

DISCOVERY MAGAZINE

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by ERICA FIRPO

Beauty can be seen in many guises in the Italian city of Venice – from the architecture to its numerous canals and famed art and glassworks

Master glass

On the Venetian island of Murano, glassmakers are quietly preserving techniques that have produced works of art for centuries

MURANO IS a mystery, a jewel in the archipelago of Venetian islands. For centuries, this tiny island has produced the world's most beautiful glass pieces – goblets that grace the lips of popes and monarchs, chandeliers that light up palaces, and decorative objects that add a glimmer to the everyday. Through rigid regulations and even threats of death, Murano has guarded its glassmaking industry for centuries, surrounding the

of reality, Murano has gained its glassmaking identity for centuries, surrounding the island in lore just as nebulous as the mists off the Venetian Lagoon.



The jewel tones of Murano glass (above right) are inspired by the island's myriad colours

Only 15-minutes north of Venice, by water bus (*vaporetto*) and/or water taxi, Murano feels a world away from Venice's crowds; a place of quiet empty streets and closed doors, privacy is Murano's calling card.

Legend claims the islands' glass history began in the fifth century when locals fled barbarians to the Venetian lagoon, bringing glassmaking techniques from imperial Rome. Venice officially dates its glassmaking legacy to 982AD when a certain Domenico signed witness to a deed, adding the term *filario* (bottlemaker) to his signature. With the cadence of ink, history was written. By the end of the 13th century, glassmakers became a powerful and exclusive guild of artisans known as *arte vetraria*. To protect its artisans, the Venetian government restricted all production of glass to Murano, with the guild declaring anyone caught practising glassmaking outside Murano be expelled or even killed.



Glassblowers wait for the moment when silica gets molten – that's when the magic can happen

In its heyday, the Venetian Republic fleet dominated the Mediterranean and the prestige of Murano glass was

Mediterranean and the prestige of Murano glass was exhibited by its place on Europe’s finest tables. Painters such as Titian and Bellini celebrated its beauty with brush strokes. “To see an unmistakably Venetian piece of glass in an unmistakably Venetian painting is to experience the wonder of the city anew,” explains Dr Letha Chien, art historian at the University of California, Berkeley. “Not only could one possess the painting, but its representational contents as well.”

But almost in the blink of an eye, glass was gone, and just as quickly, Napoleon Bonaparte conquered the Republic of Venice. It wasn’t until the late 1830s that glass production resumed and, by the beginning of the 20th century, glassmaking was once again an enterprise. Firms such as Vetri Soffiati Muranesi Cappellini Venini – the predecessor to world-famous Venini & Co – and Barovier, were created by alliances between master glassmakers and Milanese businessmen. Renowned artists, designers and architects such as Carlo Scarpa and Napoleone Martinuzzi were recruited to helm creative direction, designing both original and modern reinterpretations of history’s greatest pieces, such as the wide-mouthed Libellula vase and Rezzonico chandeliers.

WHERE TO SEE AND BUY GLASS

SEGUSO VIRO
www.segusoviro.com

DOMUS VETRI D’ARTE
FONDATA
Vetrai 82, Murano

PAULY & C.
www.pauly.it

GALLIANO FERRO
www.gallianoferro.it

VENINI
venini.com

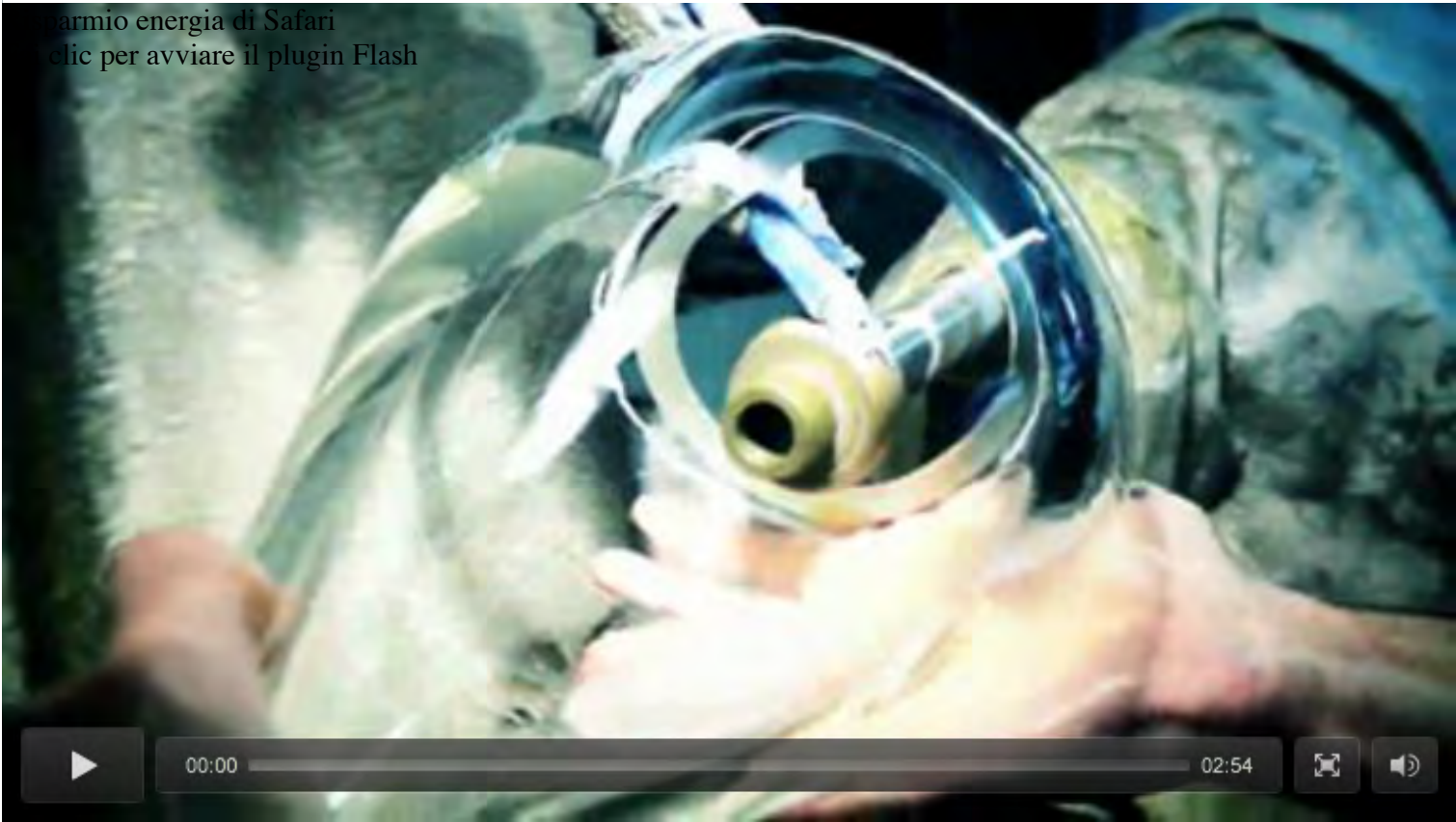
GALLERIA MARINA BAROVIER
www.barovier.it

LU MURANO
www.lu-murano.it

SALVIATI
www.salviati.com

MUSEO DEL VETRO
museovetro.visitmuve.it

LE STANZE DEL VETRO
lestanzedelvetro.it



Murano has always been a tiny and tight-lipped community, and the same applies now. Its 1,000 glassmakers represent centuries of glass dynasties such as Barovier, Salviati, Zecchin, Toso and Seguso, and some just a few decades old, such as Galliano Ferro. But they aren’t easily approachable, despite what some of the more garrulous shop owners would have you believe. “Immediately upon your arrival, multilingual show



openers greet you, ready to take you to studios,” says Franco Regina, veteran gallery owner and manager to Fabio Fornasier, one of Murano’s most avant-garde master glassblowers. His advice is to keep walking as visits to the best foundries and showrooms are usually by appointment.



Murano glass takes on all shapes, colours and forms, and all exhibit the highest level of workmanship

Glassmaking begins early in the morning, in studios or factories where furnaces operate 24 hours a day, every day of the week. In a choreographed ballet of movements – heating, blowing, reheating, pulling, stretching, cutting and detailing – master glassblowers and assistants focus on the delicate moment when silica becomes molten and magic can happen.



The glass chandeliers hanging in Venice’s Ca’ Rezzonico, crafted by 18th-century Murano glassmakers, inspire many modern interpretations

Fornasier represents one of the smaller studios, LU Murano, where he is master glassblower. “To me, this is an artist’s atelier, where anything is possible. It is an area of mystery,” he says as he pulls on molten glass. After an hour spent talking with Fornasier and watching him make his gravity-defying chandeliers, you understand. This space is much more than a workman’s studio – it is ongoing, kinetic invention. The only sounds are the crisp cutting of hot glass that has been blown and stretched in impossible directions, but the air is filled with energy.

The second-generation glass-blower chose to veer from the norm – “In Murano, many do the same thing, the Rezzonico chandelier, etc.” – instead combining traditional techniques with whimsical, experimental designs. “I believe I am an artist and thus must follow my instincts,” he says. Fornasier’s luminaries are enlightened art objects, and he produces fewer than 100 pieces annually. His handcrafted chandeliers hang in contemporary art shows with the same ease as they do in private residences, hotels and casinos.



Murano glassmakers love experimenting with form and colour

Workmanship is just one of the factors that makes Murano's glass authentic. The fronds of a chandelier or a goblet are handmade by artisans. As Regina explains, this contributes to the high cost of the glass. "Cheap trinkets are ready-made and can be found anywhere and in multiples but true Murano glass means workmanship and uniqueness."

The colour of Murano glass is also incomparable. "The particularity of [our] colours comes by virtue of the environment, extraordinary colours that exist in nature around us, like the sunset, sunrise and in the reflections of the lagoon," says Giampaolo Seguso, head of Seguso Viro, who should be considered a colour expert – for 22 generations, secret colour formulas have been passed down from father to son. His family dominates Venetian history. Since 1397, there has been a Seguso in a workroom, factory, gallery or museum, as master glassmakers or innovators, such as Artemide Seguso, Giampaolo's father and impresario of inimitable colour and filigree techniques.



Fabio Fornasier's chandelier designs have established him as one of Murano's most avant-garde master glassblowers

Much like Fornasier, Giampaolo is the new embodiment of glass artisan. He is an

much like Tommaso, Giampaolo is the new embodiment of glass artisan. He is an entrepreneur, dedicating the past 25 years to upgrading the company’s vision with contemporary designs and cutting-edge, international designers. He is a poet, working with master glassblowers on art pieces that he then inscribes with his poems. And he is a historian, researching and preserving the archived, early-20th-century Seguso designs for personal records and reinterpretation in his product line.

Authentic Murano glass is not hard to find on the island or in Venice’s many boutiques, souvenir shops, restaurants and bars. Pieces come in every technique and incarnation – vases, goblets, lamps, figurines, candelabras, dishes, paperweights, jewellery and more – pieces that bear the Veneto region’s official trademark “Vetro Artistico Murano”, a tamper-proof sticker that authenticates the product. But for Regina, that isn’t enough. “Before coming to Venice, you need to inform yourself in advance on artists, styles and galleries. And you need to ask questions when you are looking at glass.”

After just a single day of studying Murano’s glimmering legacy, it becomes clear that its colourful, inimitable glass is a reflection of Venice’s vibrancy.



Giampaolo Seguso’s family has passed its colour formulas down from father to son for 22 generations

What’s hot – Venice





Canal views come with the territory at the Bauer il Palazzo hotel



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Photos. Italian city of Venice, Murano canal, Rezzonico chandelier and coloured glass: Getty Images. Flame sculpture by Denise Gemin of Fornace Mian: Alamy/Argusphoto. Pauly & C vase: Luca Masarà

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