

Robert Willson— Bringing Life to Solid Glass

*Robert Willson, Builders Cube V, 1996
(Italy, Murano, Architects Murano).
Hot worked, applied, 20.32 cm high.
Gift of Margaret Pace Willson to The Corning
Museum of Glass collection.*



by John Bunkley

Photography and Illustrations
Courtesy of The Corning Museum of Glass

Anyone who has gazed into the clear depths of a paperweight knows how intoxicating solid glass can be. Glass in vessel form can be decorative, beautiful, even breathtaking, but one cannot escape the utilitarian. After all, it can hold our Cheerios. On the other hand, you would be lying to yourself if you insist a solid glass form, such as a paperweight, is purely utilitarian. Keeping papers from flying away in the breeze is a great excuse for exploiting the beauty of a solid piece of glass. In Robert Willson's words, "While I admire the marvelous skill of the glassblower and can in no way equal it, I have found my creative world in solid and heavy glass. I am stuck with it—forevermore, I hope."

Willson's maturity as a painter and sculptor is precisely why his work stands out among glass artists of his generation. Coming to glass later in life at age forty-four was perhaps what made his work great. Much is made of the influences of his background—of the fact that he was Mexican, Indian, and Southwestern. His work is reflective of his deep mastery of form and color theory and of his firm grip on art and cultural history. This point should not be overlooked in the study of his paperweights. Willson's work is the product of a fully formed and deep individual with accomplishments not only in art, but also in politics, history, research, and literature. Glass art does not begin and end in Venice, as his work so brilliantly shows.

Early Years, Education, and Academic Involvement

Robert Willson was an artist in the truest sense. He was a sculptor, painter, glass artist, and researcher. Like Georgia O'Keefe, who was influenced by New Mexico, and Romare Bearden, who was influenced by the Harlem Renaissance, Robert Willson was an artist influenced by his home state of Texas. He also was taken by Mayan art, Venice, and his Choctaw heritage.

Born in 1912 in Mertzon, Texas, Robert Willson studied English at the University of Texas and received his masters of fine arts at the Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes in San Miguel, Mexico. There he painted with Diego Rivera and researched with José Clemente Orozco. In 1936, Willson worked as a public school teacher, and by 1940 he was made the director of the art department at Texas Wesleyan College in Fort Worth. He later became director of the Nob Hill Art Gallery in Winslow, Arkansas, where he founded the Ozark Council of Artists. Willson became the ceramics, enameling, and drawing art professor at the University of Miami in 1952, where he remained until his retirement in 1977.

Connections to Corning and Venice

In 1956, Willson received a national study grant from The Corning Museum of Glass, where he studied the history and techniques of glassmaking. He also visited factories in Scandinavia, Germany, France, Spain, Greece, Egypt, and Italy. While in Italy he made his first visit to Murano studios, which was the beginning of Willson's collaboration with the Venetian maestros. He was forty-four years old when he first went to Venice, where he collaborated with Fratelli Toso. His most important collaborator was Maestro Alfredo Barbini. Their working relationship lasted more than thirty years.

During his visits to Murano, which generally lasted six weeks, he typically produced about thirty-five to forty sculptures. Through the years, he worked with Alfredo Barbini, Pino Signoretto, Luigi Toso, Mario d'Alpaos, Loredano Rosin, Aldo Bon, Ermanno Toso, Licio Zuffi, and Egidio Costantini. In 1964, he had his first solo glass exhibition at the Galleria d'Arte dell'Opera Bevilacqua la Masa in Venice.

Willson's commitment to, and fascination with, solid glass is familiar to anyone smitten with paperweights. He chose not to confine himself to the traditional tenets of Venetian-style glassblowing—that is, hollow, thin-walled vessels with gold leaf, *incalmo*, *zanfirico*, and delicate, decorative dragons and serpents. He wrote brilliantly, reflecting upon his aesthetic preference for solid glass: "If a glass is filled with water and placed beside an empty one, I think you can see the difference between the brilliance of solid glass and the more grey and thin effect of the blown shape." He overlooked the vessel form intentionally and completely, instead truly seeing glass as a medium apart from its historical trappings. To Willson, a blown piece would not have honored his vision. He was, after all, a sculptor and dealt with form rather than a vacuum or the negative space implied in a vessel.

It is interesting to note Robert Willson's connection with Venice. The artisans who mastered Venetian glassblowing, for whom Willson had incredible respect, couldn't have been more at odds aesthetically with Willson's paperweights. Yet, Willson worked alongside them with great respect and admiration for these classically trained Venetian artists.

Paul N. Perrot writes in *Robert Willson: Sculptor in Glass—An Appreciation*, "Had he been able to start in glass at an earlier stage of his career, he probably would have wanted to do everything himself and be, at once, sculptor and craftsman." This may be true, but it is precisely because Willson came to glass later in life that he was

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not burdened by its limitations and its historical function. Willson came to glass with the mind of a sculptor, a painter, an historian, and a writer. We have that to thank for his fresh perspective. Willson's paperweights are art first and glass second. Certainly he was inspired and enthralled with the medium, yet one cannot help but view his work, as a whole, as that of a mature and multitalented artist.

Combining Fascination with an Artist's Curiosity

Not only did Willson come to glass later in his life, but he approached it before the beginning of the American studio glass movement. One can assume that the use of glass for art's sake was not a novel or revolutionary idea. Rather, his use of glass combined a gentle fascination with the true curiosity of an artist. Labeling his smaller sculptures as paperweights is somewhat of a default categorization. His small sculptures are not simply paperweights. To view them as such would be instilling them with a function to which Willson did not intend and, in fact, rose above.

Reflecting on his presence when his glassblowers made his pieces, Willson stated: "I have tried the experiment of handing a drawing to my team and leaving them to work alone. It always comes out as Venetian glass, not as my own." His words show that Willson, although a relative latecomer to glass, was keenly aware of the implied traditions inherent to Venetian-style glassblowing. These traditions overpowered his work when he left his team to "work alone." Willson's commitment to his art and to his aesthetic, heavy and solid, overshadowed the great history of Venetian glassblowing in his mind.

Willson's reliance on solid glass is no surprise when one studies his painting and that of his artistic contemporaries. From the mythic figures of Diego Rivera—one might say massive in scale and design—to the bold and flattened planes of Rufino Tamayo, Willson's influences and contemporaries were not concerned with nuances. They were, instead, painters who dealt with the powerful and primitive. Though small in scale, his paperweights have a monumental presence, similar to that of his contemporaries.

Perhaps Willson's stubbornness to hold to his bold vision and his willingness to differentiate his work from the history of Venetian glass is why his paperweights are so fresh and vibrant. He was not penned in by tradition and was not in awe of Venetian style. Rather, he used Venetian mastery and traditions as simply another tool or vocabulary to translate his vision.

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Robert Willson and Robert Hamon (American 1935–2003), Paperweight with Horse and Female, circa 1980 (Scott Depot, West Virginia, United States). Hot worked, applied, cased, 7.6 cm high. Gift of Margaret Pace Willson to The Corning Museum of Glass collection.



Robert Willson and Alfredo Barbini (Italian, 1912–2000), Mirage, 1992 (Murano, Italy, Vetraria Alfredo Barbini). Hot worked, engraved, 43.5 cm high. Gift of Margaret Price Willson to The Corning Museum of Glass collection.