

Encased Art: Moving Toward The Next Peak

By

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When I began my career in hot glass encasement in 1976, the only references to this type of work were antique paperweights made in the 1800's and early contemporary artist paperweights. The majority of antique work featured a standard set of several popular flowers of the day, snakes, salamanders and the occasional butterfly. Other antique weights were based on millefiori patterns and some combined flowers and millefiori. A few antique paperweights deviated from those designs and they are now considered rare examples.

With the exception of antique examples from the Pantin factory in France most designs were flat. For unknown reasons Pantin stressed dimensional work with designs that still rival many encasements made today. Antique paperweights were mostly production factory made pieces using simple decorative motifs.

When the art of encasement was revived in the 1950's most of the new work resembled antique paperweights in its style, design and technique. As the techniques were being rediscovered, making work that looked like the antique was encouraged. Even artists who stretched their ideas a little did not go far beyond the same traditional flowers, insects, reptiles and millefiori canes. Adventurous artists included a bee perhaps or some variation of an antique flower. At that time encasement techniques remained largely unchanged from the antique and as with antique paperweights designs had a single view.

The encasement was made from the top down and the flat design lay parallel to the surface it sat on. There was generally not very much about the designs to discuss, they remained simple and with few exceptions, contemporary work in the fifties lacked depth or dimension. The lone exception was Charles Kaziun of Brockton, Massachusetts.

Kaziun (universally referred to as “Charlie”) set up and ran the first individual paperweight studio in the early 1950’s. Initially, he experimented with a variety of designs reminiscent of antiques. Later, Kaziun broke out of the antique mold to play with new designs inside the flat form, including unusual black and white renderings of individuals and scenes. Today, Kaziun ’s less common and original efforts are the most sought after and valuable examples of work done at that time. This demonstrates how original work always stands out over time, becomes the next peak and holds its importance.

By the 1960’s encasement techniques and designs began to change slowly but the ideas still expressed traditional flora and fauna in the antique flat style. Artists of the time worked in a world steeped in tradition, caught between the past and the present. There was a big collecting interest fostered in antique paperweights and most selling venues that handled antique paperweights simply added contemporary work to their offerings. But, contemporary work unfortunately took second place in these venues.

By the end of the Sixties, there was still no real category or niche for contemporary encased work in the market. The growing number of studios focused primarily on encasement made it obvious that contemporary glass artists were interested in developing encasement techniques. They were seriously committed to bringing this art form forward. However, work resembling the antique was still strongly encouraged and

reinventing the antique style was rewarded and admired by strong collector interest and sales.

Each new generation brings its own ideas to an art form. By the 1970's times were beginning to change. The best contemporary ideas flourish no matter how unacceptable they may seem at first; there is no stopping progress. Leaders always arise to plant the seeds and create change. Paul Stankard began the next major change in traditional encasement and motif. He began to include botanically accurate flowers in his designs. He later lifted the design off of the flat parallel surface to stand upright and created dimensional work with a new view. This manipulation of encasement lifted the designs up, which gave them a less passive appearance

Encasements, which Stankard called "Botanicals," allowed the viewer to see the design in a more intellectually intelligent way. The viewer no longer looked down at the design but looked up at it and around it. This idea created a more contemporary look and began to create possibilities for new design ideas that departed from antique styles. In the beginning the paperweight community did not readily accept this new work. This work had to seek outside approval from the greater art glass world to find an audience. The larger world of art glass lovers looked upon this achievement and began to accept encasement as contemporary art glass.

Looking back I realize the "Botanical" was not a paperweight, and was not supposed to be a paperweight. It was a pivotal piece that brought the art of encasement forward. Stankard's "Botanical" marks the beginning of seeing encased designs as sculptural art. The work was about using the technique of encasement to create new art

forms. This work created a new level in the use of encasement as sculpture, establishing a new category of glass art that might be described as “Contemporary Encasement.”

More than 25 years have passed since the premiere of the “Botanical.” Progress in encasement has moved slowly forward. A niche for this work is slowly developing. A few artists have moved forward with original, high-quality, innovative work. Some have imitated the “Botanical Style.” Some artists fell in love with using the technique of achieving upright dimension, forgetting that no matter how high or well you can push a design into the glass; progress is about originality and integrity of the idea. The love affair with dimensional work is just about over and artists are beginning to re-examine their concepts.

In the late 1990’s artists began to pay greater attention to design in their encasements. They began to explore new themes and to take greater risks on new concepts. For most artists the antique style had become a distant memory, respected as the history of the work. An artist-based niche for contemporary work was beginning to develop.

Today we have a greater number of talented artists exploring new ideas in encasement. For contemporary encasement to make yet another leap forward, however, these artists need to take their thinking to the next level. They may view their own work in the context of what has been made by others. Artists always have a grand curiosity about what is happening in the field around them. Even Picasso, Gauguin and Warhol in their time looked outside their own studios to see what was new. So you are in good company if you too are watching the art around you. BUT, letting what others do displace your own ideas handicaps new visions. The next mountain peaks in encasement design

are deeply inside ourselves, just waiting for us to bring them outside. There can be no progress if artist just copy or to imitate what others have done.

The techniques of encasement are well established and tools as well as glass to create the work are available all over the world. Mainstream fine art has created disciplines that allow artists to make progress in design. The next leap in encasement lies in the process of design, how we fashion the internal message to be encased into sculpture. Encasement affords the artist a unique format in which to convey complex ideas.

The design process guides talent to make it possible to create substance, passion and drama in the work. The design process also makes it possible for artists to make enduring statements about how we live today. Already, multifaceted narratives have shown up in some work and there is much further opportunity to explore such narratives encased in glass.

Two years ago I began thinking about moving my work forward beyond paperweights. It was time for me to take a personal leap toward my next peak using more of what I knew as an artist and my technical skills. I began experimenting with glass again, playing with the glass, seeing what would happen outside the spherical shape. At the start I did not realize that my whole way of creating my art would change. I began to think more about what I really loved and what inspired me. I knew I could translate the answers into new expansive forms. I returned to my formal training as a fine art painter and began drawing again to re-create my glass art.

My experimentation led me to an approach for developing new work using encasement that inspires the ideas and transforms the subjects I encase instead of

concentrating on altering the technical encasement itself. These experiments also let me think about ways to expand the use of encasement into other glass art forms. The more I worked to make sense of all of the new possibilities the clearer it became that I was looking ahead to just the tip of a very exciting iceberg.

The question for artists who want to move forward is: “How do we add ever greater substance to our designs?” Many artists ask the question, “Where do I start?” My experiments have shown that a five-step design process answers this question for me. The preparation for this process if you care to try it is to look inside and examine what is important to you as an artist; find out where as an individual your heart lies. What inspires you? This takes time. Once you uncover your own deep inspiration, you will really love it.

In experimenting with my approach to contemporary encasement I realized a hot glass design must start in the artist’s head and then quickly move on to a piece of paper. We do not always associate sketching with hot glass. A friend of mine draws his new designs on the concrete floor of his studio using chalk, an old technique. After, a few footprints his drawings are gone forever. So if you want to follow my process, step one of the design process is to work out your designs on paper first. This leaves behind an important record for the future. An artist’s sketchbook with personal notations is a treasure. Putting design ideas on paper also makes them real and is the first step to bringing them into existence and life.

Working out ideas on paper also brings professionalism to your work allowing you to improve your designs over time. Once you have sketched out a design that expresses what is important to you, try living with it for a while. Go back to it, go over it,

nurture it, and change it until you love it enough to create it in hot glass. You would be surprised how differently you may feel about a design on paper a week after sketching it. Looking at each sketch with fresh eyes lets you decide if it's a worthy proposed work, whether it expresses your passion.

Sketching out your designs also lets you work out the steps needed to actually make the piece happen. Many glass artists, including myself from time to time, have skipped the planning and just let it fly. Believe me, working with a plan lets you achieve the piece you see in your head more easily and prevents it from becoming a malformed disappointing blob.

Second, after a brief love affair with the idea you are ready to begin sculpting the elements of your design in the flame. Now you translate your sketch into a three dimensional shapes. When you finish preparing all of the components and they are cold, you can then remove them to a table to be positioned. As you move the parts and pieces of your design around, you begin to create a composition. At this time you may again alter your design by adding new elements that will reinforce your idea and subtracting some elements that confuse it. You begin to build your own story.

Third, it is important to think about the exterior shape. What external crystal form will reinforce your idea best? You may make a second sketch that shows how that form marries the outside and the inside elements into a unified work. The form caresses your design, strengthens its message and provides it a home to live in. In encasement art, forms are not only seen but can be handled and touched by viewers. You should entertain the idea that the viewer may walk around the piece and see it from all sides. Elements found in mainstream fine art sculpture apply at this stage of the design proces

Fourth, when the piece is complete, you may want to add surface texture to reinforce your design. Surface texture can be created hot or added with cold work. Cold worker, Ed Poore of Sagamore, Massachusetts has added surface textures to my recent glass art sculptures. I designed one exterior with mini-battutto (an Italian term for a “battered” finish) to reinforce an interior encased cane design. Ed Poore and I also jointly designed a carved breast form to enhance the sculpture “Primavera II.” There are many ways to achieve surface texture and shaping, which add yet another element to the encased design, as long as that texture supports your original idea.

Fifth and last, as a departure from other encased forms, I use museum quality mounts to lift the entire form off the table, floating it in space to create a fine art sculpture. So now we can say that in 150 years the encased design has gone from flat, to upright, to floating free. Removing the piece from a static position on a table surface to float in air brings the design alive by creating a completely freestanding work of art. The design is no longer tied down to a surface. The museum mount releases the piece to float in space and stand alone to be judged along with other fine art sculpture. I feel that mounting these pieces represents an important step toward changing how encased art will be viewed in the future.

My own experimentation with this new art form is now just two years old, in its infancy, really. Every day in my studio I feel I am slowly making my own progress. It is very exciting to think about the possibilities of such fresh and unique work and to be a part of the progress to the next peak in the encasement journey. It also feels good to share these ideas with others in hopes of elevating the art form.

All art forms continually evolve. All art -- painting, sculpture, and art glass – moves forward inevitably from peak to peak. As encasement moves forward within art glass it aims for its next peak beyond what has been and what is now. That peak lies in the future as artists in studios all around the world turn their emotional power into designs that capture life as we live it now.

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