



The Legacy of Cameo Glass

By James E. Casto

Photographs by David Fattaleh

It takes skill to produce even the simplest piece of hand-blown glassware. But creating a piece of cameo glass requires much more than skill alone. It demands a degree of artistry that borders on magic.

Cameo glass is a three-dimensional work of art rendered in multicolored layers of glass. The artist starts with a piece of glass called a *blank*. At first, the blank appears to be a smooth, dark piece of glass, but, beneath the dark surface, wait layers of colored glass. The artist carves an intricate design on the glass blank, carefully revealing the underlying layers of glass. The process is similar to that of a sculptor who creates a three dimensional figure by chipping away at a block of marble.

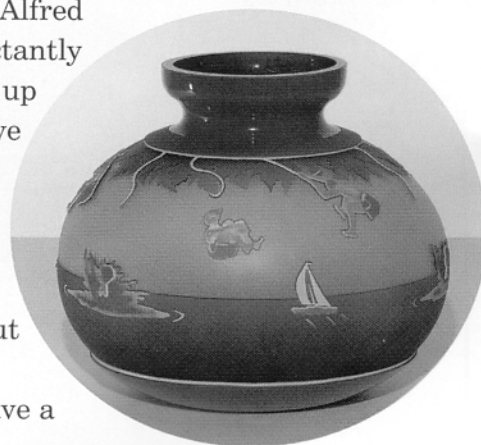
The cameo glass process dates back hundreds of years and was especially popular in eighteenth-century England. In modern times, cameo glass had nearly become a lost art until Pilgrim Glass near Huntington, along with other glassmakers, contributed to its revival in the 1980s. Other glass companies had carved cameo glass pieces before, but Pilgrim became the first glassmaker to successfully blow and carve more than four layers of glass. Eventually, Pilgrim's artisans perfected techniques that enabled them to produce cameo pieces with as many as 12 layers of glass.

Vast deposits of sand—some of it virtually pure silica—and the ready availability of natural gas and limestone made

glassmaking a widespread industry in West Virginia. What is thought to be the first glass factory, in what was then western Virginia, opened at Wellsburg in the Northern Panhandle in 1815. Eventually, sheet glass and bottle-making plants could be found in nearly every corner of the state. At the same time, plants producing hand-blown glassware and fine art glass also cropped up.

In recent decades, however, the glass industry has all but disappeared from West Virginia. A growing preference for plastics, increasing foreign competition, and spiraling natural gas prices have contributed to the decline of glass production. Bottle makers and sheet glass plants were the first to close; more recently, the ranks of art glass companies have dwindled to a few stubborn survivors.

From its modest beginnings in 1949, Pilgrim Glass had produced elegant hand-blown glassware for more than 50 years. Yet, in the late 1990s, owner and New York businessman Alfred Knobler reluctantly put the plant up for sale. "I love Pilgrim Glass," he says. "I have other businesses, but this was my first, and I have a

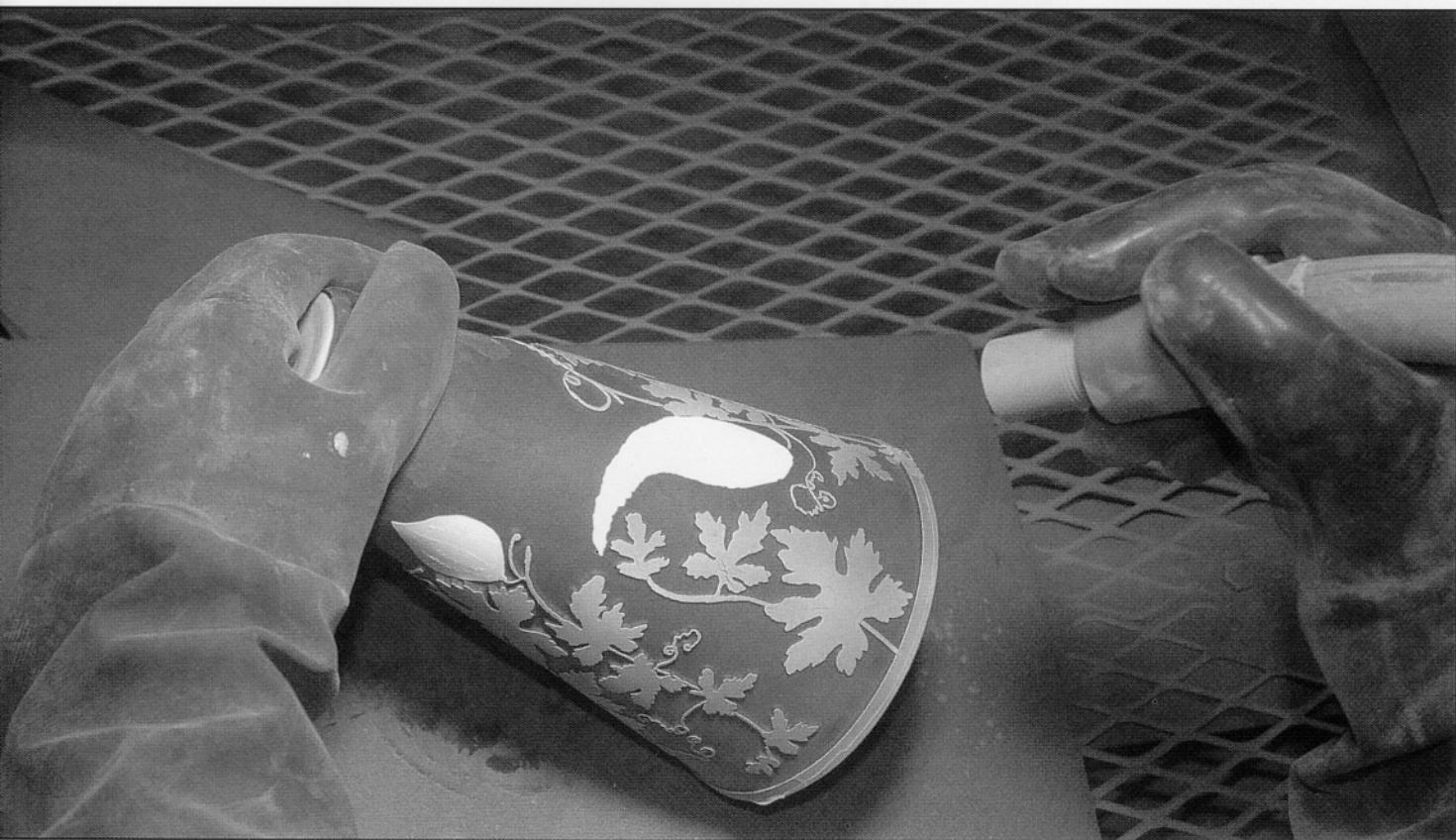


special attachment to it.” Knobler, in his mid-eighties, was ready to retire. He hoped to find someone with talent and money to take over the company. Unfortunately, he did not find a buyer. In March 2001, the Wayne County glass company stopped all production. The company’s retail shop continued to sell inventory until April 2002, but Pilgrim Glass was closed for good.

Fortunately, Pilgrim’s closure did not end the cameo glass story. Thanks to a partnership between Knobler and the Huntington Museum of Art (HMA), the company’s craftsmanship and artistry live on in a new venture — Pilgrim Legacy Cameo Glass. Knobler didn’t want to see Pilgrim’s connection to the Huntington area end when the company closed, so he found a way for some of the gifted artisans at Pilgrim to continue their work. Working with HMA Director Margaret Mary Layne, he developed a partnership with the museum to continue the production and sale of cameo glass. “The Huntington Museum of Art is pleased to be a partner in this exciting

project,” says Layne. The new partnership, she notes, is a logical complement to the museum’s glass collection, which has more than 4,000 pieces. The collection includes ancient glass, sculpture from the modern studio glass movement, and nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century European and American art glass. Many of the pieces were produced by companies that, like Pilgrim, are now part of West Virginia’s glass-making history.

Knobler donated to HMA 8,000 cameo glass blanks produced by Pilgrim before it halted production. The blanks could have ended up tucked away in a dusty warehouse, but now they will be brought to life as valuable art pieces and sold exclusively in the museum’s gallery shop. Prices for pieces of cameo glass range from \$150 for a small crystal and topaz paperweight to a hefty \$12,750 for a one-of-kind vase. The vase designs, which evoke images of ancient Greece, are carved from six layers of different colored glass.



ne Wallace uses a sandblaster to remove layers of glass.

For collectors, the museum has organized the Pilgrim Legacy Cameo Glass Club. With annual dues of \$25, members get a printed newsletter, invitations to previews of upcoming museum events, and a 10-percent discount on purchases. For more information about joining the club and to view the Pilgrim Legacy Collection, visit the museum's Web site: www.hmoa.org.

Leading the talented team behind Pilgrim Legacy Cameo Glass is artist Dwayne Wallace. Although Wallace began his career at Pilgrim Glass in 1980, he worked in several capacities at the plant before he began carving glass. He spent eight years as a grinder and did a one-year stint as a stock clerk before moving to Pilgrim's decorating department in 1989. There he began honing his glass-carving skills. Today, Wallace works in a studio behind his home on Keyser Street in Wayne, where he has lived most of his life. Sue Ward, who spent 14 of her 24 years with Pilgrim as a decorator, works with Wallace. Ward designs and masks the blanks, and Wallace brings them to life with a high-pressured sandblaster. "Working with cameo glass is always a challenge," Wallace said in a December 2002 interview with *The Herald-Dispatch*. "But it's even tougher with the situation we're in. When we were at Pilgrim, we could come up with a design and make the glass so it would fit perfectly. Now, we have to fit the glass that's already made."

Wallace, who has never had an art class, recalled that when he transferred to Pilgrim's decorating department, the development of cameo glass was still in its early stages. For months he watched his fellow workers slowly perfect the art. "I kept my eyes and ears open at all times," he said. "Then, it got to the point where I could control the sandblaster. The rest is history."



The Huntington Museum of Art ensured that Pilgrim's cameo glass legacy would survive.



A cameo glass artisan prepares a blank.

When Pilgrim Glass announced it was closing, Wallace figured his days as a glass artisan were over. He thought about going back to college to study accounting. Fortunately for fans of cameo glass, Knobler and the HMA had other ideas. 🇺🇸

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