



ARTS & ANTIQUES

Chihuly At Kew: Reflections On Nature - A Magical Exhibition By Abby Cronin

Imagine transforming sand into glorious glass sculptures. Well that is exactly what Dale Chihuly, the internationally renowned avant-garde studio glass artist does. His organic sculptural forms fuse every colour of the rainbow into patterns

we've only ever seen on close inspection of the veins in leaves and petals of flora. In keeping with his lifelong love of botanical settings, Kew Gardens is the perfect venue for his blown glass sculptural artworks. They are currently

installed throughout the gardens and inside the glasshouses. Visitors will marvel at the diversity of 32 artworks in 13 locations. Many have never been seen before in the UK. Commanding space, these luminous artworks create unrestrained



Sapphire Star – 2010. Photo-Abby Cronin



Temperate House Persians



Scarlet and Yellow Icycle Tower – 2013



Summer Sun - 2018

bursts of colour amidst the glorious greenery of Kew. They blur the boundaries separating the applied arts. Mesmerising, these dazzling glass artworks transform the vistas of Kew and the ornate glasshouses into multiple galleries.

Chihuly's enduring fascination with glasshouses began in 2001, and has continued as a series of exhibitions installed in botanical settings around the world. Known as the Garden Cycle, his work has featured in numerous locations. Garden Cycle installations such as Chicago's Garfield Park Conservatory and the New York botanical Garden are perhaps best known.

In May 2012, *Chihuly Garden and Glass* opened at the Seattle Center showcasing his studio glass. Today, his 2019 exhibition in Kew feels like a homecoming after the success of his show at the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew in 2005. No doubt British interest in his unique blown glass sculptural eye-popping pieces increased once the public saw the huge Chihuly "chandelier" permanently installed in the entrance hall at the Victoria and Albert Museum in 2001. And his pieces are in hundreds of museum and private collections around the world.

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Dale Chihuly was born in 1941 in Tacoma, near Seattle, Washington. His early fascination with this medium is explained by Jennifer Hawkins Opie, V&A Curator. Chihuly told her: 'I had this little studio in south Seattle... [where] I began to learn how glass melted and how you could fuse it together. One night I melted some stained glass between four bricks and put a pipe in there and gathered some glass and blew a bubble... From that point on I wanted to be a glassblower... I was totally infatuated,

completely absorbed in the concept of being a glassblower because to see this bubble come out at the end of this blowpipe [was] magical'.

Magical indeed it is. The sheer diversity of Chihuly's designs falls into several categories. There are floats, tentacles, reeds and stem shapes as well as a dozen well-known series of works which include *Cylinders and Baskets*, 1970s, *Seaforms*, *Macchia*, *Persians*, and *Venetians* in the 1980s. As you enter Kew through the Victoria Gate you will meet *Sapphire Star*, a stand-alone tall sculpture with individual blown glass forms which all radiate outward to create a celestial visual experience. With its vibrant blue colour, *Sapphire Star* is deeply concentrated in the centre where the individual glass elements meet and appear opaque. Inside the Temperate House, one of the largest surviving Victorian glasshouses which has just undergone a major restoration, gaze at the spellbinding beauty of the *Temperate House Persians*, a 10-metre long creation specially designed for the exhibition. Suspended from the centre of the roof of Kew's Temperate House, the *Persians'* intense deep blue hues invite you to study their complexity and remarkable assemblage.

Be sure to visit the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art where you will be able to see a stunning variety of some of Chihuly's most technically challenging glass sculptures. Displayed in vitrines and on pedestals, these pieces will expand your appreciation of

Chihuly's artistic vision. *Seaforms'* organic forms have a distinct underwater presence while his *Macchia* series combines unexpected colour combinations with coloured spots for a speckled effect. *Macchia* sculptures are a series of brilliant billowing bowls in blazing colours. While inside the Sherwood Gallery don't miss the truly remarkable film about Chihuly's creative process and his methods of working. We get to meet some of his team, observe workshops and appreciate how meticulously difficult making and installing glass sculptures are. Watching the film you will understand how unpredictable glass-blowing variations of organic forms in nature are, especially when you are a glass artist with a specific image you wish to create. The film is screened in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery of Botanical Art. It's a vivid visual record of the complex and often dangerous stages of how the process of blowing glass into unique sculptural art forms. How easily things can go wrong with the way materials react, colours blur. Glass blowing is hardly a precise science; it is technically complex and riddled with risks. In their finished state, Chihuly's glass installations offer exceptional painterly rewards. The film also documents the extraordinary complexity of organising and presenting major exhibitions throughout the world including *Chihuly Over Venice* (1995-96) and *Chihuly in the Light of Jerusalem* (1999).

Chihuly Nights, an after-dark experience at Kew, is an added bonus. See the sculptures in an entirely different light when the pieces are atmospherically lit. The after-dark experience is enhanced by music featuring wind instruments and the human voice, almost a reminder of Chihuly's breath in creating his artworks. The mood of an ever-changing soundscape aims to enhance the visitor's experience and appreciation. Be sure to book one of the summer series of special night-time tours. Immerse yourself in Chihuly's balletic sculptures. They writhe with movement and echo the unpredictable variations of organic forms in nature. They dance—their silhouettes and forms revolve as we walk around them. Light changes what we see. It's an endless joy to gaze at these ever-moving-revolving organic sculptures.

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www.kew.org

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 Get in Touch - I am available to consult if you are interested in collecting or researching the decorative arts and arts heritage.



Turquoise Marlins & Floats - 2015



Nijima Floats



Indoors in the Shirley Sherwood Gallery



Cattails and Copper Beach Reeds - 2015