

# What I Tell My Students

## Part II

Text by Paul Stankard

This essay focuses on my years of flameworking floral designs encapsulated into clear glass, and the trials and errors associated with finding a personal voice.

From the beginning of my career in the studio, I've thought of myself as a monk, dedicating my labor and creative needs as a prayer. About 10 years ago, during early morning meditation, I felt a strange confidence about my flameworking skills. The feeling that I didn't need more hand skills to express what I wanted to say in my art

was wonderfully *eerie*. (This eeriness has touched me more than a few times over the past forty seven years as *deja vu*.) This realization led to a stronger commitment to exploring alternative glass-working processes, such as casting, fusing, and enameling, in combination with my hard-won flameworking techniques. This approach has been responsible for inventing new illusions in glass that, in combi-

Built in 1997, after working 27 years in a studio garage, Stankard remodeled the house next door into a 3,000 sq. ft. studio. Photo: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard

nation with my hand skills have facilitated an evolving visual vocabulary.

During the first 15 years in the studio, I was emotionally competing with a mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century French paperweight aesthetic. I have now replaced those challenges with a growing sense of urgency, suggesting environmental issues, by blending magical realism with spirituality.

I don't regret not having a formal art education, even though I love learning, because, throughout my adult life, my career has benefited from independent studies. This love of learning and knowledge-seeking has become the primary ingredient in nurturing my artistic maturity. Today, creative people working in glass have fewer barriers to obtaining information than when I started out, and this is certainly true in the paperweight category. Workshops, magazines about glass, and the Internet, together with the Corning Museum of Glass's Rakow Research Library and the Wheaton Arts Center, offer motivated people technical and craft information to establish their starting points.

I teach an International Glass Art Survey course at Salem Community College in South Jersey. The course includes a survey of about 100 artists working in glass whose artwork is respected and exhibited internationally. While preparing my list, I was surprised to discover all but a few of these artists had degrees, a large number of those MFAs. Needless to say, we discuss this fact in the class and question if



an associate's degree in studio glass art is going to adequately prepare one for a career as a studio artist. I tell my students it generally takes five to 10 years of perseverance and determination after art school for talented people to attract attention through their work. Along this journey to develop skills and invent a personal vocabulary (personal vocabulary meaning being original), artists often develop a love-hate relationship with the glass.

These observations lead to an interesting conversation with Henry Halem, a highly respected glass artist, author and educator. Henry commented, "Paul, your observation of why there are so many MFAs exhibiting is because the university, up till now, was the only place one could study the glass arts. I think for many an associate degree would be adequate for preparing one for a career in the glass arts. It's really the quality of the program within a particular institution that prepares the student for their career, not the degree. Some are ready to go after two years but some take maybe three or four years of preparation."

Henry continues, "With the advent and growth of the public access school one can get an excellent education in glass and for probably a lot less money. What you're asking your students would be a good panel discussion for the Glass Art Society (GAS)."

I took a different track because throughout my school years I struggled with undiagnosed dyslexia. This led me to making things, which I loved, and the happiest times in school were in wood shop and metal shop. After high school, I had the good fortune to attend Salem Vocational Technical Institute, now renamed Salem Community College. During my first visit to Salem, where I saw hand skills controlling the danger associated with glowing flames melting glass, I felt a peculiar attraction to flameworking. As a side note, while teaching at Penland, I told a few stories about playing with fire as a kid, and was nearly floored by others' "firebug" stories.

When I mentioned this to Robert Mickelsen, one of America's leading flamework artists, he laughed and said most adolescents are curious about fire and have played with matches. He went



Corning Museum of Glass's Rakow Research Library enables people to research the past to build on the present. The dedicated staff is generous with their knowledge and ready to assist. Photo: Courtesy of Corning Museum of Glass



Salem Community College campus, Carneys Point, NJ.  
Photo: courtesy of Salem Community College

on to say, "I don't think this attraction has affected glassblowing any more than other careers, although the topic would make a great discussion over a few beers after the flameworking conference."

I graduated from Salem in 1963 and went into industry, where I worked hard mastering techniques to fabricate scientific glass apparatus. It was during this industrial phase of my career that I discovered my creative side. Most days in the factory, I would dream of being creative and wanted to work fulltime making art.

In 1969, when Patricia and I moved into our new house, my first priority was to set

up a workbench in the corner of the utility room to work glass. It took a lot of sacrifice to buy materials and tools needed to work evenings and weekends, but eventually I was able to earn money producing giftware. After five months of making small animals, the work got boring and tedious. I realized I needed to be more creative, and started focusing on paperweights which were more ambitious.

This new work was wonderfully exciting and the challenges associated with learning to flamework soft glass at the torch was like learning a new craft. Every aspect of this new endeavor offered inter-



1971, stylized flower. The breakthrough for this piece was the center with upright stamens. Robin's egg blue background was a popular color during Stankard's part-time days. Photo: Courtesy of Joshua Steindler



esting hurdles to overcome. Looking back, it's sweet to remember what I was able to do with little equipment, and even though I benefited from 10 years of working with borosilicate glass, I loved the creative freedom and the wide-open possibilities of this new realm.

While melting soda lime glass, there were times when the rod would pop and hot glass would fly around the utility room. It's amazing I didn't burn down our new house or get hurt, and I'm glad I didn't give up on my dreams. The reason for the glass exploding was most likely poor annealing. The clear glass came from Kimble Glass Co. in Vineland, New Jersey, with the kind support of an executive named George Steer. George authorized a few old-timers in the hot shop to hand-pull the glass into three-foot lengths that were approximately one inch in diameter. This was in the '60s, and Kimble had one of the few hand-shop furnace facilities left in South Jersey, which was once the center of our nation's glass industry.

I think back and marvel at how energized I was to learn paperweight making. The first paperweights had a variety of designs, from animals to flowers, and were influenced by the work of Charles Kazium and Francis Whittemore, two contemporary paperweight makers from the '60s. Within a few months, I was focusing on flower blossoms and following a path for developing techniques to express my interests.



Middle: 1971/2, stylized five-petal flower with upright stamens, spray of buds, curved stem with roots. The green glass is a mixture of yellow over blue over black. These personal techniques distinguished Stankard's work.

Bottom: 1973, floral motif interpreting native flower, Red Maid, suspended over white glass. Offers mottled red petals, green sequels, upright stamens, and rootlets off the stem. Photos: Courtesy of Joshua Steindler

Inside the Stankard Studio, Paul with his talented staff. Background: Christine Stankard Kressley, Pauline Stankard Iacovino Katherine Stankard Campbell. Foreground: David Graeber. Photo: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard

What has survived from that time period appears modest by today's standards, but these early miniatures were, in fact, a major effort on my part and represent emotional success and sacrifice, because everything was a struggle.

From the start, I divided the process into two tasks: first flameworking the colored glasses into a design called a set-up, then encapsulating it in clear glass. In the early days, developing the flower and the material preparation generally took a few nights.

The next step was melting and balling up one end of a one-inch-diameter clear rod to approximately two inches in diameter. This turned out to be an exercise in bravery because, at times, the entire length of the glass rod would shatter and leave me feeling bewildered. I would hear a loud pop and the length of the rod would appear snow-white as it disintegrated into slivers within a split second. The glass was obviously not annealed, and most likely tempered, which would explain the ferocity of the rod exploding into pieces.

In the days starting out, as I said earlier, everything was a struggle, and, after all these years, it's interesting to note that I am still struggling. The beauty of discovering techniques while searching for ways around obstacles reinforces one's style and is one of the most important aspects of artistic growth.

Starting out, my equipment was home-made and I remember feeling guilty dismantling my daughter's roller-skate to mount the wheels on a block of wood to use for rollers. My next challenge was how to support the glass rod over a Bunsen burner. Pat's father helped out by welding angle iron together for a stand to rest the rods on. I would position the end of the balled-up glass rod over a Bunsen burner, and hand-rotate it over the flame

Stankard fusing a stem on a lotus blossom. Photo: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard





Stankard sealing the botanical components into a design on the gas-fired hot plate. Photo: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard

to keep it heated evenly and reasonably true.

My first few paperweights were formed by gravity and a carbon paddle, and it didn't take long to make a cherry-wood mold or cup to shape the glass in. This idea came from watching furnace glassblowing demonstrations at Wheaton Village, now renamed Wheaton Arts. I remember how excited I was to bring this furnace working technique into the utility room to solve my shaping problems at the flameworking bench.

After the set-up was made, I balled up the top half of what would become a paperweight and rested it on the stand. I then balled up the bottom section and, with tweezers, picked up the colored glass inclusion and dropped it on the superheated surface. With a combination of dropping and tapping the colored glass design with tweezers onto the hot surface, I learned how to get a good seal.

Reheating the top half in my right hand while splashing the bottom half with my left hand to keep the glass hot was a good trick. When the glass was hot enough, "Whack"—I pushed the two sections together and hoped for the best. The hotter the top half-section was, the softer and better the seal would be, meaning fewer trapped air bubbles. I used the one-inch glass rod as a pontil while shaping the bottom. Next, I stuck up the bottom section with a Pyrex rod and rounded the top to finish the piece.

By the time the paperweight was knocked off the Pyrex pontil into the oven to anneal, I was on a creative high unlike anything I experienced in industry and generally felt drained. What was magi-



Middle:

Removing the clear glass gob from the kiln by sticking up the glass with a pontil to be reheated.



Bottom:

Pickup. Dropping preheated clear glass onto preheated colored glass design for encapsulation. Photos: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard

cal then and still is beautiful today is the orange glow in the clear glass from the design form before it goes into the oven to be annealed.

At this stage of the game, sharing experiences and offering encouragement to young people is an important counterpoint to my studio work. When I was young, I would hear my mom say, “If you want to be successful in life, you have to pay attention to your knitting.” I’ve taken my mom’s folksy advice and, when thinking of her words, smile, knowing that my disciplined focus has complemented my journey.

Today in my studio, developing new designs can take days, months, and—in some cases—years, as I search for ways to get it right. “Getting it right” is my way of saying “making the work personal and pursuing excellence in workmanship.” I start my designs by focusing on a plant’s characteristics and the folklore associated with it. Next is to select the colored glasses. I often experiment with powder-glass blends to melt and overlay on small diameter rods used in material preparation.

The goal is to sculpt designs in glass that suggest truth to nature, giving the flameworked flowers organic credibility or botanical intelligence. Taking advantage of a life-long interest in flowers and walking the woods must have somehow helped my work. That transfer of emotional energy and love of nature into inorganic material—glass—is the magical essence of art-making.

In my spacious studio, I have the advantage of four art-literate assistants who are all dedicated to helping me express my vision. With this help, I’m able to be more ambitious with my creative efforts.

When I started making paperweights in the '60s, a major challenge was finding suitable clear and colored glasses to flamework. Today, the glass community is fortunate to benefit from a proliferation of manufacturing companies producing compatible clear and colored glass. I use Schott S8 encapsulation glass, which is a high-quality soda lime glass distributed by Glass Brokers of Duryea, PA. My colored rods come from a growing number of companies producing a wide selection of colors. In fact, I just recently

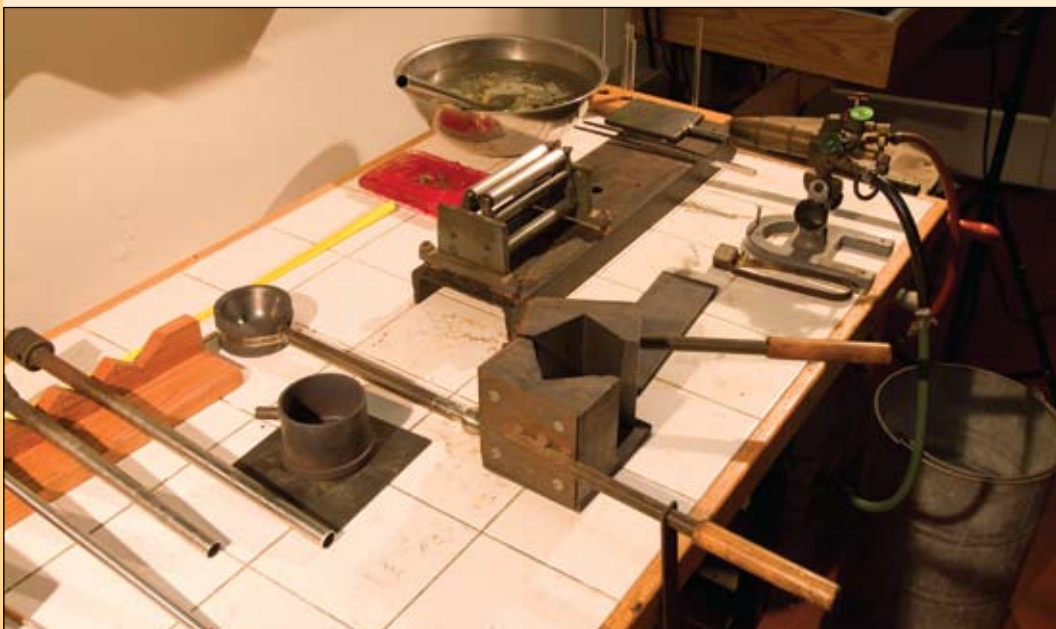


Once the design is picked up from the plate, the surface is fire polished in the glory hole.

Photo: Courtesy of Joseph Stankard

Stankard's work bench displaying tools for encapsulating, shaping, and finishing a piece.

Photo: Courtesy of Carol Bates



learned that a leading borosilicate manufacturer, Northstar Glassworks in Oregon, is producing colored soft glasses with a coefficient of expansion of 104, matching Schott S8 glass, among others.

It's strange realizing I've been huddled over a Carlisle CC bench burner my entire career, which I use to redraw 1-1/2 inch diameter 10-inch-long stock into 1/4 inch glass rods. Now, most companies are producing the smaller rods for flameworkers, which is making my task easier. These small-diameter rods used to craft botanical components are worked in an oxygen-

rich gas flame with simple hand tools. Once the components are flameworked at the benches, they're transferred onto a hot plate to keep warm and are then fused into the design. When the design is constructed, it's transferred to what I call a pick-up plate with a metal cup around it. The floral design is kept at 965 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent the clear molten glass from shocking and cracking *the design* when it is dropped on.

I've spent more time and emotional energy inventing illusions for floral designs than mastering the craft of encap-

sulating the designs. Over the years, I've learned how to melt and work colors in and around clear crystal to suggest hollows. As an example, if I am making a morning glory, I'll overlay the blue for the blossom over clear glass and flare the end, so that, when the hot soft glass drops onto the glass morning glory, the crystal becomes negative space, suggesting the flower's hollow throat.

Penland's Nocturnal Bloom glass assemblage. 8 1/4 x 7 3/4 x 4 3/4 in. From collection of Mike and Annie Belkin.

Photo: courtesy of Douglas Schaible



I bead the end of the metal five-foot pontil with clear glass to stick up the gob that's preheating in the oven at 1,000 degrees Fahrenheit. When the gob is on the end of the pontil, my assistant melts it soft in the glory hole. Once the glass has been heated and balls itself up, I guide it into the collar, sometimes called a cup, which is preheated in the pick-up oven.

While this motion is in play, I activate the suction pump under the oven to aid the pick-up and, in a fraction of a second, the colored glass is captured and surrounded by clear crystal. I then turn off the pump and blow compressed air onto the hot glass and pontil to cool it down, so I can control it as it's lifted out of the collar.

Now, with the colored glass design sealed into the crystal, my assistant heats up glass for the bottom half of the paperweight and I carefully push the two sec-

tions together. When the required volume is added, I remove one pontil from the paperweight to orient the piece and shape it into a sphere with a graphite cup, or press it into a graphite mold to shape into a cube. Once it's shaped and before it goes into the annealing oven, it's a wonderful feeling to experience the beauty of the glowing design suspended in the clear glass. This effort, glowing with beauty, is poetry going into the oven and I get a positive feeling anticipating the end of the 40-hour annealing cycle. Unfortunately, after scrutiny, sometimes the magic evaporates and the piece is rejected.

Today, I continue to do my work, but I'm also mentoring my staff to develop their own works under the Stankard Studio banner. We've established Stankard Studio to give my assistants—Christine Stankard Kressley, Pauline Stankard Iacovino, Katherine Stankard Campbell, and David Graeber—the opportunity to do their own work. In addition to helping me, they are creating their own designs. I get a sense of pride knowing that their work is personal to them and respected among glass enthusiasts.

My hope is for them to find fulfillment in their careers, just as I have. What we're doing is recording the artistic sensibilities of our time period. Ideally, these best efforts will advance skill and creative energy, exemplifying flameworked beauty into the future, so others can build on our efforts, much as we built on the efforts of those who came before us.

#### Publisher's Notes

Paul Stankard has earned an international reputation for his flameworked glass art. His most recent book, *No Green Berries or Leaves: The Creative Journey of an Artist in Glass* (available at [www.mwpubco.com](http://www.mwpubco.com)) is an inspiring read for all who want to be, as Stankard says, "on the creative side in glass."

(This is the second part of a two-part essay. Comments are welcome at [pstank4955@aol.com](mailto:pstank4955@aol.com).) (Cover photo: Courtesy of John Healey)

(From left to right) 3 1/2 in. lilac bouquet orb, 8 in. floating bouquet orb, 5 1/2 in. wildflower bouquet orb with swarming bees. Photo: courtesy of Douglas Schaible

