

Sharing a Journey: Questions and Answers

By Paul Stankard

Over the last two years, I've met a large number of borosilicate flameworkers making everything from jewelry to glass pipes who are yearning to do significant creative work and explore new boundaries. They have a strong commitment to the independent lifestyle as studio artists and many make their livings through their highly developed skills. They are not satisfied with staying in one creative place and have larger ambitions. I relate to their struggle to channel their technical abilities into something more significant by creating sculpture. What's holding many of them back, however, is a lack of artistic maturity. Few of them went to art school, and they are often simply unaware of what is considered important work by the larger world of collectors, galleries, and museum curators.

What I've been promoting with these *Glass Line* articles is excellence, but the notion of "excellence" is defined by the community you belong to. You can be an excellent goblet-maker, an excellent paperweight-maker, an excellent bead-maker, and on and on. To be excellent in these tightly defined categories, you need to recognize what is masterwork and be familiar with the skilled artists and craftspeople advancing the tradition with whom you want to strive to compete. You then can take advantage of the respect you've achieved in these decorative-arts categories to catapult yourself into the greater glass community. By competing

with the past and matching the category's history, you'll be at the front of your field.

What does excellence mean in the larger Studio Glass world, or in the wider art world? To find out, you'll need to immerse yourself in glass art or contemporary art, and enter into a dialog with the legacy of great works by the most significant artists of the past and present. The surest way to expand your audience is by creating work that goes beyond technical perfection and expresses a personal vision that challenges the larger contemporary art community.

I'm seeing a higher level of skill and technical diversity in glass objects, but, in the broader fine art community, the actual material process is secondary. Connoisseurs, collectors, and curators are most interested in how the object fits into an intellectual framework, regardless of the process used to create it. As important as skill is to executing and fabricating an artwork well, it's only one component of a significant work of art. What counts most is the work's ability to engage the viewer in a way that is relevant to our moment in art history, when the craft of ideas is as important as the craft of making physical objects.

So, how do you establish a career, and where can you start? Through my involvement with Salem Community College, the John Burton Program, and, more recently, Facebook, I've met a lot of enthusiastic glassmakers who want to excel in their

craft. I'm constantly asked questions about how to become successful and known for your work. Of the questions I've received, 70 percent deal with making money from the work produced, or having the work collected and respected. When responding to these questions, I go back in memory to the 1960s, when I was at the beginning of my own career and asked the same questions.

What I've learned along my journey is that creating significant work has nothing to do with money; it's all about educating yourself and bringing to your work what you care about and turning it into a personal vision. Many people assume that I made an adequate living on my work from the beginning. The reality is that my wife and I lived in poverty for nine years. During those years, the most encouraging sign that I could survive as an independent artist/craftsperson was a modest increase in my income due to the heightened ambition and improved quality of my work. I staked everything on quality, as I defined it, and that became my security blanket.

My focus from the beginning was flowers in glass, and I found that combination in South Jersey paperweights, most notably the Millville Rose. When I started out, it was not about art. It was about being creative in glass; specifically, making interesting paperweights that people would want to buy. The paperweight category educated me. From South Jersey paperweights, I followed my curiosity to antique French paperweights. Over a 10-year period, as I mastered the craft, I moved beyond the paperweight form to looking at all artists who had strong responses to nature. I also looked to Nature herself for inspiration. As my artistic references broadened, I worked to explore and celebrate themes surrounding the mysteries of fertility and decay.

What I'm trying to say is that I feel a little self-conscious answering these questions, because each career is unique and personal. That being said, I know artists can draw inspiration hearing each other's stories. At this stage in my career, I derive great satisfaction from sharing aspects of my journey that I hope will be a source of encouragement for others. Following are some examples; I hope they will fuel the inspiration and careers of *Glass Line* readers.



Robert Kincheloe: *What role does teaching play in a career in glass? Do you see interacting with students to be part of an ongoing education for the artist? How do you see the cross-pollination of glass media and techniques playing a role in a career in glass? Should we be able to work in all forms of glass to better develop our form?*

As professionals, we are valuable members of the cultural community. As such, we are invited to teach, lecture, and express our opinions on creative issues. For me, teaching has nurtured my artistic growth in a very, very profound way. It has allowed me to leave the studio for weeks at a time and be exposed to new ideas through interacting with creative people. It has also challenged me to defend my approach to art-making. There are no rules for being a professional artist, just as there are no rules as to what could feed your artistic need. If you value interacting with creative people from many different backgrounds and places, then teaching is an ideal experience.

Taking advantage of the many techniques in glass has complemented my work.

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Marty Christiansen: *In your professional opinion, other than good teachers, what is the most important thing that will make a glassblower/lampworker successful? In your professional opinion, what are the top three things that have led to your success as a glass artist?*

What makes a person successful is a need to be creative and to express, through their glasswork, what's important to them. That said, other issues

come into play, such as competing with the great glasswork from the past. In my case, one of the most important components was and is a very supportive partner who was willing to make sacrifices on my behalf. Nobody becomes successful by themselves. The top three things that broadened my creative world have been independent studies in the history of glass, art history, and literature. It's important to be familiar with great ideas that permeate the contemporary art landscape. It also takes courage to create—to take emotional and, at times, financial risks for the sake of your vision.

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Lea Zinke: *“These days, it would seem that people take one beginning glass class and, 20 minutes later, they are teaching glass to others. What is your opinion about the plethora of people teaching glass these days and do you think they are adequately prepared to do so? And how do you think it affects the glass art movement in the long term?”*

How you get started is not as important as where you end up; very few glass people pursue excellence (in most fields, it's believed it takes 10,000 hours of training to reach the highest levels of excellence). If an entry-level course challenges a beginner, then it's done its job. The experience of the instructor is less important than the curiosity of the student, who will continue to pursue more challenging classes that offer a more challenging level of techniques and experiences. It's up to the student to decide the value of the workshop and the pace of his or her artistic growth. That being said, most of the upper-echelon artists never took a workshop. There's a good case to be made that vocational workshops can be a distraction that stifles originality. It all depends on the individual and how each person learns.

The growth of workshops, along with the increasing number of art schools setting up facilities, is a good thing. It gives thousands of creative people a way of dreaming their way into the creative glass community and, for some, of learning about glass art and becoming collectors.

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Seth Huntley: *Is glassblowing an art or craft, and (in your opinion) is one better than the other?*

Glassblowing itself is neutral. It can be a vehicle for craft or a vehicle for art. It depends on the creative expectations of the maker. In terms of one being better than the other, excellence is an equalizer. Fine craft can be elevated to fine art. Ultimately, it's up to the viewer to decide.

Seth Huntley: *Have glass pipes had a negative or positive effect on the glassblowing community, and in what ways?*

The glass pipe and bong world is a huge paradox. The paradox is that the pipe community is separate from and perhaps larger than the glass art community. It's a subculture in glass craft that has appeal beyond anything that glass art has experienced to date. It has attracted millions of Americans who appreciate the creative efforts, from the simplest colorful production piece to the most elaborate one-of-a-kind works. The users of glass pipes have little interest in the materials, processes, or overall culture of glass art. But, as glass-pipe makers invest years in developing skills, many explore their creative sides beyond pipes to compete in the more open artistic glass art landscape.

Ultimately, I think the effect has been positive. Glass-pipe makers are inventing new equipment to accommodate their demands, and these innovations offer new creative opportunities for other glass artists. The strange side, to me, is that many relish the idea of being outsiders. And, by the standards of many insiders, their culture is what Walt Whitman's work was once considered: “not for polite society.” Because of these factors, they are invisible in the greater glass art community.

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Kathleen Elliot: *How do you gain inspiration from other artists while avoiding the pitfall of copying their ideas or techniques?*

I look for inspiration outside of glass. When I look at other artists, I'm inspired not only by their ideas, but how they present their ideas. One example is the painter Morris Graves. Many of his paintings deal with nature, specifically birds and flowers.

If you're typical of most artists, it won't matter where your ideas come from. Many thinkers believe there are no new ideas under the sun—it's all the same images and themes, continuously reinterpreted and reappearing throughout art history. By making your work personal, you're making the ideas and techniques unmistakably your own. And that's the primary goal.



Sara E. LaGrand: *How true to glass are you? If you want to create something, is it always glass only? Are you willing to explore other media, possibly mixed media, to bring your vision to fruition?*

I've been comfortable in a glass focus. My most adventurous work, which I think

is my most significant work, takes advantage of cold-working and Hxtal epoxy.

I've asked myself many times why I'm not more adventurous with the materials I use. My answer has been that I've worked extraordinarily hard to go inward. Rather than explore new materials to achieve larger dimension, I find that my aptitude is suited to refinement in exploring new allusions within my small-scale parameters.

Sara E. LaGrand 2: *As far as a glass career ... do you own your past work? The things you did for cash? Or do you distance yourself from it? Does owning your early work (encasing pennies in bottles) distract from your current, more-artistic work?*

This is an interesting question in light of the fact that I recently destroyed around 400 objects mostly from early in my career that had been accumulating in the crawl space of my studio. It's not easy to crush balls of glass. I heated them up to 1,000 degrees, then dropped them in a barrel of water, and then crushed them up. My intent was to permanently erase work that I felt was technically or artistically unsuccessful. In doing this, I hoped to strengthen my work that is out there.

When I was making giftware in the early days, my work was never signed; it was anonymous. Throughout my career, I have made a point to sign only work that I am proud of.



Matt Climer: *When I look around the world of glass art, I see an enormous pool of talent. Aside from making the best possible work, how can I, as an artist, expand the public's knowledge of this small area that is torch work?*

Aside from making the best possible work, there's not a whole lot left. There are many people sympathetic to glass who make it their business to identify significant work and promote it to a larger audience. Beyond spending your money to promote your own work, focusing on the quality and hoping for recognition are your best bet. With today's Internet-based mass media, I don't believe significant work can go unnoticed for very

long. There are opportunities to submit images of work in competitions like the *Corning Glass Review* that surveys glass art internationally and publishes its selection yearly.



Kris Schaible: *What was your biggest disaster ... the one that made you think it was all over? How did you recover and did it change your style of work?*

My career has been one material battle after another, one technical battle after another, one creative battle after another. The war that all these smaller battles fit into is making enough money to survive, to keep creating, and to feed my family. Within the first five years of working in my garage studio, I wasn't making enough money, so I went out and looked for a part-time job. I ended up being hired, but didn't show up for the first day, instead deciding that I would keep believing in my ability to make my dream happen.



Malissa Kuznicki: *Frequently thoughts such as "What will others think of my work?", "Will this sell?", and "Is my work significant?" can paralyze creativity. Have you faced this problem and, if so, what are some of the things you have done to overcome it?*

I believe many in the flameworking community start by approaching art as craftspeople. A few in that group mature to become artists. So, when you concern yourself with what people will think of your work and whether the market will support it, you're losing sight of the most important component in the creative

journey: refining the quality of the work and building on a tradition.

What allowed me to overcome my feelings of inadequacy was rejecting work that didn't meet my personal standards. The only way I could bring some peace of mind to this common dilemma was being my own worst critic. The process of rejecting 20 to 30 percent of my work motivated me to resolve many artistic and technical issues that stifled my enthusiasm for the result. For example, after developing a design with a variety of color combinations, sometimes I would see the colors change during the encapsulation process. If I'm not satisfied with the overall appearance of the finished piece, I scrap it and continue experimenting until I reach my desired result. And then there's the trapping air in the glass that turns into a big bubble. (Note the *big* bubble reference, because it's impossible to have no bubbles when exercising creative risk.)



Kerry Collett: *I'm always interested in how other glass artists market their work. What are the ways they promote?*

When you market your own work, you are most likely in a design category dealing with making money from limited production. The upper-echelon artists in the glass world associate with galleries who market their work through announcements, advertising in publications, and explaining the work to countless numbers of people who go through the gallery. Associating with galleries over a long period creates a cumulative benefit. These

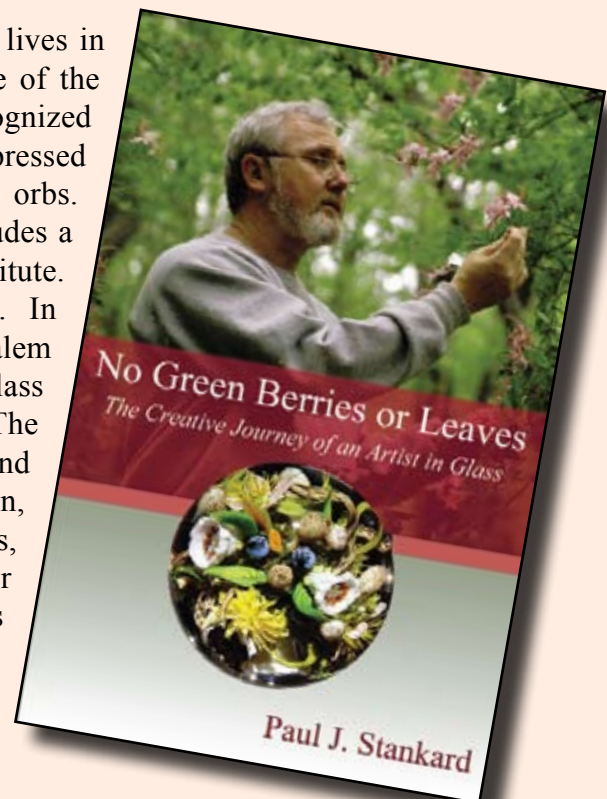
galleries spend serious money on promoting artwork and the longer you're in the galleries; the more widely your work will be promoted. □



Zach Jorgenson: *What is your favorite moment in the glassmaking or art-making process now versus earlier in your career?*

For me, putting the glowing glass in the oven to be annealed at the end of the process has been a thrill since Day One and still feels wonderfully exciting. ■

Paul Stankard is a world-renowned glass artist who lives in Mantua, New Jersey. He is widely recognized as one of the world's master glass artists, and is particularly recognized and respected for his flameworked floral motifs expressed in crystal paperweights, rectangular columns, and orbs. Stankard's formal education beyond high school includes a two-year glass-blowing course at Salem Technical Institute. However, he values higher education immensely. In addition to creating his art, he teaches art students at Salem Community College in Salem, NJ, and at premier glass art public access studios around the country such as: The Corning Museum of Glass Studio School in NY, Penland School of Craft in NC, and Urban Glass in Brooklyn, NY. He has received two honorary doctoral degrees, one from Rowan University in NJ in 1997, and another from Muskingum College in OH in 2007, and has recently received an honorary associate degree from Salem Community College in NJ, his alma mater.



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