

Captured In Crystal— The Masterful Art of



Sometime during the 1870s, skeletons of dinosaurs, numbering about thirty, were unearthed in Belgium. During that same time period, an unknown artist working for the Cristallerie de Pantin fashioned the Pantin lizards, of which there are only eleven known to be in existence today. These lizards were created either by cutting facets through an overlay or by enameling patterns over the animal. All but one of these realistic reptiles is featured on sandy soil beside a flowering plant. It seems quite likely that the Pantin dinosaur-like creatures were developed to chronicle this event for the Universal Exposition of 1878 in Paris, France.

One hundred years later, Victor Trabucco was challenged—not to copy the Pantin lizards, but to pick up where they left off. He says: “In 1978, the Great Paperweight Show at Corning was my first view of the great Pantin lizard weights. I can still feel the impact they had on me as I stood in front of the case viewing these masterpieces of the past. That was the day I set out to develop my skills and techniques to create these wonders of glass.” At that time, Trabucco had only been producing paperweights for a short time, inspired by some antique French weights he had seen. Paperweights fascinated and challenged him because of the limited format and the idea that the art form is not forgiving of error.

For the next twelve years, Trabucco addressed himself to experimenting with new techniques, equipment, and ideas and described himself as, “kind of obsessed with my work.” The results of this obsession include the development of his many beautiful flower and bouquet weights, the distinctive “Trabucco rose,” the grandeur of his magnam weights, and his innovative *Nature in Ice* and *Inclusion* series.

Astounding Technique and Great Finesse

Each of the obstacles that Trabucco surmounted, the new techniques that he developed, and his tireless devotion to perfection over the years have enabled him to produce the Trabucco lizard. In crafting the lizard, he begins with a solid-colored object, which he so ably sculpts into the final contour that conveys the feeling of motion. Trabucco, in his remarkable achievement in bringing the body of the lizard off of the ground and up into the glass, should be applauded not only for this technical feat but also because this achievement is what affects the sinewy quality and powerful sense of animation in the beast. The striking presence of the lizard is captured in the opening photo.

The next step in this process is the painstaking application of each of the five hundred to eight hundred scales, individually applied, on the legs, body (except for the underside), tail, and head of the lizard. In order for this step to be successful, it is vital that the heating be precise. The entire lizard must be heated up to avoid cracking when the torch is used in application of each scale. One end of the animal is cooling off while the other end is still warm. Meanwhile, the torch must be hot enough to fuse in the scales, but not so hot that it distorts the body. It takes great finesse to keep the lizard warm, add a few scales, reheat the lizard, but not too much, then add a few more scales, and so forth. This is a process that requires a mastery of the heat level, a methodical routine, and a sense of feel and judgment. One has only to examine the scales to appreciate the attention to detail in depth and sheer magnitude, as well as the skill with which they were applied, to understand why Trabucco feels this aspect of the lizard is a major accomplishment.

Victor Trabucco

by Karen R. Dunlop



Adding a Touch of Realism

Trabucco flowers have always been exciting, and those in the lizard weights are no exception, as you can see in the illustrations. As objects become larger and more three-dimensional, a typical approach is to make them thicker and heavier in order to survive encasement. But because Trabucco desired the flower to exude a delicate appearance, many technical obstacles had to be conquered to produce the flower, which is natural, three-dimensional, and open. The surrounding leaves are especially effective. Their graceful sweeps and curls give the impression of movement as the reptile brushes past. The plant is so believable, it is difficult to fathom that it is created with glass!

The ground treatment necessitated much experimentation until Trabucco was pleased. In previous lizard weights, he had used powdered glass for the soil, but he was not satisfied with the results. He wanted to use substances other than glass and experimented with numerous materials but kept experiencing internal problems, bubbles, and even cracked glass. After considerable trial and error, he found a material other than glass that could represent a rich-looking soil mixture made up of many different textures and colors.

Finally, encasing the lizard presents new challenges. When encasing smaller items, the process is handled differently than with large objects. Consequently, when encasing large and small objects together, the difference in heating has a tendency to distort the smaller objects as well as trap bubbles. Accordingly, one can truly appreciate the delicacy of the flower and leaves when noting the size of the lizard. Many artists have commented, "It takes a lot of courage to encase such a complex setup." Prior to encasement, the weight is about 80 percent complete. Much time, as well as physical and emotional energy, has been invested in the piece, and one cannot afford to overlook even the most minute detail during encasement.

Finding Success in the Midst of the Challenge

Trabucco Studio was founded in 1975 and is run with his wife Beverly and sons David and Jon. They combine technical know-how and creativity to bring life to their paperweights and glass sculptures and have created some of the most innovative paperweights being made today. The works occupy prominent places in the most distinguished collections of heads of state, professional athletes, major corporations, and stars of stage and screen. Examples of the work are displayed in The American Glass Museum, The Chicago Art Institute, The Bergstrom Art Center (Neenah, Wisconsin), The Royal Ontario Museum (Toronto, Ontario, Canada), The Corning Museum of Glass (Corning, New York), and The Kobe Lampwork Glass Museum (Kobe, Japan). Trabucco has also been a technical advisor to Steuben Glass. Up to 60 percent of the company's production is finished using his techniques. Trabucco reflects, "It takes a lot of mental energy to regroup after the frustration of the previous day when a weight is lost due to timing problems during encasement." Through years of experimentation, he has uncovered principles that have enabled him to make breakthroughs. Each new accomplishment brought him closer to realizing his current success with the lizard paperweights. In the early 1980s, he created the "Whiptail" lizards, which he was able to bring up off the ground, heralding his first achievement in the lizard weights. Following this, he made a few four-inch magnum lizard weights in the mid-1980s. But these lizards were smooth. He feels that his accomplishments with this current lizard are the scales, the delicacy of the leaves, and the creation of the ground.

The result of Trabucco's many years of trial and error is a spectacular five-inch weight of such great impact that it makes its presence felt anywhere. This finely crafted lizard stands on a rock ground, head poised, confident in its strength and ready to lunge. It is near a flowering plant, the leaves of which seem to flow in haughty nonchalance. While at a Wheaton Village Paperweight Collectors Convention, Trabucco's lizard made the rounds and always drew crowds of enthusiastic people. Comments from collectors such as "the greatest paperweight of the century" were overheard. This dramatic work of art is truly an intense visual experience and is instantly recognized as a masterpiece. After thirty-five long years of working with glass, during which time he has discovered and employed new techniques and processes in paperweights, Trabucco notes, "Creating the lizard weight has been the most challenging work of my career, and I hope this work gives the collectors as much enjoyment as it has given me."



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