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Tacoma Art Museum's building, designed by Antoine Predock, is perfect for its needs, and its exhibits are frequently stellar. ()

Forging Tacoma: To the south of Seattle is the town that art built

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P-I ART CRITIC

TACOMA -- On the way to the Tacoma Art Museum, a sign at the corner of Pacific Avenue and Hood Street proclaims: "Dale Chihuly Always On View."

Tacoma is the town that art built. Chihuly, a native son, is key. But he had help.

Before art moved in and took over, the place was minor league with a major inferiority complex. Its reputation for organized crime, pollution and cheesy weirdness undermined efforts to lift the gray fog of its depression. The waterfront belonged to heavy industry while strip clubs and down-at-the-heel bars bordered the downtown, and the wealthy hid out at the lakes.

By the 1990s, the city's fortunes had risen. Crime declined, environmental cleanups were under way and jobs held more or less steady.

Plus, artists had always liked the place. Graphic designer Art Chantry calls Tacoma a "little piece of New Jersey that broke off." He points out that the term flying saucer was coined in Tacoma in 1947, when a Tacoma man reported seeing silver discs flying over Mount Rainier and along the crest of the Cascade Range. When asked what they looked like, the man said, "Like saucers without cups."

Chantry also claims that the term "new age" was invented in Tacoma by a

splinter group of a flying saucer church. (Who wouldn't love a locale with a flying saucer church?)

But the city didn't want to be a carnival on cleanup patrol. Enter art.

Inspired by Chihuly, the city built the Museum of Glass, opening it in 2002 in a building designed by Arthur Erickson on the Thea Foss Waterway, a Superfund site. The building's chief virtue is the silver cone of its hot shop, and the chance to see artists blow glass is the main reason crowds continue to come.

The galleries aren't so appealing. Small with low ceilings, they look like waiting rooms at an airport, which is odd for a museum devoted to a medium that revels in light. The museum's exhibits tend toward the obvious and didactic, but the action in the hot shop remains hot.

Walking distance away is the Tacoma Art Museum, which opened in its present building in 2003. Unlike the glass museum, TAM has a lovely building that is perfect for its needs, designed by Antoine Predock. Also in contrast, TAM's exhibits are frequently stellar. Yes, Chihuly is always on view in the lobby and in cases along a long walkway leading to the galleries. He's a big reason tourists continue to show up. Hence the sign that he's always on view.

Curiously, he's infrequently on view at the Museum of Glass, possibly because the bridge linking MOG to Pacific Avenue is the Chihuly Bridge, full of his vessels in bulletproof cases, as well as two huge poles with chunky blue nuggets visible from the freeway, like big rock candy mountains.

If glass were the whole story, Tacoma's art appeal would be real, but limited. But that appeal continues to grow and deepen, even in the current economic downturn and possible partly because of it.

Artists continue to move there, seeking rents that can't be found in Seattle. The city supports artist housing and has an active and far-from-timid One Percent for Arts program to encourage art in public spaces. There also are city grants to individual artists.

As artist Sarah Kavage wrote in her profile of Tacoma for "Next American City," Tacoma's Culture and Tourism Division serves as "point of contact for artists, offering them one-on-one help to find housing opportunities and funding programs."

Seattle's Traver Gallery has a Tacoma branch beside the Museum of Glass. More interesting are the smaller and more adventurous homegrown enterprises, such as the Tollbooth Gallery on Broadway and South 11th Street, showing video art 24 hours a day in what used to be a TV kiosk.

Even more exciting is The Helm Gallery, an artist project space at 760 Broadway run by Sean Alexander and Peter Lynn. Running through March 15 is an exhibit by Tacoma artists Eli Hansen and Joey Picuch titled "Truths We Forgot To Lie About."


"Why are bootleggers romanticized?" asks Hansen. "Why are meth cooks



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Crowds are drawn to the Museum of Glass where visitors can see artists such as master glass blower Lino Tagliapietra in the hot shop.



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Robert C. Jones' oil painting in the Tacoma Art Museum's Northwest Biennial.

ostracized? Why is the Northwest home to so many bootleggers, meth cooks, serial killers and craftspeople? Does the geography of this area create a space for this kind of activity? Or do we create these stories and myths to fit the geography?"

Through DIY chemistry, traditional craftsmanship, backyard naturopathy and a limited budget, Hansen and Picuch have created an installation that reacts to the geography and history of the Northwest.

Meth cooks and craftspeople? Only a Tacoma artist would link them in the same sentence. The city's cheesy weirdness is alive, well and working to its advantage.

ONLINE

- museumofglass.org
- tacomaartmuseum.org
- tacomaculture.org
- travergallery.com
- tollboothgallery.org
- thehelmgallery.com

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