

## **“Worlds Within”**

### **Creating an Exhibit at the Corning Museum of Glass A Curatorial Point of View**

**By Debbie Tarsitano**

*An interview with Laura Cotton, Curatorial Research Assistant, Corning Museum of Glass and Curator of the Exhibit, “Worlds Within: The Evolution of the Paperweight”*

The golden age of Victorian paperweights ended at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. For the next fifty years, the techniques of encasing flameworked designs in molten crystal seemed to vanish. In the 1950’s several artists rediscovered how to encapsulate flamework designs in clear molten crystal and resumed making paperweights. Since then, the field of paperweights quietly developed alongside the studio art glass movement.

By the early 1980’s many of the artists using paperweight encasement techniques began exploring new forms and motifs that broke away from classical paperweight forms and designs. Among others, these included such American artists as -- Rick Ayotte with glassscapes, Jim Donofrio who explored American folkart motifs, Mark Pieser’s innovations in paperweight vessels, Josh Simpson’s worlds, Paul Stankard’s botanicals, Gordon Smith’s exotic motifs, Debbie Tarsitano’s abstracted sculptural forms, collages and engraved narratives, Delmo Tarsitano’s earthlife sculptures, and Victor Trabucco’s massive carved and laminated crystal sculptures. All of these artists experimented with different shapes, perspectives and motifs and expanded their work far beyond the miniature glass worlds of crystal paperweights.

The hot glass encasement techniques developed to produce these miniature glass worlds have evolved still further from the 1990’s to the present. Today in 2006 many artists combine encasement with a wide variety of shaping techniques such as hot glass sculpting, cold working, sandblasting, casting and engraving to explore any form they wish. As the humble paperweight morphs into main-line sculptural appearance, form and design, some artists have adopted a new vocabulary for speaking about their work in artistic terms.

Institutions like the Corning Museum of Glass, in Corning, New York have been instrumental in documenting and showing this progression from functional object to glass art. The Corning Museum has an outstanding collection of antique paperweights and a rich history of supporting contemporary artists’ work. Through research, publications and exhibitions, the Corning Museum presents new information on trends and developments in glass to the public in enjoyable and understandable shows.

The show, “Worlds Within” presents and identifies the latest innovations in the paperweight field today and invites the public as well as artists to view the progress of the artform with excitement.

## An Interview with Laura Cotton:

1. DT: First, tell us about the show, its title, contact information, and public events.

LC: The title of the exhibition is “Worlds Within: The Evolution of the Paperweight.” It will run from November 16, 2006 to March 16, 2007. There will be an opening event at the Museum the evening of the 16th, which is the Museum’s 2300 Degrees party with live music and glassblowing demos by Josh Simpson, who is one of the artists featured in the exhibition. The show will be located on the Museum’s West Bridge and will include approximately 188 objects. For more specific information about the exhibition, please consult our website at [www.cmog.org](http://www.cmog.org)

2. DT: Tell us about yourself and how you came to be a research assistant at the Corning Museum of Glass.

LC: Since announcing at the age of five that I was going to be an artist when I grew up, I have always known that art was my greatest passion in life. From a young age I have filled my spare time with drawing, and painting in oil and watercolor. I attended Whitworth College where I honed my skills as an artist and became hugely inspired by a semester spent in France studying French art, language and literature. At Whitworth I completed a Bachelors Degree in Art and Art Administration in 1997. I also finished an internship at the Cheney Cowles Museum in Spokane, WA which helped me make the decision to pursue a curatorial career. I then moved to Seattle where I completed internships at the Tacoma Art Museum, the Henry Art Gallery and the Office of Arts and Cultural Affairs, and I volunteered at the Seattle Art Museum. In addition, I worked for five years in various art galleries and frame shops before completing a Masters Degree in Museum Studies at the University of Washington in 2004. After finishing graduate school, I was thrilled to have been given the opportunity to come work for the Corning Museum of Glass as Curatorial Research Assistant. It has been a wonderfully enriching experience in which I am learning about every aspect of curatorial work. My position at the Museum is challenging and fulfilling, and it is a pleasure to work with a world-renowned glass collection.

3. DT: The exhibit “Worlds Within” shows the evolution of paperweights by comparisons and contrasts of past and present work. You are new to paperweights; please tell us about your first impressions of the work.

LC: Before entering my current position at the Museum, I had a strong art background, but it was focused mainly on painting. I had become intrigued by glass while living in Seattle for seven years, but knew nothing about paperweights. When I began my research for this exhibition, I was amazed by the Museum’s extraordinary paperweight collection. I have been impressed with the fact that many of the weights that we have on exhibit are written about in the books that I’ve been reading. There is so much to learn, and I have felt fortunate to be able to educate myself by picking up and examining some of the world’s most important weights. I have enjoyed developing knowledge about an

art form which is new to me. I did not fully realize how many different types of paperweights there are, and how much technical expertise and creativity goes into them. After speaking with many paperweight artists and watching them work, I have become quite captivated with the work they are creating and the individual contributions that they are each making. What may have been a passing interest in paperweights before, has now become a fascination. I am anxious to continue increasing my knowledge of the art form throughout my career.

4. DT: Describe the museum's permanent paperweight collection and discuss its origins and current focus. In other words, how did we get here?

LC: The Museum's paperweight collection represents a fairly complete history of paperweight making. There is a wide variety of different technical, historic and artistic types of paperweights spanning the last 160 years. The collection includes a large number of antique European and American weights, as well as work from many of the most significant paperweight makers of the last century. The Museum's paperweight collection began 56 years ago, in preparation for the Museum's opening in 1951. The majority of our substantial collection has been donated. A sizeable gift from Ambassador and Mrs. Houghton was the foundation for the collection.

In 1978, Dwight Lanmon, who worked for the Museum from 1973 to 1992, was the first curator here to organize an extensive paperweight exhibition, and he worked hard to fill in the gaps of the permanent collection. He later became director of the museum.

For the "Worlds Within" exhibition, the Museum was pleased to receive new donations, as well as show a wide selection of objects donated over the past 56 years. The Museum also commissioned the artist Josh Simpson to create a 100-lb. sculpture, or Megaworld as Simpson calls them, made in the paperweight technique. This piece will be the 1,000th paperweight in the Museum's collection. Our current focus for the paperweight collection is to continue to supplement the antique collection with important and unique weights, while also collecting contemporary work by artists that are taking paperweight techniques in new and interesting directions.

5. DT: What inspired you to create the new exhibition of paperweights "Worlds Within"?

LC: Our main reason for doing the show is the fact that it had been many years since the Museum had done a paperweight exhibition, and we knew it would be popular. We have a large collection that can not all be displayed on a permanent basis, and this new exhibition is an opportunity to put more of our weights on public view. After it had been decided that we would organize a paperweight exhibition, I needed to figure out what the focus of the show should be.

While I was familiarizing myself with our collection I realized that it would be interesting to concentrate on contemporary paperweights and paperweight-like objects. It was the work that I was most fascinated with. I became even more inspired after conducting research on artists currently working in the field. It became obvious to me that over the

past few decades, traditional ideas of what a paperweight is have been cast aside. Many artists now make endless varieties of paperweight-related objects, such as orbs, marbles, vessels, and small-scale sculptures. They have drawn their inspiration from many of the early paperweight makers, and they have studied their techniques and expanded on them.

I wanted to create an exhibition that would showcase our best antique paperweights -- to illustrate the genesis of the art form -- and then its evolution over the past 160 years. But my main intention for the show has been to place a spotlight on the present and future of paperweight making, and to draw people's attention to what has become a large and varied field of artistic endeavor.

6. DT: Where did you begin your research for this exhibit? Was it easy to find information? What resources did you find most helpful?

LC: While researching this exhibition, I was lucky to have access to a number of resources that were invaluable. The first thing I did was spend some time looking at the paperweights in our exhibition galleries and our storage areas to familiarize myself with the collection. It was very helpful to be able to pick them up and examine them closely. Through the process of studying a large number of paperweights, I became able to discern details, primarily in the technical quality of the work. I began to understand what makes a paperweight "special" in technical, historic or artistic terms.

I also consulted many books from the museum's Rakow Research Library, and the reference librarians were a great help. From books, I learned about the history of paperweights, and about how to identify the many different types of weights and their makers. I encourage all artists and your readers to take advantage of the outstanding resource that is our glass library.

Finally, I researched the work of contemporary paperweight makers. I watched some of them work and corresponded with them to better understand exactly how paperweight techniques are being used today. Also, my co-workers at both the Museum and Library have been very helpful in answering any questions that I may have had throughout this process.

7. DT: How will you structure the exhibit? Please tell us about your thought process.

LC: "Worlds Within: The Evolution of the Paperweight" examines the transformation of the glass paperweight from the mid-19th century to the present day. The show illustrates significant changes in paperweight making which have included experimentation with new forms, encasement techniques, and the development new, expanded concepts of the function of the paperweight.

The exhibition objects are divided according to theme and form, rather than time period. This arrangement allows the viewer to compare paperweights with similar themes that were created one hundred or more years apart. It will hopefully show how paperweights have evolved as an art form. Some paperweight makers have chosen to hold fast to



tradition and master classical designs and techniques. Others are taking risks and are pursuing numerous paths and possibilities. The traditional definition of the paperweight is being rewritten by contemporary makers, and artists are choosing to categorize their work in new ways with words such as planets, marbles, spheres, orbs and framework encasements.

As the title of the exhibition suggests, one of its aims is to show a variety of work, focusing on the idea of the paperweight as a microcosm, and comparing paperweights that represent “worlds within,” or interior worlds, and those which do not. The creation of carefully constructed and miniaturized worlds spans the history of the paperweight. The “worlds within” weights are both antique and contemporary.

As in the majority of paperweights made during the classic period of paperweight making (1845–1860), “worlds within” weights miniaturize and magnify individually-made elements. They are characterized by the encasement of designs under a glass dome that optically magnifies them. However, the idea behind the weights showing interior worlds is different than that of classic millefiori paperweights with decorative designs. The intent of the “worlds within” weights is to construct and encapsulate representational glass figures, such as plants or animals, within glass in a way that encourages a feeling of awe, wonder, and personal reflection. In many cases this awe-inspiring effect deceives the viewer into believing that a real object has been perfectly preserved within the glass.

The exhibition displays many types of “worlds within” weights from different time periods. It also showcases work by contemporary artists who are taking the “worlds within” concept even further by creating narratives and complex ecosystems within their paperweight environments.

8. DT: We talked a bit about the word “paperweight” as a term describing work made in the last century and earlier. Artists today discuss their work as art or sculptural forms. What does this new vocabulary imply?

LC: For many years paperweights were viewed solely as functional decorative objects that held paper down. They also went through phases as novelty items and production giftware, which is common even now. Even though glass paperweights were appreciated for their ornamental aspects, they were not valued in the same way in the 19th century as they are today.

The term “paperweight” was fairly closely defined until the development of the Studio Glass Movement, which began in the 1960’s. Artistic glassmaking moved from the factories to the studio, and artists, including paperweight and marble makers, began working with glass for artistic, rather than purely functional, ends.

Over the last 40 years, artists have begun to focus more on manipulating color, form, design, and material and on exploring abstraction and narrative as modes of decoration.

The term “paperweight” now primarily refers to a glass technique rather than an object. It may be time for a re-examination of the term and how it is used. Many contemporary paperweight makers seem to feel that it’s an antiquated term which does not accurately describe their work. As stated before, artists now describe their work with words such as planets, marbles, spheres, orbs and framework encasements rather than “paperweight”. Is it appropriate to place contemporary objects, which have been made using paperweight techniques, in the context of the traditional paperweight? This is one of the questions that this exhibition presents, and it has no simple answer.

9. DT: The Museum has added several new pieces from contemporary artists to its collection for this exhibit. Tell us about the new work you have received and what excites you about it.

LC: While I was familiarizing myself with the Museum’s paperweight collection, I noticed that it was lacking in current work by a number of significant paperweight artists. For that reason, I worked with Tina Oldknow, the curator of modern glass, to put together a list of people whose work we wanted to be represented in both the exhibition and the permanent collection. After contacting everyone on the list, the Museum was grateful to receive a total of 39 new pieces from 18 different artists. There is an interesting variety of objects. Each of the artists has brought their own unique perspective to the form, and it is exciting to see the growth that is taking place in the field.

10. DT: Please tell us about the 1,000th paperweight added to the Museum’s permanent collection, the Josh Simpson Megaworld, explain its importance to the collection.

LC: Josh Simpson was here at the museum in April 2005, giving a lecture about his work. During the lecture, he mentioned that one of the challenges he wanted to tackle in his life was to make a Megaworld weighing 100 pounds. The Museum’s director and curators decided to take him up on the challenge and commissioned him to create the world’s first – as far as we know -- 100-pound glass “paperweight,” which represents the 1,000th paperweight to enter the Museum’s collection (we saved that 1,000th place for him because we wanted it to be something really special).

This 100-pound Megaworld is one of a series of solid glass spheres or “planets” created by Simpson. Like his other work, it is inspired by the natural world, by his personal history, and by the material itself. Simpson’s Megaworlds are made with many layers of luminous glass enclosing vast sea- and spacescapes with minute terrestrial and extra-terrestrial details, also of glass. His work reflects the joy he finds in space exploration and the importance of ecology. His Megaworlds encourage the viewer to appreciate even the smallest details that make up our complex universe. For Simpson, the 100-pound Megaworld is the culmination of over 30 years of study, practice, preparation and inspiration. It is an exquisite example of how far the paperweight world has evolved since its beginnings in the mid-19th century. The Megaworld is a remarkable and truly unique addition to the “Worlds Within” exhibition and the Museum’s permanent collection.

11. DT: Presently, the museum's permanent collection focuses primarily on antique paperweights. The exhibit 'Worlds Within' updates the focus of the collection to include more contemporary work. Would you like more collector support for projects concerning contemporary paperweights and forms? How can interested patrons contribute to the museum's acquisition of contemporary paperweights and forms?

LC: The curators are always interested in developing the Museum's collection of contemporary paperweights and paperweight related objects, as they are interested in developing other areas of the collections. We welcome collector support, and we greatly value the generosity of donations made by artists, collectors, dealers, and other glass enthusiasts. There are a variety of ways to encourage acquisitions of paperweights and paperweight-related objects. One is through straightforward donation, but the Museum also has funds set up that are dedicated to purchasing specific types of glass. If a collector, for example, is interested in creating a fund for the purchase of contemporary paperweights, the Museum will work with that person. Anyone could then make a donation to the Museum and request that the donation be targeted for that particular fund. (These would be donations apart from, or in excess of, membership fees. The purchase of a membership is a separate activity).

DT: Do you have a closing comment?

LC: I would like to encourage the public to attend the 2300 degrees event which will open "Worlds Within" on November 16th, and to view the exhibition before it closes on March 16, 2007.







