

Vase from the Blanket Series by Dale Chihuly,
Blown Glass
c. 1975
accession number 86.106
On view in Gallery 275

Background Information:

Dale Chihuly was born in 1941 in Tacoma, Washington. He received a B.A. in 1965 from the University of Washington-Seattle in Interior Design. While Chihuly was studying at the University of Washington, he experimented with weaving small pieces of glass into tapestries for a textile assignment. He fell in love with the fluid properties of glass. He received an M.S. degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he studied under Harvey Littleton, the father of American studio glass. In 1968, He received an M.F.A. in ceramics from the Rhode Island School of Design. He then was awarded a Fulbright Fellowship to study glass art in Venice. He was the first American glassblower to work with the Venini Fabbrica on the island of Murano. In 1969 Chihuly returned to RISD and taught there for many years. In 1971 he founded the Pilchuck Glass School in Stanwood, Washington.

As a student, Dale Chihuly fell in love with Navajo Indian blankets but he was not able to afford them. He also fell in love with trade blankets made by the Pendleton Company as well as other companies. Trade blankets were made specifically for the Native American market. Chihuly could afford the trade blankets and began to collect them. He loved the Native American designs of both the Navajo blankets and the trade blankets.

In 1974, Chihuly built a glass shop for the Institute of American Indian Art in Santa Fe, New Mexico. That same year, he visited the first major exhibition of Navajo blankets at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. As a result of these experiences, Chihuly was motivated to find a way to express the beauty of the Navajo and trade blankets in glass. Chihuly and his colleagues developed Native American designs inspired by the Navajo blankets and also developed a new technique to make glass threads to incorporate the design into glass. As a result of this new technique, Chihuly began his series of Navajo Blanket Cylinders in 1975. In collaboration with glass artists Kate Elliott and Flora Mace, Chihuly created very complex glass thread drawings and incorporated them into the cylinders.

Incidents in 1976 made it a pivotal year for Chihuly. He was involved in a car accident in England that blinded him in his left eye. This limited his involvement in glass blowing. But in 1979, after a bodysurfing accident in which he injured his shoulder, Chihuly could no longer hold the glass blowing pipe and took on the role of directing the glass blowing. He hired others to blow the glass and he believes it was very beneficial to him in gaining a new perspective on the process and the projects he now directs.

Additionally, in 1976 Chihuly formed a new relationship with Henry Geldzahler, curator of contemporary art at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. The Met acquired three Navajo Blanket Cylinders for the museum's collection. This marked a major step in Chihuly's career.

Navajo and Trade Blankets: Chihuly's Inspiration

For many years, the Navajo Indians have made beautifully designed, hand-woven blankets for their personal use. These beautiful blankets later became valuable trade items with the early settlers. Early government treaties with the Native Americans mandated the provision of trade goods to help meet the basic needs of the Native Americans. There was a huge market for these goods of all kinds. Blankets had always had great significance for Native Americans (going back to the painted buffalo hide robes) and were a popular trade item. The earliest trade blankets were made in England and distributed by the Hudson Bay Company. The trade blanket industry began in mid 1700s and the "golden age" of trade blankets was from 1890-1942. Dozens of companies made these blankets. The only remaining manufacturer is Pendleton Woolen Mills of Oregon. The Native Americans would go to trading posts and trade their own hand-woven blankets, as well as other goods for the machine-made trade blankets and a multitude of other trade goods. The trade blankets were warmer than their own blankets and had more colorful designs that they enjoyed. The designs created by these companies were very innovative and the color combinations were very unique. Economically speaking, the Native American blankets were far more valuable than the trade blankets.

The trade blankets, like the Navajo blankets had special meaning for the Native Americans. "The machine-made trade blankets were known as the wearing blanket. There is a mystical dimension to wearing the blanket. When the blanket is wrapped around the shoulders, with the two sides joined in the front, the designs come together in a circle. In the metaphoric sense, the wearer is placed at the center of the universe and becomes the circle (and the cylinder)." *Colorful Exchange: American Indian Trade Blankets*, by Charles J. Lohrman.

There were many more designs and motifs in the trade blankets than in the Navajo blankets. Additionally, the trade blankets were warmer because they consisted of two layers of design and two layers of yarn that trapped in heat. The Jacquard loom, developed in France in 1800 and later imported to America, was used by manufacturers to create designs that showed reverse design from one side to the other. It made for the mass production of these warm, colorful trade blankets. Dale Chihuly's trade blanket collection has about 700 designs, many of which inspired his blanket series. Chihuly refers to all trade blankets as Pendletons, even though there were many textile companies.

Shown below are examples from Dale Chihuly's collection of trade blankets.



The technique of creating the blanket cylinders:

Chihuly, with the help of colleagues, Jamie Carpenter and Italo Scanga, developed a technique that allowed him to translate the Native American designs into glass. Later this technique was further enhanced with the collaboration of glass artists Kate Elliot and Flora Mace. The technique involves pulling heated glass rods into threads. Some of the threads are as thin as a hair while others are combined into thicker threads. Next, the threads are arranged to create drawings. And finally, a hot glass cylinder is rolled over the drawings to incorporate them onto the cylinder. Chihuly refers to this as the “cylinder picking up the drawing.”

This technique of incorporating designs into glass also influenced and made possible other series of glassworks by Chihuly including the Irish cylinders and Soft cylinders.

This image shows the glass threads created into a drawing.



Object Analysis:

The shape of the glass cylinder mimics the shape of the trade blanket when worn. When the Native Americans would wrap the trade blankets over their shoulders and around their bodies, it took on the shape of a cylinder. The designs could be seen as clearly on the blanket as they can on the cylinder. The circle created by the blanket around the wearer placed them at the center of the universe.

Our cylinder, about 8 inches by 7 inches, is orange colored glass that has four black lines with circles in the squares created by the black lines. This image is derived

from the design on one of the trade blankets. I was not able to determine whether there is a particular meaning for this design.

Dale Chihuly is known for translating forms and patterns from nature and other media into glass, the Navajo Blankets Cylinders, the Seaforms, the Basket Series, the Ikebana and the Macchia. The Navajo Blanket Cylinders were the beginning of this exciting creative process for Chihuly. The purchase of these cylinders by the Met was the beginning of a brilliant career for the artist.

Note: There is a Chihuly exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston now until August 7th to highlight the opening of the MFA Modern Wing.

This is the image of the MIA blanket cylinder 86.106 The cylinder is on view in Gallery 275.



Use on tour of American Art, Modern Art, How Was it Made?, Artist Inspiration.

Resources:

Articles by Dale Chihuly on www.chihuly.com including: "The Indian Influences Upon My Work," "Collecting Trade Blankets," and Colorful Exchange: American Indian Trade Blankets.

"Following the Threads: Where Glass and Fiber Intersect, by Jane LaFerla, Fiberarts Magazine Vol. 30, No. 1 (Summer 2003) p. 48-53.

Side by Side: Chihuly's Art and Indian Inspiration, Gillian Flaccus, Th Associated Press, Sunday, April 14, 2002.

Thomas Hoving Meets Dale Chihuly on www.youtube.com shows the technique of "picking up" the textile drawing and rolling it onto the glass cylinder.