

ARTISTRY *in glass*

An underrated yet heavily used everyday material, glass can also be transformed into objects of beauty, full of colour and light when blown by a skilled craftsman



It is extraordinary that grains of sand can be transformed into objects of beauty, such as this curvy vase that has swirls of colour worked into the glass as it is blown by a skilled glass artist.

Glass is an everyday material that is actually quite remarkable. Used for glazing, drinking vessels, vases, bottles, lighting and all manner of household objects, it can also be elevated into something beautiful, artistic and luxurious by the hand of a craftsman. Glass expert on the BBC *Antiques Roadshow* and director of glass and decorative arts at Fieldings Auctioneers, Will Farmer, explains that “glass is hideously underrated as a material considering the complexity of making it. It is mind boggling that someone can create some of the most beautiful objects in the widest spectrum of colour, shape and forms from something that fundamentally started life as a piece of sand.” Farmer also adds that one of the pitfalls of glass, its fragility, is another factor adding to its allure and collectability. “It is the most fragile of materials, if you smash glass the game is over; everything else you can restore or repair to some degree.”

Perhaps it is this delicate beauty that has made glass so desirable for centuries, whether as a simple water glass or an elaborate chandelier. The topic is so vast, that here the focus is specifically on coloured glass and artistic ‘studio’ glass.

MURANO MAGIC

In the West it was the Italians who truly mastered the art of glass making. Today Italy is still famed for the glistening products that hail from the small Venetian island of Murano. Pierpaolo Seguso, group creative director and president of Seguso, is the 22nd generation of the Seguso family to manufacture glass on Murano, which they have been doing for 600 years.

He reveals that the glass making moved to the island in the late thirteenth century because of the risk of fires in Venice. “At that time the art of glass making was also a unique craft that they [Venetians] wanted to protect,” he adds, so much so that masters on the island were honoured with noble titles.

However, there were also strict rules: glass makers were forbidden from teaching the craft elsewhere, on pain of death. Despite the island being very small, the Murano masters developed the originals of many of the glass objects we use today, from bulbs, stemware and decorative pieces, to tools such as the telescope lens. “The contribution the tiny island gave to Europe is incredible,” enthuses Seguso.

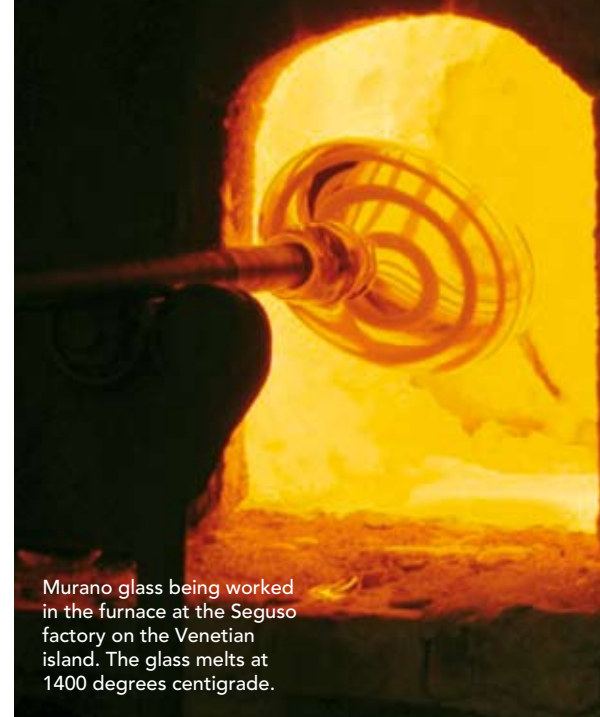
The company prides itself on continuing to manufacture all of its products on Murano, the only major glass maker to do so, and for the fact that by making a diverse range of products, rather than specialising in one sector, it upholds the traditions of centuries of Murano glass making. “We consider ourselves tailors for designers and for passionate collectors, and we cannot cheat them,” explains Seguso.

The methods of manufacture have remained the same, too. “If you visited the factory, only the colour of the shirts and haircuts of the workers have changed. The ambience and our methods are the same as 500 years ago,” he laughs. This is because the intricate detailing and elaborate elements simply could not be created using modern technology. Each piece must be handcrafted, and one of the key elements of Murano is the integral use of colour. “What makes it special is the inclusion into the glass of multiple colours and canes, which is like the threading of fabric,” explains Seguso. However, the company uses the traditional methods passed down from father to son to fulfill contemporary needs. “Our latest project is the use of modern LED lights that have glass decoration in the place of bulbs to reflect the light,” he reveals, “although the light source has changed over time, the chandelier is made in exactly the same way, which I find rather wonderful.”

ENGLISH HERITAGE

Eventually the craft of glass making did spread across Europe. In England, the West Midlands town of Stourbridge became a centre for the glass making industry. Keith Brocklehurst, co-director of the International Festival of Glass

Peter Layton’s Arrival of Spring collection is a homage to the work of his friend, artist David Hockney. From £750.



Murano glass being worked in the furnace at the Seguso factory on the Venetian island. The glass melts at 1400 degrees centigrade.

(held in Stourbridge), explains, “this year is the 400th anniversary of glass making in Stourbridge. Around 200 years ago the town was a major world centre for glass making with important factories like Stuart, Webb Corbett and Thomas Webb and Sons.” At this time the glass produced was lead crystal. By adding lead, higher temperatures could be maintained during manufacture and the result was a sparkling glass that was stronger and easier to cut. Will Farmer reveals that the factories at Stourbridge “were at the pinnacle of international glass making. At its peak the key things about Stourbridge were diversity and techniques; we developed so many techniques in a small space of time and really pushed boundaries.”

Today there are only a few companies maintaining the tradition of crystal manufacture in the area. However, what replaced it was the studio glass movement: individuals using glass to create sculptural and artistic pieces.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Peter Layton, a prominent glassblower and founder of London Glassblowing, discloses that “for centuries, glass was produced in factories behind closed doors, which made it very hard for individual artists to sculpt or use glass like any other medium – like, for instance, pottery.” Layton explains that this year ▶

Specialist Subject

BELOW This exquisite Murano chandelier takes around ten weeks to make. Alberio chandelier in amber glass, £POA, Seguso.

RIGHT Seguso also apply their traditional skills to contemporary pieces such as this chic lacquered table with clear iridescent glass legs. Palazzo Table, £POA.



is the studio glass movement's fiftieth anniversary, a movement which began when a potter in America fought the system [of factory glass] and set up his own furnace and studio. In England, Stourbridge maintained its glassmaking heritage by becoming one of the first places to build a small studio glass furnace. "Studio glass now exists all over the world and studios like mine are becoming the glass industry," adds Layton.

For him, and other glass artists, the industry has had to shift to the making of more artistic pieces as they simply cannot compete with mass-made products imported from China. "I am always striving to make meaningful objects that say something to someone: that they can enjoy and value for the rest of their lives, or as long as the piece survives," enthuses Layton. Although he does make practical objects such as stemware and vases, these are all highly decorative, and Layton enjoys the process of adding colour and working with the glass. "My philosophy is that every piece should be different, I enjoy seeing how when you put the colour onto clear glass it spreads as you blow it out, and as the glass gets thinner more light comes through it. I see it as fusion

of art and science."

The colours are worked in a number of ways: some echo the techniques of Murano using canes of colour; other times powders and granules are mixed in to the molten glass. Despite the perception that glass is a cheap material, Layton argues that colours are very expensive. "Selenium, for instance (from which you get lovely reds and yellows) is very difficult to work with and the price has gone up 700 per cent in a year. It's these kinds of things that glass blowers have to contend with." Other huge expenses include labour, since glass blowing is a skill that can take years to master, and fuel costs to maintain the heat of the furnace. "In a factory, if you take more than five minutes to make a piece, you are taking a long time, but in our studio we may spend hours on a single piece," reveals Layton. "Glass is still extraordinarily cheap when you consider the time, energy and skill that goes into it." This is a sentiment echoed by Brocklehurst and an aim of the Glass Festival is to "educate the public as to how many hours have been put into these unique craftsman-made pieces." ■



Peter Layton Yellow Paradise collection; dropper from £599 and stoneform from £540.

GLASS ON SHOW

This is a special year in the glass industry, with celebratory exhibits

2012 marks the 400th anniversary of glass making in Stourbridge so this year's International Festival of Glass is sure to be a special one. The Festival encompasses a number of events this summer: The British Glass Biennale (24 August - 15 September) exhibits work from leading British glass artists; glass making masterclasses (20 - 23 August) and a four-day festival from the 24 August, with plenty of opportunities for purchasing unique works of glass art, including a 'fun auction'. www.ifg.org.uk

This year is also the 35th anniversary of London Glassblowing. Peter Layton is celebrating with a Past & Present exhibition, from 16 October - 10 November, showcasing the work of glassblowers who have worked at his studio. Held at the studio, visitors will also be able to see glass blowing in action. Day classes are also taught at the studio for those interested in learning the basics of the art. www.londonglassblowing.co.uk

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