



A Mind in Flight: An Appreciation for Shane Fero

By Paul Stankard
Photos by Shane Fero

I knew of Shane Fero's work for awhile, but first met him in 1991 at the Corning Museum of Glass (Corning, N.Y.), while attending a Glass Art Society (GAS) conference. Shane was standing at the display of ancient glass and his name tag gave him away. When I introduced myself, it was evident we both respected each other's work – the conversation opener was about how variations on today's flameworking techniques can be found in a few fragments from the earliest examples of glass-making. I became deeply impressed with Shane's historical knowledge of glass and his special interest in early lampworking history.

During the conversation, Shane mentioned that he had moved with his wife Sallie from Florida to Penland School of Craft to be a part of a vibrant arts community and to live in a milder climate, amidst the natural beauty of mountainous western North Carolina. As good fortune would have it, I was scheduled to teach at Penland the next month, and Shane generously agreed to give my class a demonstration. He created one of his signature pieces: a blown vessel decorated with enamels, flameworked on his gas/air crossfire equipment. I had never seen a master work on this type of equipment, and I was excited to observe the use of torches that predate the development of borosilicate glasses.

Little did I know that a 20-year friendship would unfold as a result of our first encounter? Shane's generous spirit has influenced the glass landscape through his glass art and his teaching and volunteer work, which led to his becoming the president of GAS. Artists like Ginny Ruffner, Robert Mickelsen, Dina Hulet, and Shane Fero are among the standouts whose leadership as trustees of GAS has had a major impact on the glass landscape.

It is interesting how flameworking is now on par with other processes, judging by the significant artwork being produced in the contemporary glass community. Under Shane's leadership, GAS grew more international in

scope and encouraged more diversity in demonstrations at its conferences.

With this article, I celebrate Shane Fero's journey toward artistic maturity, highlighting significant markers along the way. To quote Shane, "When I began this journey, I never imagined it would evolve into the work I do today ... but dedication and persistence brought my work to fruition and acceptance."

Shane Fero began an apprenticeship program at age 15 in Florida and continued working part-time while attending high school, then community college. From his first exposure to glassblowing at the torch, Shane knew this was what he wanted to do. Little did he know that the craft had roots back to 15th-century Middle Europe and the equipment he was being trained on represented techniques from pre-modern technology?

During these early years, Shane was developing his lampworking skills under the tutelage of masters Jerry and Lee Coker and Roger Smith, all the while continuing his education, first at the community college and later at Plattsburgh State University in upstate New York. His academic interest was philosophy with a focus in esthetics. While living in the Adirondacks, a vast, protected region of lakes, streams,



"Cedar Branch with Cedar Waxwings"

Hot and flameworked glass, sandblasted and acid-etched.

17"h x 31"w x 8"d. 2008

*collaboration with Eddie Bernard, Pammina Traylor and Nadine Saylor.

mountains, and forests, Shane's life-long fascination with nature, specifically birds and animals, came alive. Shane's expansive life list of bird sightings is impressive to avid birdwatchers and was established during his time in upstate New York.

It all came together in the late '70s and early '80s when he expanded his creative vocabulary beyond blown forms to sculpt the animal kingdom with a special interest in ornithology.

One of the pivotal moments in Shane's artistic career was visiting the Corning Museum of Glass to view "New Glass: A Worldwide Survey." This contemporary glass survey opened in 1979 and traveled to four major museums over a two-year period. The idea that international artists, dominated by Americans, used glass to express themselves inspired Shane to reevaluate his approach to lampworking, which, at the time, was a means of generating income by doing production glass, to an approach of taking more creative risks. Experiencing the "New Glass" exhibit represented an epiphany that made Shane, then a parochial flameworker, aware of the burgeoning glass art community.

With his glassmaking background and skills, Shane was excited to realize that the work he saw in the exhibit was the level of art he wanted to make. The

dedication to glass evidenced by artists as diverse as John Burton, Mark Peiser, Dale Chihuly, and David Whittemore, among others, reinforced Shane's confidence in his future as a glass artist. After five hours in the museum, he purchased a complete set of slides of the exhibition because the dean of his department had asked him to give a lecture on glass art and process to the university community, which would be open to the public. With the purchased slides, his preparation was completed.

As a side note, while having a beer with Shane in Louisville, Kentucky, during the 2010 GAS conference, we discussed this article and the exhibit "New Glass: a Worldwide Survey." We laughed when I told him I was rejected for the exhibit, which led to attempts to outdo each other with our rejection stories. Rejection stories aside, the Corning Museum of Glass has educated and challenged countless numbers of creative people, this writer included, and there is a good case to be made that it has been the single most important catalyst and resource in the growth of the studio glass movement.

The '80s represented a period of fascinating personal growth for Shane Fero and a stronger commitment to glass-making as a means of expression. It was during his time in New York that Shane first integrated his per-



"Bird Spirit Vessels 1 and 2"

Flameworked glass and acid-etched

(1.) 11.5"h x 2.75"w x 2.75"d.

(2.) 7.5"h x 2.5"w x 2.5"d. 2008



"The Fire Lark"

Flameworked glass and acid-etched.
3.75"h x 7"w x 3". 2008

Technically, Shane was interpreting his interests with two distinct methods: taking advantage of current flameworking technologies to use gas-oxygen torches to melt borosilicate glass and using his gas-air crossfire burners to work soda-lime glass hollowware. At this point in his career, his borosilicate efforts were primarily one-of-a-kind sculptures, and the soda-lime efforts were hollow vessels that represented his design work. However, he broke away from traditional vessel decoration techniques to use furnace glass in free-form designs. He developed a fresh approach by adding colored shards and glass enamels to the hot, bulbous shapes, which moved him beyond the standard linear line-and-dot designs.

Shane's experience of demonstrating glassblowing to tourists resulted in his skill in creating salable objects. It was an interesting learning experience that not only built strong hand skills, but also developed his ability to interact with potential purchasers. After leaving the tourist/gift shop trade, Shane opened a gallery in Plattsburgh called Classical Glass. It was during this time that Shane's creative repertoire expanded to include creating glass versions of various species from the plant and animal kingdoms, as well as expressing the ideas he encountered in his philosophy and personal studies.

What is important to note in this period is Shane's need to make his work personal and how he persevered while implementing his vision. Because he was a dedicated studio artist, his primary challenge was to create work that could sell to support his artistic vision and experimentation. What most artists have in common is the courage to create in the face

"The Gold-winged Blackbird"

Flameworked glass, fused gold-leaf and acid-etched. 4.25"h x 6.75"w x 2.75"d. 2008

sonal interests in philosophy, nature, and art history with his continually advancing skills as an artist. He began expressing his ideas and interests in glass while still producing design. His ideas and themes during this phase of his career were integrated into a more focused and diverse list: ancient Egyptian mythology, the surrealistic art of Salvador Dali, contemporary dance, and a fascination with dreams. He has stated, "I think it is very important to study a subject in depth, and to research how other people in the

history of art and craft have expressed similar subjects."

These passions shaped the ideas Shane wanted to express in glass and required him to adapt and advance his technical skills to keep up with his ever-expanding ideas. When you lead with your skill, you are mostly in a craft mode; when you lead with your mind and then interpret your ideas, you are developing techniques and creating a new vocabulary in glass. That's exactly what Shane was doing.



"Journey of the Magpie"

Acrylic on canvas. 23.75h x 31.75w.
2008

of adversity. This adversity can take many forms: living on modest to little income, societal pressure to conform to the work norm, and creating work that people understand, among others. Shane's early years are evidence of his courage in moving beyond tourist items and begin making more ambitious and personal objects that reflected his interest in esoteric themes.

When Shane was invited to co-teach flameworking with Fred Birkhill in 1988 at the Penland School of Craft, he experienced the magic of art-making on the mountain. After several teaching sessions and attending their first Glass Art Society conference, Shane and Sallie decided to relocate in the area. As good fortune would have it, the Fero's purchased one of only a few privately owned residential properties on the Penland campus.

In the summer of 1991, I was invited to teach flameworking at Penland. I remember taking my class on a walk to Shane's studio for our scheduled demonstration. What should have been a 10-minute walk stretched into a 30-minute nature study. In season, the Penland campus is alive with native flowers, especially along the field's borders. I have pleasant memories of seeing my first stinkhorn mushrooms near a stand of Indian Pipes. Like most wildflower enthusiasts, I enjoyed pointing out the many showy field flowers, together with woodland beauties, to students and discussing ways to abstract them in glass.

When we arrived at the studio, it was exciting to see Shane working at his bench on his gas/air crossfire set-up. His burners brought back memories of watching the toolers work hot glass in the '60s at Andrews Glass, a scientific glassblowing company.



When Shane invited me to pull a point on the 25-millimeter tubing he was using in the crossfire, I felt like a kid playing with a new toy. All eyes were on me, and was I tickled. Shane said, "Stankard, good hands, I'm impressed," and I jokingly demurred with an "awe, shucks." Obviously the whole experience touched me, because I can remember it as if it were yesterday. As a teacher, it's a good feeling to facilitate an experience that showcases a master in his environment.

One of the unique benefits of being a part of a creative community in and around the Penland School of Craft is the sharing of ideas with like minds and the collective emotional support from interacting with talented professionals making up a diverse group of artist in all media. Shane's background as a flameworker and his leadership experience as past president of the Glass Art Society, along with being a gourmet cook and wine connoisseur, make the Fero's an integral part of the community. Their circle



"Study of the Indian Pipe Family"

Flameworked glass, acid-etched, black walnut box, acrylic paint and dried flowers. 12"h x 20"w x 5"d. 2008

of close friends includes Mark Peiser, Richard Ritter, Elizabeth Brim, Harvey Littleton, Kenny Carter, Rob Levine, Yaffa Sakorsky-Todd, and clay artist/philosopher Paulus Berensohn, among others. These nationally respected artists who primarily work in glass challenged him to organize his work into themes and go beyond glass to paint and be seriously involved with print-making.

When I review Shane's career, it is fascinating to realize how this past decade has pulled his various series together in ways that produce original work. Many of Shane's technical struggles have now been won. When looking at his latest work, you are seeing a high level of creative freedom that is setting new standards in this centuries-old craft. Shane brings inventive, sophisticated techniques to his work, such as acid etching glass to enhance colors, incorporating acrylic paint and fused gold leaf, and sandblasting to add dimension and visual information to the surface.

What may seem simple to a casual observer is, in fact, the result of a highly skilled, labor-intensive effort. Yet, in spite of the labor and technicality of his work, Shane maintains the peace and tranquility he has encountered through his love of nature. It is a true master who can disguise effort in beauty. It is interesting to see how Shane's Adirondack bird-watching has culminated in some of the most poetic and delicately blown-glass objects.

I have seen Shane working on his bird series in his studio, and I was struck by the serene environment he works in. My analogy for Shane in his studio is that of a monk in his work space; when you enter, you instantly sense the sincerity of the maker's efforts.

In the process of writing this article, I talked to number of people about Shane's career. The response was indicative of the glass community's love and respect for him. Here are three representative quotes:

"Jade Moon Bottle"

Hot and flameworked glass, sandblasted and acid-etched. 17"h x 7"w x 7"d. 2008



• “The lampworking of Shane Fero has evolved into a fine-art medium. His engaging birds and anthropomorphic sculptural figures are dynamic and fluid, suggesting active psychological states and emphasizing expressionistic details of unexpected color.”

– Peter J. Baldaia, director of Curatorial Affairs, Huntsville Museum of Art

• “The first time I saw Shane working he was making one of his surrealist personages. From art history I had only known these as two dimensional images and rather doubted some could exist in three. His vision was a revelation. His process was also as I watched him manipulate the mass and position of the extremities with subtle mystery into exquisite sculpture balance. It was the most compelling flame working demo I’ve ever seen.”

– Mark Peiser, award-winning glass artist, first glass resident artist at Penland School of Crafts, and pioneer of the studio glass movement

• “Shane is a gifted artist but, more than that, he is truly dedicated to giving back to the glass community as a whole. In two terms as president of the Glass Art Society, which is an accomplishment in itself, he led the organization into creating a true online interactive presence to assist in connecting members more easily from around the world. He gave so much of his personal time and energy to making the organization better.”

– Pam Figenshow Koss, executive director, Glass Art Society

Publisher’s notes: In addition to an active career as a studio Artist Paul Stankard a pioneer in the Studio Glass Movement teaches flameworking art at Salem Community College in Southern New Jersey.



"Bird Goddess"

Hot and flameworked glass, acrylic paint on glass base. 24”h x 8”w x 8”d. 2008

