

## WILLIE STEVENSON, LEFTY KALEIDOSCOPE MAKER

Written by June Grayson

"Kaleidoscopes are a natural step in my growth as an artist and express wonderfully my sense of joy and beauty in the Creator and His Creation."

If you think a kaleidoscope is a simple toy destined only for a child's Christmas stocking, think again.

Kaleidoscopes are a burgeoning art form and a hot

collector's item. At least 10,000 committed Americans eagerly await each new scope created by the less than 100 nationally-known scope artists.

The kaleidoscope is a mirrored tube that lets the light shine through. It creates such beautiful geometric designs from any jumble of mundane objects that even the most jaded adult may gasp with delight.

David Brewster, a Scottish scientist esteemed for his research on polarized light, accidentally invented the kaleidoscope in 1816, thus precipitating the first wave of mirror madness.

Within a few months, aggressive entrepreneurs sold thousands of kaleidoscopes throughout Europe. During the Victorian Age, the kaleidoscope provided parlor entertainment for the whole family.

With the advent of radio and television, such parlor fancies disappeared and scopes were forgotten except as a child's toy.

The present scope revival has flourished ever since the Smithsonian Magazine published an article about kaleidoscopes in November, 1982. Six years later this second mirror mania shows no sign of abating. In fact, scopes are one of the

fastest-moving items at the wholesale trade shows.

And scopes now delight investors as well as collectors ever since an exquisite antique kaleidoscope sold for \$31,220 at Sotheby's in London, in February, 1987 - the highest known price ever paid for an antique scope.

Now there is even an organization, the Brewster Society, for scope collectors, with its own quarterly newsletter, News Scope.

But the scope revival began before 1982.

The children of the counter-culture movement of the 1960's, those dropouts from the Industrial Age, in their search for a better life, discovered that scope making could be a cottage industry that supplied their material needs while they objectified their artistic visions of the brave new world.

Willie Stevenson is just such an artist. A self-styled high-school clown, college goof-off, and counter-culture "bum", Stevenson is now a focused and mature artist who makes kaleidoscopes of uncommon power and charm.

"I think I must be totally right-brained," Stevenson says, "if that translates into creativity. I am up every morning at 5.30 when I have so many ideas for scopes and sculptures that I can't write them down fast enough. My scraps of paper spill

out of every drawer in our home. I never know how my ideas are going to be used. Somehow they eventually all fall into place."

Stevenson uses the 1 1/2 inch copper tubing used by plumbers for his nine inch long scopes. By a secret technique he has developed, he wields an acetylene torch as an airbrush to produce the striking custom designs that dazzle the eye. He protects the finished exteriors with a baked-on, high gloss finish.

Stevenson classifies his designs into four general patterns. Genesis represents the creative energy of lightning bolts. Landscape features the moon in the night sky. Sunrise captures the flame of the rising sun. Vortex swirls to a powerful center. These patterns represent his translation of the unseen and surreal to the real and visible world.

"I couldn't do it without my left-brained wife," Stevenson asserts. "She is the one who knows how to talk to our computer and take care of the business details. In fact, she first made me aware that I see things differently than other people - always in vivid three dimensions. Now I can give my creativity full rein and she knows what to do with it."

Alice Stevenson is no mean artist herself. She is in

charge of the mirrors and stained glass that form the interiors of their scopes. She "hand pulls" the finest stained glass into bizarre shapes by the use of heat, and floats assorted pieces in the "magic oil" in the object case so that the design keeps changing even after you stop turning the scope. "I lean to my favorite blues, greens, and lavenders - with an occasional red and yellow piece for contrast," explains Alice.

She uses only "first-surface" glass for the interior mirrors that create the reflections. On such mirrors the reflective surface is on the top, rather than underneath as in common household mirrors. She creates either a "three-mirrored" scope or their favorite, a "seven-pointed star" with a complicated mirror arrangement that produces a more intricate geometric design.

Willie did not plan to be a kaleidoscope maker. In fact, he calls himself an "artist blacksmith" who creates "kinetic sculptures". Kinetic sculptures seek to make movement itself an integral part of its designs. Many kinetic artists see a connection between such forms and the moving toys and coin-operated machines of previous ages.

In fact, if you like Rube Goldberg designs, you will love Willie Stevenson. He made his first kinetic sculpture in

college - a metal bud that unfolded into a flower and played music when a coin was inserted. Now he is working on a Five Senses kaleidoscope. Put a coin in it, and the music starts (hearing). The beat of the music produces vibrations (feeling).

Look through a tiny cherub's belly button in the scope tube for the kaleidoscopic images (sight). Then inside a little door will open and blow out a whiff of perfume (smell). And when the mechanism shuts off at the end, a little piece of candy rolls out into your hand (taste).

This is not a "production" scope, however. This is a one-of-a-kind creation for which avid collectors will willingly vie to buy at \$15,000 retail.

The Stevensons plan to continue making their present scopes for only a few more years. Thus they can secure their financial foundation and pay for their workrooms and home on a wooded acreage in the Blue Ridge mountains near Asheville, N.C.

"Our present work has established us as artists and we are already exhibited in prestigious galleries," Alice explains. "We hope that when Willie switches to his limited yearly editions of 500 kaleidoscopes, there will be many collectors receptive to his work who will be interested in paying the \$1,000 retail each such scope may cost."

Willie credits his mother, a beautiful Cree Indian, with teaching him to draw. He also remembers the fascination with which he watched his grandfather, a doctor, carve violins and "whirly-gigs" in his spare time.

"It's a wonder I ever learned anything in school, though," Willie says. "I went to little country one-room schools in New Hampshire during the depression and the teachers could never accept my left-handedness. They would come by my desk, take the pencil out of my hand and turn my paper around several times a day. No matter. I could never learn to do anything with my right hand."

Willie is proud to call himself a blacksmith. "When people hear blacksmith, they mistakenly think of someone who shoes horses. Wrong. That is a farrier. A blacksmith is an artist, no less than a painter. He shapes metals by heating them in a forge and then molding them."

But Willie credits his success to more than being a blacksmith. Call it luck. Or call it a miracle. The nice thing about miracles is that they sometimes do happen. Willie thinks that one happened to him.

"At one time I was so strung out on dope that my

life was a shambles. I knew that I was powerless to remake my life. But I asked God to turn my life around and I believe that He did," Willie says. "That is why we call our business Spirit Scopes."

"We don't talk to others about our beliefs. But we hope that we can share some of the joy and beauty we have known in our own lives with the other people we meet through the way we live and the products we make."

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