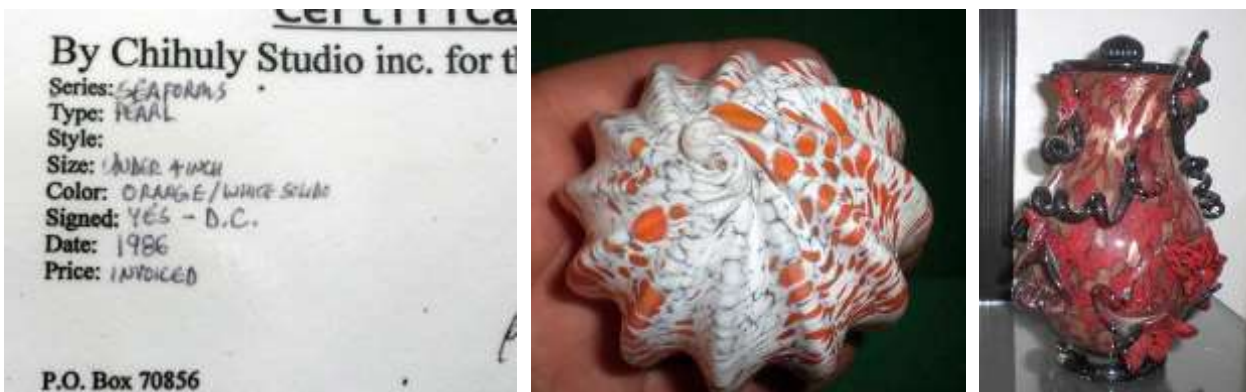


Diary of a Glass Gumshoe

Michael Little of Renton, Washington is just a small-time punk in comparison to Glafira Rosales who profited in the 80 millions by selling forged art work; and Studio Glass is minor compared to the likes of Rothko, Motherwell, Pollack, Diebenkorn, Lichtenstein, De Kooning and the other Abstract Expressionists she sold to Knoedler Gallery in New York. Nevertheless, our field has its crooks, and I enjoy trying to catch them.

In September 2011 a seasoned glass collector, whom I knew slightly through correspondence over the years, contacted me via email saying that he had acquired ten Chihuly glass pieces that were to arrive that day and he said, “everything looks right to me,” including the certificates of authenticity and invoices from Foster/White Gallery in Seattle. Still, he wanted me to take a look at them to verify they were indeed Chihuly’s, so somewhere in his mind there must have been a question. As soon as I saw the photos I replied, “do not accept the shipment.” Nothing was right about the pieces – the signatures, the dates were off by a year or more, the pieces were, in my opinion, substandard, and the documentation was questionable. The collector refused delivery and later wrote that the seller, whose name he had not shared, threatened bodily harm after the items were returned. I heard nothing else about this story, and assumed the collector was embarrassed that he had been so easily fooled.



Some of the first items presented to me by a collector in September 2011

Two months later, in November 2011, a doctor from Oklahoma who had been given my name by the Chihuly studio for evaluating some drawings he had acquired, contacted me about an appraisal of eight paintings on paper. This was the first time I had seen such drawings this particular size (20 x 16 inches and 22 x 14 inches) and painted in such a childlike manner – as if a classroom of children was asked to paint Chihuly-like drawings, including the signature. There was a stamped address on the reverse which was Chihuly’s Lake Union studio, and I knew such a stamp had never been used. There were registration numbers on the back of the paper that also caused concern as the alphanumeric indicators were incorrect.

After contacting Chihuly colleagues, none of whom had ever seen such numbers, rubber stamps, or such terrible paintings coming out of the studio, I wrote a letter to the new owner and told him the drawings were fakes. He had shared the name of the eBay seller, Michael Little, who had promised the buyer Certificates of Authenticity, which he said never arrived. The doctor forgot the incident, and it was not my business or responsibility to contact the seller for information on the provenance of the drawings. The doctor paid me for my time and the document saying they were fakes and that was the end of the story – or at least that is what we thought.



Detail of one of the faked drawings, which we think were made by Michael Little himself as the Immigrations and Customs Enforcement (ICE) and Homeland Security (HIS) investigators found paper and paints in his parents' basement along with signing tools, examples of stationary, rubber stamps and other forgery paraphernalia.

Fast forward to January 17th, 2013, when I received an email from someone who called himself "Hi" in the "From" line. The email was short, and simply stated, "Hi, I have some Chihuly Studio art that I need authenticated because it's going to be donated to a museum. Chihuly told me to contact you since one piece is a Navajo Cylinder."

I'm always interested in seeing the early Navajo Cylinders again, and I replied as I normally do with my rate sheet and list of what I need to be able to research and do my due diligence for an IRS appraisal, and requesting his name and address where the document would be sent. The reply to that email was interesting (verbatim):

Hi, I'm just trying to figure out what the museum needs right now to admit them into their collection of other Chihuly art. It's the Jundt Museum in Spokane and most of the pieces we have are over there just waiting on some kind of paperwork saying what the pieces are. I'm in Renton, I have the Navajo cylinder here at my house, the pieces in Spokane are in a back storage room at Jundt.

The cylinder is out of an estate in Rhode Island and it was made at RISD by you and Dale. Another piece that we have is one of the first few Venetians that Lino Tagliapietra made for Dale Chihuly on a short trip in 1987, a prototype to what the Venetians could look like and a very magnificent work of art. For now those are the 2 pieces we want to focus on but there are other pieces for a later date.

How much do you charge for just a paper that says the pieces are from Chihuly without the IRS Appraisals? I can't put a value on these pieces, they're not replaceable and I'm more interested in giving them to the museum for other people to see rather than just sit on shelves in our house never to be seen by anyone. At Christmas time nobody came to our house, we haven't had visitors since last April!

Included are a picture of the cylinder and the Venetian.



The bells start ringing! First, what he showed me was not a Navajo Blanket Cylinder, nor one I worked on with Dale back when I was doing the thread work in 1974-75. It looked like perhaps one that a student in his class had done on the peachblow we were melting at the time in the RISD glass shop, with various thread drawings that were definitely not mine; the so-called “Venetian” looked like the one I had seen in September 2011, albeit without the lid; and the story about Lino was completely bogus because I was in the studio in 1988 when the first *Venetians* were created and none had flowers, and Lino had not visited the year before with a prototype for Dale to see. I checked with Martin Blank who was gaffing with Lino on the *Venetians* for several years and he said something like, “no way did we make that ugly thing!” I also ran it by Charlie Parriott who has served as one of Chihuly’s colorists over the years and whom I have known since 1973, and his one word reply was, “China.”

That same day I received a phone call from a Jim Coombes of Spokane, Washington, asking me if I had heard from Michael Little, a.k.a. “Hi”. I said yes. About two hours later I had listened to the whole story from Mr. Coombes. Essentially, he had seen a chandelier that had been installed at the Jundt, his local museum, and decided to make it his mission to donate a collection of Chihuly work to the museum. He had never bought art before, and his first stop was eBay. We all know that is a mistake because they employ no authenticators and have no system of vetting, although sometimes items can be taken down from the site if someone puts up a fuss about wrong attribution. A lot, unfortunately, slips by the artists who are not always looking out. Mr. Coombes, a retired Airforce pilot who was working nights at Gonzaga University, bought his first piece on eBay and was thrilled. Then he was contacted directly by the seller who said he had more, and asked if he would like to see them.

The seller and Mr. Coombes met in the parking lot of a shopping mall near Seatac airport where about twenty more pieces were acquired with cash out of the back of Little’s vehicle. Little sees he has caught a whopping big fish, and invites him to his family’s home in Renton for dinner and to view more pieces, including drawings, chandelier parts and various other glass pieces he says are by Chihuly. Coombes bought some more pieces, with cash, and now the number approaches a hundred items for about \$30,000., however \$10,000. is still owed Mr. Little for the red “Venetian” which Mr. Coombes would like to have authenticated for the Jundt Museum. He sent me three photos of pieces he had bought, and all three were fake. He said, sorrowfully, that he feared all hundred pieces were fake. He had taken some of the Certificates of Authenticity and copies of invoices to Traver Gallery and to Foster/White Gallery in Seattle and everyone said they had never seen such documentation before. Then he decided to come to me on the advice of Chihuly staff.



The third piece Jim Coombes presented to me, purported to be a 1981 Basket Set. I knew that Chihuly did not make *Baskets* with “jimmies”, and that this was not his signature. I have since seen this signature on a “Persian” that was acquired through Mroczek Brothers Auctioneers. Little had also given the auction house pieces to sell.

Mr. Coombes said he was 72 years old and, while he was very embarrassed by his art collecting naivety, he wanted Michael Little out of commission if it was the last thing he ever did. I said I would help him achieve that end.

We agreed to keep Little hanging on until we were able to get the authorities to look at the case. February 9th, when I asked Little more questions and for his name, here was his response (verbatim):

Hi, The pieces are in Spokane right now and Jim Coombes is trying to donate them to the Jundt Museum, he is in possession of the art now. I included his email address, or tagged his email address so he gets this email too. I really don't know what the museum needs, Jim does though and he also has pictures...

The collection is my family's, the Little family, I'm Michael Little in Renton, WA. We don't really want to be tied into the pieces in a way that someone might realize they can target us or victimize us, burglarize us and such.

If the Jundt Museum or Jim Coombes wants his name and address on the paperwork that would be good or we can give you one of our addresses.

The artwork was sold to us through Belltown Art (Seattle and Bellevue galleries), they brokered or sold items from the Foster/White gallery before it switched owners and then many pieces came directly from Dale Chihuly and Parks Anderson in lots of surplus or overstock or unwanted/mistake/mishap pieces which was either given to or sold to Belltown Art. I do realize that some of the pieces aren't magnificent and spectacular but they all came from Chihuly's studio. That's what I've found out but Belltown Art seems to not want to deal with Chihuly or they just don't care to help us anymore, typical of an art gallery that collects money and turns their back on the customers. Belltown Art's email address is belltownart at inbox.com. We bought the pieces from someone named Ryan and there was another guy named Michael at Belltown Art but the only one who wrote back to us is a new guy named Lee and he's sort of a buttheaded jerk, in a way. He did send a picture of a fax from Dale Chihuly himself (signed) stating that things for Belltown Art are ready for pickup.

The Venetian in the picture below is of important historical significance, being that it is one of the first Venetians. There is a similar 'White' Venetian at the ECHT Gallery in Chicago which I'm very certain Dale Chihuly was trying to replicate the look of this Venetian that Lino Tagliapietra made for him.

I'm not sure which of us is going to pay for your services or if we're splitting the bill but both of us have Paypal. This is my Paypal email address but I dumped funds out of it and sent them to my bank account yesterday (Friday).

So... I guess Jim has to write to you and send his pictures and descriptions....

*Thanks for writing back!
...michael*

When asking more questions Little wrote more tales, including providing me a list of Belltown Arts artists, most of whom I knew well from the Seattle area. I made a few calls, and no one had ever heard of them. Everyone who has ever worked for Chihuly knows that “seconds” are not passed out of the back door by anyone, including Parks Anderson. While Little’s story was impressive, it was entirely fabricated.

Coincidentally, one of Dale’s personal attorneys lives part time in Santa Fe and asked me to lunch in February – a social occasion after the New Year and before he departed for Seattle later that day. I seized the opportunity, and put together the chronology of events with all the emails and photos, and asked him to read it on the plane and call me about what might be done next. The next day brought a conference call with him and another lawyer who stated that the FBI would not take the case (I have since discovered that the FBI only investigates cases valued over one hundred thousand dollars that is in the public domain), so they had contacted HSI/ICE being it appeared that at least some of the items had been imported from China.

On February 28th I interviewed with the federal investigator who instructed me to keep Mr. Little waiting for my Certificate of Authenticity, and asked if I would be willing to go to Little’s house to look for evidence. While this would have been quite a thrill for me, I suggested taking a device with which we could Skype. In early April they went without me or an iPad, but had no trouble finding the evidence they needed.

Mr. Little seemed somewhat mercurial and volatile, and I was thankful that my address was a mail house and I could not easily be found. On the other hand, he knew where Jim Coombes lived, and Jim was keeping the entire story from his wife so she would not live in fear. There was a lot of anxiety about Little and the pending case, so I spoke to Mr. Coombes several times a week.

On the morning of April 25th I received several emails that Michael Little had been arrested, as well as calls from the Seattle press. Dale also called and said he knew nothing about it and wanted to hear the story because, coincidentally, he was going to be giving a lecture at the Jundt Museum that evening. I told him what had occurred over the last few months, and that he should be sure to speak to Jim Coombes who most certainly would be attending the lecture, and because he'd gone to a great deal of trouble to see that this Little character was shut down.

Little's eBay and Etsy sites, where he sold Mustang parts, beach glass from Greece, fake Chihulys and even some fake Harvey Littletons, under the name "lowerednjuiced," were taken down. He still has some videos on line if you search deep enough – one of which shows the inside of the Chihuly blowing studio trash container. He had been a visitor at the studio a year before.

Little pleaded guilty to wire fraud on June 19th, a quick victory for the U.S. Attorney. A wire fraud conviction has potentially higher sentencing limits and longer periods of supervision than a trademark counterfeiting conviction and carries an important message to the general public.

Sentencing, November 20th, 2013:

Kate & Jim,

I've been out of the office all day on another case; however, I wanted to pass along the sentencing information on Michael Little. He was sentenced to 5 months custody and 5 months at a halfway house to be followed by three years court-ordered supervision with restitution in the amount of \$75,389.10. Thank you again for all of your time and consideration on this case. Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL J. LARSON - Special Agent

After investigation of Little's sales records, Special Agent Larson had found twelve of the twenty-five victims willing to come forward with requests for restitution. Whether or not Mr. Little will be able to make good on this will remain the question. Judge Lasnik stated during sentencing that Little might not have gotten jail time at all had he not lied again in court by saying he thought the pieces were real because they came from a sick old lady whose name he would not divulge. Judge Lasnik also said that he'd really like to send the lazy but clever defendant to boot camp, but that was not possible so he hoped that incarceration would at least get him out of bed and out of the house.

"This defendant was persistent and creative in his fraud that recycled ordinary glass into costly works of art," said U.S. Attorney Jenny A. Durkan. "Fraud schemes like this one target all artists and damage confidence in the online marketplace."

January 13, 2014, Michael Little incarcerated. Hopefully this is the end of the story, and Mr. Little doesn't have an equally clever cellmate with whom to commiserate on future scams, as did Seattle's art dealer-become-art thief Kurt Lidke.

Kate Elliott
December 2013

Kate Elliott graduated from Harvey Littleton's program at U.W.-Madison in 1972 and worked for Dale Chihuly for sixteen years. She owned and operated Elliott Brown Gallery in Seattle from 1993 to 2002. She is a certified member of the Appraisers Associate of America, and authenticates Chihuly's work. She lives in Santa Fe, NM.