

# HOUSE & GARDEN

THE MAGAZINE OF CREATIVE LIVING

FEBRUARY 1987 \$4.00



## AN EVERYDAY LUXURY

Simon Pearce wants his distinctive handblown glass to be used

By Nicholas Fox Weber



Glassblower Simon Pearce is a ghostly presence behind the water goblet taking shape

Bertrand Russell, in his autobiography, describes a dinner visit from Prime Minister Gladstone. Russell was seventeen years old and lived with his grandmother in a vast house in Richmond Park which had been given to her and her husband by Queen Victoria. "As I was the only male in the household, he and I were left alone together at the dinner table after the ladies retired. He made only one remark: "This is a very good port they have given me, but why have they given it me in a claret glass?" I did not know the answer, and wished the earth would swallow me up. Since then I have never felt the full agony of terror."

Decorum in that Victorian dining room had as grand a role as that of its cousin decoration. Both prevailed in the world of glassware as they do in many households a century later. But for those fortunate enough to have the work of Simon Pearce on the table today, not only might the burgundy be in a water goblet or the ale in a champagne flute, but the cut surfaces and fragile stems suggestive of a terrifying formality have been replaced by shapes and textures that proffer only comfort and tranquillity.

In his undecorated goblets one feels the very forces that give them their life: their history from molten sand to the pontil iron. The pontil mark that remains on the bottom of each piece of glass refers to the processes that are glorified rather than disguised in his work. Pearce makes handmade blown glass for everyday use. His clear uncut goblets and other vessels are, with the exception of certain pieces by Steuben, an innovation in our time, restoring to functional glassware the character it had before the eras of ornament and industrialization. As such, he is like Bernard Leach and other modern potters who restored to dinner service the unadorned (Continued on page 80)

## FINE WORK

essence of the raw materials out of which they were made.

Simon Pearce, who for the past five years has been working in Quechee, Vermont, arrived naturally at his craft. Philip Pearce, his father, started a pottery in the small seaside town of Shanagarry in County Cork, Ireland, when Simon was ten. This former bookseller-farmer was reviving a tradition of country earthenware that had died out almost a century earlier twenty miles away in the town of Youghal, where his clay came from. His work has the same rugged elegance as his son's glassware.

Daily living was cherished in the Pearce home. Simon recalls the special seasoning that went into the food—largely thanks to Simon's mother, Lucy Pearce, who was a friend of Elizabeth David's and had some of the same know-how as the great food writer. Every household object was carefully



chosen. "No matter how inexpensive or menial its purpose—even if it was the brush to sweep the floor—it was always beautiful to look at." Lucy Pearce was also remarkable for instilling in her children the sense that they could do whatever they wanted. Simon feels that the reason he learned to build machinery and a factory, to weld and do elec-

trical work, as well as make glass and run a business, is that when he was growing up, she encouraged him to finish everything he started or tried. "Generally when a child's bicycle breaks down, his parents take it to the shop and get it mended. The child immediately decides, 'I can't mend bicycles; that's up to the experts.' In the case of my brother Stephen and me, our mother would watch us fiddle with a bike, and when we got fed up and said we couldn't fix it, she would look at it with us. If it needed a new link, we would take the chain off, get on the bus alone to the large town ten miles away, and buy a new one. If we couldn't put it back on by ourselves, someone would do it *with* us, but never *for* us." Even before they were teenagers, materials and instruction were always available for making their own wheelbarrows and wagons or even building a slate roof. The result was that, unlike Bertrand Russell, the Pearces grew up with no terror whatsoever. As for decorum, the Pearce boys used to run across the dining-room (Continued on page 82)

A one-of-a-kind large-stemmed bowl, *above*, signed and dated in Pearce's 1803 Vermont mill, *below*, on the Ottauquechee River.



table while guests were dining there. (Their parents were friends of A. S. Neill, the founder of Summerhill, and championed some radical approaches to child rearing.)

When Simon first had the idea of making handmade functional glass a piece at a time, he needed every bit of the self-confidence his mother had encouraged. Dropping out of school at age fifteen to travel and become a potter, he went at age seventeen for two years to New Zealand to study with the British potter who had trained his father, and then spent a year in the Orient with Stephen, by then also a potter. On his return he decided to work in glass rather than clay. It was 1968, and he was 22 years old. For a year he wrote to the governments of glass-producing countries, to factory owners and experts on the subject. "Everyone said it was impossible. One of the great glass experts in England wrote me, 'You're absolutely out of your mind. Don't even attempt it. It can never be done; it's not like throwing a lump of mud on

a wheel.'" He decided to attend the Royal College of Art in London, but grew dissatisfied after a few months and switched to the Rietveld Academy in Amsterdam. He soon became convinced that rather than study he should go directly to a factory. He was prepared to do nothing but sweep floors if necessary; in fact at the Vennini factory near Venice all he did was make and serve a mixture of white wine and Coca-Cola to the glassmakers. Other stints in factories were with Leerdam in Holland; Kastrup Holmegaard in Denmark; and Boda, Orrefors, and Sandvick in Sweden. A breakthrough occurred in Scandinavia. The glassmakers "were open, frank, and giving." Not only did Pearce get a lot of practical training, he was also given the freedom to experiment a bit.

In 1971 he set up a glass workshop in Ireland, in Kilkenny northeast of Shanagarry. He used some of what he had learned abroad, particularly at Orrefors, but without the insistence on uniformity. He sought some of the quality

he loved in pub glasses of the type he had started to collect at age fifteen. There would be "no hand polishing, no engineers with micrometers." The designs were based neither on historical precedent nor on a desire for originality—only on an instinct for balance and proportion and what felt right overall. "The key is to get the right weight of collar, the right length of stem. Even if the dimensions are correct, if you put on a thin mean foot, it will be ugly and just won't work." There had to be a reason for each nuance of shape. "The base of a wineglass is wide so that it stands up properly. The shoulder of a pitcher needs a certain curve so that it will work. Otherwise one must resist. Swirls and dents put in just for their own sake are worthless." People have pointed to the influence of early Georgian forms, but Simon says that the designs are quite different, even though the feeling is similar. He does admit to a kinship, however, with the combination of sophistication and primitiveness—"the gentleness and softness, that trying not to be hard or rigid"—of traditional Irish design as it is manifest in early silver and the plasterwork of Dublin.

An audience emerged shortly after the Kilkenny workshop was established. Simon Pearce's work was soon exhibited, written about, and sold in Ireland, England, and America. In 1981 he moved with his American wife to Quechee, which is five miles from Woodstock. He bought a mill on the Ottauquechee River; it generates all of the electricity for the unique dual-chamber glass-melting furnace that he designed with the help of engineers from Corning. In the melting chamber he puts his formula of 70 percent pure silica sand from North Carolina, 15 percent lead, and nine other ingredients of which the mix is crucial. Because the lead content is 15 percent rather than 30, the product is technically half crystal. It is lead that brings down the melting temperature of sand and then holds the heat so that the material can be worked. In Pearce's glass there is no need for the same lead content as for full crystal, where an increased softness is necessary for cutting and polishing.

The method is based entirely on effectiveness, without reverence for tradition or the (Continued on page 84)

## STEAMBOATIN<sup>SM</sup>: THE ORIGINAL AMERICAN VACATION.

Over a century ago, more than 11,000 paddlewheelers plied the Mississippi and Ohio rivers. It was an era of discovery. An era of grandeur. The Steamboatin' Era.

Today you can glide back in time and rediscover America—Steamboatin' style aboard the legendary Delta Queen and the magnificent Mississippi Queen.

**FREE COLOR BROCHURE**  
1-800-543-1949

See your travel agent or call toll-free  
or write: The Delta Queen Steamboat Co.  
Dept. 2167 #30 Robin St. Wharf • New Orleans, LA 70130

Name \_\_\_\_\_  
Address \_\_\_\_\_  
City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_  
Telephone (area code \_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_

**DELTA QUEEN**  
STEAMBOAT CO.  
MISSISSIPPI QUEEN

idea of handwork except as they are necessary to attain certain qualities. The new furnace improves the material because the movement between the two chambers helps eliminate bubbles. The four-foot-long pipe with which Pearce, or the people he has trained, remove the glass from the second chamber is made of stainless steel because a traditional iron pipe might scale off into the furnace and turn everything green. After the centering—"one of the hardest things in glass-making, which is getting the weight in the right place"—most of the glass is blown into beechwood or graphite molds, which Simon considers indispensable to many forms even if "at the Royal College of Art, a mold was a dirty word." After it is blown, the object is transferred to the pontil iron for the finishing processes. Five people making high-quality commercial crystal can finish 120 stem glasses in an hour, whereas five workers for Simon Pearce complete 20, or with luck 22, per hour. Appealing as mechanically produced

glass may look in a shop window, Simon Pearce feels that once it is at home it has a cold, lifeless feeling, which he would no sooner settle for than his mother would have served canned vegetables.

At Pearce's two shops—in Quechee and on Bleeker Street in New York—

In 1981 Pearce moved to Quechee, Vermont, five miles from Woodstock, and bought a mill on the Ottauquechee River

one sees the perfectly balanced, sparkling results. In stock there are three styles of wineglasses, round water goblets, sherry glasses, tankards, highball

and whiskey glasses, carafes, jugs, bowls, pitchers, lamps, candlesticks in various sizes, and several designs of vases and other miscellaneous objects. Simon will not take commissions, but periodically introduces new items after he has tried them out for a while at home. Last fall the rather Oriental-looking, uterine-shaped vases displayed in the New York shop were particularly remarkable.

The boy who used to run on the table has now joined the world of catalogue sales and specialty stores. His wares can also be ordered by mail from Quechee or seen at such retail outlets as Henri Bendel, numerous jewelry and gift shops, and many branches of Pierre Deux, as well as in the two shops that bear the Pearce name. The pottery of Simon's father and brother is on view as well. Stephen Pearce's work combines the allure of Korean stoneware with the high spirits and inventiveness of Picasso's ceramics.

In Quechee, Simon also has a restaurant where the objects of all three are used and where he supervises the food preparation. In the mill viewers can actually watch the glass get blown by the ten or so glassblowers Simon has trained. In addition, one often encounters the designer himself. His appearance combines classic features and irregularity much as his work does; he has the sort of rugged good looks that could have done no harm to his self-assurance.

In his house nearby Simon Pearce makes beauty as inevitable in the lives of his three sons, all under the age of six, as it was in his childhood. They have used his glassware ever since they could pick it up. "People come in and say how awful it is that the children use expensive glasses. In fact, they've broken only one glass. That investment in my children's education is pretty cheap compared with what people are spending on education down the road at art college." If the common sense and adventurousness that Simon and Pia Pearce embody is carried on by their children, their education is off to a good start. The lucky devils can drink their milk from a brandy snifter, their juice from one of the new tulip wineglasses. One can only guess what Mr. Gladstone would have to say. □



## America's favorite to the rescue.

No other dictionary responds to so many calls for help—how to spell it, how to say it, how to use it. And it's the only dictionary to tell you how old a word is.

**A Genuine Merriam-Webster®**  
More people take our word for it.

© Merriam-Webster 1985