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Mark Peiser

Given the newness of the field and the fact that everyone had started from zero technically, when a blower mastered hot glass techniques not seen in 50 years, it was big news. Mark Peiser was one of these. Peiser (b. 1938) earned a BS in design at Illinois Institute of Technology and had taken courses in engineering. His moment of transformation occurred in 1967, when he tried glassblowing at Penland School of Crafts. Seduced by the material, he closed his industrial design business, moved to Penland and became the first resident glassblower at the school. The fact that he knew next to nothing didn't discourage anybody. In those heady days, motivation mattered more than knowledge and skill.

One of the most difficult problems confronting glassblowers was color compatibility. Peiser's engineering training gave him the conceptual tools to work through the problem, as well as the discipline to acquire skill. The glass designed by Tiffany (produced by skilled workers) became Peiser's point of reference: first the peacock-feather design, and then Tiffany's "paperweight vases." These vases had rich decorative imagery in the form of both hot colored glass and millefiori applied to the surface of opaque or translucent glass. Peiser started using clear glass to make vases about 1976, and discovered a startling effect: curved clear glass acts like a lens. The convex front surface magnifies what is seen through it, and the concave back surface reduces. Peiser exploited this property to create optical illusions of deep space. In homage to Tiffany, he called his series "Paperweight Vases."

The most effective of these works were woodland scenes in which the view was framed by tree trunks. The base depicted a forest floor, usually including grasses and millefiori flowers,

and the top depicted foliage. Peiser applied the elements in layers, building them up in real space between gathers of clear glass. These works, a new development in contemporary glass, received considerable acclaim in publications and exhibitions. Furthermore, Peiser's considerable skills marked a milestone in American studio glass, showing that as blowers achieved a degree of control over the medium, they could turn their attention to matters of artistic intention.

Peiser continued the series until 1981, when he abandoned the vessel and turned to cast evocations of landscapes. Some of these were as magical in their illusions as the paperweight vases. Others were weighed down with heavy-handed symbolism: sunsets, stairs to nowhere. Later cast sculptures represented emotional states. In spite of his ambition, none of Peiser's later work had the impact on the field that his paperweight vases did.