

Saint Mary's College Museum of Art Mounts Mesmerizing Chihuly Display

By Laurie Snyder



May Green Spotted Venetian with Two Putti, 1991. On loan from the George R. Stroemple Collection, A Stroemple/Stirek Collaboration.

Photo Ohlen Alexander

There are artists and then there are *artists*. Dale Chihuly is the latter – the kind of innovator whose work stops you in your gallery browsing tracks and leaves you standing nonplussed at curious combinations of texture and tone. Lauded as “bold, complex, fiercely colorful work” by Gerald W. R. Ward, the Katherine Lane Weems Senior Curator of American Decorative Arts and Sculpture, Art of the Americas, at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, Chihuly’s captivating creations are currently on display at the Saint Mary’s College Museum of Art.

On loan from the George R. Stroemple Collection, the exhibit includes Chihuly’s Putti Venetians, and “15 capacious multi-colored vessels, each with hot-formed figurative sculptures of putti and mythological creatures in the design,” says Heidi Donner, manager of education and public information for SMC’s museum. Visitors have already returned two and three times, she says, to also marvel at 42 Piccolo Venetians,

“smaller but no less spirited vessels based on traditional Venetian themes” and three perfume bottle-inspired vessels surmounted by Signoretto sculptures.

Born in Tacoma, Wash., in 1941, Chihuly was the son of a butcher-union organizer father and a mother who adored gardens. He first learned to melt and fuse glass in 1961 while studying interior design and architecture at the University of Washington, and by 1964 was being heralded for his groundbreaking weaving of glass with fiber. After completing his Master’s in Sculpture at the University of Wisconsin, he headed for the Rhode Island School of Design where environmental explorations with argon, neon and blown glass earned him a Fulbright Fellowship. That led to an invitation to work on the island of Murano, home to the most elegant and delicate glasswork the world has ever known.

In 1968, Chihuly became the first American glassblower ever to work in the renowned Venini factory there.

Three years later, he co-founded the Pilchuck Glass School in Seattle. His work, admired by Britain’s Queen Elizabeth, has been displayed in hundreds of staid museums worldwide and has also been prominently featured at the Bellagio in Las Vegas.

As might be expected of one with such a heavily mile-stoned career, Chihuly has also had his moments of controversy. His settling of a 2006 lawsuit against a former glassblower employee for copyright and trademark infringement became fodder for American news outlets. The suit sparked a national debate over the gray and not-so-gray lines between reverential imitation and outright theft – and, as observed by the St. Petersburg Times, the point at which a respected, established artist might be seen as taking advantage (or not) of the apprentices he hires.

Chihuly has, in fact, not physically executed his own glass blowing since losing an eye in a car accident nearly three decades ago. He has hired gaffers – artisans – to help make what he sees in his mind’s eye real to the eyes of others. The Venetians included for the Saint Mary’s exhibit were produced in 1988 – a product of these artist-artisan fusions. “I saw a great collection of Art Deco Venetian glass in a Venetian palazzo that I’d never seen before, and I was stunned at how unbelievably innovative and beautiful these pieces from the 1920s and ‘30s were,” says Chihuly of his Venetian period on his website. “I would pretend that I was a designer in the 1920s and make these eccentric pieces with reds and blacks and golds and greens – and handles. . . . It wasn’t long before something started to happen. It opened first in the drawings . . . around the fourth or fifth day I started to make bold drawings in charcoal.” His gaffer, Lino Tagliapietra, then turned Chihuly’s glass visions into being.

And they are wondrous. As delicate and fragile as life itself, Chihuly’s glorious glass revelations will leave you mesmerized and mystified.

Be sure to hurry over to Saint Mary’s. This exhibit ends July 20.

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