

Chihuly Glass Featured at BYU MOA
by Rosemarie Howard
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What do Native American woven baskets and hand-blown glass have in common? Not much, unless you are glass artist, Dale Chihuly. During a visit to the Washington State Historical Museum in 1977 Chihuly saw the woven baskets of the Northwest Native Americans. "I was struck by the grace of their slumped, sagging forms," recalls Chihuly. "I wanted to capture this grace in glass."

Taken with how the baskets sagged under their own weight, as glass does when being blown, he began to explore the form as it could be created on a blowpipe, focusing on process and chance.

The breathtaking results of this inspiration can be seen in the nearly 50 examples of glass works of art displayed in the "Chihuly Baskets" exhibit, which opened April 13 at the BYU Museum of Art.

"Anxious objects" was the term Campbell Gray, director of the MOA applied to these stunning pieces of art. He expanded on his comment, saying, "Anxious care must be taken to avoid destroying the fragile, easily broken shapes of glass; at the same time, they seductively draw you to them--creating the anxiety of wanting to touch something you shouldn't."

Chihuly's early "baskets" were smaller and effort was made to incorporate complex surface patterns on earth-toned glass so they would resemble the fiber baskets. In his later efforts with this style, the abstract quality of the shapes, rather than their cultural references, now dominates. Critic Hilton Kramer wrote in the New York Observer of December 13, 1993, that the glass pieces "are among the most original abstract sculptures on the current scene, and the only sculpture, I think, that succeeds in making vivid color and the transparency of its masses absolutely integral to the experience of sculpture itself."

Born in Tacoma, Washington to George Chihuly and Viola Magnuson Chihuly, on September 20, 1941, Chihuly was the youngest of two sons. His father, who suffered a fatal heart attack in 1958, was a butcher and a union organizer; his mother is a homemaker and avid gardner. After graduating from the Stadium High School in Tacoma, Chihuly enrolled in the College of Puget Sound. He later transferred to the University of Washington in Seattle to study interior design and architecture. It is during this period of time that he learned to melt and fuse glass in his basement studio.

Chihuly has traveled the world, studying the craft of glass blowing, raising it to an art form. He was the first American glass blower to work in the prestigious Venini Fabbrica on the island of Murano.

In 1976 an auto accident cost him his sight in one eye, preventing him from working as a gaffer. Although he no longer personally blows the amazing glass forms for which he is known, he works very closely with his staff to create these remarkable three dimensional forms from his two dimensional renderings.

His large Seattle studio is run like an old world artist's workshop, adapting a model of teamwork that the artist observed during a Fulbright Fellowship studying at the

Venetian glass blowing studio on the island of Murano. Scores of apprentices and senior glass artists work under “master Chihuly’s” close supervision.

Chihuly’s work is included in more than 170 museum collections around the world. The Pilchuck Glass School north of Seattle, which he co-founded, is a major international center for glass art training. He has received many awards, including honorary doctorates from the University of Puget Sound, the Rhode Island School of Design and the California College of Arts and Crafts. He received two fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the American Council for the Arts Visual Artist’s Award, and the Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award. In 1992 he was named the first National Living Treasure in the United States.

The Chihuly Baskets exhibit will continue at the BYU Museum of Art through September 16, 2000 and is free to the public. The museum is located on the campus of Brigham Young University on North Campus Drive and is open Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 6 p.m., with hours extended to 9 p.m. on Monday and Thursday; Saturday hours are 12 a.m. to 5 p.m. The museum is closed on Sunday.