

# The Artist Collector Connection

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Printed in Glass Art Magazine

Last spring I stood in front of a large imposing granite headstone in a lovely New Hampshire cemetery. The name FULLER engraved in dignified roman letters brought to mind many memories of the late collector and patron of the glass and fine arts, Henry Melville Fuller of Manchester, New Hampshire.

I met Henry Fuller, in the early 1980's. We subsequently met many times at glass events, shows and auctions over the years. Henry was a true New England gentleman, and I soon learned, a man of fine and well-informed taste in art. In the years following our first meeting, Henry built one of the finest modern and antique paperweight collections in the world. Through dealers representing my father Delmo and I, Henry Fuller acquired over 20 of our works as well as the work of many antique and modern paperweight artists. Each time I met Henry, he would tell me how much pleasure he derived from owning my work. He complemented my latest designs; pointing out the details he admired most. It meant a lot to have such wonderful conversations with someone who understood so much about my message.

At one of our meetings about 10 years ago, Henry told me that when he began collecting Hudson River School paintings in the 1950s he started by reading all the books on the subject he could find. Then he began visiting art galleries. Finally, Henry began buying art that he liked, eventually building a museum quality collection of fine paintings.

He told me that when he took an interest in crystal paperweights, he repeated his self-education process. First, the books, and then the Gallery visits, mainly to Leo Kaplan in New York, and finally he began collecting. Henry always invested in what he personally loved; he first educated and then trusted his own taste no matter what others advised him to do. In short, as a collector, he depended on his own sense of values when buying art.

Henry Fuller amassed a superb collection of American Hudson River artist landscapes valued at tens of millions of dollars. (He once confided to me his sense of disbelief, that a prominent dealer in New York paid him \$480,000 for a painting he had paid less than \$3,000 for in the 1950s.)

At his death last year, Henry Fuller donated his glass paperweight collection along with his oil paintings – in all worth some \$43 million -- to the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, New Hampshire. Henry wanted to enrich the community he grew up in and to share the wisdom and gratification he derived from the art he collected. Henry Fuller is just one of many collectors whose appreciation and encouragement have enriched my career and encouraged me to persist in my work. Henry taught me about the love of art, not from the point of view of the artist, but from the point of view of the beholder, the collector and the art lover.

A collector from the same era, early in my career and as unforgettable as Henry was the late Mr. Arthur Rubloff, a Chicago real estate developer. We met in 1979 at the Corning Museum of Glass "Great Paperweight Exhibit;" I was then 20 years old and making my earliest work in glass. Random seating at the Corning Exhibition dinner

accidentally sat us next to each other for an evening. During the meal we talked about glass and shared our interest in paperweights, enjoying a great time. I did not know it at the time, but after our dinner meeting in Corning, Mr. Rubloff began adding my work to his collection. Each time we met he encouraged me to continue and made motivating and inspiring comments about my current designs. He continued collecting my work until his death in the late 1980s. Nothing said during the meal prepared me for what I learned later -- that Mr. Rubloff was one of the most famous glass paperweight collectors in the world. A man of wealth, he had earned a reputation for amassing large collections in a single day. (Once, he authorized a dealer bidding for him to buy every lot in an auction at Sotheby's when the first few lots sold for only a few thousand dollars.) Some of Mr. Rubloff's enormous collection is now housed at the Art Institute of Chicago, which he endowed with enormous generosity. Through the years Mr. Rubloff acquired over 40 pieces from my dealers. From our conversations I learned that he found the detail and content of my work remarkable, he even enjoyed looking at the work in his later years as his eyesight was failing.

As artists we enjoy our friendships with collectors. We need to remember that our work has to remain our own genuine inner thoughts if it is to attract collectors to us. Collectors who view glass as art realize that the artists' own original creative processes reveals the best work. I find nearly all collectors readily accept the idea that my work must be of my own design and making. In the creative process we artists disclose our own point of view and how we process information.

In meeting collectors I have explained how certain of my own experiences have triggered designs in my work. It enriches their enjoyment of the art when collectors hear artists tell why they created something. It also creates a valuable verbal history of the work.

Some artists seek approval from collectors by mimicking popular designs. Taking that path only cheats the artist out of opportunities to make his or her greatest work. After a while collectors realize such work lacks integrity. I feel the collectors know when something is not genuine and original, and in the long run such works serves no one. Great artwork comes out of the artist's deepest passion for an idea. It is difficult for an artist to maintain excitement, high energy and quality in creating someone else's vision.

Collectors have many tastes; they look forward to what we may create and put before them anticipating our very best. As artists have an obligation to present work of fine quality and highest personal integrity. A collector Alexander Acevedo advised me several years ago to make every piece "Wow them." As a collector he felt an artist capable of creating great work should go for it and never settle for less. He felt high quality and high-energy work should set the standard in glass art.

When collector's view your work and are drawn into it they make an emotional connection. I sometimes think of it as almost a telepathic bond. Collectors at shows are often in a room filled with many choices. No matter how many designs there are to choose from somehow they select one piece that speaks to them. What makes the connection? I find when I chat with collectors we often have something in common personally. Most often we seem to share some type of experience from our pasts -- not necessarily being in the same place at the same time -- I am talking about things in common based on our similar values.

Often collectors and artists share what is most precious to both about life. I have not spoken with a collector yet about my work that I have not experienced sharing of values. Thinking about this connection, I have concluded that it isn't only form, shape, color, and design that attract people to our individual work. A parallel between the artist's emotional expression and the collector's life references forms a bond that cannot be created or designed ahead of time. It just exists naturally.

The sharing of emotional value explains why one collector is drawn to an artist's work while another collector sees nothing in it. The emotional feeling that produced the work, when shared by the collector, connects artist to collector. The artistic path to take is to create your work freely, from you're your own feelings, uninhibited by trends and styles. The emotion behind your work will connect you with collectors who feel it too and care about the same things. Collectors will not connect with an imitation of a feeling and will not connect with you or your work no matter how skillful you may be.

Over the years many collectors I have known have spoken to me about my work; they always bring out something that connects me back to my own experiences as an artist. When I talk about my work and how it relates to those experiences, I get a renewed sense of purpose. For example, two collectors from New York, Ed and Sheryl, recently purchased my work at the Urban Glass Auction at the 2002 Glassblowers' Ball in New York City. When we met later in the evening we discussed what they liked about the piece, "Scarlet Dahlia." They loved the rich, powerful, vibrant color, the beauty and flawless precision of the framework design. As we talked, I learned that Ed had a Father very similar to mine. Ed's father taught him the same work ethic that my Father Delmo taught me. The more we talked, the more we found that we had similar upbringing and experiences. Although we had only met just hours before because of my artwork and their appreciation of it, it was like comparing notes with someone I had known all my life. Somehow the way I created the piece led us both to share our common experiences in life. From these comments and others by collectors, I realize the expression of my work as an accumulation of all my personal experiences and feelings about life. My background influences how I express my art. As a child I learned from my parents how to construct my ideas bringing them to a reality. I am talking about the way one goes about building something. I realized that Ed and I shared similar methods of constructing and expressing ideas. This similarity evidently came out in my work and we made a connection.

Collectors sometimes say they do not know why they like the work but never the less they were attracted to it. I feel it is the sharing of emotional experience, it explains that inexpressible connection between artists and collectors that arises with all art.

Collectors also see things in our work artists do not see; they have a very special outside perspective. I recently spoke with Martin, a collector, about a sculpture I made with small red Dahlias and black and white snakes. He said, "This piece symbolizes you and your Father, Delmo." I was surprised and had to look again at my own work. I realized he could be right. Lately I have re-designed my work creating sculptural pieces. I had unconsciously included my signature red dahlia flower with a snake, which was one of my Father's favorite designs. I thought my inspiration was using the two contrasting designs and color to express an exotic and intriguing combination. Yet based on Martin's comment, I agree it was a way to let the feeling of my Father's work and his memory into my new work. As always in life I did not leave him behind.

Speaking with collectors has really enriched my connection to my work and the outside world. The collectors uplift the artist and often point out delicate discoveries artists can't see about themselves. Creating art glass is a difficult process; to achieve the end result we all suffer the strains and demands of the medium. We are also distracted by schedules for shows, studio finances and equipment problems, the necessary evil of the business side of our studios. Speaking to collectors has a calming effect centering us leading us back from the edge supporting us with a welcoming light of understanding. There is a tremendous psychological aspect to the artwork we make and collectors can often perceive our inner thoughts.

Often collectors say that pieces in their collection are like their children. They adore them all equally and would not part with any. When some collectors tell me about how and when they acquired a work in their collection they will often look to their spouse and say, "remember that was the year we moved into our new house or that was the year we were married". So their collections are connected to memories as well as valued artworks.

Collectors also give very special thought to displaying the work they own. Many create beautiful architectural spaces, using lighting and finely crafted cabinetry to enhance the enjoyment of their collections. It is really nice to know that collectors preserve our work and care for it for future generations.

The truth is, when all is said and done, no one will know, except collectors in the future, what the best work of our time was. At least 100 years will have to pass before anyone will see what work stands the test of time. Some work popular today will not hold up later, as values change. Other work unknown today will be the rarities of tomorrow. The integrity of feeling, the motivation embodied in your work will confer longevity. Collectors, who cherish and hold on to the work and pass it down to future generations, will know the answer of what the best art glass truly was. Collectors who connect with appreciation and affection will convey that love of the work to their family. Collectors often introduce me to younger special grandchildren; nieces or children who share the collecting interest with their elders and who will be the recipient of the collection. How proud the collector usually is to have such a person in their life. Then there are others like Henry Fuller who did not leave his collection to a family member but instead decided to share it with a museum so many thousands of people can enjoy it for many generations.

When I watch the Antiques Road Show on Channel 2, our Public Broadcasting Station, it does not amaze me when someone brings an obscure piece of glass given to him or her by his or her great grandmother. The piece they had in their house as a keepsake from a beloved relative turns out to be worth a fortune. There is usually an interesting story of how great grandma met the artist at a street fair in the 1800's and paid five dollars for the work. Or how Grandpa had been a collector and had a room full of art in a style ahead of its time, the work lovingly passed down through the family. The work is often by an obscure glass artist who has now as the expert says, "come into enormous popularity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the work is now rare and at the peak of the collectors market."

The collectors are the keepers of the flame protecting and preserving our artwork, bringing you and your message to new generations. Artists need to bear in mind the importance of the work they commit to the future.

Often in the end all that transcends time is the memory of the connection developed between artist and collector, and the work.