

Blown away by Tacoma's hot heart of glass

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When Mark Sigafoos slides open the furnace door at his glass-blowing studio, a wave of heat from the 1,149 °C interior hits me. It blasts my torso like a campfire roasts a marshmallow. Sigafoos dips a long steel rod into the molten glass, pulls it out, and twirls it, rotating the globule on the end. Then he hands the rod to me. It's make-or-break time—literally—in my glass-blowing debut.

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Never mind that until yesterday, I had never seen glass blown. I'm in Tacoma, Washington, where glass artists are everywhere. And if the teenager I watched blowing glass a day earlier can handle the heat, I'm staying in the kitchen.

Tacoma may seem an unlikely candidate for an artists' mecca, yet it's one of the best cities in the world in which to explore glass art. That's largely due to the influence of Dale Chihuly, who grew up here and is now renowned for his colourful, whimsical glass creations. His success has spawned a whole community of glass artists.

“He's famous for essentially revolutionizing and popularizing studio glass,” explains the Tacoma Art Museum's Jana Wennstrom as she leads a walking tour of Chihuly's works. Before the 1960s, glass was produced mostly in factories by craftspeople, rather than by the designer. Chihuly was one of the first to unite design and production in his own studio. (At 67 years old, he's still producing work in Seattle.)

Many spectacular Chihuly pieces light up Tacoma's public spaces. At Union Station, there are several works, including a massive Chihuly chandelier that hangs from the domed ceiling. With its vibrant, candy-coloured curlicues, it looks like something that belongs to Dr. Seuss. Across the street, another lightning bolt of a chandelier injects a University of Washington study room with red-hot energy. And at the Swiss Pub nearby, eight vases from Chihuly's Venetian series are set elegantly on a shelf high above the bar. With its pool tables and \$2.25 pints of Pabst Blue Ribbon, the Swiss isn't a typical venue for highbrow art. But Wennstrom says that Chihuly frequented it in 1994 when he was working on his Union Station installation, and gave the pub the pieces on permanent loan.

We cross the 152-metre Chihuly Bridge of Glass, which connects downtown to the waterfront. Again, you wouldn't expect to find fine art on a highway overpass. But here, light filters through thousands of Chihuly “sea forms” suspended in a glass case above the concrete pedestrian bridge.

At the Traver Gallery on the other side, I get close enough to breathe on some of Chihuly's masterpieces and marvel at their six-figure price tags. But the adjacent Vetri, which sells the much more affordable work of other local artists, proves there's more to Tacoma's glass scene than just Chihuly.

In fact, glass art is everywhere—even in my room at the Hotel Murano. Each of the 21 guest floors displays the work of a single artist, augmented with photos of the production process. I happily roam every corridor, taking in Flo Perkins's quirky glass bowling pins and Susan Taylor Glasgow's delicate glass bustier. It's amazing how diverse the genre is.

The exhibits at the waterfront Museum of Glass underline that point. But the highlight is the hot shop, an amphitheatre where I watch four people work together for 45 minutes to fuse a single goblet. Emcee Heather Cornelius notes that although the goblet is produced by a team of craftspeople, the designer is credited for the end product.

Later, a short drive brings me to the Hilltop Artists in Residence. This nonprofit hot shop attached to a middle school runs free glass-blowing programs for youth in the community. Chihuly actively supports the students and donates much of the glass.

As we watch a group of teenagers coax shapes from molten glass, outreach coordinator Kathy Anderson explains that many of the students have academic or behavioural problems. Glass blowing fosters trust and keeps them in school. Some of the students' work is sold in the adjacent shop and at fundraisers, and talented students are commissioned to do pieces. An exceptional few have their work sold at Vetri.

“For a lot of kids, it's the danger, the energy, and the excitement that attracts them,” Anderson explains. “We have kids that will trade it for gang activities and criminal activity. It's definitely not a nerdy thing to do. You've got to be tough to blow glass.”

Stay tough, I tell myself the following day as Sigafoos hands me the red-hot rod at his Tacoma Glassblowing Studio. During the next half-hour, he guides me through a series of fast-paced steps in making a bowl: shaping the molten bulb; rolling it in coloured glass shards; reheating it so that the colour sticks; and blowing air into the bulb to open it into a bowl. The process is intense and suspenseful—hold the glass a moment too long in the heat and it can drop off like an ice-cream cone.

When I pick up the cooled bowl the next morning, I can't believe how beautiful it is. Of course, that's due to Sigafoos's skill, not mine. But I did choose the colours, which have blended into a lovely red, cobalt, and lavender feathered pattern. So I allow myself to beam with pride when the compliments come. This masterpiece is mine, all mine.

Access: Tacoma lies about 280 kilometres south of Vancouver on the I-5. Chihuly walking tours are conducted by the Tacoma Art Museum. Tacoma Glassblowing Studio intro sessions cost \$65. Packages are offered in conjunction with Hotel Murano. Visit the Hilltop Artists in Residence weekdays by appointment. The organization's next biannual sale takes place on June 13. The writer toured as a guest of Tacoma Regional Convention & Visitor Bureau.

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