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American studio glass

Roots, status, prospects

Paul Hollister

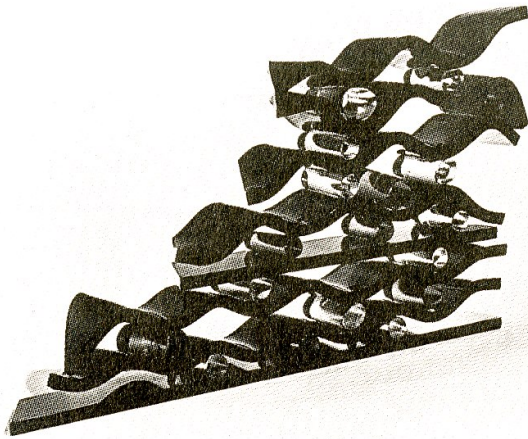
The auspicious official beginning of American Studio glass, which occurred in a small garage behind The Toledo Museum of Art in 1962, marked the conjunction of a possible new art form with recognition of its potential by a museum. But this moment of glass truth also marked the end of a long search by potter Harvey Littleton for the possibilities of creative glassworking outside the factory system.

Harvey Littleton was born in Corning, NY, and worked as a young man in the Corning Glass Works as a moldmaker and an inspector of glass stove ware. From 1949 to 1951 Littleton taught ceramics at The Toledo Museum of Art, and after 1951 at the University of Wisconsin. He became an exhibiting potter and was active in the American Crafts Council and other crafts groups. Though he was familiar with the slumping of sheet glass by pioneers Maurice Heaton and Michael and Frances Higgins, Littleton did not yet conceive that "hot glass" could be worked outside the factory.

Then in 1957, on a ceramic and glass trip to Europe, Littleton discovered seven very small glass factories around Naples and met a glasscutter who had once worked for Paolo Venini. Littleton went to Murano, where he spent 2½ unwelcomed months, visiting 60 factories. A few were no more than two-man demonstration furnaces, which convinced him that a single person could be both designer and gaffer, like an artist working in a studio. Encouraged by the American Craftsman's Council, Littleton turned to the director of The Toledo Museum of Art, Otto Wittmann for help. It was Wittmann who suggested the improvised but now historic seminar workshops of March and June 1962, and provided the garage for glassworking.

Dominick Labino, then director of research and development at Johns-Manville Fiberglass, supplied and installed a small, gas-fired furnace and annealing oven to replace Littleton's ineffective pottery kiln, and in the museum garage, after an initial bad formula melt described by Fritz Dreisbach as looking like "bubble gum and cottage cheese", Labino came to the rescue with his low-melting, long-working, high-durability fiberglass 475 marbles formula.

After briefly exploring the generally rudimentary state of glassworking instruction in England, Scotland, Germany and Sweden, Littleton established a studio and glassworking classes at the University of Wisconsin in the Fall



1. Harvey Littleton, "Pile Up" 1972 (19 1/4" x 38 3/4" x 4"). Photo Brian Westveer.



2. Dale Chihuly and James Carpenter, "Environment" 1971-1972 (detail). Sagged and pulled glass tubing (500 sq.ft.).

of 1962 and Spring of 1963. By 1964 students there were working hot glass seven days a week. Thus began a decade of learning the basics.

What Littleton and Labino in effect had done was to release tens, and by example hundreds of craft-potters from throwing on the wheel, and in turn throw them into the fiery furnace. Along with Littleton, the ex-potters and art students blew and tugged, exploded and imploded, tweaked and twisted, flailed and trailed, smashed and re-fused disreputable bubbles, selling them cheap as craft — which they hardly were because craft requires skill. They blew as if glass were an Abstract Expressionist material — an obvious influence from the New York painting of the fifties. Erwin Eisch quotes Harvey Littleton's father, a glass chemist at Corning Glass Works, as saying to Harvey, "I have worked all my life to get bubbles and imperfections out of glass, and now you come along and bring all these flaws back into the glass". To which Harvey later countered, "technique is cheap" (fig. 1)¹.

Source of photos: fig. 3 from a poster by Malcolm Gear; fig. 5-6 *American Glass Now*, The Toledo Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Crafts; fig. 8 *New American Glass: Focus West Virginia*, Huntington Galleries, Huntington (WV) July 22-Sept. 16, 1979; fig. 10 *Glass Club Bulletin*. The National Early American Glass Club, spring 1980; fig. 12 *Bildwerke in Glas*, 25 Jahre New Glass in Amerika, Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt Dec. 1987-Jan. 1988; fig. 16 *New Glass A Worldwide survey*, The Corning Museum of Glass 1979, cover photo; fig. 17 courtesy Tom Patti.

¹ Information up to this point comes from "Harvey Littleton Remembers" 32, 33; and Eisch's "Memories" 32, 33, *Glass Art*, 4.1(1976).



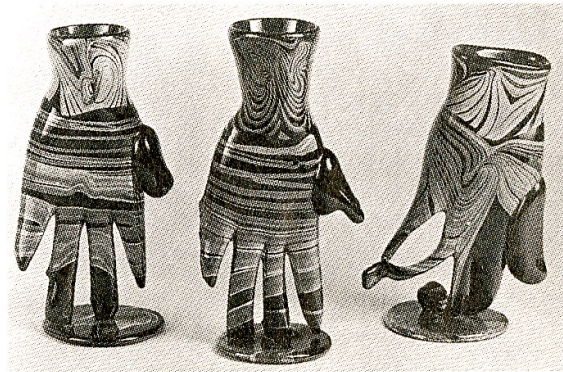
3. Dale Chihuly, "Blanket Cylinders" 1975.



4. Dale Chihuly, "Sea Form" 1981. Piece blown in optic mold. Photo Ira Garber.



5. Henry Halem, "Masked Bandit" 1972 ($4 \frac{1}{4}$ "x $14 \frac{3}{4}$ "x $11 \frac{1}{8}$ ""). The Toledo Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Crafts.



6. Joel Philip Myers, "Hand Forms" 1972 (approx. 10"x5"x4"). The Toledo Museum of Art, Museum of Contemporary Crafts.



7. Joel Philip Myers, hand blown vase ca. 1979 (H 10" x D 3"). Heller Gallery. Photo William Quinn.

Interest in glass as a material to be worked exploded across America, eventually creating glassblowing departments in between 75 and 100 universities, colleges, and craft schools. The conscientious student could earn a degree of Master of Fine Arts, while acquiring the skills for setting up a studio. Awareness of glass as a potential art form was advanced by three "Toledo Glass National" exhibitions at The Toledo Museum of Art, five one-man shows at New York's Museum of Contemporary Crafts, and "American Glass Now", an exhibition sponsored jointly by the above two museums. The centuries-old concealment of glass secrets was opened to the broad light of experiment; teachers and their students learned together. Knowledge of glass chemistry and techniques was openly shared, and the traditionally peripatetic nature of glassworkers spread the word.

Though the first decade (1962-1972) was primarily a learning period, working glass was far from drudgery. Marvin Lipofsky called it "doing my own thing"; Dale Chihuly said his work "has a lot to do with the good time had in doing it". Not your typical factory worker response.

- In 1967, Chihuly and Jamie Carpenter blew and pulled a 500 sq.ft. environment of uranium glass spaghetti lighted with neon, argon, and mercury gases that changed color at the touch of a hand (fig. 2). In 1970 their neon tubing was frozen in 50,000 lb. of ice as an outdoor wintertime sculpture. Carpenter later designed some beautifully simple glass forms for Steuben, and in recent years has moved into architectural glass with important commissions, including a chapel and two glass houses.

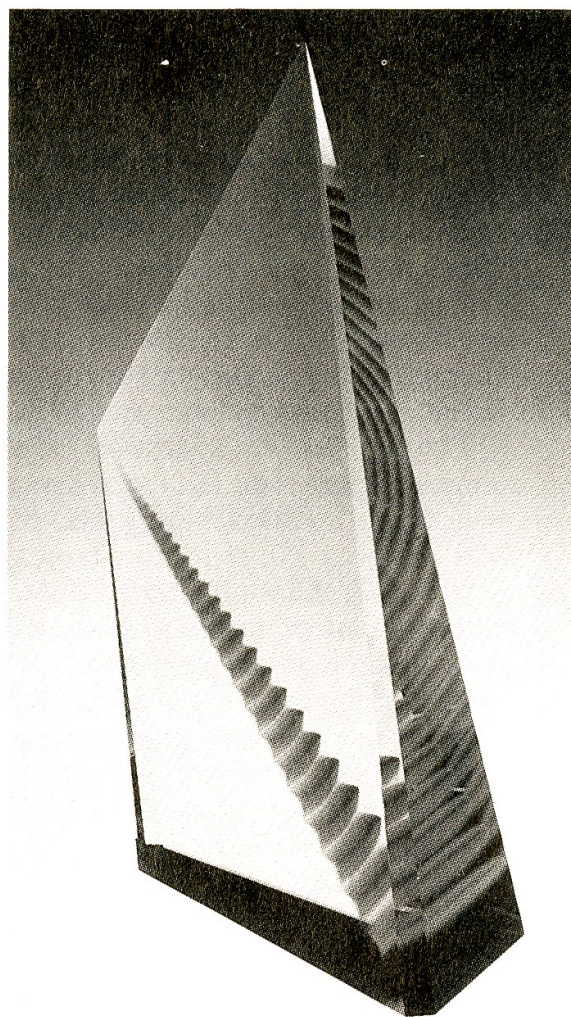
Dale Chihuly's glass has attained international recognition. Chihuly, a world traveler, has been receptive to a variety of cultural influences which he expresses aesthetically through the technical possibilities of glassblowing. His stylistic periods have unfolded from Indian "Blanket Cylinders" (1975-1976), Indian "Pilchuck Baskets" (1977-1980), "Sea Forms" (1981-1986), the latter merging with the "Macchia Series" and a brief variation vaguely influenced by Arab sprinkler forms and other middle eastern curiosa (fig. 3-4). Chihuly founded the important Pilchuck School (1971), to which glassworkers from all over the world come to study and to teach. In addition, he cracks the whip over the largest glass non-factory, complete with traveling road shows and a busy catalog-publishing industry.

- The 1970s saw the mastery of technique; most historical glass techniques were relearned and practiced with precision and style. Henry Halem's inspired response (1972) to the Kent State University shootings was probably the first glass casting and the first use of *pâte de verre* in American studio glass (fig. 5).
- Halem has since become a master of glass collage in Vitrolite, an opaque industrial plate glass a cache of which he discovered in a warehouse.

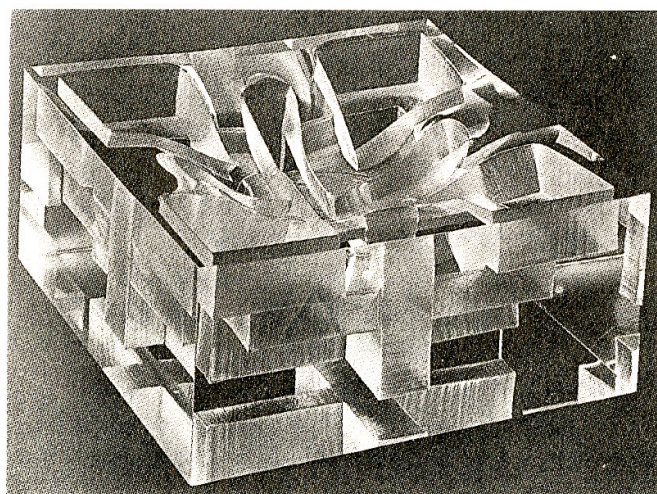
- Interior and exterior collage formed the design of many beautiful vessels by ~~David Huchthausen~~ and by Joel Philip Myers (fig. 6-~~2~~ **A**). A fine series of opaque white and opaque black glass, matt-surfaced vases of ancient amphora shapes were decorated with meticulously detailed, pre-cut blown glass shards, looking like aerial views of ancient ruins. Myers perseveres in blowing larger "Contiguous Fragment" vessels, in which shards are sealed inside the glass.



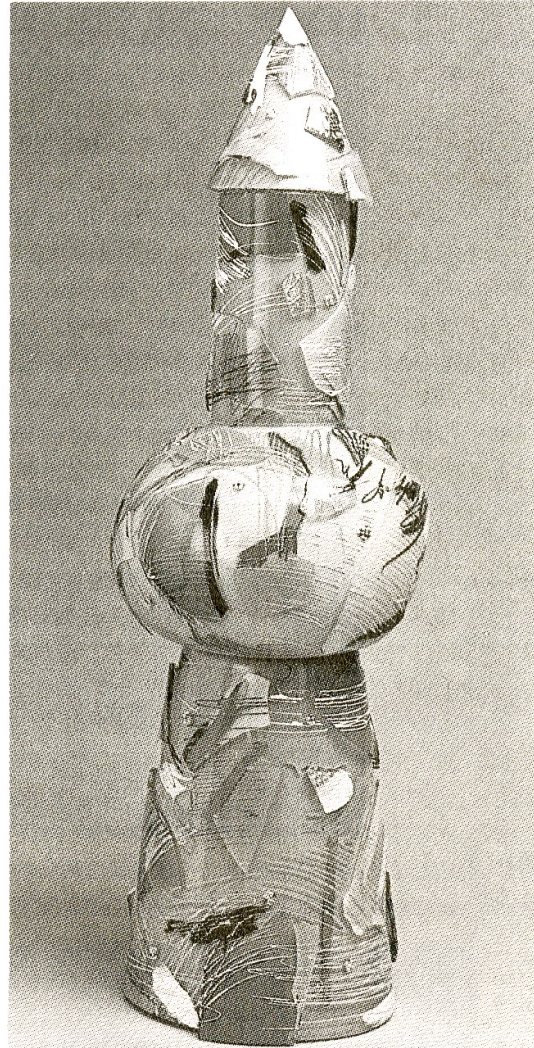
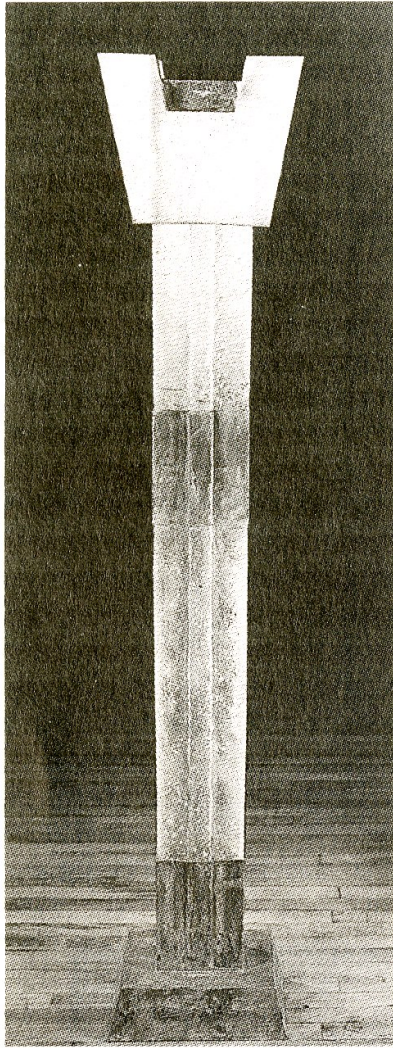
8. Mark Peiser, "Tree and Swing" 1979 (6 1/2"x6 1/2"x6 1/2") Huntington Galleries, Huntington (WV).



9. Mark Peiser, "Gradus Ad Parnasum" 1986 (13 1/4"x8 1/2"x3"). Poured, cut, and polished. Raleigh Contemporary Galleries, Raleigh (NC).



10. Steven Weinberg, cast glass 1980 (approx. 8"x8"x4"). Photo Peter Kolk.



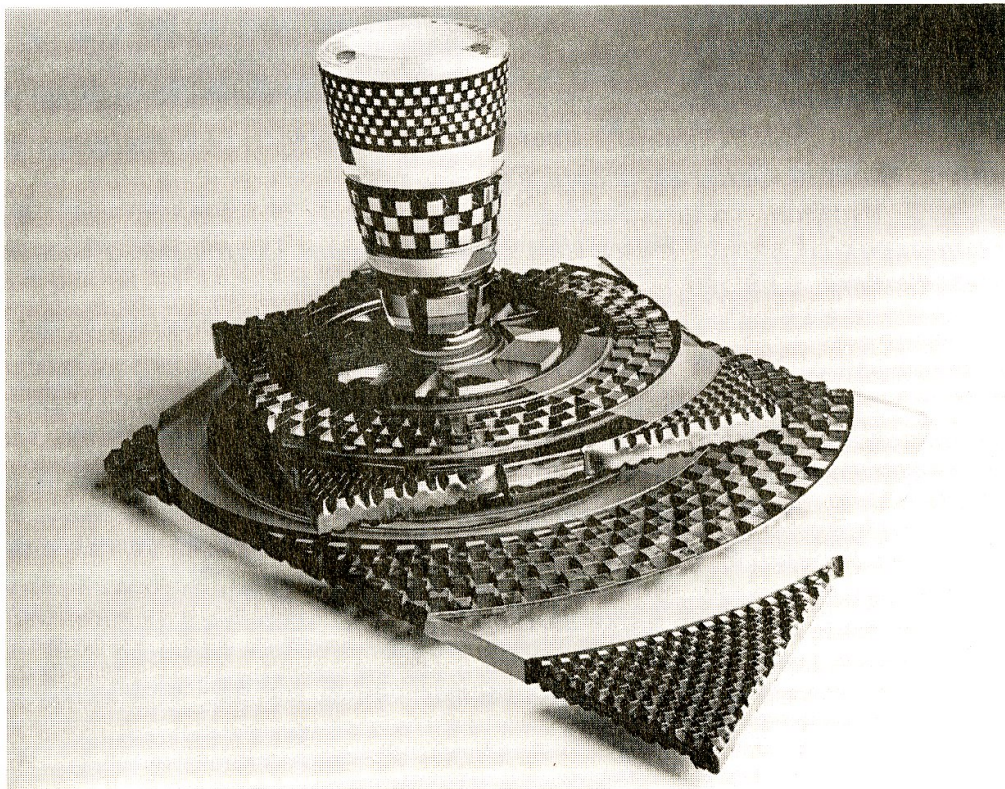
11. Howard Ben Tré, "Column" 1984 (86"x18"x10 $\frac{1}{4}$ ""). Cast glass, copper, and patina. Habatat Galleries. Photo Ric Murray.

12. Richard Marquis, "Shard Rocket" 1987 (114,3x33,02x33,02 cm). Blown glass with exposed shards. Hessisches Landesmuseum Darmstadt. Photo Betsy Rosenfeld Gallery, Chicago.

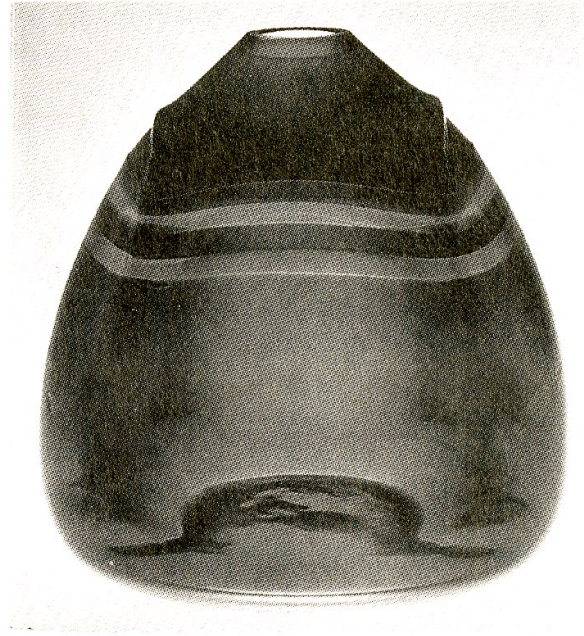
- The evolution of former industrial designer Mark Peiser's ordeal with vase imagery is interesting. After a brief fling with Art Nouveau-influenced iridescent surfaces, Peiser decorated the circumference of vessels with opaque panoramas somewhat reminiscent of Matisse's paper cutouts. Finding this
- unsatisfactory, he sealed ~~millefiori and threaded~~ scenes between thick layers of clear, colorless glass (fig. 8). Deciding that these dense, sylvan temples closed rather than opened up the possibilities of the glass, he began to spiral his scenes around the clear glass as they might be seen by a person walking
- down a country road. Finally, in 1980, Peiser chucked blowing and began casting, an increasingly popular technique, which he has developed in an ingenious and singular way (fig. 9).



13. Judy Bally Jensen, "A Dream of Venus" 1987 (31"x29½"). Etched glass with reverse painting. Heller Gallery.



14. Michael Glancy, "Crystal Concentrations" (H 9½" x L 28" x W 14"). Blown glass, industrial plate glass, copper and silver. Heller Gallery. Photo Gene Dwiggins.



15. Paul Stankard, "Foxglove Botanical" 1988 ($2 \frac{3}{4}$ "x $5 \frac{7}{8}$ "). Lampwork encased in crystal. Summers Gallery, Inc. Photo George Erml.

16. Tom Patti, "Banded Bronze" 1976 (H 17 x W 17.8 cm). Colored and colorless sheet glass, laminated and blown.

- ● Also working in an intimate scale is Steven Weinberg. About 1980, Weinberg cut geometric shapes out of plaster, arranged them in a 4x8x8 inch mold, and cast wave-green industrial glass over them. With the plaster removed, the result was a reverse casting in which the labyrinthian negative space became positive sculpture, while the positive containing glass appeared negative (fig. 10). This had never been done before in glass. Yet, not content
- with these powerful demi-cubes, Weinberg has switched to clear optical glass, floated gauzy contours in it, and exposed to the touch underparts that resemble Roman amphitheaters. The new work is twice the size, busier, and not nearly as effective.

On the heavy end of casting — surpassing even the weighty works by Kent Ipsen and Hank Adams — is Howard Ben Tré. Ben Tré started small with his thought provoking, flesh-toned "Burial Box", included in Corning's 1979

- *New Glass: A Worldwide Survey*². By 1985, Ben Tré's cast memories of the

² This was a juried exhibition in which 95% of the glass selected was from studio glassworkers. That exhibition stands in telling contrast to Corning's *Glass 1959*, in which a mere 5% of accepted work was from individual glassworkers and 95% from factories.

- detritus of the mechanical age were soon superseded by his copper-sheathed
- glass columns some two meters high. Some of them crack, especially out-of-doors, but Howard shrugs it off — after all, Greek columns crumble too (*fig. 11*).

- Striving for bigness has been an end in itself for many in American studio glass — even Richard Marquis, who back in 1972 managed to squeeze the entire Lord's Prayer into a millefiori cane less than 1 cm in diameter. In 1987, Marquis produced "Shard Rocket" (H. 114.3 cm), onto which menacing form gaily delineated shards are not fused but epoxied (*fig. 12*). Epoxy is the easy glass glue of the 1980s.

In recent years an increasing number of studio practitioners have been enticed into the fun house of crafts, where they become lost in multiple choices of materials and textures, and glass content becomes vestigial. Other more successful experimenters have brought new life to abandoned or dormant glassy materials and techniques: *pâte de verre* (Doug Anderson, Karla Trinkley); painting or reverse painting on glass (Carol Cohen, James C.

- Watkins, Judy Bally Jensen); lampwork (notably Ginny Ruffner and Paul Stankard); and Toots Zynsky's nests of fused and slumped glass threads suggesting the plumage of rare tropical birds (*fig. 13*).

In the brief space remaining, I want to consider three tenacious pursuers of unusual glass concepts.

- Michael Glancy learned electroforming while at RISD³ and first applied it to glass in 1979. Where other blowers of thick vessels leave off, Glancy begins by sandblasting the design into the glass through a rubber stencil, a trick he gleaned from tombstone carvers. The sandblasted design is then submerged for a week or more in an electrolytic bath, which dresses it in a suit of copper or silver, but leaving the polished glass design protected by the stencil. Glancy's craftsmanship is impeccable, while his sense of design possibilities appears unlimited (*fig. 14*).

2500 BC
gold ewer
from UR,
Arabia
(Persian
Gulf)

- The best miniature lampworker of our time — one to challenge Johann Friedrich Meyer of Dresden or Bernard Perrot of Nevers — is undoubtedly Paul Stankard, a former blower of scientific glass. After nearly 20 years of self-teaching, Stankard has produced tiny botanical studies of wild flowers, their seed pods, roots, and mysterious subterranean visitors that are at once real and fantastic (*fig. 15*).

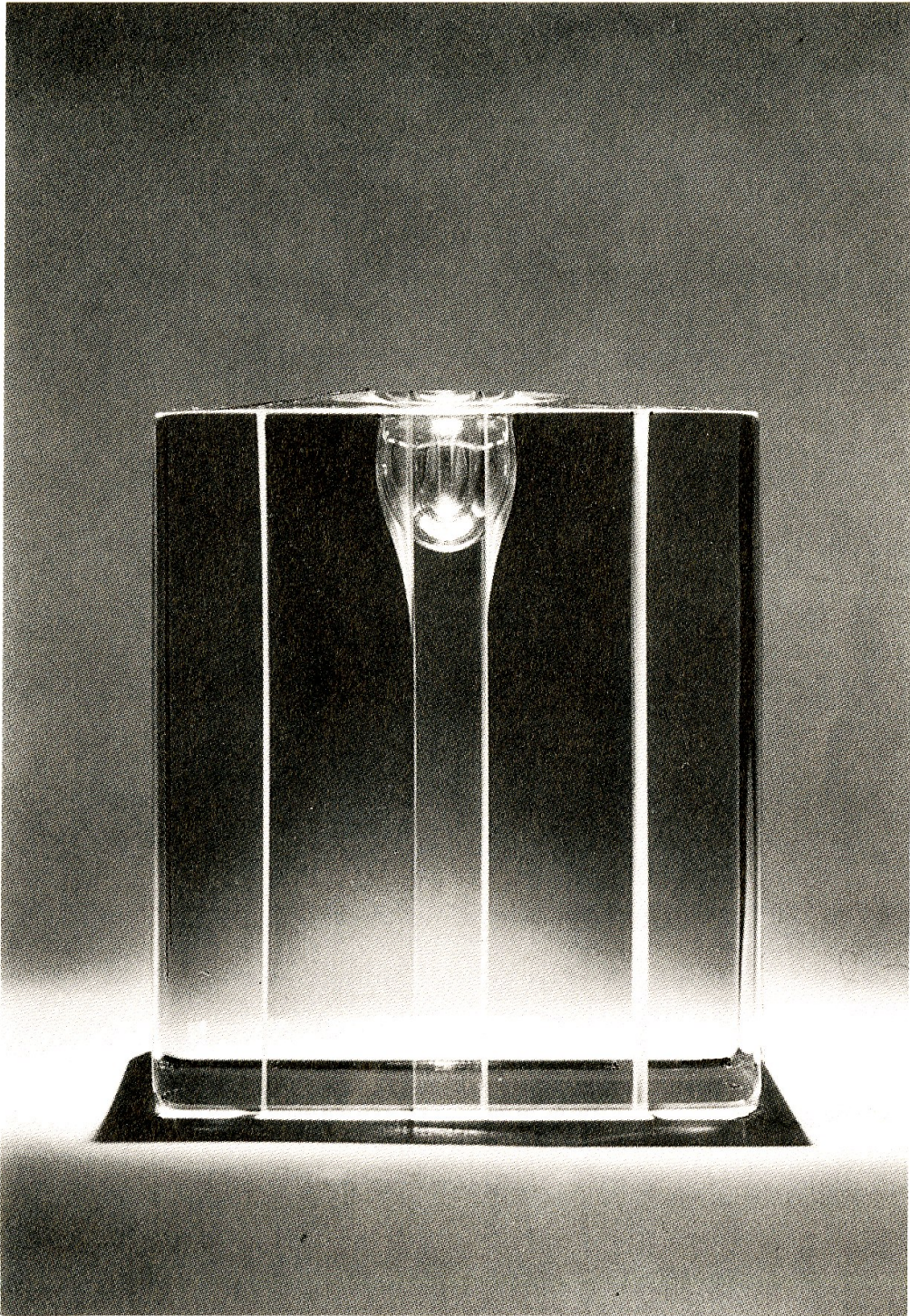
Show
lampwork

- In 1976, Tom Patti stacked small squares of tinted sheet glass until they formed a cube. Then he fused the cube and blew it into a sphere. Patti had sphered the cube (*fig. 16*). For the past 12 years Patti has maintained the same basic concept, while the structure of the form became more detailed and elaborate until about 1985. Since then he has gradually reduced the form to ultimate organic simplicity. Patti's 6 inch (15 cm) pieces are truly monuments in miniature (*fig. 17*).

³ Rhode Island School of Design.

TURN NOW TO
LAST PAGE

and How I discovered Patti



17. Tom Patti, "Solarized Blue" 1988 (H 5")

These limited lines give only a fragmented notion of the enormous progress made in American studio glass, which, after all, started from scratch in 1962; nor do they adequately convey the full range of inventive approaches to this uncanny material. For the many glassworkers unmentioned are also part of the great surge of energy that has borne American studio glass on the shoulders of imagination through an historical generation.

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