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New Dale Chihuly artworks in Venice 30 years after ‘Chihuly Over Venice’

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Dale Chihuly's "Gold Tower," a 2025 work that reaches 31 feet high, was installed at Palazzo Cavalli-Franchetti in Venice this spring as part of "CHIHULY: Venice 2026." (Nathaniel Willson)

By [Jas Keimig](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

In a scene from the 1998 documentary “Chihuly Over Venice,” Seattle glass artist Dale Chihuly sits in an airy alleyway in Venice, Italy. He looks exhausted, but is, clearly, triumphant.

After two years of planning and working in hotshops around the globe, Chihuly and his team installed over a dozen monumental glass chandeliers all over Venice. His signature sculptures made of colorful, iridescent bull kelp-like forms hung in unexpected sites. He sent colorful, onion-shaped glass orbs drifting down the interconnected canals of the ancient city, where the Tacoma-born artist learned the art of glassblowing from master craftspeople. Clearly, it was a huge moment for him.

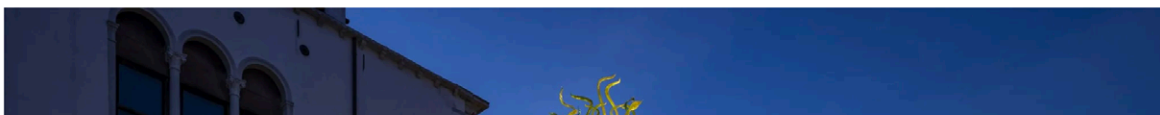
“I don’t know how I feel exactly, I’m still kind of shellshocked,” said the then-55-year-old Chihuly, who, by that time in 1996, had garnered global critical acclaim for his contributions to glass. “I just don’t quite know what we did ... I do know that the Italians, they come up to you and say, ‘complimente, complimente’ — congratulations. But of course, the ones that don’t like it aren’t going to tell you they don’t like it!”



Dale Chihuly's "Ponti Duodo e Barbarigo Chandelier," part of the "Chihuly Over Venice" 1996 exhibition. (Russell Johnson)

Cut to 30 years later, and Chihuly and his studio are, once again, preparing to exhibit his glass sculptures in the City of Canals. "[CHIHULY: Venice 2026](#)" is a celebration of 30 years since "[Chihuly Over Venice](#)" saw his glass creations installed across the Italian city.

To mark the occasion, three glass chandelier sculptures — ranging from 16 to 31 feet in length — have been installed along Venice's Grand Canal, on view from the Ponte dell'Accademia until November. Erected in time for the [Venice Biennale](#) giant art exhibition starting next month, the outdoor chandeliers will be accompanied by an archival center, opening May 5, at Istituto Veneto di Scienze, Lettere ed Arti, where visitors will have a chance to peek at behind-the-scenes documentation of the original project, replete with photos and reams of faxes (Chihuly's preferred mode of communication).





Dale Chihuly's "Blue and Green Tower," a 2025 work, measures 26½ x 10 x 10 feet. Part of the "CHIHULY: Venice 2026" exhibition, it was installed at Palazzo Balbi-Valier Sammartini in Venice this spring. (Nathaniel Willson)

"It's one of my great memories," said Chihuly, now 84, in an interview this month at The Boathouse, his Lake Union studio. "I've traveled a lot and nothing ever inspired me as much as Venice. To be able to go back again and do a project — I can't wait. I'm very excited about it."

City of inspiration

The new outdoor exhibition comes nearly 60 years after Chihuly first stepped foot in Venice in 1968 as a Fulbright scholar to study glassblowing at the famed Venini factory on Murano island. Twenty-eight years later, "Chihuly Over Venice" found the famed glass artist at the apex of his career, experimenting with form, color and scale after bringing centuries-old Venetian glassblowing techniques to America.





Dale Chihuly and Emmanuel Aguilera-Santos in the hotshop at The Boathouse, Chihuly's Lake Union studio, in 2024. (Nathaniel Willson)

Planning for his latest exhibition in the city that inspires him started over 2 ½ years ago.

“Dale is not one to look back, but I felt very strongly that this 30th moment — especially because that is when we first started to be together and work together — was really an important moment to mark,” said Leslie Jackson Chihuly, who is married to Chihuly and is president and CEO of Chihuly Studio. “Venice will always be part of Dale and part of his legacy.”



Rick Holland and Leslie Jackson Chihuly review “Gold Tower” at a Chihuly Studio location in Seattle in 2025. (Nathaniel Willson)

Jackson Chihuly and Britt Cornett, Chihuly Studio director of exhibitions, hit the streets of Venice, walking alongside the city’s various waterways to determine where they could maximize impact. They settled on three concentrated sites (Palazzos Cavalli-Franchetti, Balbi-Valier Sammartini and Querini alla Carità) visible from the Ponte dell’Accademia, a central thruway over the Grand Canal, opting for new spots rather than rehashing beat for beat what they did three decades ago.

“It was important not to try to emulate what happened in ’95 and ’96 — that had its own moment — but to celebrate it and, in a way, look at how Dale’s career has progressed in the 30 years since,” said Cornett. “So, as with much of his work, he’s continued to push scale.”

And he went huge. In designing the pieces for this exhibition, Chihuly drew inspiration from the natural world, particularly the water and colors of the Pacific Northwest. Over the course of five months, Chihuly’s team of eight glassblowers worked on crafting the forms for three sculptures. They then handed off the process to his studio team, who built the chandeliers before the pieces were shipped to Venice in mid-January. (Chihuly hasn’t blown glass since the late 1970s when a car accident left him blind in one eye, but he remains involved with the planning of his projects and comes to the studio every day.)



📍 Dale Chihuly's "Gold Tower," left, which measures 31 x 10½ x 10½ feet, and "Blue and Green Tower," right, which measures 26½ x 10 x 10 feet, were installed this spring as part of "CHIHULY: Venice 2026." (Nathaniel Willson)



Of the three chandeliers in "CHIHULY: Venice 2026," the largest is "Gold Tower," which clocks in at just over 31 feet high and consists of more than 1,600 handblown golden glass forms. The "Blue and Green Tower" is nearly 27 feet high, 10 feet wide, and composed of close to 1,400 handblown elements.

And, finally, the "End of the Day Chandelier" is the smallest of the bunch at 16 feet tall, made of around 350 leftover forms found lying around the studio. The title comes from a glassblowing term of the same name, which references a work made of odds and ends not used in other sculptures that have been repurposed and consolidated into a single piece. In that way, it serves as a sort of portrait of a moment in time.



1 of 2 | Rick Holland builds the "End of the Day Chandelier" at a Chihuly Studio location in Seattle in 2025. (Nathaniel Willson)

"I found that a very interesting connection point to the project in '96," said Suzanne Geiss, curator of Chihuly's Istituto Veneto presentation in Venice. "This idea that all these different things that might have been touched over a long period of time get reused and made into something."

All three sculptures were sent in four 40-foot containers that were shipped off from Seattle in mid-January and arrived in Genoa in March. The works were then driven to Venice via truck and, over two weeks in March and April, reassembled and installed along the Grand Canal. While hauling tons of glass is nerve-wracking, Cornett says the Chihuly team has it down to a science. The biggest piece of advice Venetians have relayed about working close to the canal?

"Don't fall in," she said.

Venice as a canvas

While "CHIHULY: Venice 2026" is a measured, concentrated affair, the 1996 exhibition it's honoring was a much more sprawling effort. It came from Chihuly's idea to turn the city of Venice into a canvas, connecting master glassblowers from around the world. From 1995 to 1996, Chihuly and his team worked with local artisans in hotshops in Finland, Ireland, Mexico and Italy to craft 14 ornate chandeliers, composed of Chihuly's characteristic tubular, grape-like glass forms. Those monumental pieces were then erected over canals, under bridges and in courtyards across Venice in September 1996.

"Dale was looking at Venice as a canvas for contemporary art before anybody was doing that," said Jackson Chihuly. "Because 20 years ago, that wasn't

was doing that," said Jackson Chihuly. "Because 30 years ago, that wasn't happening. Now every part of Venice is rent by the square centimeter."

Back then, the project was a lot more run-and-gun, said Jackson Chihuly. Entirely self-funded, Chihuly didn't receive written, explicit permission to install "Chihuly Over Venice"; rather, they had to go on verbal agreements he and his team made with the city's ministry of culture. Chihuly and his team were more interested in experimentation, putting these enormous glass sculptures in unexpected public settings. Sometimes, that involved sweet-talking Venetians into loaning their private residences in service of the vision.



📍 Dale Chihuly's "Palazzo di Loredana Balboni Chandelier," left, and "Campiello Barbaro Chandelier," right, were part of the "Chihuly Over Venice" 1996 exhibition. (Russell Johnson)





📍 Dale Chihuly's "Campiello Remer Chandelier," left, and "Chiostro di Sant'Apollonia Chandelier," right, were part of the "Chihuly Over Venice" 1996 exhibition. (Russell Johnson)

"I saw a balcony from the Grand Canal, and I was with the guy that was showing us around Venice, helping find locations," said Chihuly of one such interaction. "He said, 'Well, Mrs. Balboni owns that balcony, and maybe I can arrange for you to meet her,' which he did, and I went back the next day.

"The first thing that I saw when we opened the door was a huge Francis Bacon painting. Then she let me look at the balcony. And she had some prosecco and cookies out. I didn't want to come right out and ask her if I could use the balcony, but finally, she said, 'I know you want to use the balcony,'" Chihuly continued, with a chuckle. "And she said, 'I'll let you use the balcony — if you decorate my lawn party.'"

Though they didn't have to hassle Venetians for use of their balconies for "CHIHULY: Venice 2026," this new project reflects the 60-year arc of Chihuly's career while also meditating on how far the contemporary studio glass movement has come. For that, Chihuly recalled a bit of advice a friend gave him in 1968 as he boarded the ship in New York that would take him to Venice for the first time.

"He said, 'The first thing you do when you get to Venice is shave off that beard. The second thing you do is get a new sport coat. Thirdly, get a pair of wraparound shades,'" said Chihuly. "And don't look back."

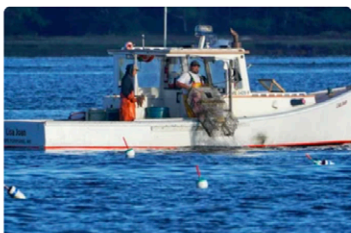
Jas Keimig: is an arts writer based in Seattle. Their work has appeared in *The Stranger*, the *South Seattle Emerald*, *Cascade PBS* and beyond.

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