

Art as Practice

Melissa Ayotte Explores Nature and Creativity

By: Lawrence H. Selman

Photography courtesy L. H. Selman, Ltd.

Melissa Ayotte may have been born among glass rods and the roar of the torch, but she is no mere apprentice to her father. In fact, the same curiosities that drew her father to the artistic medium pulled her in other directions. Her interest for many years has been in psychology, understanding human motivation and behavior. With this interest in mind sciences leading the way, Melissa found herself more and more interested in the Arts. She began taking photography and sculpture at the New Hampshire Institute of Art while also delving into her own self-study of painting, poetry, and the creative process.

While finishing her Masters program at Antioch New England Graduate School, she apprenticed in the studio with Rick, and it was then that her interest in glass began to take hold. Impossible to miss in the Ayotte household, glass demanded her attention in the studio where she could work Rick's pieces, pulled colored rod, or assisted in design. Upon obtaining her M.A., Melissa began pursuing a career in counseling and clinical psychology while continuing her work in the studio.

Glass initially served as a refuge from the day to day of her career. But as her aptitude developed into skill, Melissa started taking more glass and generalized art classes, soon realizing she had found her true interest. Glass moved into the leading position, with her love of mind sciences serving as a strong foundation to her creativity. In the year 2000 Melissa spent time assisting at Stankard Studio and



Melissa Ayotte creating nature in glass.

then began full-time at Ayotte Glass Studio, where she continues to create.

In taking to glasswork and learning to capture these small, still moments of life, she is discovering the most human of motivations: to create what was not there before. Melissa aims to push the limits of the paperweight, creating novel pieces which reflect her sense of the Nature - earthly, human, and divine.

At a time when many paperweight artists are "expanding" out of the spherical format into other three-dimensional shapes, Melissa has made a deliberate choice to stay close to the traditional form. *"I consider the limitations imposed by the spherical shape of the paperweight to be very liberating, in the sense that I am forced to reckon with the boundaries of the glass and develop new ideas, techniques, and creative approaches for expanding those boundaries. The shape itself provides a structure from which I can evolve my own*

sense of creativity, ultimately aiming to evolve the art of paperweight making in general.

The more I become aware, open and awakened to the Natural world, the more closely I align with my true creative intention. By allowing my quest for expanded consciousness to lead my artistic expression I hope to develop new ways of understanding and experiencing not only glass, but life.

My art is my practice, an alchemical experience of bending and shaping a solid - glass - into a liquid form, then creating a sculpture from this change in material. I believe the glass artist is more than craftsman or artisan alone, rather a practitioner of a higher-aim transformation. This transformation happens in the glass artist as she creates it, within the material while it changes shape and also, I hope, within the viewer when he engages the sculpture."



Figure 1: "Vine Bouquet." 3 1/4" diameter.

A traditional form reflecting her sense of nature.



Figure 2: "Narcissus."
3 1/4" diameter.



Figure 3: "Hidden Jewel" with "pate de verre"
Buddha sculpture. 3 3/8" diameter.

I reach down to feel a stones' cool, smooth evenly pummeled surface resting within the almost white sands now between my fingers. In the air are the sounds of a timeless ocean running back and forth all day, all time. The pull between moon and water somehow carves out concentric striations of white, black, and gray. These lines are barely noticeable as I touch this naturally polished stone - the stone I've now chosen to lift up, to carry with me as I walk along the edge of this vast openness.

What is it that causes us to pick out particular stones, to make them a part of our walk along a beach or careful placement within a garden? This attentive and intriguing engagement with the natural world takes me toward my inner nature where I take up my creative journey. At first glance, altering the boundary of a paperweight with its perfect roundness and translucent brilliance did not seem natural, especially since the boundary itself is liberating, allowing me to feel contained or held by the circular space while my creative impulses fly free. But the more I open up to the natural world, the more I notice the subtle imperfections in shape and form: cycles, parts falling off, things receding, and objects not round. This awareness creates a desire to hold the beauty of flameworked flowers and metaphors in an organic vessel, which like the stone, must to be touched. Perhaps it is the many walks along the New England coastline or the hundreds of hikes in our "Granite State," New Hampshire inspiring this change. But one thing is clear, the individuality and multitude of Stone is nearly unimaginable, rivaling the splendor and uniqueness of the snowflake. Like the flowers, butterflies, leaves, and archetypal images which I reference in glass, stones present their own brilliant unquity in their differing shapes, sizes, colors, and textures.

I bring the idea into the studio and spend the rest of my time figuring out the boundaries of each individual design. Heating, re-heating, shaping, re-shaping, while denying all previous training for those carefully formed spheres we call a paperweight. I express visually to my mentor, boss and father, Rick Ayotte why the altered shape makes sense. It was not until the exterior texture became a reality that he and I fully recognized that the paperweight can be a stone. After all, we know stones are used as paperweights in rudimentary circumstances, but we did not yet understand how the beauty of a stone is enhanced with living ideas inside.



Figure 4: "Hidden Jewel stone."
3 5/8" diameter.



Figure 5: "Forget me nots in black stone."
3 1/4" diameter.

Though light does not pass through the optical quality crystal now turned opaque stone, illumination occurs. An opening invites the onlooker to turn the eyes toward what is within. I am aware how my training in Psychology influences this aspect of the work. I am not only interested in the items of obvious beauty, I am also intrigued by the less apparent or unconscious realm. In some ways, the window to the stone is the only place where reflection can provide an image of oneself, like the paperweight easily reflecting all things near the dome. However, that carefully chosen window, turned slightly, does not reflect, and the viewer beholds a secret - the sculpture formed inside [Figures 4 - 10].

In this way, the absence of transparency creates a container of light, giving the flowers, leaves, bouquets, and metaphors an even greater focus. The stones offer a small glimpse into a larger idea: perhaps all matter, however, seemingly insignificant, contains the opportunity for life. It is my hope to relay the same kind of mystery experienced in the wilderness. After all, I am the daughter of a man who spends his life engrossed in the natural world. As a result, I too am cleansed in the icy waters of our North Eastern streams, nurtured by the multi-colored leaves of autumn and their distinctive smell as they head towards winter, awakened by the flight of migrating birds and alarmed by snapping twigs underfoot as I make my way into the wild.

I suppose for some it is difficult to comprehend how a person could spend hours manipulating a solid, glass, into a liquid, then back to a solid for the primary purpose of expressing some great mystery within. But as a beginner, I say that the flame, colors, and the intention our of work come together to form glass paperweights, stones, and whatever the next intention may be, and that these objects are captured moments which speak to our journey in life.

The ocean is vast, the waters sometimes deep. Standing along shore looking out, I see no end, only the limitation imposed by vision. This vastness is where we look day after day when we enter the studio. What washes to shore is not easily predicted. The desire is not to control our creative impulses; rather to be open and aware when something new and exciting comes to mind. - Melissa Ayotte



Figure 6: "Awakening bouquet and yellow sun in red stone." 3 5/8" diameter.



Figure 7: "Tea rose bouquet in gray stone." 2 5/8" diameter.



Figure 8: "Pink rose with nurturing hands stone." 2 3/8" wide.



Figure 9: "Double bouquet in gray stone." 2 3/4" wide.

The viewer beholds a secret - the sculpture formed inside.



Figure 10: "Lavender bouquet in blue-gray stone." 5 1/8" long.

To Learn More:

The early work of Melissa Ayotte can be seen in "Ladies in Weighting" by Nancy Alfano in the 2002 *Annual Bulletin of the Paperweight Collectors Association, Inc.*

About the Author:

Lawrence H. Selman has over thirty years experience in the field of fine paperweights. He started L. H. Selman Ltd. in 1969 as a small mail-order business and has become the exclusive dealer for some of today's most prestigious glasshouses and individual artists. His publishing house, Paperweight Press, is devoted exclusively to publications in the field of paperweights.