

The Rise and Fall and Rise of Venetian Glassmaking

Glassmaking in Murano, Italy has a long and impressive history. In fact, it is the longest lasting center for glass making in history. From the 9th century to today, Murano has continued to produce beautiful and innovative artwork through generations of success and failure. A small island northwest of the city of Venice, Murano is not much larger than a few square miles. As a major trading port, Murano reflects Asian and Muslim influences. Multihued beads were used in trading with Asian, African and Muslim neighbors.

In the 13th century, glassblowing in Venice grew so rapidly that in 1260s, Arte, a trade association was formed. In an attempt to formalize a body of guidelines on how glass shops were to be operated and the duties of the glass blowing master and his disciples, the Capitoloare Guild was created. For more than 500 years, the Capitoloare was updated, addressing quality control, raw material agreements and trade protection from foreign competitors.

In the 1200s, glass blowing operations were moved from the city of Venice to the island of Murano because of the fire hazard to a city built of wood. The consolidation of all glassblowers to the island allowed the government to oversee and manage its monopoly on this profitable industry. In fact, the government was so intent on protecting the industry, it created harsh consequences for glassblowers who tried to leave and practice glassblowing in other countries. The glassblower's secret techniques were not only prestigious, but an underpinning of the local economy.

This tightening of control actually produced a higher quality of glass - as the level of competition was intensified between master glassblowers. Innovative ideas and techniques quickly spread throughout the island. With the advent of the Renaissance, new techniques were refined and consumer demand heightened as people sought out the lightest, most graceful glass, further enflaming the reputation and prestige of Venetian glassblowers. Venetian glass became so popular some glassblowers disregarded the Guild's edict on trade secrets and began migrating throughout Europe.

Growing competition from other countries, the occupation of the Venetian Republic by Napoleon's army in 1797, and eventual abolishment of the Guild in 1805, brought about the demise of Venice glassblowing. Gone were the beautiful works of art from just a few decades before. The scant few glassblowing shops that remained produced only beads, small bottles and other trinkets needed for trade.

Thankfully, a reversal of fortunes began to occur in the late 1800s as lost glass blowing techniques began to be reintroduced and artists such as Antonio Salviati won numerous awards at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris for his amazing glass pieces. Around that time, the rediscovery and utilization of murrine, a glass working technique from Roman times become instrumental in the revitalization of the Murano glass industry in the late 1800s.

Over the next 100 years, glass artists such as Paolo Venini, Napoleone Martinuzzi, Giacomo Cappellin, Carlo Scarpa, and Ercole Barovier, to name a few, left their glass artistry genius on the Murano glass industry. The heat of adversity again produced magnificent results directly after World War II. The artistic energy pent up during the war produced some of Murano's most creative and innovative years in the 1950s. Maestros collaborated with artists including Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore and Jean Cocteau, as well as served as mentors to budding artists of the American Studio Glass movement.

The most recent challenge to Venetian glassblowing has been counterfeiting since the 1990s. Sadly, many of the classic vases, glassware and millefiore objects are being counterfeited in Asia, for sale overseas. In response, the Venetian glassmaker's consortium registered a Murano trademark that appears on their wares with the European Union that is difficult to replicate or counterfeit.

About the Author

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