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## THE HISTORY OF MURANO GLASS

Murano Glass has been produced in Venice since the year 1293 with the most amazing mouth blown glass products in the world. Please enjoy this brief 4 part history on Murano Glass, its origins and some of the furnaces involved in making this industry what it is today

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DEAN C  
CEO  
MURANO ART GLASS AUSTRALIA

Recognised Member of the World Wide WHO'S WHO of CEO's and Business Executives  
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## PART 1

# MURANO GLASS HISTORY – THE BEGINNING IN 1293



The history of **Murano Glass** is and fascinating as it is interesting. Since the 9th century, the mastery of **Glass blowing** turning colored sand and molten glass into beautiful forms of art renowned the world over is simply unsurpassed. It is without doubt the longest and most prolific glass producing area in the world with trade secrets, styles and methods long protected by a fiercely proud community. The islands that make up **Murano** in **Venice** cover but a small area of a few square miles and it lies North West of Venice Italy.

The origins of **Murano glass blowing** it is believed, dates to the 9th century in Rome where the upheaval of various ethnic influences such as Asian and Muslim shaped it's people and eventually, the various products that Muranese **glass blowing** furnaces produced. In early times, it's main source of trade were multicolored beads between it African, Muslim and Asian neighbours. The first recorded production of Murano Glass was describe in an historical document which notes Domenico as a Master Glass Blower or MAESTRO who practiced the art of creating bottles. Other rare documents have described noted individuals such as Pietro Fiolario who began working with Glass in 1803 and Giovanni Fiolario who made bottles in and around the mid-12th Century (1158)

The 13th Century brought an abundance of historical records on the growing trade of glassblowing in Venice. The craft grew so rapidly, that in the 1260's a trade association, the Arte, was formed. In an attempt to create and formalize a body of broad rules on how **glass** shops were to be operated and the duties and responsibilities of both maestri and discipuli (disciples), the Capitolare was created. The earliest known version of the Capitolare dates to 1271, and was updated regularly for over 500 years until 1776. Over time, the Capitolare addressed quality control, raw material agreements and trade protection from foreign competitors. Although few glass pieces survive from the 13th century, documents from that period describe a range of utilitarian products from glasses and vases to beads and other less widely recognized objects including enamelled glass, imitation jewels and richly colored window panes.

## PART 2

### MURANO GLASS HISTORY – 13<sup>TH</sup> TO 17<sup>TH</sup> Century

In 1291, the Maggior Consiglio (Venetian government) decreed that all the glass furnaces had to be moved from the city of Venice proper onto the island of Murano, because of the fire hazard to a city built of wood. More politically astute observers note that the consolidation of all glassblowers on a small island allowed the government to better oversee and manage its monopoly on the profitable industry.

Realizing that the Glassblowers secret techniques were prestigious and one of the underpinnings of the local economy, the Republic further tightened its control by issuing an edict forbidding glassblowers to practice their craft in other countries. To insure that the maestri's secrets were never revealed, harsh sentences were meted out to individuals who leaked secrets to foreigners or left Venice without official permission. At the time it was rumoured that the Maggior Consiglio even hired assassins to capture or kill artisans who left the island.

However, the close eye kept on Murano and its artists had unforeseen positive consequences. By artificially concentrating the entire glass blowing industry on a small island, it inadvertently intensified the level of competition between maestri; as a result the quality of glass was dramatically refined, and new techniques and ideas rapidly disseminated throughout the island.

The Renaissance had a profound effect on Italy, and Murano in particular. Angelo Barovier discovered Cristallo, a pure, bright, completely transparent crystal glass, which complemented the intricate designs seen in the mid to late 15th century. Goblets, bottles and pitchers all had ornate and sophisticated designs including enamelling and gold leaf. New production techniques were slowly developed, including, filigrana a retortoli in 1527 and a ghiaccio around 1570.

Also during this time, engraving was also seen on some works of glass. Throughout Europe in the 16th and 17th centuries, the lightest, most graceful glass was sought after, allowing the reputation and prestige of Venetian glassblowers to flourish as the quality, designs, and bright colors became widely known.

The demand for Venetian glass became so great; some maestros disregarded the Guilds edict on trade secrets and began migrating throughout Europe. Even Louis XIV commissioned master craftsmen to create glass pieces for the palace at Versailles. The Netherlands, Germany, France and Spain also had their own furnaces run by Muranese expatriates who described their works as *à la façon de Venise* (in the Venetian manner) and often modified classic designs and techniques to suit local materials and tastes.

### PART 3

## MURANO GLASS HISTORY – 18<sup>TH</sup> Century to 1910

The emigration of talent had its effect on Venice's pre-eminence in glassblowing. Other countries used the once secret knowledge divulged by the Maestri of Murano to create their own styles and interpretations of glass. Bohemian crystal, thicker, heavier and often engraved, grew in popularity to the point that it rivalled the popularity of Murano Glass the century before. This change in taste towards a more robust glass and the fall and occupation of the Venetian Republic by Napoleon's troops in 1797 combined with the subsequent abolishment of the Guild in 1805 precipitated a long lasting crisis in Venice. The first half of the 19th century saw many Murano furnaces shuttered and its artists scattered throughout Europe. The surviving shops did not produce the beautiful works of art they had been known to make only a few decades earlier, rather; they were only making beads, small bottles and other trinkets needed for trade. This reversal of fortune lingered until the 1860's when Vincenzo Zanetti developed the **Glass Museum of Murano**, (in reality more of a school than a museum) and slowly began reintroducing lost glass blowing techniques.

During the same time, Antonio Salviati opened Salviati & Co. and began producing wonderful pieces that hadn't been seen in 200 years. The artists at his furnace became so adept; they won numerous awards at the 1867 Universal Exposition in Paris. By the 1890's glass making in Murano was showing signs of reinvigoration, and Salviati & Co. was bought by Barovier after Salviati's death in 1890. Ironically, the rediscovery and utilization of *a murrine*, a glass working technique from Roman times, is partially responsible for restoring the Murano Glass industry in the late 1800's.

In 1896, the first Venice Biennale show opened, allowing Muranese maestri to meet, share ideas, and establish relationships with other like-minded artists from other nations. The results of this seminal meeting can still be seen today in the maestri's close collaboration with artists worldwide. However, once again, the furnaces were confronted with stiff competition from foreign glassmakers including Tiffany and Lalique.

Around this time, the company Fratelli Toso was beginning to be recognized for its works with *a murrine*, but World War I interrupted the fledging recovery of Muranese craftsmanship, and it wasn't until the 1920's, three artists, Vittorio Zecchin, Paolo Venini, and Giacomo Cappellin began creating new works with simple lines, delicate colors and the thinnest of glass. One of the pivotal players in the modern Murano era is Paolo Venini. An unlikely candidate, an attorney with no experience in glassblowing, he was known for his willingness to collaborate with others in diverse fields, especially from the world of architecture. One of his greatest contributions to Murano in the 20th century was developing upcoming artists. The list of artists his company mentored over the years reads like a who's who of the modern Venetian art world. In 1921, Paolo Venini teamed up with Giacomo Cappellin to establish a new company named V.S.M. Cappellin Venini & Co. Their pieces, created by Vittorio Zecchin, were immediately recognized to be exceptional works of craftsmanship combined with a delicate sophistication. However, the partnership didn't last long, and they parted in 1925.

## PART 4

### MURANO GLASS HISTORY – 1910 TO THE MODERN DAY

After the breakup, Venini started Vetri Soffiati Muranesi Venini & Co, and hired Napoleone Martinuzzi, a sculptor who was overseeing the Murano Glass Museum, to manage his new venture. Martinuzzi developed pulegoso technique, and in 1930, helped bring forth the controversial use of opaque glass, something never seen in the centuries of Murano glass craftsmanship. The use of opaque glass proved to be a watershed event, since it completely broke with tradition, allowing the artists to experiment with different creative ideas that would have been considered absurd a few years prior.

Giacomo Cappellin also opened a new furnace, Maestri Vetrai Muranesi Cappellin & Co, and retained Vittorio Zecchin as director. Vittorio Zecchin remained director at Maestri Vetrai Muranesi Cappellin & Co, until 1926 when an unknown architect, Carlo Scarpa, replaced him. The first few years under Scarpa were heavily influenced by Zecchin's designs, but Scarpa didn't take long to find his muse and produced many high quality pieces which made use of forgotten techniques, bright colors and opaque glass. Although Cappellin & Co. was considered an exceptional furnace; it closed in 1932 due to fiscal mismanagement. In a stroke of good fortune for Paolo Venini, Martinuzzi's departure from Venini in 1932 to form Zecchin-Martinuzzi glass with Francesco Zecchin allowed him to pick up Carlo Scarpa as art director, who was looking for work after the closing of Maestri Vetrai Muranesi Cappellin & Co. Scarpa's innovative techniques flourished during his tenure at Venini & Co. In addition to creating new ways to work with molten glass such as sommersi, he also developed new surface treatments including a corrosi, battuto, a fasce and a pennellate. During these years, Paolo Venini also took more of an active role in the day to day operations of a glass house and began co-designing works with Scarpa.

After departing Venini in 1947, Carlo Scarpa returned to architecture, restoring the Castelvecchio in Verona to wide acclaim, before passing away in 1978. Also during the 1930s another artist, Ercole Barovier rose to prominence in Murano after he and his brother, Nicolo took over the creative direction of Vetreria Artistica Barovier. In 1939, after the brothers went their separate ways, the company was renamed Barovier & Toso Co., after a merger with the Toso family, and remains so named to this day. Ercole Barovier was known for his work with a murrine and the creation of beautiful sculptured animals. He spent much of his time during the 30's perfecting a technique he named colorazione a caldo senza fusione, and also created fresh pieces in the 40's and 50's using the tessere technique. In 1996, The Barovier family was recognized by the Guinness Book of World Records for being the oldest glass making family in the world. Also during the 30s Ermanno Toso changed the direction of Fratelli Toso, which had been founded in 1854 by his ancestors, from one of creating traditional Muranese objects to one of more modern tastes. Again, war threatened the glass masters in the 40's but the industry managed to survive World War II and emerged post-war with pent up artistic energy, making the 1950's some of the most creative and innovative years the island of Murano have ever seen. The filigrana technique was expanded and used to new effect by another Murano master, Archimede Seguso, who opened his own shop, Vetreria Archimede Seguso, in 1946. Today, the works created during this time are considered the most desirable by collectors.

Artists including Dino Martens, who brought traditional Venetian techniques to America, Flavio Poli and Fulvio Bianconi all began making unique, non-traditional works to express their creativity. Since the 1950's the maestros in Venice have collaborated with artists worldwide, including Pablo Picasso, Henry Moore and Jean Cocteau in addition to serving as a mentors to artists who started the American Studio Glass movement. A recent challenge to the Venetian glassblowers in the marketplace has been counterfeiting. Beginning in the 1990's and continuing today, many of the classic vases, glassware and millefiore objects are being counterfeited in Asia, for sale overseas.

In September 2002, in response to this growing problem, Promovetro, the glassmaker's consortium registered a Murano trademark with the European Union. The mark, a lilac colored sticker with a glassmaker's cana de soffio (blowpipe) and the Italian inscription "Artistic Glass Murano" is printed on a film that is difficult to replicate or counterfeit.