Baskets of Glass

Dale Chihuly, the American sculptor in glass, has long been interested in the native arts of the Pacific Northwest. Early in his career he became fascinated by their basketry (Lobb & Wolfe, 1990; Porter, 1990). Native Americans were adept at making basketware in all shapes and sizes for cooking, carrying, storing, clothing, drinking, protecting and preserving. Each basket has a form that derives from its function, and an ornamentation that transcends its ordinary usage. In his book on *Indian Basketry*, James (1901, pp 121-2) quotes from William Holmes:

[W]hile their shape still accords with their functional office, they exhibit attributes of form generally recognized as pleasing to the mind, which are expressed by the terms grace, elegance, symmetry, and the like. Such attributes are not separable from functional attributes, but originate and exist conjointly with them.

The following illustration from James' book (p. 119) shows a collection of Native American baskets:

Chihuly was born in Tacoma, Washington, in 1941. After studying sculpture and glassblowing, he returning to Washington State to set up the Pilchuk Glass School in 1971. Chihuly knew the collection of baskets in the Washington State History Museum in his home town of Tacoma. He soon decided to make baskets of glass:

> I looked at baskets and thought I would try to make them in glass. I wanted mine to be misshapen and wrinkled like some of the older baskets I had seen in storage there. (Chihuly, 2011, p 44).
>
> I was struck by the grace of their slumped, sagging forms. I wanted to capture this grace in glass. The breakthrough for me was recognizing that heat was the tool to be used with gravity to make these forms (from Chihuly webpage)

With these glass baskets Chihuly began looking at the forms of things. At about the same time, he was creating glass cylinders with superimposed patterns based on Navaho blankets. He was trying to understand the forms and patterns of particular objects by representing them in another medium. The baskets of glass themselves later evolved into sea-forms. Other forms followed: macchia (spots), Persians, ikebana, floats, fiori, rotoli (coils), chandeliers. His work has been shown all over the world, in parks, museums, shopping-centers and casinos (Chihuly & Kuspit, 1998, 2014, Chihuly et al, 2016).

The exhibition of Chihuly work currently at the Royal Ontario Museum concludes with a final display based on the Northwest Room at Chihuly's Boathouse Studio in Seattle. On one wall are photogravure portraits of Native Americans by Edward S. Curtis (1868-1952).On another wall are examples from Chihuly's collection of blankets woven with Native American patterns from Pendleton Mills in Portland, Oregon (founded in 1863). The focus of the room is a display of Chihuly's baskets of glass together with historical Native American baskets that he has collected:

The two glass basket in the following illustration show the way in which Chihuly traced patterns by melting shards of colored glass onto the basic forms. They are similar to the Navaho cylinders, but the solid cylinders have evolved into hollow baskets.

There are clear contrasts between the woven baskets and their glass representations. Flexibility becomes rigidity. The baskets absorb the light and enjoy their shadows. The glass

forms interact more dramatically with the light, reflecting it from their surface and letting it into their inner structure:

An impressive pairing displays the brilliance of the glass against the gravity of the woven basket. The princess and her grandmother:

Characteristic of Chihuly’s baskets are that they can contain other versions of themselves. Children embraced by their mother. This illustration shows only one:

The more recent series of *Fire Orange Baskets* (2016) shows baskets within baskets. The furnace has stripped the baskets of earthly material and leaving only their translucent forms. The reflections change continually like flames in fire:

> Those images that yet
> Fresh images beget.
>
> W. B. Yeats *Byzantium*, 1930

Yeats was fascinated by how art persists beyond the life of the artist. Art has access to some world of eternal forms that is beyond the transience of human life. His two Byzantine poems (Jeffares, 1946) consider how art persists in the images or forms that it creates.

> Once out of nature I shall never take
> My bodily form from any natural thing,
> But such a form as Grecian goldsmiths make
> Of hammered gold and gold enamelling
> To keep a drowsy Emperor awake;
> Or set upon a golden bough to sing
> To lords and ladies of Byzantium
> Of what is past, or passing, or to come.
>
> W. B. Yeats, *Sailing to Byzantium*, 1926

Plato thought of art in almost the opposite way (Pappas,

2015). He considered individual objects as transient instantiations of some ideal form. He worried that artistic representations of an object were deceptive since they were twice-removed from the ideal.

Perhaps Chihuly's baskets, like Yeats' poems, are creative attempts to represent the forms directly. The medium of glass accentuates the idea of seeing through the object to its true form. But Chihuly's translucent baskets may not last as long as Yeats hammered gold. Man-made versions of the ideal can be as transient and fragile as glass.

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