The first works to come out of the new American studio glass movement were as simple as this translucent vase, blown by Harvey Littleton in 1963.
BREAKING AWAY

Experts said you couldn’t blow glass outside a factory setting. But starting in 1962, artist Harvey Littleton and an experimental band of “black sheep” proved the experts wrong.

By Lee Lawrence

IT COULD HAVE BEEN just nine exhilarating and exhausting days: a dozen artists melting glass and twirling blowpipes with the curiosity of 10-year-olds tinkering with a chemistry set. But through a combination of tenacity and serendipity, what happened at a workshop in a garage on the grounds of the Toledo Museum of Art in March 1962 triggered art’s equivalent of a chemical reaction. Fifty years later, we are still feeling its effects.

The man behind the workshop and a second that followed in June was Harvey Littleton. Today he is an icon; back then he was a potter, husband, father, teacher, dreamer and indefatigable seeker. The son of the head of research at Corning Glass Works, Littleton took his father’s word for it that you couldn’t work glass alone, according to Littleton’s biographer and former student Joan Falconer Byrd.

The prevailing hypothesis was that you could throw a pot and fire it in your studio, but to make something from glass you needed the kind of furnace and teamwork that only an industrial setting could provide. When it came time to enroll at Cranbrook Academy of Art, Littleton chose ceramics.
But there is “a romance to glass,” to borrow from Byrd, and for years Littleton carried a torch for it. In 1958, on a break from teaching at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, he traveled to Venice. Watching the glassblowers of Murano, he started to believe he could work glass solo.

Back home, he melted glass in his kiln, blew some “bubbles,” and improvised a furnace and an annealing chamber—not Murano caliber, but the results were credible enough that word got around the craft community and glass emerged as a hot topic at the 1961 national conference of the American Craftsmen’s Council.

Still, there was a long way to go. As Corning Museum of Glass director Paul Perrot cautioned conference attendees, “The true potential of this fascinating material will only burst forth with the entry of many more craftsmen into the field.”

The March 1962 Toledo workshop ignited that explosion. Lighting the fuse were Otto Wittmann, who headed the museum; Dominick Labino, who directed research at the Johns-Manville Fiber Glass Corp.; and Norman Schulman, who taught ceramics at the museum’s School of Design. Nine other participants joined them, including Tom McGlauchlin, who taught at Cornell College in Iowa; Littleton’s graduate assistant, Clayton Bailey; Frances and Michael Higgins, who worked with fused glass; and Littleton himself.

Photographs show Littleton—white shirt, tie, dark-rimmed glasses—standing back from the furnace, a ball of gather poised on the tip of a blowpipe, or sitting at the workbench, his hands a blur, while Labino and Bailey look on. We see a seriousness of purpose, intensity, commitment. What we don’t see is the mix of unbridled enthusiasm and blundering experimentation that McGlauchlin described in his October 2006 interview for the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art.

McGlauchlin met up with Littleton and Bailey in Toledo, and the three men bunked in Schulman’s basement, none of them sleeping a wink, he recounted, “because we were so excited about this workshop starting.”

Littleton had talked a lot about Bernard Leach, particularly his emphasis on potters taking control of every aspect of their work. “Harvey saw Leach as a man who revived pottery as a medium,” McGlauchlin said, “and he wanted to be the Bernard Leach of glass.”

For McGlauchlin, there was no question that the workshop “was a historical event.” There was just one little hiccup: they didn’t know much about blowing glass.

The first batch was unworkable, and even after Labino supplied fiberglass marbles that melted beautifully, the going was tough. The tough, however, kept going, taking turns well into the night working the molten glass.
Portfolio: Harvey Littleton

Littleton’s work quickly evolved from simple, colorless forms to complex expressions in color and shape. He used melted Johns-Manville marbles to achieve both subtle and vivid hues in the two 1965 vessels shown here. “Eye,” a more complicated 1969 work, is blown, cut, assembled and bonded.
The day before the workshop ended, chance stepped in. Littleton gave a museum talk, and an attendee asked if he might come out to the garage. The man “took his jacket off, and then, his tie still on, took a blowpipe,” McGlauchlin said. While they all looked on, he worked

“Harvey wanted to be the Bernard Leach of glass.”

—Tom McGlauchlin, 1962 Toledo workshops participant

the glass so that “it was always flexible and felt so hot that if he stopped moving the pipe, I’d say it would have bent in 90 degrees in a second and it would’ve just flopped.” Yet it didn’t. Instead, in about eight minutes, “he blew this vase about 8 inches high, 4 inches in diameter.”

His name was Harvey Leaftgreen, a retired glassblower from the Libbey Glass Co., who proved as generous as he was competent. “He said,” McGlauchlin recalled, “ ‘Now, if you tell me what you’d like to make, I’ll walk you through it.’ ” McGlauchlin then blew a thrillingly thin-walled bowl under Leaftgreen’s tutelage.

After McGlauchlin returned to Iowa, “all I talked about was glass,” he said. And he wasn’t alone. There was a second Toledo workshop in June and, that fall, students began experimenting in Littleton’s farm studio.

“He was learning with us,” Byrd, who was one of those students, recalls. “To a degree that was exciting, and to a degree disconcerting.” But they soldiered on. Littleton, says Byrd, “had a great deal of faith in the medium.”

Meanwhile, some 300 miles away at Alfred University, Joel Philip Myers knew all about the Toledo workshop but hadn’t been able to attend. In 1963, however, he was offered a job designing at the Blenko Glass Co. in West Virginia, and he jumped at the opportunity. “At the time they were making glass by hand,” he says, “so I realized that this could be a place where I could learn on my own to blow glass.” A year later he joined Littleton at the next
Dominick Labino experiments with glass during the June workshop. Although best known for his role, with Littleton, in the pivotal Toledo workshops, he made significant solo advances in both the art and the science of glass.

**Gatherings of Glass**

Lovers of studio glass today exhibit the same unflagging energy that animated the movement's pioneers 50 years ago. In 2010, the Art Alliance for Contemporary Glass (AACG) reached out to museums across the country, encouraging them to celebrate the 50th anniversary. Some had already planned to do so; others hadn't given it much thought. A year later, the number of commemorative exhibitions and events "has mushroomed," according to AACG board member David Denn.

One not-to-be-missed exhibition celebrates the work of Harvey Littleton. "Founders of American Studio Glass: Harvey K. Littleton" is on display at the Corning Museum of Glass in Corning, N.Y., through Jan. 6, 2013. The museum's first solo exhibition of Littleton's work spans the arc of his career, with 19 pieces crafted from the '60s until the '80s. For more information, visit www.cmog.org.

You can find the full—and growing—list of studio glass events on the AACG website at http://contempglass.org/2012-celebration/events. And don't forget to check in with two other key resources: your local collectors association and your local galleries.

Like Littleton, Eisch believed that "the craftsman and the artist must be in one person." At the 1964 Congress at Columbia, Eisch, Marvin Lipofsky and other new adherents proved that artists could learn technique well enough to express their artistic vision in glass. The craftsman/artist connection was indeed possible. That same year, *Life* celebrated the drama of glass blowing with a photograph of Harvey Littleton at the glory hole, and the Museum of Modern Art in New York purchased a Littleton vase.

T**he ranks** of these craftsmen/artists—or "black sheep," as Eisch once referred to them—swelled, and in 1966, two shows introduced the new medium to the larger public. At the National Invitational Glass Exhibition in San Jose, Calif., the blown works overshadowed other, more familiar glass techniques. The Toledo Glass National...
Portfolio: Dominick Labino

Dominick Labino, a career glass research scientist at the Johns-Manville Fiber Glass Corp., expressed ongoing frustration with having to work within the confines of industry. The 1962 workshops, and the art movement that ensued, would allow him to create work on his own terms. Some of Labino’s early pieces, clockwise from top right, include a 1965 vase, a 1969 bowl, and vases from 1969 and 1968 and illustrate his technical prowess during the first decade of studio glass.
Portfolio: Other Pioneers

As the studio art glass movement gained momentum, other artists began experimenting with the medium and leaving their own indelible marks. Erwin Eisch, a friend and colleague of Harvey Littleton since their first meeting in Germany in August 1962, is considered the founder of studio glass in Europe. Marvin Lipofsky founded the glass program at the California College of Arts and Crafts in 1967. Joel Philip Myers stumbled upon the medium by accident. Trained in advertising design, he developed his glass techniques on his own. Fritz Dreisbach, Littleton's assistant while a graduate student, has since taught the art of glass at more than 130 institutions worldwide.

Counterclockwise from top left: an irregular cup created by Erwin Eisch in 1964; a 1969 glass sculpture incorporating Christmas tree flocking by Marvin Lipofsky; a bottle vase in a symphony of hues, designed by Joel Philip Myers for Blenko Glass in 1965; a dramatic "Copper Ruby" vase, crafted by Fritz Dreisbach in 1964.
Participants in the June 1962 Toledo glass workshop included: front row, left to right: Rosemary Gulassa, Harvey Leefgreen, June Wilson, Robert Florian and Harvey Littleton; back row, left to right: John Karrasch, Octavio Medellin, Clayton Bailey, Stanley Zielinski, Norm Schulman, Diane Powell, Edith Franklin and Erik Erikson.

wowed audiences with 80 works by 43 artists, and other shows, including the Smithsonian’s Ceramic Arts USA, included glass. Thanks to Littleton, Labino, Schulman, Robert Fritz, Lipošky, Fritz Dreisbach, Myers and others, the movement had burst forth, sending shock waves far and wide thanks to yet another powerful element: many of these original pioneers were also teachers.

COMING UP IN PART 2: Tracking the expansion of the fledgling studio glass movement.

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**Want to know more?**

Try these jumping-off points:

- **The Art Alliance for Contemporary Glass** has information about the early days, including a selection of archival photographs and a short video, online at www.contempglass.org/2012-celebration.

- **The Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America**, part of the Smithsonian's Archives of American Art, is accessible online at www.aaa.si.edu/collections/projects/laitman.

- **Harvey Littleton: A Life in Glass**, by Joan Falconer Byrd (Skira Rizzoli, $45), the first in-depth biography of the founder of America’s studio glass movement, is scheduled for release in February 2012.