

Ken Rosenfeld: The magical link between artist and collector

Ken Rosenfeld has been creating his beautiful paperweights for over 30 years, and his skill and ingenuity have been increasing throughout that time. In 1988 the PCA Annual Bulletin included its first article about Ken and his paperweights, written by Lawrence H. Selman. So much has been written in books and articles about Ken and his glorious art that finding new words to describe them inevitably carries echoes of past praise and past reflections. No apology is needed for revisiting some of those beautiful thoughts.



“This picture shows a new version of Ken’s scramble paperweight with lampwork, filigree rods and assorted canes”.

I was honored to spend time with Ken at the 2017 PCA Convention and we talked about his techniques and the processes involved in converting ideas from his mind’s eye to the hot glass. There is a very long and difficult learning curve for anyone starting out as a glass artist today, Ken pointed out. The materials used are expensive; the equipment is very specialized and requires high skill levels to produce consistent results; hand and eye coordination must be good; there is a very small market; and competitors are already highly skilled. All this is intimidating for a newcomer, and they would need to be very tenacious in order to succeed.



“This stunning paperweight shows two upright fish swimming over seaweed above a blue star cut base.”

Ken specializes in lampwork creations reflecting nature by creating commonplace imagery: flowers, fruit, leaves, stems and tiny creatures. The three dimensional effect is enhanced by using tiny clear glass supports to hold for example a butterfly hovering over a flower, or to hold a flower head up above its leaves. When these are encased in clear molten glass, the clear glass supports disappear from sight. But it is not nearly so easy as it sounds! Take the colors for example,

a typical Ken Rosenfeld paperweight may contain around 20 different colors of glass. And the chemicals which have been added to make the colors in glass can change its coefficient of expansion, so that if two touching colors have different coefficients they will cool at different rates and a crack might appear. True-to-life beautiful color is an essential feature of Ken's paperweights and he has learned over the years which colors can be combined and which to avoid.



"One of a kind compound Koi Pond and frog paperweight with a hot applied pedestal".

Another crucial stage in making a paperweight is the moment when the hot glass comes down over the lampwork set-up to encase it. The set-up needs to be just hot enough that it will not crack when the molten glass touches it, but not so hot that it is distorted and squashed. Ken uses a metal cup to hold the lampwork set up when the hot glass is poured over it. This metal cup has slightly sloping sides and a very special base with minute holes through which air can pass, but the holes are too fine for molten glass to pass through. A vacuum pump draws away the air from around the lampwork through those holes in the base, drawing down the molten glass to close over the creation without leaving air bubbles. And of course, creating a base that has holes fine enough to allow air to pass but too fine for molten glass, is a technical wonder in itself. These discs with their micro-holes are provided by technicians using a process known as EDM (electrical discharge machining) which uses electricity to cut very very fine holes through the metal.



"Complex foliage and seed pods with morning glory and 2 clematis".

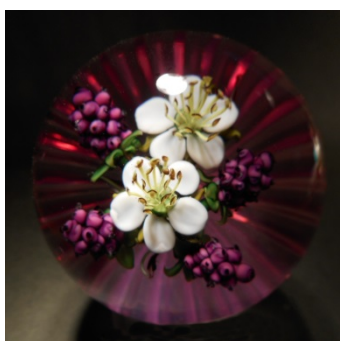
When the molten glass has cooled and been removed from its metal cup with its precious set-up fully encased, it can then be re-heated to complete the exterior shape or another set-up attached underneath to make a fully 360 degree vision. After the paperweight has cooled, Ken sometimes applies fancy cutting to the outside or just to the base; but he has found

that not all his designs suit the fancy cutting. For a time Ken was working with other people who applied the cutting to his weights, but eventually he bought his own equipment and now he does his own fancy cutting.



"Fancy cut bouquet with top facet and deep cutting to the sides".

Ken loves making paperweights, and in particular he loves creating something of beauty that will never fade, never get dusty or broken, and that with a reasonable amount of care will last for generations. He described it like this: "The encasement is like a camera shutter; in an instant the work is preserved permanently. Placing the design under glass and sealing it there, gives you visual access but does not diminish it. Lampwork that is not encased gets dirty and is so delicate that it's difficult to clean without breaking it.. But once it is encased, it is safe for ever. You can always see it."



"Berry Bouquet on pink star cut ground".

Another feature of the way Ken makes his paperweights is that he rarely works out a new design on paper because the idea has to be made successfully in glass. Drawing on paper doesn't let you know if the design will work as a paperweight. He sees it in his mind and experiments with prototypes made in glass – this, he says, tells him if the design is feasible. A paperweight, says Ken, should feel good in your hand; and the creation inside should give a sense of satisfaction. Sometimes it can take hours for a collector to discover all the features in their paperweight. And finally, Ken says " Making paperweights has been a wonderful challenge. Lampworking is a fascinating artform; the more effort put into it, the more it rewards with increasing detail.". Here are some more examples of Ken's recent work.



“Paperweight with a Compound Koi Pond”.



“Aventurine Lizard with Clichy type roses on a pink desert ground”.



“Tropical Tree Frog with bamboo on a black ground”.