



Chihuly, Scanga and Shire:
Works in Glass

April 21 - May 31, 1991

Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

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Dale Chihuly, one of the most prominent artists of the studio glass movement today, received his master's degree in 1968 from the Rhode Island School of Design. Upon graduation, he traveled to Italy on a Fulbright grant, becoming the first American glassblower to work on the island of Murano, Italy (near Venice), the center of the Italian glass industry. After returning to the United States, Chihuly moved to the Seattle area, founding the renowned Pilchuck Glass School in 1971.

The works by Chihuly in this exhibition belong to a series called the *Venetians*. These pieces were inspired by the work of Paolo Venini, an Italian artist who founded his own glass company in 1926, reviving the traditional millefiori (a thousand flowers) and filigrana (filigree) techniques of Venetian glass production of the 16th century.

Chihuly began his *Venetians* in July 1988 with a series of drawings in pencil and watercolor, soon moving to ink and charcoal as the drawings became bolder and the designs more exuberant. In a collaborative effort, the drawings were turned over to gaffer¹ Lino Tagliapietra, the Italian glass maestro invited by Chihuly to his Seattle studio. Tagliapietra was the original gaffer, giving life in glass to Chihuly's ideas on paper. However, Seattle glass artist Richard Royal and other gaffers were also involved in the glass-making sessions.

Although reflecting his long-standing interest in nature and organic form, the *Venetians* represent an anomaly within Chihuly's design manner, utilizing a symmetrical-shaped core rather than his usual free-form or asymmetrical style. Surface decoration becomes the dominant element, however, deeming the symmetrical core as merely the scaffolding upon which Chihuly balances Medusa-like coils, curling leaves, conical protuberances or blossoming flower buds. The voice of function is reduced to a whisper, losing out to extravagant ornamentation. Delicate, outrageous, elegant and bizarre, the *Venetians* hover on the edge of over-indulgent gaudiness. They resist such classification, however,

through the intricate harmony of sumptuous color, texture and fantastic form.

Italian-born Italo Scanga arrived in the United States in 1947 at the age of 15. Since receiving a master's degree in sculpture from Michigan State University in 1961, Scanga has held a variety of teaching positions, from the Rhode Island School of Design and the Pilchuck Glass summer school to his present position in the visual arts department of the University of California, La Jolla.

As a sculptor, Scanga has incorporated

glass containers in his sculptural assemblages since the early 1970s. His collaborations with Richard Royal, however, have produced glass works of an independent nature. The vessels are no longer unobtrusive, relegated to a subsidiary role in the sculptural tableaux, but rather the medium upon which images and sculptural forms are placed.

Scanga designed his first glass works in the early 1980s, exemplified in this exhibition by three painted vessels. The painted images reflect Scanga's interest



Richard Royal/Italo Scanga collaboration, *Untitled Bird Vase*, 1990, 17" x 14" x 13"

in a variety of artistic sources such as cubism and folk art, but more importantly display his interest in symbiotic relationships. Therefore, in each piece there are three "unrelated" images: one realistic, one abstract and one of choice.²

The vessels with sculptural forms of birds represent his latest works, and are pieces that were technically very difficult for gaffer Richard Royal to create.³ As for the bird motifs, Scanga himself explains, "I liked the idea of a living thing like a

bird flying down and getting stuck – frozen in space, in time – a moving thing that simply stopped."⁴

Artist and designer Peter Shire began experimenting with glass in the mid-1980s, when he spent two weeks as artist-in-residence at the Pilchuck Glass School. The Pilchuck experience exposed him to the Studio Glass Movement⁵, and with the help of gaffer Richard Royal, Shire's drawings were transformed into glass. The residence at Pilchuck also led to an invitation to visit the glass-making

facilities at Murano, furthering his interest in glass.

Shire's glass designs emerge from a variety of artistic strategies, ranging from fine art, advertising, graphic and industrial design. Born, raised and still living in the Echo Park area of Los Angeles, Shire received a bachelor's degree in ceramics from the Chouinard Art Institute in 1970. He was influenced early in his career by ceramists Peter Voukos and Kenneth Price, who challenged the traditional separation of craft and art. Another influence on Shire was the sleek classicism of the Bauhaus. But Shire soon developed his own ceramic style, and later branched out into furniture design, sculpture, and as seen in this exhibition, glass.

Shire's self-referential sense of humor produces his very personal, yet accessible, design style. A self-described visual humorist, he is fascinated by the fine line of perception (or "moment") that divides illusion from true magic, and believes that this "moment" is in part responsible for the emotive power and appeal of art.⁶ Thus, the juxtapositions of geometric and organic shapes and the use of whimsical color schemes – combined with names like *Eggs on a Raft*, *Ellios' Fish Dinner* and *Happy Unbirthday* – seem zany, often challenging our imaginations. But for this fourth-generation Californian who loves carnivals and magic tricks, and believes there should be bleachers by every glassmaker's furnace, his works make perfect sense.

Bonnie Speed

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1. The term used for the person who physically creates the glass object at the furnace.
2. From a phone interview with the artist, March 9, 1991.
3. Each piece was blown as a single vessel. The birds are not a later addition.
4. From a phone interview with the artist, March 9, 1991.
5. The Studio Glass Movement began in the United States in the early 1960s, when the development of a low-melting point glass formula allowed artists to produce glass in their own workshops using their own furnaces.
6. From a phone interview with the artist on March 2, 1991.



Peter Shire, *Ellios' Fish Dinner*, 1989, 26 1/4" x 10 1/2" x 9 3/4"

Acknowledgment

This exhibition would not have been possible without the generous loan of works from numerous sources. We are most grateful to Dale Chihuly, Italo Scanga, Peter Shire and Richard Royal for their assistance with this exhibit.

Thanks should also be extended to Anthea Zonars, glass director of the Betsy Rosenfield Gallery, Chicago; David Tooker, director of the Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand and the Spirit, Scottsdale, Ariz.; Sandra Schemske of the Susanne Hilberry Gallery, Birmingham, Mich.; Tracey Savage and Kerri Adams of the Dale Chihuly Studio, Seattle; and Donna Shire.

We are also indebted to University of Kansas Ph.D. candidate Bonnie Speed for her fine essay, as well as JCCC Community Services, Hallmark Cards Inc. and Richard Farnan, AIA, for their generous financial support.

*Bruce Hartman, director
Gallery of Art*



Dale Chihuly, *Gold Ochre Venetian with Coils*, 1990, 21" x 24", photo: Roger Schreiber

Exhibition Checklist

Dale Chihuly

Gold over Carmine Venetian, 1990
26" x 11" x 10"

Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery,
Chicago

Black Venetian, 1990

40" x 11" x 10"

Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery,
Chicago

Gold over Cobalt Venetian, 1990

21" x 12" x 13"

Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery,
Chicago

Gold Ochre Venetian with Coils, 1990

21" x 24"

Courtesy of the artist

*Orange Venetian with Manganese Blue
Flowers*, 1990

31" x 21" x 16"

Courtesy of the artist

*Cerulean Blue Venetian with
Blue Coils*, 1990

28" x 16" x 13"

Courtesy of the artist

Italo Scanga

Untitled Vase, 1987

glass with glass enamels, 12" x 5 1/2"

Courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery,
Birmingham, Mich.

Pipistrello and Abstraction, 1989

glass with glass enamels, 20 1/2" x 13 1/4"

Courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery,
Birmingham, Mich.

Untitled Vase, 1986

glass with glass enamels, 12 3/4" x 7 3/4"

Courtesy Susanne Hilberry Gallery,
Birmingham, Mich.

Untitled Bird Vase, 1990

17" x 14" x 11"

Richard Royal/Italo Scanga collaboration

Courtesy Betsy Rosenfield Gallery,
Chicago

Untitled Bird Vase, 1990

21" x 13" x 13"

Richard Royal/Italo Scanga collaboration

Courtesy Richard Royal

Untitled Bird Vase, 1990

24" x 10" x 10"

Richard Royal/Italo Scanga collaboration

Courtesy Richard Royal

Peter Shire

Eggs on a Raft, 1989

17 3/4" x 5 1/4"

Courtesy of the artist

Tall Guy, 1989

17 1/2" x 12"

Courtesy Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand
and the Spirit, Scottsdale, Ariz.

Happy Unbirthday, 1989

19 1/2" x 7"

Courtesy Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand
and the Spirit, Scottsdale, Ariz.

George's Ghost, 1989

19 1/2" x 9" x 4 1/2"

Courtesy Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand
and the Spirit, Scottsdale, Ariz.

Ellios' Fish Dinner, 1989

26 1/4" x 10 1/2" x 9 3/4"

Courtesy Joanne Rapp Gallery/The Hand
and the Spirit, Scottsdale, Ariz.

Cover: Dale Chihuly, *Black Venetian*, 1990,
40" x 11" x 10", photo: Roger Schreiber

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