



Portraits  
Scott Mitchell Leen

# In the beginning, there was Dale

SOME OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST  
YACHTS HAVE HIS WORK AS  
THEIR STARRING PIECE.  
CHARLOTTE HOGARTH-JONES  
DISSECTS THE CHIHULY  
EFFECT WITH THE  
GODFATHER  
OF GLASS  
HIMSELF

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**T**ake a look inside some of the world's biggest and boldest yachts – 133-metre *Al Mirqab*, for example, built by Kusch at Peters Werft; the 100.9-metre *Atessa IV* by Hayashikane; or the 77-metre Turquoise yacht *GO* – and there's one thing they all have in common: a whirling, swirling, brightly coloured chandelier at their core, instantly recognisable as the work of Dale Chihuly.

Credited with single-handedly reviving the ancient craft of glass-blowing, the 78-year-old American is undoubtedly a big hit in the superyacht world – perhaps more so than any other artist. For designers, his pieces add drama and focus to a room. “We were introduced to Dale through the client who is a big fan and wanted a major chandelier feature running up the main staircase,” says Jonny Horsfield, of H2 Yacht Design, who penned the interior of *GO*. “He produced the most stunning piece of work that fitted into our interior design perfectly.”

“Dale and his team are masters of glass,” says Andrew Winch, of Winch Design, who worked with Chihuly on *Al Mirqab*. “He dreams in colour. The major project he did with us is still the largest and tallest artwork in glass we have created afloat – and it may still be the tallest and most complicated he's ever created.”

Owners, meanwhile, are often art lovers, with Chihuly pieces taking up pride of place in their homes. Even those with little interest in aesthetics spy a potential investment opportunity, given that no two Chihuly pieces are the same. Though at first the thought of bringing more than 300 fragile pieces of glass to sea might seem foolhardy, his creations – be they chandeliers, sculptures, or even painted glass windows – continue to be more in demand than ever.

Perhaps it's not surprising that Chihuly's works have found a natural home at sea. “I grew up on the water in Tacoma [in Washington State], and as a little kid my mother would take me on beach walks and I'd collect little bits of coloured glass that floated,” he reminisces. “I've got fond memories of that time.” As a child, he never dreamed of becoming an artist. “Maybe a bus driver,” he ventures, “but my dad was a union organiser and a butcher, so that's the sort of work

## “AS A KID MY MOTHER WOULD TAKE ME ON BEACH WALKS... I'D COLLECT BITS OF COLOURED GLASS THAT FLOATED”



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Top: the Monet Pool Tower and Fiori glass sculpture in Denver. Top left: Chihuly's Sol de Citrón in The New York Botanical Garden. Above left: Macchia at Fairchild Tropical Botanic Garden in Florida. Above: part of his London exhibition in 2013



Above: master glass-blower James Mongrain with Dale Chihuly at the Boathouse. Below: Glasshouse Sculpture at Chihuly Garden and Glass, Seattle



I was exposed to.” Nevertheless, his mother, Viola, was a passionate gardener, and her love of nature may well have influenced the organic, sprawling forms inherent in much of his work.

At the University of Wisconsin, Chihuly rented “a little cabin, right on the lake”, while at the Rhode Island School of Design he snapped up a boathouse on the water at Pawtuxet Village, near Providence, “as soon as [I] could afford it”. Today, his studio is the imposing Boathouse on Lake Union, Seattle, from which he admires pleasure and working vessels, some of which remind him of time he spent working on a fishing boat in Alaska. “I've always wanted to be on the water,” he enthuses. Look closely at some of his pieces and you can spot jellyfish-like sprawling tentacles, rolling folds of glass resembling crashing waves and sea foam, shades of aqua and blue, and furled-up shells from his *Seaforms* series.

But there's more to the world-dominating Chihuly empire than artistic talent. Acquiring a Chihuly is a serious undertaking and there's no doubt that his slick, 90-strong team of engineers, architects and other professionals has helped his pieces transition from land to sea. “We always over-engineer – we're known for that,” explains Keri

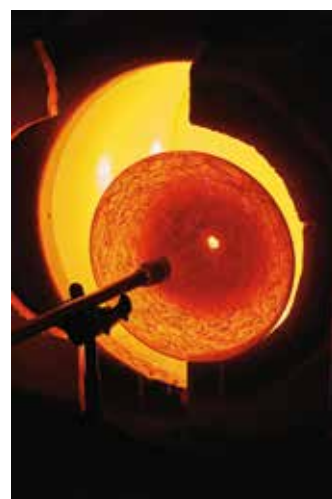


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Right: Mongrain and Chihuly. Below: the Merletto Basket is created. Below right: Rio delle Torressele Chandelier, Venice, 1996



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Schroeder, project manager at Chihuly Studio. From the very beginning of a commission, the in-house team has to work with yacht builders and designers, giving estimated weights and advising on structural support and how the piece should be suspended. “There are times when we are designing brand-new hardware specifically for that piece and that location, so clients are getting custom armature and hardware as well as the artwork,” she explains. Even the lighting, which is always external to the pieces, is gone through in rigorous detail. “It’s really critical to the success of the artwork,” she explains, “...and we’re often the very last thing to go into the yacht prior to sea trials.” There haven’t been any accidents yet...

It’s a far cry from the chaos of a pivotal moment of Chihuly’s career back in 1995 – the *Chihuly over Venice* project. “There are two projects that mean a great deal to me, and that’s one of them,” he says. “It was just an idea I had about hanging chandeliers over the canals of Venice, but I never really got written permission to do it. I went back to the councillor five times, but nothing, and in the end it was really nerve-racking because anyone – unions, the *gondolieri*, the motor taxis, the fire department – could have stopped me at any time.” The show was a resounding success, propelling the artist into the limelight, and the original chandelier can now be found on board *Attesa IV*. “I never really knew how much the Venetian glass-blowers loved, or hated it,” he says.

From that point on he garnered a rapidly growing array of fans worldwide. For yacht owners who have commissioned their own Chihuly pieces, however, the “big reveal” doesn’t happen on board –

instead, the first time patrons see their piece is at the studio in Seattle, where it’s assembled in full, suspended exactly as it would be, in a set built to mimic the space it will hang in and with lighting that replicates the same onboard conditions. Then it’s taken down piece by piece, before being reassembled again on the boat, wherever it may be. “Often, [the first viewing] is quite emotional,” says Schroeder. “Usually, it’s been a real labour of love for everyone for a year or a year plus, and people can feel quite blown away by the result.” Tears are common, she says.

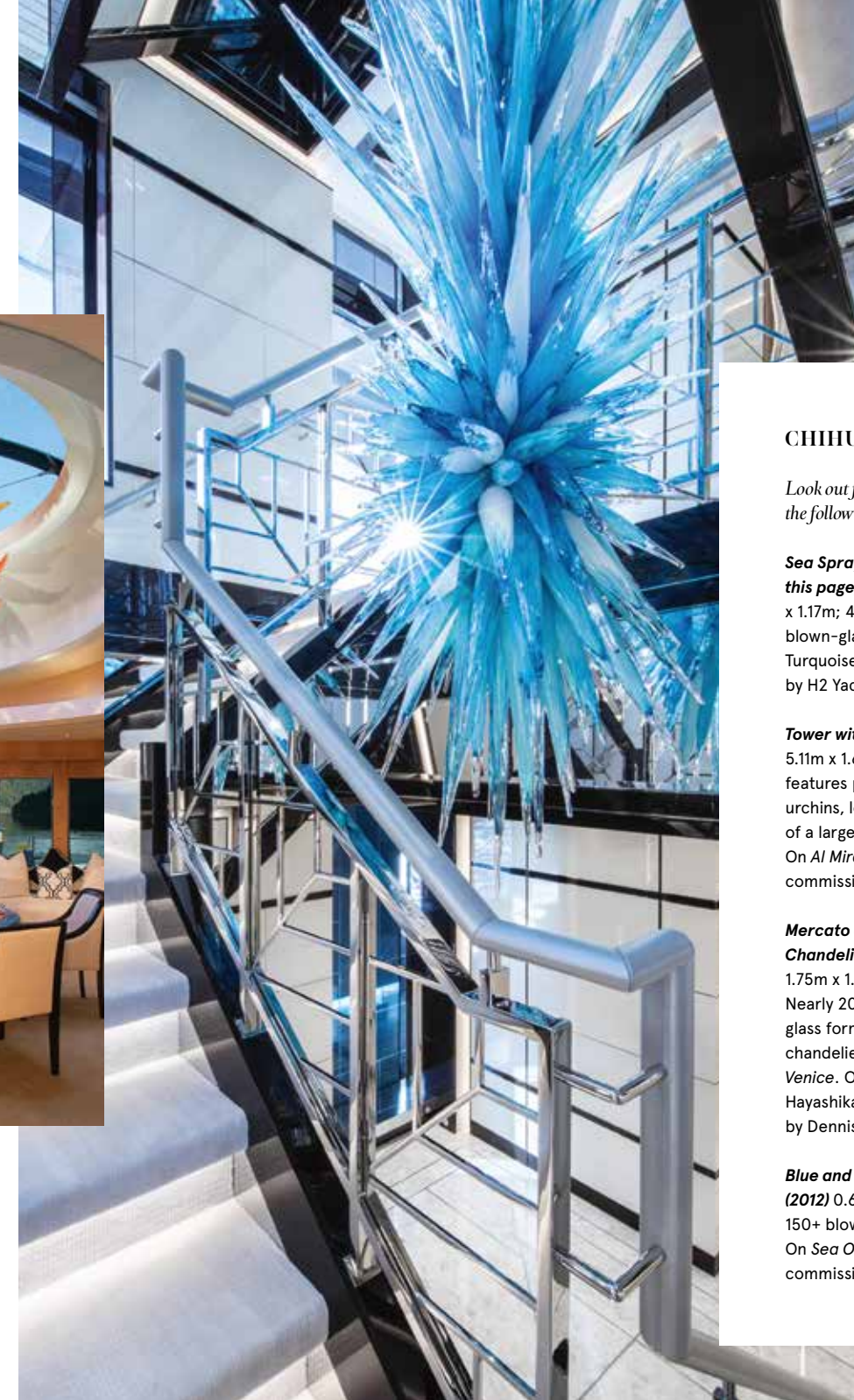
Then it’s off to shipyards everywhere – from Germany and Turkey to Kuwait – for the second installation, and there are often complex factors to take into account, depending on where in the world the client is based – feng shui is a common subject.

Of course, there are pieces that never leave the studio. “My approach to glass is organic: I rely on fire, breath, gravity and centrifugal force to create my work, rather than striving for asymmetry or perfection,” Chihuly says. “I’ll start off with an idea, and then as I work it evolves

**“I WAS TOLD THAT I SHOULD QUIT – EVEN THOUGH I DIDN’T HAVE ANY MONEY – BUT I WASN’T TERRIFIED”**



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## CHIHULY AT SEA

Look out for pieces on the following yachts:

**Sea Spray Chandelier (2017, this page, left)** 5.59m x 1.19m x 1.17m; 400+ individual blown-glass forms. On *GO* by Turquoise Yachts, commissioned by H2 Yacht Design.

**Tower with Sealife (2008)** 5.11m x 1.68m x 1.45m; tower features putti of starfish and urchins, located in the middle of a large spiral staircase. On *Al Mirqab* by Kusch Yachts, commissioned by Winch Design.

**Mercato del Pesce di Rialto Chandelier (1996, far left)** 1.75m x 1.83m x 1.83m; Nearly 200 individual blown-glass forms, an original chandelier from *Chihuly Over Venice*. On *Attesa IV* by Hayashikane, commissioned by Dennis Washington.

**Blue and Gold Chandelier (2012)** 0.61m x 1.24m x 1.24m; 150+ blown-glass forms. On *Sea Owl* by Feadship, commissioned by Winch Design.

or changes. Then, I have to sit with things and decide whether I have the beginnings of a new series here – or whether I should chuck it.” Given that one of his Venetian vases went for \$52,000 (£40,200) at Christie’s in 2018, perhaps it’s strange to think of the many potential masterpieces that never made it past the bin.

Chihuly is clearly uncomfortable discussing his own success, and yet it’s inescapable. It’s estimated that the Pacific Northwest is home to more glass studios and artists than the famous Venetian island of Murano. “That has a direct relationship to Chihuly – he’s a real advocate for the art itself, and the education and the promotion of it within the community,” says Danielle Zarrella, communications manager at the studio. Chihuly co-founded Hilltop Artists, which

offers young people technical skills and helps build confidence with its tuition-free glass art programmes. And there’s the Pilchuck Glass School, where Chihuly first set up himself. “I was working as a young professor at the Rhode Island School of Design, and I was trying to decide whether to keep working or go back to Seattle,” he recalls. “I was told that I should go ahead and quit – even though I didn’t really have any money – but I was ready for it and I wasn’t terrified. It was good advice; I never regretted it.” He was able to use the Pilchuck’s furnaces that winter and the rest, as they say, is history.

Chihuly’s employees, both in and out of the workshop, are fiercely loyal to him, and there’s a sense that those involved feel honoured to be there. Many have worked for him for more than 20 years. “I’ve been



around eight years, and I still feel like a newbie!” laughs Schroeder, and for the artisans, it’s a platform where they can experiment and share ideas with other artists. “I’ve had a lot of great glass-blowers work with me over the years, and they sort of know when the right time is to break away,” says Chihuly. “I’m very proud that so many of them have done so well, and I keep in touch with all of them, although it’s always bittersweet when they leave.”

Though demand is high, production is slow. There’s often a good year of liaising between design teams and the Chihuly Studio before a concept even makes it off the drawing board, and there’s a limit to how much Chihuly wants to make, too. “Because of my exhibition schedule, there’s only so many commissions I can commit to,” he explains, “and the project has to be the right fit.”

It’s clear, though, that he finds the creative process invigorating. “Lately I get the most joy out of painting in my studio, or drawing plans for projects that I want to pursue,” he says, “exploring concepts I haven’t done... yet.”

And so, for now, pieces continue to emerge, in yachts and houses, parks and art galleries. I ask him if he plans to retire. “Well I’m 78 and I’m still working – the ideas are still coming up – and I’m involved in a lot of different projects,” he says. “But it does enter my mind. How will I stop? And when?” ■

**“THERE’S ONLY SO MANY COMMISSIONS I CAN COMMIT TO; THE PROJECT HAS TO BE THE RIGHT FIT”**



*Top: working on a Glass on Glass painting. Above: the 1,000-piece-plus Colorado. Left: his paint-splattered shoes*



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