

American Bounty

The Paperweight Journey of a New Jersey Artist

By: David Graeber in Collaboration with Betsy Carpenter

Like all present day glass artists, David is an anomaly in our high speed, technological age. He pursues a South Jersey glassmaking tradition that dates back to 1739 when Caspar Wistar built a glass house along Alloways Creek in Salem County. Then, like now, the art of glassmaking demanded hours of painstaking precision, maximum concentration, and abundant creativity. Historically, paperweight creation became “an important emblem of skill among glass-workers. . . . most glassblowers at one time or another tested their skills by making paperweights. Often they incorporated into the designs the traditional community values of home, church, and country.”¹

David, a life-long Southern New Jersey resident, capitalizes on his love of nature when creating his paperweights. He is a keen observer of the world around him, whether touring world famous Longwood Gardens in Kennett Square, Pennsylvania, hiking the Smoky Mountains, or enjoying a vacation “down the shore” in Cape May County with his wife, Sandra, and the couple’s three teenagers, Karen, Kyler, and Kevin.

Once back in his Westmont, Camden County studio [Figure 1], David translates his impressions into acclaimed works of art like “American Bounty” [Figure 2], a three and one half inch sphere featuring stylized tobacco leaves, cotton boles, flowers, and wheat. As he explains in his five-minute YouTube video, the inspiration for this piece came from his son Kyler’s study of our nation’s original thirteen colonies. A life-long learner, David was fascinated by colonial agricultural techniques



Figure 1: David Graeber Studio



Figure 2: American Bounty Series 2011
3 1/2" diameter.



Figure 3: George Vail and Dave Graeber.

and followed up by researching the impact that agriculture has had on our country's natural landscape. "American Bounty" captures the artistic essence of his research.

An independent glass artist since 2009, David is quick to acknowledge all those who have helped and do help him perfect his craft. A 1986-1989 apprenticeship with art professor George Vail [Figure 3], a bit of a Renaissance man who formerly lived in nearby Audubon, not only instilled military-style discipline in his student, but also introduced him to woodworking, architectural reconstruction, commercial art, and forensic sculpture. A former mechanical engineer, Vail is a self-taught artist, founder of a former local newspaper group, and an avid reader. While serving as Professor Vail's apprentice, David also worked for Scotko Design Group of Gibbsboro, New Jersey. Here he served as foreman for woodcarving and graphic arts.

William "Bill" Marlin, Ed.D., Camden County College's first full-time Art Department faculty member, dedicated teacher, and an established painter, was another of David's mentors. While studying in this department, David was named the Co-op Student of the Year, an award presented annually to a New



*Figure 4: William "Bill" Marlin Bouquet 2012
4" diameter x 2 1/2" high*

Jersey Community College student. Recently this College's art exhibition venue was named The Marlin Gallery in his honor, and David donated one of his floral paperweights [Figure 4] in Dr. Marlin's memory.

David recalls that in 1989 he was introduced to internationally acclaimed master glass artist Paul Stankard who is credited with raising the status of paperweights from that of a "craft" to "fine art." He welcomed the invitation to work as Stankard's assistant [Figure 5], an opportunity that afforded him creative freedom and that allowed him to hone his skill. Thanks in large measure to Stankard's encouragement, David struck out on his own; however, he continues to assist Paul.

Recently, when asked about David's work, Paul said, "David is a wonderfully skilled artist with a natural gift for detail. For more than two decades, I have had the pleasure of watching him grow intellectually and artistically. An easy person to work with, David served as my



Figure 5: David Graeber at the torch with Paul Stankard.

assistant for twenty-two years, and continues to help me execute my own aesthetic. Today he is a master of his craft, and has established his own studio. One of his creations, his interpretation of the life cycle of the silkworm [Figure 6], part of his “American Bounty Series,” was exhibited last September at the Selman’s “Celebrate the Paperweight Weekend” held in conjunction with the Chicago Institute of Art. This is a fine example of David’s independent study coupled with his ability to translate his ideas into a paperweight.”

Carl Carter, a paperweight collector, introduced David to Ed Poore [Figure 7], a world renowned master cutter, whose studio, The Crystal Workshop, is located in Sagamore, Massachusetts. Poore’s unique cutting designs have enhanced several of David’s heart weights [Figure 8]. His “Oval Basket with Chrysanthemums” [Figure 9] is another example of the wonderful collaboration of these two artists.

Ed highly values their collaborative efforts and notes that “David’s creative designs coupled with his outstanding technical ability enhance the old world art of paperweight making. In my opinion, he is one of the top



*Figure 6: Silkworm Paperweight 2012
4" diameter x 2 1/2" high.*

notch glassmakers in our country today. His unselfish attitude and willingness to share credit make it a pleasure for me to work with him. I enjoy our teamwork, and am proud of my affiliation with him.”

Today David sells many of his paperweights through dealers including Leo Kaplan, Ltd.



Figure 7: Dave Graeber with Ed Poore and son Jim Poore.



*Figure 8: Divine Light Heart Paperweight 2010.
4" x 4" x 2 1/2" high.*

in New York City and L. H. Selman Gallery located near the Art Institute of Chicago.

Phil Edelman of Leo Kaplan, Ltd. speaks of David's "great composition that's enhanced by his meticulous attention to detail." He adds that David's graciousness and willingness to always publicly credit fellow artists like Ed Poore, whose masterful cutting enhances many of David's paperweights, is unique." Edelman confirms that "one of David's 'Silkworm' paperweights recently sold within twenty minutes of its being offered for purchase." He concludes that David is one of the most recognizable and popular paperweight artists in the country.

Alexis Magaro of L. H. Selman Ltd. notes that "words we have used to describe David's work here at L. H. Selman include 'exquisite,' 'meticulous,' 'stunning,' 'exceptional effort,' 'luminous,' and a host of similar superlatives. Now, within this context it is important to consider that when we describe a paperweight



*Figure 9: Oval Basket with Chrysanthemums
2010. 2 1/2" x 4" x 2 1/2" high.*

it is rarely with commentary. Our object is simply to give information about the



*Figure 10: Lavender/Yellow Rose Plaque
4" diameter x 3" high.*



Figure 11: Detail of Silkworm Paperweight

piece. Time and time again, however, our enthusiasm for David's work crowds its way into the descriptive because it seems almost vulgar to omit it. One of David's bouquets [Figure 10] is not simply a bouquet, it is a magical interpretation of nature that has been thoughtfully, perfectly, and astonishingly rendered. Always striving for inspired subject matter, David's pieces are the result of an inquisitive mind that is constantly scrutinizing its environment; hence David's beautiful tribute 'American Bounty,' conceived after a careful investigation of the crops that sustained the United States during its fledgling years, as well as the magnificent tribute to the Pantin 'Silk Worm' [Figure 11] recently exhibited at the Chicago Art Institute. A master craftsman, a perfectionist, a tireless seeker, and a thinking artist, David Graeber is at the very top of his game."

A believer in giving back to the community, David occasionally teaches classes at the Carlisle School of Glass Art in Millville, New Jersey and volunteers his time at historic WheatonArts. When his sons were younger, he served as a cub master for one year and as a

scout leader for six years. Today he is a board member of the Batsto Citizens Committee, Inc., an organization that advises, assists, and promotes restoration and interpretation of historic Batsto Village, once the site of a nineteenth century windowlight furnace. He is a member of the PCA, Inc., the Delaware Valley PCA, and the Texas PCA.

Perhaps best of all is the fact that South Jersey's glassmaking tradition is thriving in the Graeber family where Sandra assists her husband in his creation of more fine art, while daughter Karen is enrolled in Camden County College, David's alma mater, a place where caring professors guided him as he started his paperweight journey.

End Note:

¹Rita Zorn Moonsammy, David Steven Cohen, and Lorraine E. Williams, Editors, *Pinelands Folklife* (New Brunswick and London: Rutgers University Press, 1987), p. 112.

To Learn More:

Additional examples of David Graeber's work can be found on his website www.davidgraeber.com.

 **About the Authors:** 

David Graeber continues to create his glass wonders in his studio in Westmont, New Jersey. Betsy Carpenter, a long-time resident of New Jersey's Pinelands National Reserve, has served as Public Programs Coordinator for this State's Pinelands Commission. Today she continues as a free lance writer.

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