

Dale Chihuly – Glass Sculptor

Dale Chihuly was born September 20, 1941 in Tacoma, Washington. His father George was a butcher and his mother Viola was a homemaker who loved gardening.

He was sixteen years old when his brother died in a Naval Air Force training accident, and his father died a year later.

His mother wanted him to go to college. He really didn't want to go, but he went anyway to please her.

That first year he was in school he worked on a project for his mother designing and making her basement into a den. He liked it so well he transferred to the University of Washington to study interior design.

Later he made for himself a studio with a small oven in it. He became interested in working with glass and learning the art of glass blowing.

He worked in Alaska as a commercial fisherman and saved his money to go to graduate school, then he went to Europe to Venice to study glass blowing. His first introduction to the use of glass had been with some experimenting weaving glass into tapestry.

Upon his return to the states he started the Pilchuck Glass School for teaching the art of glass blowing. He hired master craftsmen to come over from Europe to teach.

There are now more glass blowers in Seattle than there are in Venice.

When Chihuly works with his glass blowers on a project, he is definitely in charge of what happens, and they must do it exactly as he envisions it.

He likes creating outside displays such as those in botanical gardens because the choices for placement are varied.

He has about fifteen departments in his studio made up of teams who do the work. The glass-blowing team usually has a minimum of seven people. A very large exhibit requires more workers. On one project he had sixteen people on the glass-blowing team.

After the glass has been produced, another team will put the pieces together in a form he has designed.

When the individual pieces are completed, the glass is packed in cardboard boxes and shipped to the site of the installation.

Another team of about twelve people keeps up with the shipments and also oversees the movies, videos, prints, and the book publishing.

When he starts creating a piece, he makes a 20 by 30 inch watercolor paper drawing and pins it up on the wall in front of the furnace for the workers to see.

The colors he uses are supplied by cottage industries in Germany, Romania, and New Zealand. The colors come in the form of 2-pound rods, powder, or ground-up color which resembles sand. The color is added during the glass making process.

He makes very large pieces such as giant flowers. These present a challenge to his glass blowers and keeps the work interesting and exciting.

In 1976 in England he was in a car crash which caused him to lose the sight in one of his eyes. After a long recovery he began blowing glass again, but it was difficult because he had lost his peripheral vision and the ability to see things in depth. Everything appeared two-dimensional to him. His role changed from glass-blower to creator and facilitator of exhibitions.

Nighttime displays in which the exhibits are lighted are particularly impressive.

Some large works may take months or a year to prepare the glass for shipping. An outdoor display will take 2-4 weeks to assemble at the exhibition site.

After the exhibit of the Tower of David in Jerusalem in 2000, the political situation became so volatile he asked the hosts to take it down and ship it back to him to avoid putting his workers in harm's way.

The Tower of David exhibit was massive with some of the pieces towering to 45 feet in height. Over a million people visited the exhibition.

For a culminating event in Jerusalem he stacked huge blocks of ice to make a wall, then lighted it with many colored lights. After three days and nights the cubes melted and the wall came crashing down.

After an exhibition time is finished, the pieces are either sold to the host or shipped back to Seattle and stored, to be used in another exhibit.

Dale Chihuly has received many degrees and awards for his work.

He married Leslie Jackson in 2005 and they have a son, Jackson Viola named after his mother and grandmother.

Learn more at <http://gardenofpraise.com/ibdchihuly.htm>