

# A Reading List

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**F**lameworking is going to college, and it is exciting to witness this process flourish in art departments around the world. People of all ages are showing a growing interest in working glass hot at the flame. It is easy to predict that, within 15 years, the glass landscape will be reinvented by a new wave of currently unknown talent: educated artists who bring a fine-art expectation to their art-making and take advantage of the material, namely Borosilicate glass, to rewrite glass history.

This trend is important to me when I think about my evolution as a glass artist and writer. When I was gathering information for my book *No Green Berries or Leaves: The Creative Journey of an Artist in Glass (NGB&L)*, I arranged to pick up my grammar- and high-school transcripts at my former school. While walking back to my car from the guidance counselor's office, I opened the envelope, and the first form I pulled out had my IQ recorded at 78. First I felt embarrassed and then angry. I knew the problem was not intelligence, but poor reading ability.

While writing *NGB&L*, I wanted to share my struggles with reading as a dyslexic in the hope of inspiring younger people to overcome their own obstacles, but emotionally I could not reveal that IQ score. After all these years, the memory of being a poor student is still unpleasant. Why am I sharing it now? To show that you can forget the labels others may have placed on

you and seek out knowledge in areas you care about in order to enhance your art.

Even though I was a poor learner, I instinctively knew reading was a primary ingredient that nurtured artistic maturity. Before the advent of books on tape, I worked hard to get just a little information out of books. In the late '90s, while teaching a flameworking course at Penland, a student of mine, Michael Sherrill, noticed I was having difficulty reading, and asked me about it. He said that he, too, was dyslexic, and told me I could get just about any book ever written on tape through the Recordings for the Blind and Dyslexic (RFB and D) and the Library of Congress. Sherrill's information startled me to near disbelief, because I immediately realized the value of listening to books pertinent to my love of art-making, and that the barriers finally would come down and I could read books that have challenged follow artists for centuries.

One of the key components of my artistic maturity has been reading recommended books on art and art-making. I love thinking that the magic of art-making is to impregnate the material with emotional and intellectual energy nourished by, in my case, listening to books. I cannot imagine my work reaching my best effort without the benefit of reading.

By internalizing the fresh thoughts in great books, I started to feel like an educated person and experience enhanced self-esteem. I was engaged in a dialog with past masters by listening to their ideas and struggles. This, in turn, had me demanding more of myself and realizing my life was no more or less burdensome than other artists.

This short reading list blends philosophical attitudes about art-making; the technical challenges involved in art-making; and the goals, egos, and lives of individual artists throughout history, but it is by no means complete or universal. These are simply books that were recommended to me throughout my professional life by people whom I respect. Each of

these works helped me grow with artistic maturity and reinforced the idea that reading about artists, art-making, and the creative process will benefit other creative people's careers.

## The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini

Shortly after I left my career as a scientific glassblower to be on the creative side full-time, I read an article about a local sculptor, Dave Caccia, who worked in metal. I was eager to meet other artists and went to visit Dave at his studio. This visit was the beginning of a lifelong friendship. He suggested that I read *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini*. I took his recommendation seriously because I was hungry to learn anything about art.

Cellini's autobiography demonstrated that making art was every



bit as difficult, financially as well as emotionally, in Renaissance Italy as it is today. The masters of the past were not above petty squabbles, nor the desire to be well-known. The only difference between today's artists and the artists of the past is that time has anointed certain works of past artists as significant. Most importantly, this was the first book that introduced me to art-making, and it reinforced the idea that biographies of other artists are a valuable resource.

#### *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*

##### **David Pye**

In the late 1970s, I met Mark Peiser at the Heller Gallery in New York City. He mentioned having read David Pye's *The Nature and Art of Workmanship*. I had a tremendous respect for Peiser and his work, and purchased this recommended book the following week.

Reading the book was exciting: Pye expanded the craftsmanship experience. I intuitively understood his ideas, which, until then, had been completely outside my frame of reference. The point of the book was a division of expectations between the craftsmanship of certainty and the craftsmanship of spontaneity.

Pye invited me into an esoteric world previously reserved for educated makers.

#### *The Story of Art*

##### **E.H. Gombrich**

Because of my involvement with the Creative Glass Center of America (CGCA) at Wheaton Arts, I befriended literally several hundred glass artists who were juried into the fellowship programs; upward of 20 people per year. The friendships nurtured through the CGCA have remained a treasured part of my career. One of the 1984 fellows was an artist named James Van Deurzen who I met when he was fresh out of graduate school. In one of our many conversations on contemporary glass art, he recommended the writing of art historian E.H. Gombrich.

I picked up *The Story of Art*, and followed Gombrich's scholarship to other books on art, including *The Sense of Order: A Study in the Psychology of Decorative Art*. *The Story of Art* gave me a sense of pride, knowing that, as a maker, I was continuing a great tradition that complements society whether it accepts one's work or not.

There are times when much of what I read goes over my head and I have to read (or listen) a second time. *The Story of Art* was no exception, but I sensed the value of the information and was willing to do whatever it took to understand Gombrich's ideas.

#### *Art & Fear: Observations on the Perils and Rewards of Art-making*

##### **David Bayles & Ted Orland**

*Art & Fear* is a rewarding read because it touches on the many unique variables that studio artists deal with daily. Most creative people live in the first-person singular. As a creative person who spends much of life in a studio, it is reassuring to read about the universal challenges of being creative. As a reader, you sense that you are connected to a creative community whose members all face similar challenges and the same worries. Another positive aspect of *Art & Fear* is that it is a straightforward, easy read; it talks about many serious philosophical art-making issues in plain English.

#### *Walt Whitman: A Life*

##### **Justin Kaplan**

In the mid 1980s, I felt as if I hit an invisible wall with working in glass and began looking for other avenues to express myself. I had always loved poetry, and I began using poetry to celebrate the plant kingdom. I enjoyed going to the Reading Terminal Market in Philadelphia to browse around and found a copy of Justin Kaplan's *Walt Whitman: A Life* at a used book dealer. Reading Kaplan's book expanded my interest in Whitman and his poetic accomplishments, but I was most taken by Whitman's courage as a creative person. Learning about Whitman's struggle to protect the integrity of his vision inspired and strengthened my resolve to protect the integrity of my own work.

#### *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

##### **Robert M. Pirsig**

When I read that *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was required reading for all students graduating from Cranbrook Art Academy, an institution for which I have great respect, I immediately sought the book out. To my delight, it was available on audio CDs. After listening, I felt I had been exposed to the most sincere discussion of quality ever articulated. I connected to the discourse on quality as an object-maker, and it elevated my awareness to the mystical potential of my work.

Although I felt a personal connection to the narrator, and absorbed a lot of meaningful concepts, it would be very difficult for me to explain the book, which I ended up listening to twice.

These six books represent the core of a larger selection, composed over a 30-year period, all of which could have been discussed here. The idea that connects all of the books that have contributed to my life and work is the celebration of creativity, but each of us has to follow our own interest. Almost every book on my list came by way of recommendations from artists whom I respect, even though over my career I have been receptive to different books at different times—a book that was recommended in my 30s may not have been fully appreciated until I was in my 40s.

If your friends aren't readers, there are also scholars who have dedicated their careers to developing reading lists. Also, consider the respect the book is given. If you do not connect on your first read, do not despair or give up, it could affect your creative outlook 10 years down the road.

Everyone's list can and will be different, but, as long as an artist reads works that complement his or her personal interests, they will avoid being handicapped by ignorance. Ultimately, no matter where the books come from, as long as they challenge you through a conversation about ideas, you will grow. Even if only one idea out of an entire work sparks off the page and broadens your perspective, the book has been a gift.

Publisher's notes: In addition to an active career as a Studio Artist, Paul Stankard teaches flameworking art at Salem Community College in Southern New Jersey. Paul is a featured writer for Glass Line magazine whose articles focus on independent education.