The story of the piece is the life cycle of a bird told within three separate cast glass sculptures. I began with a clay model, which lets me think out my design. Sculpting in clay is not like using glass in a torch as a medium; the work of clay sculpting is more contemplative. As I made my sculpture, I began seeing how nature fits bits and

pieces together, so I decided to tell the story of the life cycle using the puzzle as a metaphor. This work speaks of the balance of nature, the transformation of creatures around us. We are all a part of nature, pieces in the puzzle which always return to the earth. In the end, what was once living just seems to disappear.

**Ben:** One of your most recent works is "Anticipation of Spring," done in 2012. This piece is an oil painting on canvas with cast glass vase and birds. What inspired this work?

Debbie: This piece was made for the Sandwich REDUX 2012 show. It was inspired by two painted and blown sandwich glass pieces in the museum collection. In the painting, we see a pair of birds which sit on a bare branch inside a vase decorated with tulips in relief on its exterior [Figure 15]. The birds to me sym-



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Figure 14: "Life Cycle Puzzle." 3 part Pate de Verre sculpture fitting together like a puzzle. Based upon the life cycle of a bird or found objects in a forest. 20" wide x 13" deep.



Figure 15: "Anticipation of Spring." Painting with cast glass vase and birds after the Sandwich Museum blown and painted pieces. 24" high.

bolize the thought that during winter we all anticipate spring and patiently wait for its arrival.

**Ben:** You have worked long and hard to develop your new skills. Does your present direction exclude flame working? You

spent years developing an acknowledged and renowned mastery of these techniques. They should not, it seems to me, be excluded from your artistic vocabulary.

Debbie: I agree with you. In fact, this winter I did a workshop on flame working and encasements at The Studio at the Corning Museum of Glass. The reason for the workshop was to keep a traditional and significant set of skills and techniques alive for a new generation of glass artists. Doing this workshop invigorated me, inspiring me to consider innovative ways in which I could incorporate aspects of these techniques into some of my new work. Revisiting my earlier days at the flame also brought home a very important personal truth: today my technical knowledge and interests have gone beyond paperweights, but paperweights laid the foundation for what I know now.

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**To Learn More:**

More of Debbie Tarsitano's work can be seen on her web site <http://debbietarsitano.com>.

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 **About the Author:** 

Bernard A. Drabeck, a member of PCA, Inc. since 1973, served this organization as both Vice President and President. He is Professor Emeritus from Greenfield Community College where he served as coordinator of the English Department.

1976 -----The Evolution of the Art of Debbie Tarsitano ----- 2014

