

SOUTH JERSEY PAPERWEIGHTS AS FOLK ART

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WHEN the first immigrant glassworkers came to southern New Jersey in 1739, they made utilitarian bottles and window glass to meet the demand of a growing population. It was not long, however, before they sought to express themselves in the medium with which they worked daily. The lily pad decoration which evolved from this creative process is recognized as folk art and was a design unique to America.

Southern New Jersey's less-known glass folk art was the paperweight. The "frit" or "flat" paperweights have been unheralded because they were produced utilizing the resources of a mass-production facility. They have often been misidentified as "commercial" or "industrial" art. But this artistic expression of the common glassworker is folk art in the tradition of the weather vane, ship's figurehead, decoy, or scrimshaw. Not every glassworker made paperweights, nor were those produced usually intended for sale. They were unique artistic expressions in glass, which a glassworker alone could execute.

The idea of making a decorative glass object to hold papers or decorate the top of a desk was doubtless inspired by European and New England weights. Glassworkers immigrated to this country in great numbers in the nineteenth century and, once in America, did not confine their activities to one locale. Millefiori cane was being used in New England glasshouses in the 1860s, but this technique was not carried into southern New Jersey. There, the glassworkers, as Lawrence

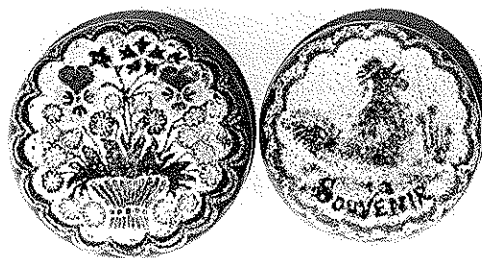


FIG. 1. *Two Port Elizabeth paperweights.*

Selman says in *Paperweights for Collectors*, "did not so much imitate French paperweights as formulate a totally new American statement in glass."¹

Paperweights which were flat, rather than spherical or domed, were the earliest produced in southern New Jersey. Research in the 1930s dated these first weights in the early 1860s (Fig. 1).² Port Elizabeth paperweights utilized powdered glass or "frit" for their colorful renderings rather than millefiori cane. These early weights were created by assembling powdered glasses on a flat surface of stone or iron possibly retained by a

1. Lawrence H. Selman, *Paperweights for Collectors*, Santa Cruz, California: Paperweight Press, 1975, p. 29.

2. Paul Hollister, *The Encyclopedia of Glass Paperweights*, New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1969, p. 235 ff.

shallow ring. A gather of molten crystal was then placed atop the powdered design with a punty iron or blowpipe remaining in place. When sufficient time had been allowed for the powdered glass to adhere to the molten gob, the entire mass was lifted from the smooth surface and encased in another layer of crystal. The resultant gather was shaped into a shallow dome with a wooden blocking tool and then annealed. The finished weight, after annealing, was ground flat on the back where the pontil attachment had been. Few of these early weights are extant, and perhaps only a few were made, for the process of arranging the glass powders without a form or die would be a tedious one. They *were* made, however, and are the artistic expression of craftsmen whose working hours were filled with bottles, window glass cylinders, laboratory apparatus, and hand-drawn tubing and rod.

There were no special tools involved in this process. The flat plate known as a marver or "marble" was a common feature in the bottle factories of Millville, and the applewood shaping block was already being used to cool and shape a glass parison prior to mold-blowing in "German" system blow shops. Grinding equipment was present in almost every bottle factory as the blow-over production blowing process was widely used.

Powdered glass was not only arranged to create flat pictorial paperweights, but also manipulated by driving it into the crystal dome of the paperweight. This technique was used to create the "devil's fire" design, where the powder was carried into the body of the weight and then swirled to create an effect reminiscent of the flickering marsh gases in south Jersey's tidal swamps. Lily/mushroom/umbrella weights were also created by driving powdered glass which had melted and adhered to hot crystal to the base of the weight, after the powder layer had been ribbed in a crimp (Fig. 2).

Paperweights were not made as production items in south Jersey glass factories such as Whitall Tatum, Moore Bros., or Whitney. They were,

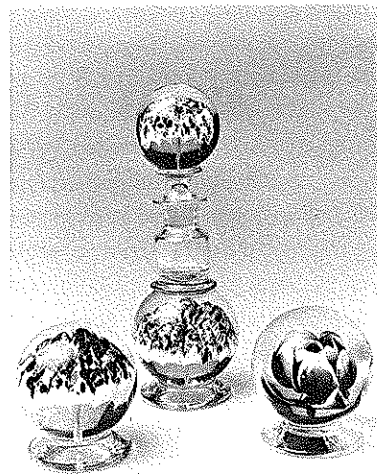


FIG. 2. Lily/mushroom/umbrella weight, ink bottle, Millville rose weight attributed to Emil Stanger.

however, made with the tools and techniques of production glassblowing. It is obvious that the trailed or scattered powders would produce "one of a kind" paperweights. This made each setup an arduous process. Glassblowers soon learned that an iron die—much like the insert plate introduced in the last half of the nineteenth century to personalize bottles for pharmacies or breweries—could hold the powdered glass.³ The introduction of the die meant that lettering for mottoes and names as well as fine lines could be reproduced in a flat paperweight. This discovery coincided with the introduction of high-quality soda-lime glass in the bottle and window glass factories of south Jersey after the Civil War. White glass to fill the die was readily available, as it was used in the manufacture of thermometer tubing (Fig. 3).

The use of an iron die reduced the chances of failure and widened the circle of paperweight makers in south Jersey factories. Interestingly, dies and their resultant weights range from fine

3. Cecil Munsey, *The Illustrated Guide to Collecting Bottles*, New York: Hawthorne Books, Inc., 1970, p. 40.

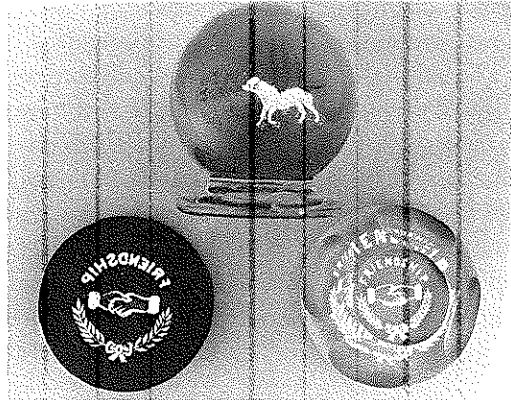


FIG. 3. Die used in paperweight making and resultant paperweight; a Michael Kane upright hunting dog paperweight.

engravings produced by a skilled moldmaker to the crudest of scratchings. This range suggests that weights were made in the largest factories which maintained their own mold shops as well as the smallest, most primitive factories.

The values of Victorian America are represented in the sentimental motifs celebrating home, religion, country, loved ones, and holidays. Much like scrimshaw, or "sailors' valentines," weights were not made for commercial purposes, but rather as special gifts to loved ones and relatives. This explains the cutting of a die to make a weight which contained an individual's name. Obviously, there was no possibility of mass-producing this type of weight, yet a metal die was employed. Custom advertising weights for local firms were the closest this technique ever came to mass production.

Perhaps the most sophisticated of the flat weights were those made by Michael Kane, a Whitall Tatum glassworker in Millville. Kane's ships and hunting scenes are the product of sculpted dies and are so skillfully wrought that fine lines remain in relief on the surface of the powdered glass (Fig. 4). It has been suggested that finely powdered enamels were used to achieve this crispness. Kane was a German immigrant and may have been exposed to the finely sculpted sulphides of Baccarat. A weight by Kane depict-

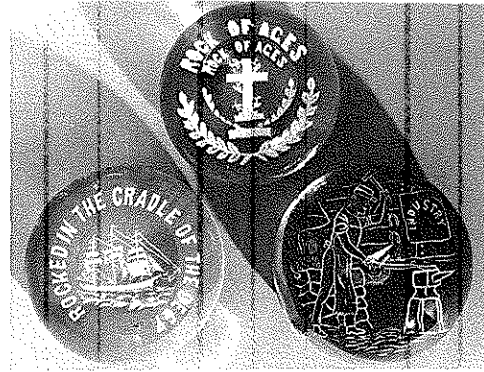


FIG. 4. Three south Jersey "Motto" paperweights.

ing a hunter and his dog in the field seems particularly reminiscent of a mid-nineteenth-century Baccarat sulphide.

From the 1860s on, paperweights were made in southern New Jersey. Occasionally the flat weight style was turned to advertising purposes, but no significant changes occurred until the turn of the century.

Since Minns's article "Paperweight Making as Done at Millville" appeared in the *American Collector* in 1938, four men have been linked in their development of a new technique in paperweight making.⁴ In this new type of weight, glass was forced into the crystal mass to form upstanding flowers and designs. Ralph Barber, Marcus Kuntz, Emil Stanger, and John Ruhlander were outstanding Millville glassworkers. We know that Kuntz and Stanger were involved in blowing a 108-gallon container about 1902 at the Whitall Tatum factory in Millville. Interviews with family members identify Barber and Ruhlander as outstanding "gaffers."

During the summer months glass factories in southern New Jersey shut down to rebuild fur-

4. Edward W. Minns, "Paperweight Making as Done at Millville," *American Collector* vii, November/December 1938, p. 8 ff.

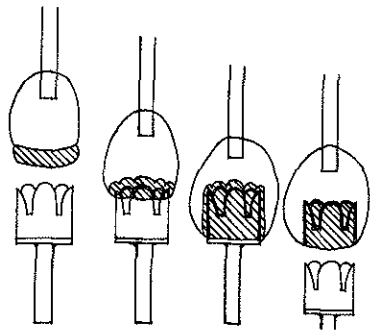


FIG. 5. Use of the rose paperweight crimp.

naces and to avoid work during the hottest months. We know, however, that these four men chose to pursue their glassmaking in a factory on the boardwalk in Atlantic City. The Bohemian Art Glass Company record is unclear, but oral reports put these four men there in 1899.⁵ It was after this time that the upright "Millville Rose" paperweight appeared. Perhaps the time devoted to purely decorative glassmaking gave these four a chance to experiment with new ideas, or the idea, tried elsewhere, was reintroduced and perfected during this time (Fig. 2).

The technique for making a rose paperweight utilizes a crimp of semicircular blades mounted in a handle or base. The crimp was forced into a crystal mass through a thin layer of colored glass. This established the petals within the paperweight; then the base of the weight and excess color had to be cut away with jacks, and the pontil removed from what would become the dome of the finished weight (Fig. 5). There seems to be no precedent for this technique, although it does have features in common with other traditional south Jersey paperweights, the "devil's fire" and lily/mushroom/umbrella. In the "devil's fire" weight, however, individual fingers of glass were driven into the crystal dome. The mushroom weight does drive colored glass into crystal, but the excess color is then shaped into the top of the

design. There is nothing of the delicate "cutting-down" process involved in the rose weight.

The skills of an accomplished craftsman were required to create a rose paperweight as witnessed by contemporary attempts to recreate this classic paperweight design. Much as with other examples of American folk art, the men who made these designs did so because they could. They expressed their artistic inclinations in a medium over which they were master, without concern for commercial viability or academic concepts of art. Their desire was to freeze a naturalistic rose in a ball of crystal glass and see others marvel at their accomplishment. Their guide was nature and their skills were those of the mass-production bottle and window glass factories.

It was the very existence of the hand glass factories which made this material available for artistic expression, for as the mass-production facilities turned to automated machines, the skilled glass craftsmen began to retreat from the scene. The hand skills required to execute the traditional south Jersey paperweight could only persist in the presence of large commercial hand shops. The loss of traditional paperweight-making techniques was recognized in the 1930s, when a Works Progress Administration program was introduced to employ glassworkers in southern New Jersey.⁶ Attempts were made to keep the techniques or rose paperweight making alive, but they were not very successful. Emil Larson provided the living bridge for these skills, emulating Ralph Barber and critiquing Charles Kaziun's efforts with torch and rod. Automation effectively removed molten glass from the realm of art medium until the contemporary studio glass movement once again put glass within the reach of the individual craftsman.

5. *Daily Evening Union*, Atlantic City, New Jersey, January 11, June 10, and August 18, 1899.

6. Adeline Pepper, *The Glass Gaffers of New Jersey, and Their Creations from 1739 to the Present*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1971, p. 256.