

PENTA

20 Minutes With: Studio Glass Pioneer Dale Chihuly



Merletto Basket Set © Chihuly Studio. All Rights Reserved.
Photographer Scott Mitchell Leen

Dale Chihuly has been creating mesmerizing, beautiful works out of glass for decades, pushing the boundaries of what glass can look like in intricately designed objects and massive, breathtaking installations bursting with color in cities and museums around the world.

Home for Chihuly, 78, is Seattle, Wash., where Chihuly Merletto, his latest project, is being featured—virtually—by the Traver Gallery through the end of July.

Like all of Chihuly's efforts, Chihuly Merletto is inventive, playful, and exquisite—inspired by ancient Italian caneworking techniques, but showing up in lacy loops within irregular, undulating shapes of glass like those he began playing with in his original basket series in the 1970s.

Chihuly recently answered questions posed by *Penta* about his work and his latest collection.

PENTA: A big question to start: Why did you originally turn to glass as your primary medium of expression?

Dale Chihuly: I fell in love with glass in the '60s, when I was studying interior design and architecture at the University of Washington. My first experiment involved weaving pieces of glass into a textile I was making for my mother's window. Then on a whim, I tried to blow a bubble out of glass using a regular metal pipe I had in the basement. I didn't have any training or the right tools, but as soon as I saw that bubble forming, I was hooked.

I understand that you first began creating “organic and asymmetrical” forms out of glass in your basket series in the late 1970s—what prompted that?

During a visit to the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma, I explored an exhibition of Northwest Native American woven baskets. Over time, and with the help of gravity, the baskets had evolved into irregularly shaped, slumped forms. I was struck by the beauty and perfection of their imperfection. This moment was pivotal to my approach to glassmaking. The woven baskets inspired me to buck the historic glassblowing traditions of perfection by pursuing the creation of organic, asymmetrical forms using fire, gravity, and centrifugal force.

The Chihuly Merletto collection is the latest extension of this series. What drew you to merletto, the Italian caneworking technique?

One of the key drivers to my artmaking practice is a need to challenge myself and my team. There is a particular energy and satisfaction that comes out of pushing the medium through scale or utilizing techniques that I have never explored.

With merletto, I noticed a similarity between the patterns of the ancient technique and early pencil drawings that I created with a bundle of pencils held in my hand. This similarity inspired me to take on a new challenge, and to explore the merletto technique in a new way...in my way.

Your aim with the collection was to “capture the movement of lace in the glass.” How do you do that?

My organic approach to glassmaking, relying on gravity and centrifugal force, is central to my experiments with the technique and to creating the dynamic, flexible, lace-like patterns that flow freely around the *Basket* form. Merletto was developed by the Muranese in the 15th century, and historically, Venetian glassmaking strives for perfection and symmetry. The traditional approach to merletto results in more static patterns.

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In a [video](#) [showing the collection being made] I saw that you draw first, clutching a handful of pencils, or sometimes using sweeps of colored chalk, or even a pile of ice cubes, and then these wonderful, surprising glass pieces are created. How does the work go from drawing paper to glass art?

I've been drawing since I was a student in the '60s, and I utilize a variety of materials in the process. When I lost the sight in my eye [in a 1976 car accident] and could no longer blow glass myself, I began using drawings to communicate ideas to my team. There is an incredible energy that comes from the artistic dialogue between my drawing and the glassblowing. I like to be on the hotshop pad with the team doing my work while they do theirs; it's a thrilling experience.



I understand that you work using a team in your glass studio, which seems necessary given the physical labor and size of some of these pieces. Can you tell me more about the team and the creative process?

James Mongrain and Dale Chihuly, The Boathouse hotshop, Seattle, Wash.
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I learned the team approach to glassblowing while studying at the Venini Glass Factory on the Venetian island of Murano in the '60s. I quickly adopted this approach and have been fortunate to build a team of skilled artists who help me realize my creative vision. The size of the team each day depends on the type of work we are doing; larger scale works require more hands on deck. I love the team approach. If artmaking required that I always work alone, I probably would not have been an artist.

Through the Chihuly Foundation, you have supported artists and youth arts education, and you've worked with the elderly, veterans, and the disabled. Recently you also donated to the Covid-19 Artist Trust Relief Fund to support artists in Washington state. Why is this important to do?

People in our community and around the world are suffering. We are all affected by the restrictions of the pandemic, and as a nation, we are also experiencing a time of mourning and much-needed reflection.

I choose to be hopeful for positive change and strive to keep my focus on the healing and uplifting power of art, which is especially important in difficult times. My wife Leslie and I are grateful for our health and a deeply connected community of colleagues and friends to rely on. In turn, we are honored to support other artists in their pursuits and serve the most vulnerable populations.

Have you been able to work during this time of sheltering-in-place?

It is not yet safe for the team to blow glass together, so I spend my creative energy and time working from home. Although the time alone was forced upon us, it has given me time to reflect and to gather inspiration for future projects. Recently, I have been working on several drawings and exploring new, digital exhibition opportunities.

For your art, what's next?

I am looking forward to the June debut of my *Chihuly Merletto* exhibition at Traver Gallery in Seattle, and to a new garden exhibition at Cheekwood Estate in Nashville, which opens in July. I have several other projects in development that we hope to share with art enthusiasts later in the year.