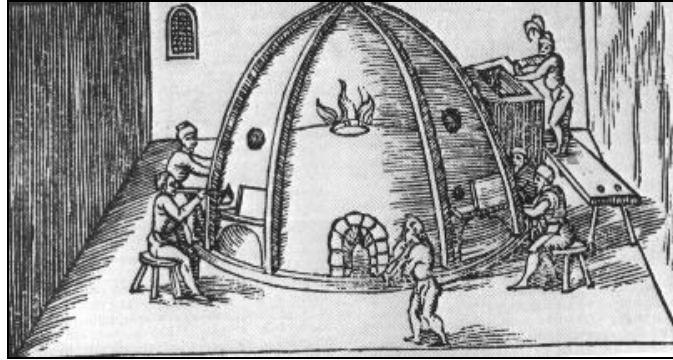


# Murano - Island of Glass

By Bob Muth



Three-Tiered Furnace : Venice 1540

Today, the island of Murano is only a short ride on the number 41/42 *vaporetto* from Venice's Piazza San Marco. Every day, thousands of tourists make the forty-minute boat trip to buy glassware, handcrafted glass animals, whimsies and decorative bottles, as well as to get a good meal and try the local wine. The tranquillity of the island today belies its ancient and colorful history, which spans much of the history of western civilization.

Venice came into prominence as a provincial town in the Eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, which is one explanation for the more eastern and exotic character of the city's art and architecture, compared with that of other cities in Italy. Early in the 9<sup>th</sup> century, (828 AD) the Venetians stole the remains of St. Mark from Alexandria (stored in a barrel of pickled pork for protection from the customs officials), and brought them to the city as its patron saint. This marked the assertion of Venetian independence from Byzantine rule, and ushered in a remarkable millennium of glory for Venice as a trading and maritime power. The city

adopted a republican form of government, with an elected *doge* (from the Latin *dux*, or duke) and a great council of nobles. The Republic of Venice soon acquired substantial territories on mainland Italy and the Adriatic coast, as well as enormous wealth and sophistication.

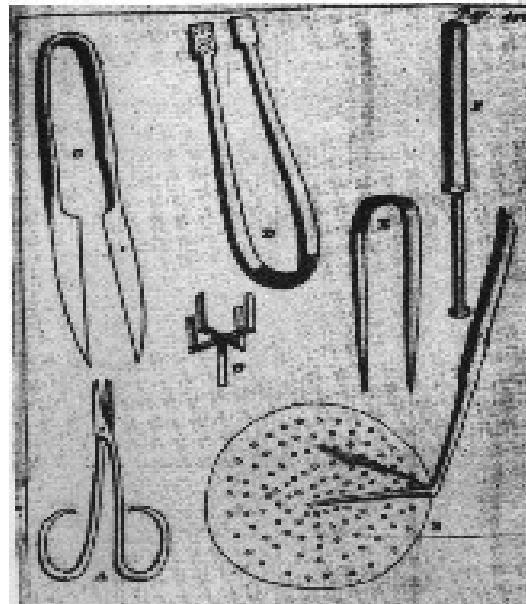
As early as the 8<sup>th</sup> century glass making became one of the major economic activities of the Republic. Mercantile activities in Venice were heavily regulated by the council in order to maximize revenues to the State, and glassblowing was no exception. The types of fuel used in the furnaces, the origin of the silica in the glass, and the size of the ovens were all prescribed as early as 1200 by the government. In 1291, the doge and council banned glassmaking from the city of Venice, relegating the industry to the island of Murano. The main reason for this decision was the danger of fire in the medieval city. (This fear was well-founded; I witnessed a large fire in a *palazzo* near the Rialto bridge during my recent visit) A side effect of the move was to greatly increase the secrecy

involved in Venetian glassblowing, which resulted in an increase in the creativity of the glass masters, who tended to be highly competitive. Legend has it that any glassmaker attempting to relocate or sell his secrets would be punished by death. By the 15<sup>th</sup> century over three thousand glass blowers were employed on the island, and the industry gradually evolved from utilitarian objects to highly decorative and beautiful works of art. The Renaissance marked a peak in the ingenuity of the Venetian glass makers.

By the 18<sup>th</sup> century a slow decline began in the economic and military fortunes of Venice, and in 1797 Napoleon took control of the republic, ending a thousand years of independence. The Treaty of Vienna in 1815 ceded the city to the Austrian Hapsburgs, who shut down much of the glassmaking industry in order to favor their homeland of Bohemia. By 1820 only thirteen furnaces remained on the island, and only five blew glass. The remainder produced molded items for export.

During the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century the slow decline began to reverse. The Fratelli Toso firm was started in 1854, and the Salvati company began production in 1859. These businesses achieved worldwide admiration for the beauty of their glass, and in 1866 Venice was freed from Austrian rule, voting in plebiscite to join the new Kingdom of Italy. The master glassblowers who had kept the centuries-old traditions alive were once again free to make Murano a world-renowned center for artistic and decorative glassware.

Today Murano is known for its modern styles of glass, particularly the bright colors and intricate patterns the factories are expert at producing. The glass making process, however, remains very labor intensive, and many of the tools used 500 years ago are still employed today. Pontil rods, nippers and wood blocks are used for the hand blown pieces, although the furnaces have switched from alder wood to methane gas as an environmental measure. This has the added advantage of keeping a constant temperature during the fusion process. The masters work without masks or gloves, and have the burn marks to prove it.



Tools—16<sup>th</sup> century

Murano glass is once again at the cutting edge of design and beauty, thanks to the masters' keeping alive the knowledge and techniques of their predecessors. The opportunity to see the furnaces in action is an experience that anyone interested in glass should especially value. Murano has earned over the past eight centuries its nickname, *isola del vetro*, the island of glass.