**Inside Dale Chihuly’s Studio “The Boathouse”**

Last October I wrote a [blog posting](https://hughstephensblog.net/2017/10/18/chihuly-and-his-art-who-is-the-true-creator/) about glass artist Dale Chihuly’s travails with a lawsuit brought against him by a former associate (or employee, his status is not clear), Michael Moi, who claims that he co-authored many of Chihuly’s works over the past 15 years. Moi is suing Chihuly for copyright infringement, and (naturally) substantial damages. As far as I am aware the case has yet to be heard, although there were [legal wranglings](http://www.chicagotribune.com/sns-bc-us--chihuly-lawsuit-20171027-story.html) in the fall that led to the disqualification of Moi’s lawyers.

In my blog I commented that from my perspective it was self-evident that Chihuly was the true and definitive creator of his works, even if he didn’t personally design or produce every single piece. Chihuly has never claimed that he did. But he created the studio, developed the genre, oversaw the production and design, exercised quality control and conferred the ultimate authenticity on the final product by giving it his “seal of approval”, his signature. That end-to-end process makes a product a “Chihuly”, (costing up to six figures), rather than being just a pretty piece of glass. A few weeks after I had published my blog, I had a chance to see the production process up-close with a visit to Chihuly’s studio, the “Boathouse”, on the shores of Lake Union in Seattle.

The Boathouse itself has an interesting history. Although it’s a digression, the story is so interesting that I cannot resist taking you down this path for just a moment. It was where George Pocock in later years built his racing shells for rowers, and indeed there is a beautiful wooden 8 man shell hanging from the ceiling of the main reception room in the building. Pocock was the builder of the boats used by the University of Washington rowers made famous by the [book](https://www.goodreads.com/book/show/16158542-the-boys-in-the-boat) “The Boys in the Boat” (with a movie in the offing) about their journey to and ultimate victory at the 1936 Berlin Olympics. It was in a Pocock boat that they won the gold medal in Berlin, upsetting favoured European crews. Pocock came from a boatbuilding family in England (his father built racing shells for Eton College) and had emigrated to Vancouver, BC in 1910, originally building shells for the Vancouver Rowing Club. But he was recruited by a wily UW rowing coach, Hiram Conibear, who convinced him to move to Seattle, where he set up shop, eventually moving to the shores of Lake Union. Today [Pocock Racing Shells](https://www.pocock.com/), in Everett WA is a leading manufacturer of these specialized boats in the US, although now they are made of hydrocarbons.

But let’s get back to Chihuly. If anything, my visit to his studio only confirmed my initial conclusions about Chihuly’s role and genius, but it was a revelation to see how the process actually works. First we visited the “hot room” where several “gaffers” were engaged in melting and shaping glass according to a design they were following, operating smoothly as team, with each knowing his role. Apparently they were working on a commission for a large glass chandelier. I was told that many of these gaffers (glassblowers) have their own small studios where they develop their personal creations when not working at the Boathouse.

We saw where the supplies come in and are inventoried, and where finished pieces are stacked waiting to be assembled into larger creations. We did not see the design studio which is in a separate building with a show-room but we did see a number of examples of Chihuly’s work and collections in the Boathouse. Among these are his collection of Northwest native baskets which have served as the inspiration for a number of Chihuly’s works, his collection of trading blankets, and the “long room” containing an enormous Douglas fir table, the Pocock rowing scull and a number of chandeliers and large glass bowls. What surprised me was that some of them, finished and looking beautiful, were marked for destruction because of some imperceptible flaw or other. I would have happily had that piece in my home but it did not meet the Chihuly standard. There are no “seconds” coming from this studio.

Other memorable rooms were the swimming pool, where one stares down through limpid waters to an undersea world of shells and creatures (created by Chihuly), an operating aquarium filled with Chihuly creations, and even a unique Chihuly bathtub. Many of these rooms and attractions have been featured on the web, as the Boathouse is on occasion opened for charitable tours. One recent posting, which I think captures well the ambiance and attractions of the facility, can be found [here](http://www.monpetitseattle.com/chihuly-private-houseboat/).

The Boathouse, as I mentioned is not open to the public, but the full impact of Chihuly’s work can be viewed at the Chihuly [Garden and Glass Museum](https://www.chihulygardenandglass.com/), located at the base of Seattle’s famous Space Needle. This is a remarkable exhibit and testament to the man who has inspired and nurtured a whole glass creation ecosystem in the Seattle area, with many other studios and the [Pilchuck Glass School](http://www.pilchuck.com/), founded by Chihuly himself (with patrons) in 1971.

Whether it is his works abroad, such as those that were installed in Venice a few years ago, or in Kew Gardens in London, or those inspired by Pacific Northwest culture and gardens, it is clear that Chihuly has put his personal stamp on this genre in many ways. Today the Boathouse is a hive of productive creativity, with the works being produced and assembled by many craftsmen and women, responding to commissions and also creating new works for public consumption. It is a well-oiled operation from design to production to assembly. And, at the end of the day, the works that emerge are truly worthy of being called “Chihulies”.

As I noted above, some of the members of “team Chihuli” produce their own creations on their own time, a good outlet for their talents and a way to develop their individual persona. Rather than trying to assert ownership by alleging co-authorship through the courts, one wonders why Michael Moi did not do the same.

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