

Mary Zimmerman

Dr. Larkin

November 23, 2022

FAC Museum Exhibit Review

The Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College has a mission to “provide innovative, educational, and multidisciplinary arts experiences that elevate the individual spirit and inspire community vitality. The Fine Arts Center provides visual arts, performing arts, and arts education to the entire Colorado Springs community and is a valuable resource for students and faculty that furthers the educational mission of the college. Their aim is to create a national model of distinction for an arts center that joins with a college to serve the campus, the community, the region, and the world. This model should be a public access point to diverse educational and cultural experiences for the FAC, the college, and local, national, and international communities.” (Mission and Vision, 2022) Located in the former home of philanthropists Julie and Spencer Penrose, who later turned their home into the Broadmoor Art Academy in 1919. This drew many talented artists to the region resulting in a thriving art scene to rival Taos and Santa Fe. Additionally, the majority of the collections housed at the Fine Arts Center are donations from Julie Penrose. Julie Penrose was an avid art collector, and it seems the bulk of the donated collections are from the southwest, Mexico, and Indigenous of origins. There is one exhibit that seemed almost like a juxtaposition of the collection, featuring the permanent collection of works by Dale Chihuly in the Lane Family Gallery, these works feel slightly disconnected from the theme of other exhibits throughout the museum. However,

these dynamic works do fit into the museum's mission in relation to creating an innovative, awe-inspiring exhibit for the education of the glass medium. Below, I will explore the Chihuly collection in relation to museum work, interpretive hierarchy, and what characteristics contribute to this dissimilar but successful exhibit.

Seattle based glass sculpturist Dale Chihuly first came to the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center with a temporary exhibition in 2005. This popular exhibit would lead the Fine Arts Center's Board of Trustees to purchase a collection of artworks for the museum's permanent collection. These pieces were first presented to the public in 2007 and includes the *Orange Hornet Chandelier*, a *Macchia Forest*, and *Persian Wall* installations along with several mixed media paper works that invoke styles akin to abstract expressionist Paul Jackson Pollock.

Following G. Ellis Burcaw's *Characteristics of a Good Exhibit*, the entrance to the exhibit is an excellent example of Burcaw's second characteristic of good exhibits, it must be visible. "The exhibit must be lighted, unobstructed, and shown with minimum of inconvenience and distraction." (Burcaw, 1975) This exhibit demands attention from anyone walking by with the impressive bursting of colors, and an open floor plan. The flow of traffic is ideal for allowing guests to pass in a circular fashion around the centerpiece, the *Orange Hornet Chandelier*. The use of distinctive styles of glasswork media creates a texture throughout contributed by the curves of *Macchia Forest*, and the corkscrew swirls of the *Orange Hornet Chandelier* nests. This is enhanced by the various display styles presented at stations throughout. While the hefty *Orange Hornet Chandelier* is hung from ceiling mounted cables, the *Persian Wall* is displayed linearly mounted along walls with almost invisible brackets, and the *Macchia Forest* pieces are presented in groups of three on varied height pedestals tucked into the back corners. Breaking

up the space are hung mixed media abstract papers, these works grouped in twos, present another texture to interrupt and serve to break the lines formed by the *Persian Wall*. Adding to the circular flow of the exhibit is a large round black stone placed on the floor directly under the *Orange Hornet Chandelier*. By matching the width of the hung work at its widest point, the dual-purpose stone also prevents the lure of touching from guests.

In speaking with Christian Valvano, Assistant Registrar of the Fine Arts Center, they were able to explain the Chihuly collection was purchased by the previous curator who was a fan of Dale Chihuly. They mentioned the museum had to fundraise to add these works to the permanent collection, as there was no way to purchase them via funds allotted from the collections accession plan. When asked what the collection care policy entails for these objects, the shocking scope of having to fully dismantle each “hornet nest cone” from the ringed frame of *Orange Hornet Chandelier*, every time the object is cleaned was very surprising. With preservation being the number one priority, and all decisions about care from the agents of deterioration made with this in mind, the primary dangers to glass objects are physical force, water, pollutants, light/ultraviolet light, and fluctuating relative humidity. According to conservation institute guides found online, “soda-lime glass is light and has been the most common type of glass manufactured from antiquity until the present.” (Canadian Conservation Institute, 2018) Consideration in developing a care plan for soda-lime glass must address water in the atmosphere, as excess humidity can cause the dissolution of silica. The institute describes this process as, “In soda-lime glass, the excess sodium in the glass absorbs moisture directly from the air to form sodium hydroxide, a strong base, which then dissolves the silica in the glass. It is a cyclic reaction, as the removal of silica frees up more sodium for reaction. The glass

begins to appear foggy and has a soapy feel.” In a stable environment soda-lime glass can be safely stored at a relative humidity between 40–50 percent. This conservation institute also notes “....in a dusty or polluted environment, glass will become dirty if not protected from particulates. Even slight amounts of dust will be visible on the transparent surfaces of glass, resulting in an unaesthetic appearance. Preventing dust deposition is far safer than having to deal later with dusting and cleaning—which may not always be safe or recommended, and which, at the very least, involves handling and therefore unnecessarily increases the risk of physical damage.” This certainly fits the lengthy and complex cleaning of the *Orange Hornet Chandelier*. Additionally, the interior room gallery location for this exhibit was likely chosen to combat light exposure. Glass that is exposed to ultraviolet light can shift in color causing solarization, thus altering the original colors of the glass. Overall, the prevention conservation of glass works needs to be carefully weighed versus the risks of performing these acts.

Using the Smithsonian’s Guide to Exhibit Design, An Interpretive Hierarchy to determine the overarching “big idea” that guests should walk away with from this exhibit, would be artworks that challenge the viewer to consider the limitations of the glass material. Key messages or smaller statements that support the big idea would be the definitions provided by Mr. Chihuly’s techniques. For example, a label presented with the *Macchia Forest* describes what the Macchia technique entails. It details how Chihuly realized he was using too few colors. Wanting to express the full range of hues available in glass making, he developed a method of using white to separate the colors, resulting in numerous spots of vibrant colors. (FAC, 2022) Finally, critical questions that are used to support the key messages, as well as present the answers the museum should provide guests pertaining to the exhibit, are best presented in a

label explaining how Mr. Chihuly named his works in Italian, such as *Macchia* means “spotted” in Italian. Thus, the *Macchia Forest* is explained in both technique and naming to the guests. This exhibit brings to mind Freeman Tilden’s thoughts on interpretations, “A cardinal purpose of interpretations, it seems to me, is to present a whole rather than a part, no matter how interesting the specific part may be.” (Tilden, 2009) Indeed, this exhibit could easily incorporate the science behind glass making as another mode of education of the medium, by explanation of how hand-blown glass comes from what is commonly call Soda Lime Glass. Perhaps even explain how assorted colors of glass are created by adding different minerals to clear molten glass. But here, the interpretation is set solidly as a whole, and presented in the fitting framework as a work of wonder and art.

For a museum, the role of light is an essential part of creating an interaction between museum goers and the objects, while also preserving artifacts. In the Dale Chihuly exhibit, the lighting methodology adds context to the beautiful works and thus creates a successful exhibit. The room that houses these works does not contain any natural light and is a dimly lit (ideally for preservation) compared to the other galleries. Instead, the room uses lights to highlight the dimensional transparent glass works creating ambient layers to contribute to the overall lighting of the room. This type of lighting lets one move through space at a much lower level from mounted angled overhead lights. The ratio of physical space that houses glass works and the extension of lighting coming from them creates dimensional layers to achieve a successful exhibit in this hand-blown glass medium.

This lighting style also contributes to the space in the form of shadows thrown from the lighted glass works. In the *Persian Wall* display these yellow and blue toned wall mounted

works, cast colored shadows directly below them. It should be noted that walls containing these pieces are a lighter gray, while all other walls are almost black. Likely due to the nature of the wall mounted installation thus calling for a lighter color to bounce light off the glass works. Darker walls only contain mounted mixed media abstract works, as everything else is on clear spotlighted pedestals allowing ambient colors to shine through. Indeed, lighting seems to be the alluring factor of this glass exhibit's triumph.

Overall, the Dale Chihuly exhibit at the Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center is another facet of the institution's expressive art collection. By incorporating these aesthetically pleasing hand-blown glass works into their permanent collection exhibitions they allow guests to interpret a different medium in radiant colors. In addition, the well-planned exhibit space in both design and lighting amplifies the movement of the glass and allows guests to be affected by the emanated glow of each piece. Mr. Chihuly expressed the effect of his exhibit best when he says, "I want people to be overwhelmed with light and color in some way that they've never experienced."

Bibliography:

Burcaw, G. E. (1997). Introduction to museum work (3rd ed.). Altamira Press.

Colorado Springs Fine Arts Center at Colorado College. Fine Arts Center. (2022, November 20). Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <https://fac.coloradocollege.edu/>

A Guide to Exhibit Design. Smithsonian Exhibits. (2018, September 26). Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <http://exhibits.si.edu/>

Tilden, F. (2009). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. (Fourth Edition, Expanded and Updated ed.). Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press.

Logan, J. A., & Grant, T. (2018, December 14). Government of Canada. Preventive conservation guidelines for collections - Canada.ca. Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <https://www.canada.ca/en/conservation-institute/services/preventive-conservation/guidelines-collections/ceramics-glass-preventive-conservation.html#a3b>

One Man. Many Stories. Chihuly. (n.d.). Retrieved November 25, 2022, from <https://www.chihuly.com/>

