

# Encapsulated Snake Paperweight



Design and Demonstration by Jim D'Onofrio  
Text and Photography by Laurie Nessel

"If you're not questioning where you are or how your work affects other people, then you're not doing your job."  
Jim D'Onofrio



Jim D'Onofrio has been fascinated by the Desert Southwest ever since 1975 when he visited friends in Tucson, Arizona. In 1984 he and Paul Stankard traveled to study desert flora up close. Unusual plants such as the ghost-white Indian Pipe amazed Jim and inspired his designs. He lived outside Phoenix for several years in the early nineties and eventually settled and has lived in Cave Creek, Arizona, with his ceramicist wife Aron Frogge since 2003.

## The Cost of Freedom

When Jim struck out on his own, he was thrust into the artist's dilemma—how to survive making art, a crucially important element with a family to support. One must balance practicality and creativity. Jim found that balance by being disciplined and versatile. Security was sacrificed for freedom when he became his own boss, and he knew that he must be prepared for the unexpected. One memorable experience, for example, was breaking three paperweights when he dropped one on top of two others. To salvage them, he sent them off for recutting, but they were lost in the mail for three weeks.

There is also the cost of operating a studio to consider. Jim's paperweights range from fifteen hundred to two thousand dollars each. That price includes up to two hundred dollars for hand-polishing the pontil mark and the cost of failures. Then there is the fact that Schott Glass Technologies in Duryea, Pennsylvania, makes encasement gobs only intermittently, so artists must stock up when they are available. One shipment can run ten thousand to fifteen thousand dollars.

## Developing a Personal Style

Jim strives for movement and realism in his work. There is action or anticipation in each piece. He considers new designs regularly, but they take time to perfect. Series are made to amortize the research and development. Working in the medium of paperweights means that the magnification exaggerates any flaws, so instead of worrying about detail, Jim emphasizes the narrative. The fabrication



### Effetre/Moretti Rod

422 Orange

### Kugler Rod

K 161 Light Beige

K 086 Turquoise

### Schott

400-Gram Schott 90 Gobs (2)

### Tools and Materials

Pontils (2) Small Glory Hole

Large Torch Small Torch

Large Graphite Paddle Large Marble Mold

Hotplate Large tweezers Fine tweezers

Vacuum Setup (Kiln, Chamber, Pump)

Annealing Kiln Rollers

Cold Working Equipment



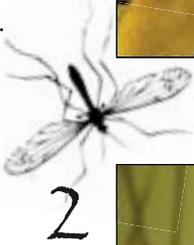
is a delicate procedure. Any misstep can destroy hours invested in each piece. As he puts it, "You don't learn by your successes. You learn by your failures."

Jim is secure with his reputation and eager to share the knowledge he has acquired over the years. He urges paperweight tyros to attain a level of expertise in order to express their own creativity. "Learn technique but work from heart and mind," he says. He takes pleasure in helping others fulfill their passion for the craft. To that end, Jim offers demos and workshops in his studio. He also shares his art through his representatives, the Leo Kaplan Gallery in New York City and paperweight dealer, Larry Selman, at The Glass Gallery in Santa Cruz, California.

## Forming the Snake

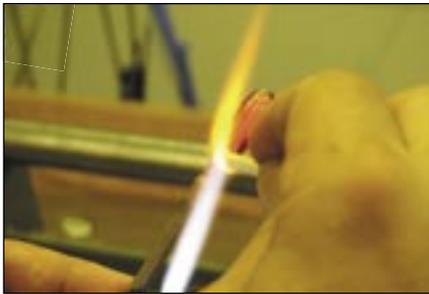


1  
Preheat the rod in a reduced (cooler) flame.



2

Swipe the snake color all around the core color. Jim is using Effetre/Moretti 422 Orange over



Kugler K 161 Light Beige. Leave a section exposed for the lighter belly. Flatten the belly and pull out. Jim always partly encases the base color to create highlights.

3

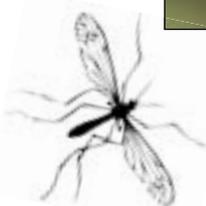


Taper the neck. It is critical to draw it down in one shot. If it gets too thin, you must start over. Then shape the head and eyes using tweezers.



4

Dot with stringer and melt in to define the labial scales.



5

Redefine the head shape using tweezers. There is a lot of detail in the head. Strive for naturalism and realism.



6

Add dots with the Kuglar K 086 Turquoise for contrasting detail at the back of the jaw.



7

Use a reducing flame to heat the body of the snake. The flame starts 3" past the torch face.



8

Make the first bend behind the neck, noting the turquoise at the jaw hinge. Then heat and make the second bend.





9

Heat and make the third bend.



14

Practice until you are happy with the appearance of the snake. You may

have to make several in order to get one good one. Each snake took around 45 minutes to make.



10

Heat and manipulate the snake to fit the confines of the vacuum tray.



## Encapsulating the Snake

You'll notice throughout the photos that Jim keeps an impeccably clean, neat, and well-organized work area. The color rods are neatly arranged on the back of the workbench, with tags denoting the manufacturer and color code.



11

Heat the tail.



Here is the setup arranged on the vacuum base. The base is perforated. The vacuum tube in the back of the base is connected to the vacuum pump below the bench. The ring on the top right is placed on top of the base and contains the molten encasement glass during the vacuum process. Jim simulates gravel using various glass frit mixes that are crushed in a steel mortar and pestle. The globe behind the snake is a sculpted flower that has already been encased. Delicate, upright designs must be supported or they will distort. After annealing, the pontil mark is cold worked to a high polish using cup wheels.



12

Pull out the tail. You will learn how thick to encase your core snake color to keep the core from showing through too much when you taper the tail.

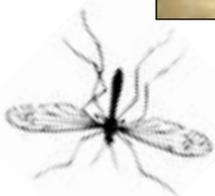


13

Flame-cut the tail.



The setup is preheated for two hours at 980° in the clam-shell vacuum kiln. The vacuum pump is on the milk crate below the kiln. Note the counterweight for the kiln lid. The custom-made stainless steel pontil is a 1" tube welded onto a 3/4" tube. Each lasts about two years.



1

Heat the tip of the pontil and wrap the outside edge with clear rod.



5

Heat the gob in the glory hole. Jim has a vintage 1988 Denver glory hole with Giberson burner.



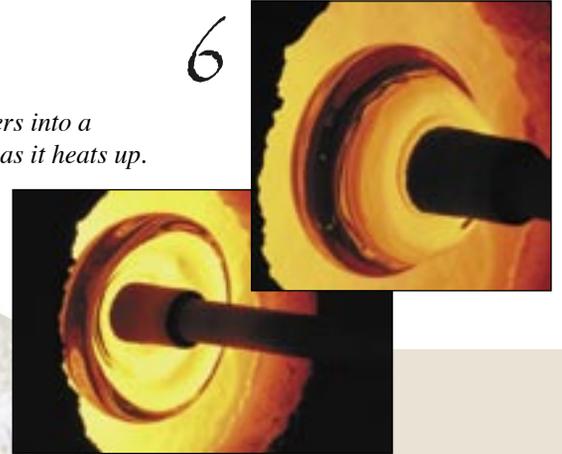
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Pick up the preheated clear Schott gob (gob-shaped ingot) with the pontil. It takes 1-1/2 hours to preheat gobs.



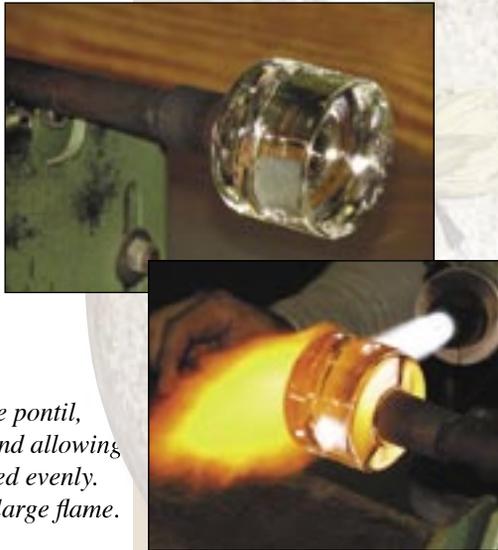
6

The gob gathers into a convex shape as it heats up.



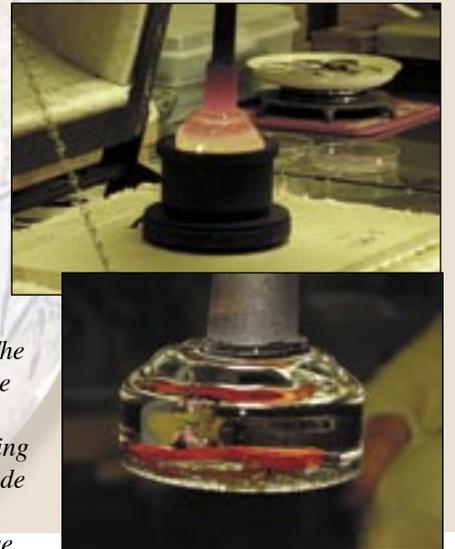
3

Rollers support the pontil, reducing fatigue and allowing the gob to be heated evenly. Heat the gob in a large flame.



7

Molten Schott is dropped into the vacuum cylinder and sucked over the setup. The encasement is held in the cylinder for several moments to cool before lifting it out. You can see the side view of the encasement with the setup at the base.



4

Skin the entire surface of the gob to remove any impurities or irregularities. Start peeling from the pontil side. The skinned glass is pulled off and flame cut.



8

Heat the pontil.



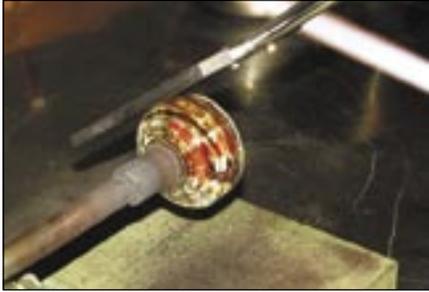
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*Heat the encasement.*



10

*Paddle the encasement into a cylinder. Take care to not overheat and distort the design.*



13

*Heat the entire gob.*



11

*The assistant keeps the encasement warm by the glory hole while a second pontil is prepared to pick up the Schott gob that will be the base of the paperweight.*



14

*Allow the base glass to flow over the bottom of the encasement.*



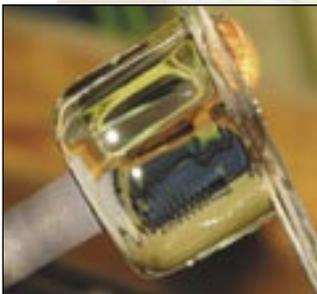
15

*Heat and remove the base pontil.*



12

*Pick up the second gob from the kiln and heat. Skin the side of the base gob. Then heat and skin the top of the gob.*



16



*Paddle back into a cylinder. Notice the side view showing the encasement now in the center of the paperweight.*



21

*Attach the pontil to the base of the paperweight.*



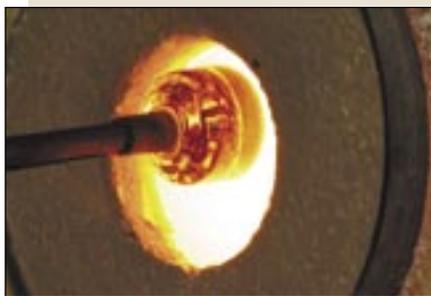
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*Heat and remove the pontil from the top of the paperweight.*



17

*Heat the paperweight in the glory hole.*



23

*Heat and let the glass drip off, removing any impurities left by the pontil. Then reheat.*



18

*Block to shape.*



19

*Heat just enough to melt in the chill marks.*



24

*Block the paperweight to shape. Then melt in the chill marks.*



20

*Heat a new pontil to prepare to swap.*



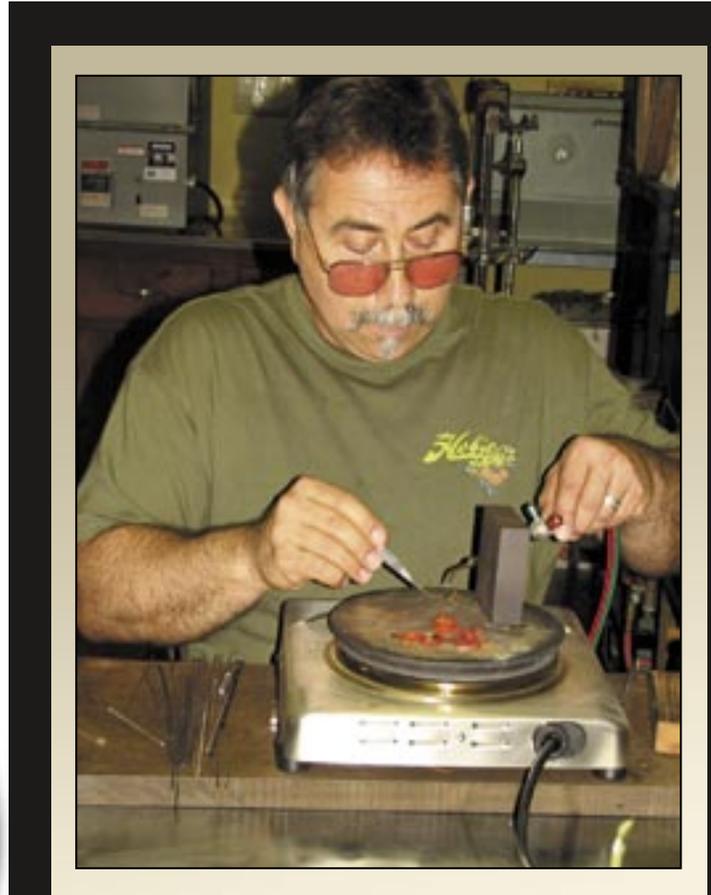
It's time for the final inspection. The paperweight is knocked off and annealed as follows: Hold at 980°F for 1 hour. Ramp down to 800°F over 8 hours, to 500°F over 6 hours, and to 70°F over 3 hours. This is for a double gob weight, or two 400 gram gobs. Jim anneals no more than two paperweights at a time, preferring to prevent shock by reducing the number of times the door is opened.



You will find a step-by-step tutorial for the lizard pictured in Step 14 in the Spring 2009 issue of The Flow.

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Jim D'Onfrio studied sculpture with Boris Blai, dean and founder of Tyler Art School in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, and received a BFA from Rowen University in New Jersey. In college he was introduced to Paul Stankard, who began collecting Jim's beautifully detailed wood and cast bronze fantasy figures and thoroughbred horse sculptures. In 1980 Stankard offered Jim a job cold working his botanical paperweights but soon promoted him to torchwork, where he excelled. In his eight years with Stankard, Jim concentrated on sculptural components for encapsulation and helped develop designs that include the well-received root people and introduced the upright, rectangular, compound paperweight.

Jim strives for movement and realism in his work and emphasizes narrative elements rather than detail in his glass art. He is eager to share the knowledge he has acquired over the years and takes pleasure in helping others fulfill their passion for the craft. To that end, Jim offers demos and workshops in his studio and is also affiliated full-time with the local school district. You can reach him at (480) 488-1782 or [fracturedflames@earthlink.net](mailto:fracturedflames@earthlink.net).

Laurie Nessel works in stained glass and teaches flameworking at the Mesa Arts Center in Arizona. You can view her work at [www.laurienessel.com](http://www.laurienessel.com).