

# Paul J. Stankard

## Paul Stankard's Legacy

by Brayton Furlong

In the last century, Paul Stankard has become one of the most recognizable names in contemporary glass. His contributions and achievements are vast and span over four and a half decades. Initially his reputation was built by being the most ambitious and original paperweight artist in the world. Most of the techniques and aesthetics used in creating contemporary paperweights were discovered and developed by Paul. His artwork, which includes large orbs and botanical clusters, has been his most recognizable accomplishment. Paul has consistently pushed himself as an artist technically and aesthetically throughout his career, resulting in nothing short of the phenomenal. Over the last forty-plus years he has exhibited in the finest museums and galleries along with teaching in the most prestigious glass schools. There is no question that by the time Paul Stankard is finished he will have cemented himself a place in the history books as one of the great artists of the twenty-first century.

### Early Years and Education

Paul Stankard was born in 1943 in the town of North Attleboro, Massachusetts. When Paul was fifteen he moved with his family to southeast New Jersey. From a young age Paul was intrigued with constructing things. He would often raid a burned down jewelry factory for wire and metal parts, which he used to form imaginary machines and boxes. His mother used to always say that Paul was good with his hands. His grandfather, who lived with the family, had been an engraver. Paul remembers spending hours as a child watching him work.

Paul began having trouble in school early on. It wasn't that he didn't care; rather, it was the fact that traditional methods of teaching and the traditional class setting were insufficient, besides the fact that he found reading especially difficult. With forty-five students in his class, Paul was slipping through the cracks. Hoping he would improve, his mother began tutoring him at home. It was not until much later in his life that Paul was diagnosed with dyslexia, a learning disability that makes reading particularly difficult.

Due to his struggle with dyslexia, Paul was denied a formal art school education with its accompanying exposure to design, language, and vocabulary. He had to go around his so-called "disability" and play catch-up. Paul found ways to adapt to his environment and figured out the ways that he learned best. Regular trips to museums and exhibitions helped him learn about art. Another form of instruction he used was listening to books on tape, which provided a way to study art history and other topics through nontraditional means. His persistence and drive were rewarded when he ultimately received an associate's degree and, later in life, two honorable doctorate degrees from his beloved Salem Community College.



*Homage to Daisies Cloistered Column*

### From Scientific Glasswork to Personal Glass Art

Salem Community College had a glassblowing program, which Paul's father had heard about and immediately recommended to Paul. They decided to visit Salem to check out the facilities. Paul was fascinated by watching the students bend tubing over an open flame. Soon after, Paul signed up for his first course despite his parents' wishes for him to join the military. After his first year at Salem, Paul landed a job at a scientific glass company. That summer he spent forty hours a week doing production lathe work, perfecting his technique.



*Field Flower Paperweight, Mid 1970s*



*Paul J. Stankard, 2008*



*Swarming Honeybee Orb, 2006*



*Tea Rose Bouquet Botanical with Mask, 2004*

After graduating from Salem, Paul continued to work in the scientific industry. Over the next seven years Paul worked at four different companies. He loved the craft, saying, “Glassblowing made sense to me.” He found it to be challenging and enjoyed mastering different techniques. In the '60s Paul began exploring his creative side by making and selling small animals and penny jars. Despite the lack of encouragement, he took pride in his artistic creations and began to realize how fulfilled he was when making creative glasswork rather than scientific. It was inevitable that his focus in glass would eventually shift.

While working full-time in the scientific glass field, Paul spent his nights and weekends teaching himself how to work with soda lime glass. It wasn't long before he started experimenting with paperweights. There was something about focusing on a two-inch sphere that captivated Paul. He thoroughly enjoyed developing designs and then encapsulating them. After spending two or three days on each paperweight, he would begin cutting and polishing,

watching his designs come to life. Even though he hadn't sold any paperweights, he continued to make them.

Paul initially encapsulated animals. After that he focused on floral paperweights and then went back to animals. Eventually it was flowers that held his attention, particularly native flowers, during a time when antique paperweights were highly collectible, selling for \$1,000 to \$1,500. Contemporary paperweights were selling, but the market for them was small. When Paul first started selling his paperweights they were going for ten to twenty-five dollars each. As his work developed, however, his paperweights started to be noticed. Paperweight dealers wanted Paul to make paperweights more like the ones that the French had made, but he stuck to his fresh approach on paperweights and developed techniques for making fine plants, multiple blossoms, buds, leaves, and stems with roots. When paperweights reached their peak, Paul was producing upwards of 200 paperweights per year. His ambition and originality had launched his career as a paperweight artist.



Paul J. Stankard with staff

### Gaining Momentum through Perseverance

The road to financial stability as a glass artist wasn't an easy one, even for Paul. He worried about financial insecurity and had to sacrifice a lot. When he left his scientific glass job, he forfeited his annual salary of \$10,500. During his first year as a full-time glass artist he had a gross income of \$6,400. The following year his income increased by \$1,100, and about four years into it he finally made \$10,000. In today's dollars, \$10,000 would be comparable to \$30,000. With a family to support, that's not much.

In 1976 the pressure of making a living with his glass art was too much for Paul and resulted in his having a nervous breakdown. All he wanted to do was succeed and be able to support his family. His wife Pat began making jewelry and sold it as a side business in order to help out. He appreciated his wife's loving support very much. She was a great mother and was able to make the kids' clothes along with cooking healthy but frugal meals. Persistence is the word that comes to mind as Paul relays his past. It took five long years for him to get in the groove of things financially and to settle down emotionally.

In the late '70s Paul decided to take his career in a different but equally fulfilling direction—teaching. He was invited to teach the first lampworking class at Penland School of Crafts in North Carolina. During a time when glassworking techniques were very secretive, Paul's way of teaching was significant. He had decided to approach teaching without keeping any secrets to himself. Paralleling this time, Paul also pursued his vision of Wheaton Village for transforming it into a major glass art center. With much deliberation, The Creative Glass Center of America at Wheaton Arts was born in 1983.

The '80s proved to be a very busy time for Paul. His involvement in teaching was very extensive, and he was developing his most ambitious work to date, the botanical series. He started gaining representation in two of the most respected galleries in the business—Heller and Habitat. He also did commissions for the Smithsonian and the Chicago Art Institute. Paul was very interested in working with these galleries. However, it wasn't supporting his family. He worked both sides of the street; hanging out with studio glass artists and doing business with the dealers. He has observed that, "Art making is making thousands of decisions every second, and every decision makes it personal to you. This slowly takes you away from what others are doing."



Winter Squash Paperweight, Minkoff Collection

### Fine Art and the Studio Glass Movement

As Paul became more involved in studio glass, he became more interested in putting himself into a studio glass context. He demanded more from himself and his work. He didn't worry about financial security but focused on making his work better instead. Looking closely at antique paperweights from Europe, Paul decided that if he were going to be the best that he would have to outdo the most impressive antique French paperweights. It wasn't until he put his floral encasements upright in the botanical series that he accomplished this. At that moment he realized that he had put as much visual info into his work as the antique French had done. At first the galleries considered his work decorative art. He didn't really care how his work was categorized—craft, kitsch, fine art; that wasn't his issue.

In the mid '80s Paul began celebrating nature through writing poetry. He also discovered Walt Whitman, internalizing the ideas of poetry and interpreting them into his glass. As his poetry and glass became intertwined, he was able to create an even more unique and personal aesthetic in his work. As Paul began to give thought to the primary ingredients and virtues in fine art, his work became more refined. He was able to take his career full circle in 1997 when he became an art advisor and teacher at his alma mater, Salem Community College, in Carneys Point, New Jersey. He appreciates being able to share his professional experiences in the field with his students. It is a unique way for Paul to give something back to the place where he got his roots.

Besides writing his own poetry, Paul has had several books published on his work and process, most recently an autobiography on his life and work entitled *No Green Berries or Leaves*, which gives a unique look at the trials and tribulations that Paul faced as he walked the path to becoming a very successful glass artist. He is also a regular contributor to a lampworking magazine.



*Paul Stankard building a floral cluster to be encapsulated*



*Penland Nocturnal Bloom Assemblage*

## Stankard Studios

According to St. Benedict, "Work is prayer." Knowing Paul, this suits him and his philosophy very well. His studio is 3,000 square feet and consists of multiple levels. The ground level is filled with several annealers, a glory hole, and a marver. The second level had a variety of workstations all housing Carlisles and hand torches, and the third level contains a nice office space. His working studio is very organized and clean, something that really impressed me. From the ground floor you can walk down a few steps into a basement-like area. This space is divided into several rooms filled with workbenches and a cold shop.

Stankard Studios is a branch of Paul's operation and includes his daughters, Christine, Pauline, and Katherine, and his son Joe. They assist Paul with his work and are encouraged to produce independent work under the Stankard Studios name. One idea behind Stankard Studios, among others, is for Paul to eventually slow down while still overseeing work produced for his paperweight dealers.

As we walked through the different levels of his studio, he showed me a commission he was working on. It was one of his clustered paperweight sculptures. As I studied his mastery he revealed his technique to hide the lines caused by multiple-part encapsulation by laminating clear glass on the outside. I was blown away by his openness to share and respected him that much more for it. We then went into his office where I noticed a large painting of Paul and Lino Tagliapietra blowing glass together. Upstairs we began talking about the economy and other things while a large cluster of Dale Chihuly's clamshell bowls glimmered in the light. This piece is part of an amazing collection of glasswork from many of the most notorious glass artists in the world, including his own. His home is like a gallery filled with the "Who's Who" of contemporary glass.

If you ever get the chance to take a class or listen to a lecture given by Paul, I highly recommend it. He is a charismatic guy with a great sense of humor and one of the best teachers out there. His years of experience can be insightful and inspiring to anyone on any level. He is truly one of the great American masters.

*You can find out more about Paul Stankard and his glass art by visiting [www.PaulStankard.com](http://www.PaulStankard.com).*



*Studio, Paul at Glory Hole*



*Paul Stankard, late 1960s, scientific glassblowing*