



Paul J. Stankard

and His Poetry in Glass 

by Dr. Julie Anne Denton

Thou Orb Aloft Full-Dazzling

When I think of sex, death, and God, they bring to mind the innovative glass work of Paul J. Stankard. Stankard is a man who single-handedly changed the centuries-old tradition of paperweight-making forever. Not only did Stankard challenge the angle from which we view the paperweight, but he also created an inspiring, enchanting, mythical, and thoughtfully authentic artistic language—a language never before matched in this genre, nor since. In fact, no other has even gotten close to the originality of Paul Stankard. Why? Because his intimate relationship with nature that he is able to translate into visual poetry takes the purest type of sincerity to develop. You do not have to take my word for it; the myriad museums and private collections his work adorns both nationally and internationally are testament to both his skill as a craftsman and his transcendence as a self-taught, dyslexic artist. One doesn't get collected this widely unless the viewer can taste the sublime. I caught up with 79-year-old New Jerseyite artist Paul J. Stankard to discuss his life's work.

In Paths Untrodden

It's important to understand a little more about the historical significance of Paul's trade. "It is interesting how my work is mimicking furnace work. I ball up clear glass and I am then encapsulating the colored glass in clear. The tradition of the paperweight has its roots in furnace glass. My flameworking is mirroring what previously happened in the hot shop, but by using flameworking for the entire process, I can craft more detail into my pieces." The French firm Baccarat, which is still based in the region of Lorraine (now part of Grand Est), is possibly the most well-known of the French paperweight houses, although there were also Cristalleries de Saint-Louis (est. 1767), de Pantin (est. 1850), and de Clichy (est. 1842). When founded in 1764, the firm was initially called Verrerie de Renaut by request of the Bishop of Metz to Louis XV. After the French Revolution, the company was renamed Verrerie de Baccarat. The golden years of production for Baccarat were between 1846 and 1855.

*Left to right: Flowers Floating in the Mudhole.
Photo by Lauren Garcia.*

*Paul Stankard, Summer Bouquet with Prickly Fruit,
2012. Ron Farina Photography.*



Above: Paul Stankard, Honeybee Swarm with Flowers and Fruit. Ron Farina Photography.

Right: Paul J. Stankard at the 2018 Salem Community College's International Flameworking Conference, collaborating with Lucio Bubacco. Courtesy of Salem Community College.



I was shocked with myself because I had assumed that all paperweight components were flameworked in those great houses. "The designs were constructed at a torch, but thereafter they brought those flameworked components to the hot shop where they encapsulated the florals into clear glass. Much of the French paperweight production was millefiori paperweights that were completely furnace worked. They made the millefiori canes in the hot shop, sliced them up, arranged the cane pieces in a pattern, and then they were encapsulated. Compared to what contemporary flameworkers can do, it is so far beyond what the French were able to achieve. The French flameworked floral designs were stylized

and they integrated murrine slices into the flower patterns. From my perspective, the French floral paperweights are rather basic." Before Paul J. Stankard, these designs were considered the best to date. "At the start of my career, I was trained to do fine work for the electron optical industry, working with precision borosilicate tubing and tight tolerances. When I brought those scientific skills over to the creative side, I was able to fashion very detailed creations and that constituted a fresh interpretation of nature never before seen." In essence, the knowledge Paul gained from working in scientific glass truly helped to inform his paperweights and enabled him, technically, to innovate. "It still does to this day!"



Earth My Likeness

In terms of visuals, I associate Stankard's palette with his deep love of poetry, art, and appreciation of aesthetics. "My work is influenced by my childhood memories growing up in rural Massachusetts. Picking flowers for my mom. I began my creative journey by encapsulating animals in paperweights. I worked on elephants and horses and birds for about six months, but when I made my first flower, friends became excited and that inspired me. First, I made a simple daisy bloom, then another daisy with a simple stem, then two blooms and sometime later came roots on one of the little plants. The inclusion of roots was the first moment my work began to become referential as opposed to perfectly accurate. From those early stylized flower successes, I started to focus myself on botanical intelligence, and I wanted my work to celebrate the characteristics of the native flowers. It was such a challenge to make, for example, a blue-eyed grass (*Sisyrinchium angustifolium*) appear visually convincing; to make a mountain laurel look like a mountain laurel (*Kalmia latifolia*). In the mid-eighties, it became less important for me to make my botanicals perfect copies of nature. I wanted the work to speak its truth on a deeper referential level whilst simultaneously retaining its honesty and biological credibility. Many people who observe my work today ask for the names of the flowers in my paperweights. I enjoy fabricating my own Latin names so my romantic blossoms (*Venerum flores*) gain some semblance of a history, even if it is made up."



Top to bottom:
Grouping the components to be encapsulated.
Courtesy of the artist.

Paul J. Stankard, assisted by David Graeber, dropping molten glass to encapsulate colored glass design.
Courtesy of the artist.

Assistant David Graeber pressing the panel into the mold with the wooden tool.
Courtesy of the artist.



It was clear to me that Paul moved away from exact depictions of flowers because it was holding his artistic voice hostage. "I think of my work as poetic. I am inspired by the grace of poetry and particularly Walt Whitman, America's leading poet. Interestingly, for forty years I have been listening to books on tape, and at a certain point I became interested in the Western Canon." The Western Canon is the body of cultural works that include high literature, philosophy, music, and art that are classically valued in the West. Included in this collection are also works that do not find their origins in the West but are considered classics by Western consumption. This intellectual tradition moves from Plato to Nietzsche in philosophy, and from Chaucer to Cervantes in literature. "One of my particular favorites is *Ulysses* by James Joyce. My family heritage is Irish, and I empathize with the story that follows a day in the life of Leopold Bloom in Dublin. I can also relate to this book through my own work because Joyce takes a single mundane day and turns it into an existential work of modern fiction. I take flowers that some may consider ordinary, and I elevate my subject to be more than its component parts."

Top to bottom: Paul Stankard, Homage to Walt Whitman: Morning Glory Bouquet Orb. Photo by Jeff DiMarco.

Paul Stankard, Close up of human form in Veiled Tap Root Botanical. Douglas Schaible Photography.



Pioneers! O Pioneers!

Back to Paul's process and what he considers important to making great work. "It always has been, and it still is to this day, imperative for me to take risks and encourage spontaneity! To push the process! To be willing to fail! That is one of the reasons my work stands out, because I am not afraid to blow a week's work on a risk endeavoring to push the envelope of my bliss. I would rather take the risk, with the very real chance of failure, and execute something special, than produce consistent, safe mediocrity. When I am developing a new design, and I see an opportunity to make it more intelligent by changing the geometry of the composition, it is then that it is important to test the theory out even if it means spoiling the piece. I also incorporate a lot of clear glass into my designs which, in a paperweight, equates to negative space, and I simply love the dialogue it creates."

I observe that Paul has a few exceptional characteristics; he has the skill in his fingers to carry out his designs, the temerity and obsessive compulsion to continue searching until his subject is exhausted, and, the pièce de résistance, his work transcends the everyday floral. The paperweights of Paul J. Stankard are spiritual and magical havens that have been trapped in time and space, engaging observers in a visual communication akin to speaking with God (however one perceives that entity). "My interest in art, literature, and poetry has nurtured my artistic maturity, and the harmony I achieve with my work is a result of that."

Left to right: Paul Stankard, Tea Rose Bouquet Botanical with Mask, 2004, Douglas Schaible Photography.

Paul sculpting a flower. Carol Bates Photography.



Top: Patricia and Paul Stankard in the studio.
Photo by Kayla Dawn.

Bottom: Paul Stankard with his book.

Small the Theme of My Chant

Moving back to Paul's process, I am interested in the type of equipment he is using to create his masterpieces. "I use a furnace worker's standard glory hole for warming up my optically clear transparent glass gobs. After encapsulating my botanical components, the glory hole can also keep my paperweights warm during finishing. I work with five-foot pontil irons, which I turn on an eight-inch metal roller with ball bearings." Using a yoke system differs from the glassblower, because they use a gaffer bench for turning their hot glass. "I have tried a bench, but I find I am much more successful with the rollers. When I have a large gather of glass on the roller, my pontil iron is perfectly balanced and it doesn't feel in any way awkward." Paul actually uses hollow three-quarter-inch stainless steel pipes. Although he isn't blowing anything, in terms of the physics it makes sense for Paul's pipes to be lightweight. The pontil also includes a welded one-and-a-half-inch solid end to accommodate his paperweight gather. "If I am changing pontils, all I need do is concentrate my flame on that solid metal part of the pipe, and once it turns cherry red the pontil pulls right out." As a flameworker myself, I inform Paul that I use a similar technique using borosilicate rods to hold soft glass gathers. "Before I pick up the gob, which is preheated in the oven, I take borosilicate, glass and bead the end of the pipe with it. I cover my pipe in borosilicate, because it helps my gob to attach sturdily to the pontil iron. Thereafter, I take everything to the glory hole to heat up."

When Paul first started creating paperweights full time in the utility room of the family home in the late sixties, he felt a little like he was drifting. "For the first year I would stay up late at night watching the Johnny Carson show, go to bed at 2 a.m., and wake up at 10 a.m. to groggily start work. There was no discipline! Then I pinged on the idea that I should get up at 7 a.m., break for lunch, finish at 3 p.m., go to the gym, work out, and be home for 5 p.m. to enjoy time with my wife and children. It was a wonderful routine, and that framework successfully made me focus on what was important." This type of rhythm meant that Paul no longer needed to waste his precious time considering where he should be, and what he should be doing. "I also set aside Friday and Saturday mornings for experimentation for new designs. My work discipline evolved from my need and desire to create 'good' work, and the rhythm I achieved within the studio flowed in symmetry with the discipline I had imposed on myself. Nowadays I use 40-hour annealing cycles, but in those years two paperweights sat in the kiln to cool for twelve hours, and I would come to the studio in the morning just in time to examine the previous days' efforts."

Song at Sunset

More recently, Paul J. Stankard has been working on a long-awaited and striking new book. After two years of extra tweaking and editing of his text, he is rather excited about its final release this April. Paul's inspiring book is called *Inspiration from the Art of Paul J. Stankard: A Window into my Studio and Soul*. Not only is this page-turning tome filled with images of Paul's stunning paperweights, but it is paired with his insightful words, written for those who seek and appreciate creative energy. To further preserve his legacy, Paul J. Stankard is considering taking his teaching skills online toward the end of 2022. Watch this space!

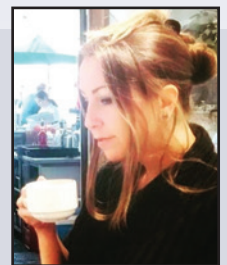
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Dr. Julie Anne Denton received her doctorate in the combination of sandcast and flameworked glass for artists from the National Glass Centre, UK. She has learned from and worked with the best flameworking artists in the world including Emilio Santini, Lucio Bubacco, Vittorio Costantini, Gianni Toso, Shane Fero, Loren Stump, and Sally Prasch, to name just a few. She rounded off her education with Bertil Vallien of the renowned Swedish design house Kosta Boda (est. 1742).

Julie settled in Zürich, Switzerland, in 2010. From the center of the city she runs her design firm, www.Atelier315.ch, and www.ZurichGlassSchool.com, her online learning platform for sculptural flameworking skills. She works with a small team beside her who all care deeply about quality education, creativity, and business.

Dr. Julie creates glass and bronze work that resonates beauty, workmanship, and authenticity. Her key themes are people, folklore, nature, and counterculture. She has also received worldwide recognition for her storytelling skills as an artist and her technical skills as a glassmaker.



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