

Dale Chihuly, Artist in Glass, Prepares to Redecorate Venice

By Roderick Conway Morris, International Herald Tribune

Aug. 24, 1996

Dale Chihuly, the world's most flamboyant, prolific and high-earning glass artist is, as it were, about to come home. While an obscure, aspiring young glassblower he spent the winter of 1968-69 on a Fulbright fellowship as an unpaid helper at the Venini factory on Murano. The experience changed the course of his career.

Early this September he returns to the lagoon with a million-dollar project, "Chihuly Over Venice," in which he plans to hang a dozen of the massive glass sculptures he calls "Chandeliers" outdoors in various parts of the city.

"At the time I came to Venice all the glass artists in the States worked by themselves," said Chihuly, who was in Venice recently to reconnoiter locations.

"When I came over here I realized that if you worked with half a dozen or more people you could achieve things you could never do alone. When I returned to the States in 1969 I was teaching at the Rhode Island School of Design and I started working with my students as a team. And from that point on I've worked with a group, and now have a really big team and access to the best glassblowers in America and Europe too, so I can make whatever I want with whatever kind of team I want to put together."

Chihuly's magic formula by no means brought him instant success. "I didn't really sell any glass until 1976, after working at it for about 15 years," he said. "But by 1980 the sales of my glass matched my income as a professor and I decided to go

out on my own. I'd started the Pilchuk Glass School in Seattle in 1971, so I was going there every summer anyway, and after a couple of years I could afford to build a small studio there for myself."

Chihuly now lives and works in a converted Seattle marine yard called the Boathouse and employs more than 70 people. Scores of museums across America and beyond have bought Chihulys, and hardly a month passes without a show of his work opening in a museum or gallery somewhere in the world. Consequently, he also now employs a sizable team solely to carry out their design and installation.

The artist was born in 1941 in Tacoma, Washington, of Swedish and Czechoslovak stock. A burly, exuberant man with a mop of curly brown hair, he wears a patch over one eye, which gives him a piratical, mischievously Mephistophelian air, enhanced by a slightly manic chuckle. The patch is the legacy of a car smash in England 20 years ago in which he lost an eye when he was hurled through the windscreen. This and his other injuries have meant that he has found it difficult to blow glass himself since then.

"Luckily, I was already used to working with a team, so I was able to say to them: 'Well, you're going to have to do what I was doing from now on,'" said Chihuly.

Ever restless, Chihuly frequently changes artistic form and direction. Earlier series have taken up different themes, from his rococo "Venetians" to the exotic, flowery "Persians" and shell-like "Seaforms." He has also done a line in giant glass balls he terms "Floats."

The abiding feature of all his pieces is their dazzling color — from tomato reds and lime greens to sumptuous purples and indigo blues. "I can't understand it when people say they don't like a particular color," said Chihuly, in almost outraged tones. "How on earth can you not like a color?"

Meanwhile, his works have also been getting larger.

"I made my first Chandelier in 1992," he said. "It was a kind of fluke really. I did it for a show at the Seattle Art Museum. I put two teams onto it and in a few days we blew about 500 pieces of glass and put them together. It was yellow and when we

put it up it was 12 feet high and must have weighed 1,000 pounds. And it worked — above all I think because of the massive effect of the color.

"After that I kept making them and showing them but nobody ever bought one. I couldn't understand why, because I thought they looked great in big spaces. But, you know as an artist you get excited about something and you don't really care what people think. Finally, I did think: Gee, I wonder if I can keep on doing this? Because by that time I had hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in Chandeliers. Then, fortunately, the spell was broken and suddenly people did start buying them."

The parts for the "Chihuly Over Venice" pieces have been blown over the last year, produced in several different countries by teams composed of Chihuly's own collaborators and local glass artists. The first session was done in Finland at a small factory outside Helsinki, and the results temporarily installed there.

"When we arrived we started blowing right away for seven days straight," Chihuly said. "We made about 2,000 pieces of glass and hung the Chandeliers around the village. There was only about three hours' darkness a night so we worked nearly all the time. A lot of the villagers got involved and we ending up schlepping the glass all over the place. We'd hang it from a bridge, then toss it in the river so that it could float downstream and then the villagers would gather it with their rowboats and hand to it up to our team so they could hang it in a tree or something. They'd never seen anything like it before — it was wild!"

The Chihuly circus then went on to the Waterford Crystal factory in southern Ireland — where the pieces they made with the Irish blowers were hung at Lisemore Castle — and later on to Mexico. The final components are to be blown in Murano with some of Chihuly's old Venetian friends and colleagues.

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CHIHULY will oversee the installation of his works over the canals and in the gardens and courtyards of Venice in time for the city's first Biennale of Glass, which opens Sept. 12.

Looking forward with evident glee to "Chihuly Over Venice," the artist said, "I've been dreaming of this project for years, and I think the Chandeliers are a kind of culmination of the whole teamworking method."

The part exhibition, part happening clearly also appeals to Chihuly's anarchic tendencies.

"Glass-blowing remains one of the most secretive of all the arts and crafts," he said. "I'm really keen to break down this obsession with secrecy — and where better than Venice, the most secretive place of all? Let's face it, this attitude is really not much use to anyone anymore. Because all the secrets are out!"

A version of this article appears in print on in The International Herald Tribune