

Dale Chihuly, a Northwest Innovator

I stand on the floor gazing up at a glass chandelier above my head. Like an exploding firework, it is fiery red at the center, fading to transparent white at the tips. This is a chandelier in Dale Chihuly's Icicle series, and shows how the original use of color, light, and form in his glass art has influenced people around the world. He founded the Pilchuck Glass School, which has influenced glass blowers young and old. His glass art has been displayed around the world. Before Chihuly, glass was mostly functional. It was considered industrial, and was used for window panes and water glasses. With his brilliant colors, use of light, and enormous pieces, Chihuly transformed glass from a craft to an art. This is why I think Chihuly is the most significant glass artist since Tiffany.

Chihuly's use of color, light, and form in his glass is innovative. He likes the effects of passing light through opaque glass. Chihuly even said, "Glass is magical – it transmits light and color in a special way" (Anonymous[1], 2008). By placing intense colors next to each other Chihuly creates optical mixing, so when you see a piece from far away the colors seem different than when they are seen up close. Chihuly also said "I want to create forms and colors no one has ever made before" (Anonymous[2], 2008). In addition to color and light, his flower-like glass gives the impression of life and movement. His organic shapes are inspired by ocean life forms such as sea shells, sea urchins, jelly fish, and anemones.

Chihuly began his art career when he was young. He was born in 1941, in Tacoma, Washington. While studying interior design at the University of Washington, he became interested in glass. He continued blowing glass at the University of Wisconsin – Madison and

Rhode Island School of Design. Then, in 1976, tragedy struck Chihuly when he lost the use of his left eye in a head-on car crash. Since he had only one eye, he lost his depth perception. So, he stopped blowing glass. Instead, he worked with a team. He would design the glass and paint what he wanted it to look like. Because he was working with a team, he did not have to blow all the glass himself, so he could make bigger pieces which became popular around the world.

When Chihuly began his huge Venice project in 1995, he had no idea what a big hit it would be. Chihuly and his team blew glass and had small outdoor installations in Finland, Ireland, and Mexico in preparation for the Venice project. Then, they packed up twelve thousand pieces of glass and shipped them to Venice, where they arrived in the summer of 1996. Fourteen chandeliers varied from two to thirty feet tall, and contained from thirty to two thousand eight hundred hand-blown pieces (Warmus, 2002). There was a particularly popular piece in the fish market. It was orange and had lots of long tentacles, and their brilliant orange color contrasted with the dark brown ceiling. Glass bulbs floated in the canals of Venice. Since there were no maps nobody knew where the glass pieces were, but people were so excited they wandered around trying to find them. People in four different countries were dazzled by the color, light, and form of Chihuly's glass, so private collectors and museums were inspired to buy his pieces.

Though his Venice project may have been a big hit, his Jerusalem installation was even bigger. Chihuly's exhibit "Chihuly in the Light of Jerusalem 2000" was one of his biggest hits yet. Over one million people came! His center piece, "Crystal Mountain," was a forty-four foot high cone-shaped metal frame covered in pink glass chunks which looked exquisite at sunset.

Another spectacular piece was “Blue Tower”, which was a forty-eight foot high metal pole covered in glass arms. One of the most beautiful things about the “Blue Tower” was its color. At the top it was a dark blue, and as you went downwards the color became paler and paler until at the bottom it was almost white.

Some people who were amazed by the color, light, and form of Chihuly glass have come from around the world to go to the Pilchuck School, which was founded by Chihuly in Stanwood, Washington, in 1971. It has classes for people at all levels and succeeds because class sizes are small. Teachers can pay attention to individual students so even beginners can succeed. It has become the leading glass school and an international center for glass art.

Chihuly is one of the most innovative and influential glass blowing artists. He founded the Pilchuck Glass School which has had an international influence. Not only that, but he transformed glassblowing from a craft to an art. He has had exhibitions around the world, from Leavenworth to Mexico, from Venice to Jerusalem, and from Ireland to Tacoma. I conclude that Chihuly is the Tiffany of our age. Not only the glass artists who have seen his glass, but all glass artists owe a great debt to Dale Chihuly for making glass art so popular.

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