



Flameworking pioneering, instructor Sally Prasch working in Penland's well equipped studio.

Photo courtesy of Penland.

Developing a Personal Voice in Glass

By Paul Stankard

The goal of this article is to share information that will complement one's artistic maturity while searching for a creative identity in flameworked glass.

Making significant work at the torch is a worthy goal, made easier when layering knowledge of the field over years of experience at the bench. One of the ways a creative person develops a personal voice in glass is to get in touch with her/

his authentic interests and have the courage to be creative. In a conversation about this subject, glass artist Milissa Montini said, "In the end, a person's voice is the culmination of their knowledge, interest, and experience," which makes my point in a very succinct way. Mastering the flameworking craft generally takes four to five years of hard work before you are able to perform on a skill level that allows articulating a personal aesthetic.

When I hear street crafters say, "I can't afford to make my art work because it doesn't sell," I generally say something simplistic like, "Making art is not about money." I feel uneasy when advising young flameworkers who are starting out; they lack an artistic vocabulary, which makes it difficult for me to connect with them in the language of art and design.

I hear from young students enrolling at Salem Community College that they want a career in glass so they can explore their creative side. They tell me they are signed up for Scientific Glassblowing so they can develop and enhance their hand skills. When I suggest that they are making a poor choice because they will miss the foundation courses offered to glass art majors, they remind me that I came from the scientific glassblowing field. In fact, it took years of sacrifice for me to become successful working in my studio as an artist, and it took longer to de-program myself from the scientific glassblowing technology that provided my fundamental training.

As my work evolved, a sense of security came from a commitment to quality and

originality, and, slowly, the issue of artistic integrity came into focus. These virtues define the basic foundation for a fine-art craft effort.

It takes courage to be an artist. That said, craftspeople who are introduced to their creative spirits through flameworking glass and who do not have an art school background would do well to enroll in their local colleges and sign up for art programs—especially art appreciation. For additional learning experience, I encourage students to check out the websites of the glass galleries listed below. When viewing glass art featured in these galleries, you may not relate to all of the work, but be assured the artists featured in these selected galleries are doing quality work that celebrates a personal vision.

When I started out in the '60s, I became intrigued with the issue of “Is it craft, or is it art?” that permeated the discussions at fine craft shows in and around Philadelphia. In the late '60s, my wife Pat gave me a book entitled *Glass Philosophy and Method* by John Burton. This book

offered me the most succinct definition and emotional understanding of the issues. Toward the back of his book, Burton presented a collection of quotes under “Thoughts for Creative Minds,” which opened with one of my favorites, attributed to Saint Francis of Assisi:

- “He who works with his hands is a laborer.
- “He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman.
- “He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist.”

In my naïve response to making things and a desire to learn as much as I could about art, craft issues, and unknown challenges, this quote satisfied me on a very basic level and has served me well throughout my career. It wasn't until writing my autobiography, *No Green Berries or Leaves, The Creative Journey of an Artist in Glass*, and revisiting the early years of my career that I reconnected with Burton's book and St.

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in a personal way. The sentiment of these words encouraged me to think about objects in

Francis's sweet quote. I became intrigued with the idea that more words of wisdom from St. Francis's writings on creativity and art making awaited me, so I started researching the holy man's written work, only to find very little from this 12th-century mystic and no reference to art or craft. After researching the poem, I now believe the quote was misattributed. In different sources, the quote is attributed to John Ruskin, St. Thomas Aquinas, even a labor lawyer in Los Angeles.

The original speaker of these words is not important; what is important is only that a reader connect with the sentiment

an artistic way. The first line, “He who works with his hands is a laborer,” makes me think about anonymous glassworkers in a factory. The second, “He who works with his hands and his head is a craftsman,” suggests to me high skills and an awareness of the marketplace. The final, climactic line, “He who works with his hands and his head and his heart is an artist,” suggests skill, discipline, and a passion to make work personal, regardless of the marketplace.

If you have the opportunity to attend a college or university glass art program, I'd say that is, in my opinion, the most direct way to prepare for a career as a studio artist in glass *and* become an educated person. And, if you want to learn, or need additional time in a subsidized studio environment, you can continue on by enrolling in an MFA program. This is one of the best ways to develop a personal body of work and connect with the greater glass art community.

I realize the majority of flameworkers don't have formal art education as a practical option and will have to educate themselves independently. Not having access to a collegiate glass program does not exempt the beginning flameworker from needing the educational components essential to developing into a mature artist. The flameworkers outside of the art school experience, not having the benefits that formal art education provides, are essentially on their own.



Penland student working with a innovative technique in the Flameworking studio.

Photo courtesy of Penland.



Eugene Glass School's annual Flame-off.

Photo courtesy of EGS.

That brings me to the purpose of this article: to deconstruct formal glass art education and discuss ways to recreate it on an individual level.

Through deconstruction, I came to four key components: access to equipment and studio time for experimentation, and to interact with a teacher; an understanding of art history, design, and knowledge of the humanities through reading; first-hand encounters with excellence in contemporary glass through visits to museums, galleries, and print and online publications; and to be a part of a like-minded community.



Pittsburgh Glass Center, student working in the Flameworking studio.

Photo courtesy of Pittsburgh Glass.

The basic criteria for work space are: comfort, proper lighting, and ventilation. If you don't have a place to work, you can rent time and take classes at public access studios. I started in a utility room with my bench taking up most of the space. I covered the cost of running a studio by making small glass animals, and worked hard to earn enough money to buy soft glasses and some basic tools to experiment and develop techniques for paperweight-making. This early effort led to a body of work that revealed opportunities for me to be creative with each additional effort and invent a personal language that is articulated and captured in glass. It seemed that each new object offered new areas of exploration, leading further and further away from the small glass animal production.

When you allocate time to experiment, the hope is that the work will begin to support itself, by replacing production glass with one-of-a-kind efforts. For example, it took me five years to refine what I call the "Botanical Series" that slowly, over time, replaced my paperweight-making activity. This series consists of rectangular blocks that are the equivalent of four floral paperweights melted together, to suggest a flowering plant suspended in space. My experiments started with a "what if" kind of test that led to searching for new illusions or ideas, which led to new techniques to execute the ideas, and opened up new ways to interpret nature in glass.

Once a place to work is secured, it's important to work under the tutelage of a teacher who is well-informed in the areas of contemporary glass. Outside the traditional classroom, the best places to connect with a teacher are public access studios. As Brian Frus, director of Education at Urban Glass, puts it, "Public access studios ... boast university-like resources and opportunities for education while remaining easily accessible by individuals." The growing number of public access studios offers a variety of opportunities, including weekend workshops, one- to two-week sessions, and—at a few craft schools, like Penland, eight - week concentrations for college credits, led by master craftspeople.

A career-altering experience for me occurred in the mid 1970s, when I attend-

ed a seminar at the Bergstrom-Mahler Museum in Neenah, Wisconsin. I attended the conference as a paperweight-maker, but was exposed to much more. This was my introduction to studio glass and the artists who were established as artists in glass.

One of the most magical ways to grow with artistic maturity is to have exposure to literature through great books. There are endless numbers of books recommended by college arts and humanities programs around the world; the key is to figure out your interests and follow your passions. By reading a good book on art-making, you broaden your field of reference and heighten your expectations by motivating yourself to reach higher. The first two books that inspired me to reach higher were *The Autobiography of Benvenuto Cellini* and *The Nature of Art of Workmanship* by David Pye. Cellini's autobiography celebrates his life as a 15th-century goldsmith. Though Cellini lived in a different era and worked with different material, I connected with his being part of a vibrant creative community and his defending his craft to painters. Pye's *Workmanship* distills hand skills into two categories: the workmanship of certainty and the workmanship of spontaneity. I intuitively related to his message because of my craft background. Both of these books, and the many I have been



Pittsburgh Glass Center, public access studios

Photo courtesy of Pittsburgh glass.

touched by since, challenged me to consider the significance and the importance of my task in a social context.

When I promote studying and understanding art history as an important component in a flameworking artist's development, I'm suggesting we learn from the past, as well as compete with it. It's beneficial to place one's artwork in an art historical context and this is true with glass and its 5,000-year history. If your work is in a fine arts tradition, then the object will most likely reflect today's issues and fashion. It certainly will expand the history of art while expanding the glass tradition. If your work is in a craft or decorative arts context, you are competing in a rich tradition going back to the dawn of mankind. The potential to do significant work is present whenever you light the torch, but it's a long shot with big odds as long as you're knocking out the product.

I tell my students that, if they want to do excellent work, they have to know what excellence is. It's paramount that developing artists visit museums and upper-echelon galleries to experience masterwork first-hand. When you realize that others, using the same tools and materials as you, have reached a high level of competence in making work personal and established themselves in the contemporary glass canon, you should be inspired because, if they did it, why can't you do it?

In my early days, when I delivered my paperweights to two dealers in New York City, I would make time to visit the Heller Gallery to keep abreast of the contemporary glass scene. One of the contemporary artists I first encountered and was inspired by was Mark Peiser, whose career was celebrated because of his paperweight vessels. Peiser's body of work inspired me to bring the same focused dedication as I perceived he was bringing to his glass.

Throughout my career, the number of glass-specific publications and the opportunities to experience glass artists' work have increased exponentially. When you count private websites, the websites of major museums and galleries, YouTube videos, and other online media, the problem is no longer finding information, but



Urban Glass hot shop.

Photo courtesy of Urban Glass.

how to be discriminating in your selection. Of the craft magazines, *Glass* magazine from Urban Glass in Brooklyn and *American Craft*, offers a broad overview of contemporary craft art. Glass students should know that, while they have material concerns in glass, their brothers and sisters in clay, wood, metal, and textiles, etc., are equally challenged with their own material concerns.

When I step back and consider the entire field of American craft, it's interesting to know that the roots go back to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement in late 19th-century England. The movement was established to celebrate objects made well, and it's interesting to see how this sentiment has evolved beyond utility into expressive objects

Urban Glass, student working in the Flameworking studio.

Photo courtesy of Urban Glass.



that celebrate ideas. Recently visiting YouTube, I was blown away to see that 80,000-plus people will log on to watch a video of a glass pipe being made. To me, this predicts a possible artistic explosion that takes advantage of the flameworking process. If a small percentage of these 80,000 people used the same passion they demonstrate for making things to educate themselves and understand their context in the history and future of glass, we could see a world-wide renaissance unlike anything glass has experienced.

Being part of a community can be as casual as connecting with other flameworkers in chat rooms, Facebook, a public access studio, membership in the Glass Art Society (GAS), and taking classes. I'm a relative newcomer to the Internet, but I believe hundreds, maybe thousands, of flameworkers are connecting online. Gatherings such as Salem Community College's International Flameworking Conference, museum exhibits, gallery openings, and public access exhibits offer

wonderful occasions to meet like minds and share information. Ultimately—and this is especially true with the flameworking process—art-making is a solitary endeavor, but these resources open it up and provide connections among artists and their supporters.

One of the main points of this article is to encourage those who feel the need to grow into the next level to allocate time, each week, to experiment in glass independent of the marketplace. The secret is to persevere and, eventually, you'll begin to build on your experiments. It's really about starting at any point and building on a body of work that evolves over time by taking advantage of your refinements and discoveries.

Here are some of the resources that can help readers build their artistic voice and maturity.

Schools offering glass art with strong programs in flameworking:

- Salem Community College (the oldest U.S. college-level flameworking program)
- Rochester (NY) Institute of Technology
- Cleveland Art Institute
- University of Illinois
- Chemeketa Community College

Nonprofits, and cultural centers, public access studios:

- Wheaton Arts
- Urban Glass
- Glass Axis (Heidi Rozell, Studio Director, www.glassaxis.org,
- Public access studios, such as Glass Axis, are environments dedicated to the creation of glass art and the exchanging of ideas in glass. These studios include artists at all levels, from different backgrounds. When they come together, they bring their distinct styles and a wealth of knowledge.

“We offer artists a chance to cross-pollinate their knowledge. It is exciting to see lampworkers, fusers, glassblowers, and casters collaborating on work and sharing their experiences. The challenge for the artists is to make the most of the resources provided by public access studios, and to allow themselves to become a resource for others.”

Salem Community College Instructional Chair of Scientific Glass Technology Dennis Briening assists Katie Severance of Mt. Ephraim, N.J. in SCC's newly opened Paul J. Stankard Studio/Lab in the Samuel H. Jones Glass Education Center.

Photo courtesy of SCC



- Corning Museum of Glass, Amy Schwartz, director of the Studio, www.cmog.org.

“At the Studio, we are advocates for artists and students using glass. We provide a supportive environment where all the details are taken care of so that our artists can focus on their work and their learning. We provide access to all the people and things that make Corning special: the glass collection, the library, curators, scientists, photographers, conservators, and artists. We aim for excellence in all that we do.”

- Pittsburgh Glass Center, Heather McElwee, assistant director

“At the Pittsburgh Glass Center, we strive to foster a new generation of glass artists and enthusiasts in the Pittsburgh region, while attracting talented glass artists from around the world who recognize the advantages of having the best in glass art equipment to maximize their talents in a thriving arts community that supports their lifestyle.”

- Toledo Art Museum
- Eugene Glass School

“Eugene Glass School, a non-profit organization, is a glass resource not only for the glass community but for everyone. We offer beginner classes that start with the very basics for students who know absolutely nothing about glass. For intermediate students, we offer classes that focus on specific techniques so that the students can choose to take only the classes that offer the techniques that they wish to learn. Advanced students get the rare opportunity to work with world-class artists.”

- Penland School of Craft

Penland’s flameworking studio is a comfortable, well-light space with ten work stations, torches for hard and soft glass, an assortment of kilns, and a glass lathe. The studio has hosted classes in sculpture, vessels, paperweights, beads, fusing, murrine, neon, and occasional classes that combine flameworking with hot glass processes. These classes take place in Penland’s intense but noncompetitive workshop environment. In addition to the camaraderie and inspiration available within the studio, students are exposed to people working just as intensely in a dozen other disciplines. Along with Paul Stankard, prominent instructors in the Penland flameworking program have included Emilio Santini, Sally Prasch, Cesare Toffolo, Loren Stump, Kristina Logan, Dinah Hulet, and Lucio Bubacco.

- Pilchuck Glass School
- Holsten Gallery, www.holstengalleries.com
- Heller Gallery, www.hellergallery.com
- Habatat Galleries, Michigan—www.habatatglass.com, Chicago—www.habatatchicago.com, Florida—www.habatatgalleries.com
- Ken Saunders Gallery, www.marxsaunders.com
- Hawk Gallery, www.hawkgalleries.com
- Jane Sauer Gallery, www.jsauergallery.com
- Scott Jacobson Gallery, scottjacobson-gallery.com



An award-winning video crew visited the Samuel H. Jones Glass Education Center in February to tape a segment on Salem Community College distinguished alumnus Paul J. Stankard for the PBS program *Craft in America* that will air this fall (October 7th, 2009).

Photo courtesy of SCC

Salem Community College’s Samuel H. Jones Glass Education Center features a 10,000-square-foot studio/lab named in honor of distinguished alumnus Paul J. Stankard. Pictured here is the flameworking shop. The studio/lab also has a cold shop, hot shop and kiln shop.

Photo courtesy of SCC

