

Legends of Glass – Harvey Littlejohn

Harvey K. Littleton is considered to be the father of the studio glass movement. Littlejohn is a glass artist whose work ranges from functional vessels to sculptural forms. His father was a physicist at Corning Glass Works where he invented Pyrex glass so he had early exposure to glass in the factories.

Trained as a ceramicist, he began experimenting with hot glass in his studio in 1959. Through two landmark workshops and by establishing the first Studio Glass curriculum at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, he helped to bring glass out of the factory and into the artists' studio.

He attended Brighton School of Art in England, received his Bachelors of Design at the University of Michigan, and received his M.F.A. from Cranbrook Academy of Art. His work can be found in the collection of the High Museum of Art, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Museum of Modern Art, New York, Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution, the Victoria & Albert Museum in England, among others.

In 1957 a university research grant allowed him to visit Europe, where he studied the influence of Islamic culture on contemporary Spanish pottery. However, he first stopped in Paris to visit Jean Sala, who had been recommended to Littleton as an artist who worked alone in glass.

After four and a half months of research in Spain, Littleton visited the site of his wartime service in Naples and was surprised to find seven small glass factories there. On a later visit to the island of Murano near Venice he visited more than fifty glass factories. The little demonstration furnaces outside the factories fascinated him. The furnaces would be staffed by a couple of the factory's glassblowers, who would perform their craft for tourists. Prior to this Littleton believed that glass could only be made in an industrial setting, by a team of workers. His Murano experience convinced him that a single artist could melt and work glass in a private studio.

Upon his return to his Wisconsin studio Littleton began melting small batches of glass in his ceramics kiln, using hand-thrown stoneware bowls as crucibles. As a result of these experiments, the American Craft Council asked him to chair a panel on glass at its Third National Conference in 1958. The panellists were glass artists and designers Michael and Frances Higgins and Earl McCutchen, who worked in laminated glass at the University of Georgia and Corning Museum of Glass director Paul Perrot.

At the American Craft Council's fourth conference in 1961, Littleton not only presented a paper on his own work in glass but also exhibited a sculpture made of three faceted pieces of cullet that he had melted, formed and carved in the previous year. After the conference, Littleton began applying for grants to get his vision of a hot glass studio program off the ground.

During the fall 1962 and spring 1963 semesters, Littleton taught glass in a garage at his Verona farm to six students under an independent study program. By the following year he had secured University of Wisconsin funding to rent and equip an off-campus glass department in Madison. Through the University's glass program, Littleton would train many prominent glass artists, including Dale Chihuly and Marvin Lipofsky.

With the launching of the first college glass department Littleton said that he "...became a kind of evangelist for the medium." He gave lectures at university art departments throughout the Midwest and northeast United States about the potential of glass as a medium for the studio artist. Littleton served as the chairman of the University of Wisconsin art department from 1964–1967 and from 1969–1971. He retired from teaching in 1976, and in 1977 was named professor emeritus. It was around this time that Littleton, in addition to his work in glass, began to develop the technique of vitreography, printmaking using glass plates.

In 1962 Littleton's first pieces in blown glass were, like his earlier works in pottery, functional forms: vases, bowls and paperweights. His breakthrough to non-functional form came in 1963 when, with no purpose in mind, he remelted and finished a glass piece that he had earlier smashed in a fit of pique. The object lay in his studio for several weeks before he decided to grind the bottom. As Littleton recounts in his book *Glassblowing: A Search for Form*, he brought the object into the house where "it aroused such antipathy in my wife that I looked at it much more closely, finally deciding to send it to an exhibition. Its refusal there made me even more obstinate, and I took it to New York ... I later showed it to the curators of design at the Museum of Modern Art. They, perhaps relating it to some other neo Dada work in the museum, purchased it for the Design Collection." This led to Littleton's mid-1960s series of broken-open forms, and "Prunted," "Imploded" and "Exploded" forms.



These sculptures, especially the "Prunted," or "Anthropomorphic," forms were influenced by Littleton's colleague Erwin Eisch, who visited and worked with Littleton in his Wisconsin studio for a month in late 1967. Several weeks after Eisch's departure, Littleton realized that he had unconsciously adopted his friend's strongly personal figural style in his own work. Littleton reacted to this discovery by turning to simple, clean shapes in 1968, forming tubes, rods

and columns of glass that he cut and grouped together on bases of plate glass or steel.

Allowing the pull of gravity to stretch and bend hot glass while on the blowpipe or punty led Littleton to his "Folded Forms" and "Loops" series, which continued until 1979. His "Eye" forms, also from the 1970s, take the form of concentric cups of various colours in diminishing sizes that nestle one inside the next.



Littleton explored cutting and slumping industrial, including plate and optic glass, beginning in 1970. In sculptures such as *Do Not Spindle* and *Distortion Box*, slumped squares of glass are transfixed by a brass rod. In *Rock Around the Clock*, a bent piece of optic glass bar from Corning Glass Works in Danville, Virginia, can be set rocking on its bronze plate glass base with a touch of the hand.



Perhaps Littleton's best-known body of work is his "Topological Geometry" group of series, made between 1983 and 1989. Included under this heading are his signature "Arc" forms and "Crowns," as well as his late "Lyrical Movement" and "Implied Movement" sculptural groups. In 1989 chronic back problems forced Littleton to retire from working in hot glass but he remains an important mentor figure to the studio glass movement he helped create.

