



merchants of venice

There was a time when Murano glass was synonymous with Europe's most sumptuous palaces. Can a new generation of glassmakers reclaim its reputation for technical and creative innovation? Lucia van der Post reports

Take serial entrepreneurs Shirley and Vernon Hill (Vernon built US Commerce Bancorp into a top US bank and is the man behind Metro Bank) who have long been collectors of glass, mostly from the 600-year-old family firm of Seguso Vetri d'Arte. It was through collecting that the Hills met the Seguso family and began to see that many furnaces were closing down and skills were being lost. "I have antique pieces in my collection that can't be made any longer because the glass master died without passing on the techniques," says Shirley Hill. So two years ago, the Hills decided to make it their mission to raise Seguso Vetri d'Arte to world-class status. "I was not just going to give money," says Shirley, "I wanted to go slowly and build a brand."

Among the first things the Hills are doing is starting an apprenticeship scheme so that techniques can be passed on. They also believe that Seguso Vetri d'Arte isn't just

From the 13th to the 18th century Murano was one of the wonders of the world with an unrivalled reputation for innovation, its glassmakers having developed, among other things, ways of incorporating threads of gold into their creations and techniques for the famous millefiori (multicoloured) and lattimo (milk) glass.

It is no secret that since then Murano has been through sad times. When the recession of the 1970s and 1980s hit Italy, many of the furnaces turned to making cheap touristy objects, while at the same time crude copies from China and eastern Europe debased the whole notion of Murano glass. This led to the closing of many furnaces, the loss of many jobs and even a fear for the survival of this ancient and noble craft.

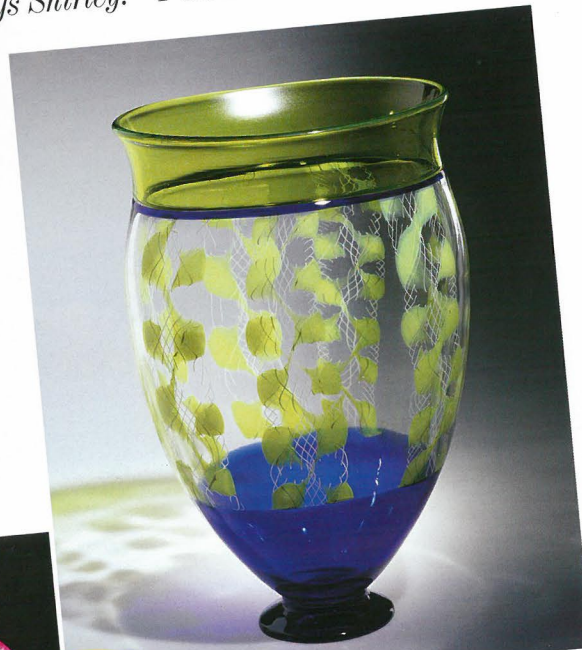
But Murano knows how to triumph over the hard times – in the 15th century it was saved by Angelo Barovier's invention of crystal-clear glass, while three centuries later it was the development of luxurious Venetian mirrors and chandeliers that saw off the competition from Bohemia. And while today it is still too early to say that a complete renaissance is under way there are, fortunately, philanthropists and patrons, latter-day Medicis and Gonzagas, who have a deep love of the finest Murano glass and want to ride to the rescue.

Luca Berta, who runs the Venice Art Factory Project with co-founder Francesca Giubilei, is in no doubt as to what has gone wrong and what needs to be done. "The furnaces have completely failed to renew themselves. They stick to traditional techniques and traditional designs. Almost none of them invests in any research and development – and with science advancing so fast today, there are lots of exciting innovations they should be embracing."

Take serial entrepreneurs Shirley and Vernon Hill (Vernon built US Commerce Bancorp into a top US bank and is the man behind Metro Bank) who have long been collectors of glass, mostly from the 600-year-old family firm of Seguso Vetri d'Arte. It was through collecting that the Hills met the Seguso family and began to see that many furnaces were closing down and skills were being lost. "I have antique pieces in my collection that can't be made any longer because the glass master died without passing on the techniques," says Shirley Hill. So two years ago, the Hills decided to make it their mission to raise Seguso Vetri d'Arte to world-class status. "I was not just going to give money," says Shirley, "I wanted to go slowly and build a brand."

Among the first things the Hills are doing is starting an apprenticeship scheme so that techniques can be passed on. They also believe that Seguso Vetri d'Arte isn't just

The Hills decided to make it their mission to raise Seguso Vetri d'Arte to world-class status. "I wasn't just going to give money," says Shirley. "I wanted to build a brand"



Clockwise from top left:
Napoleone Martinuzzi for Venini
Doge chandelier, £10,500.
Giampaolo Seguso for Seguso
Vetri d'Arte vase, £25,000, and
paperweight, £20,000. Tadao
Ando for Venini hourglass, £7,600

with some enchanting handmade tumblers (€100) and wine glasses (€160) to buy online. Salvati is another Murano company benefiting from recent investment. Founded in the mid-19th century to counter the competition from English and Bohemian glass, it was bought by the

Umana group in May with the specific intention of reinvigorating the brand. At this year's Milan Salone del Mobile, Salvati gave some intimation of where it is heading. In its *Breaking the Mould* exhibition, a team of seven international designers, collaborating with a materials scientist, produced a series of experimental one-off vessels (from €1,960 through Venice Future) formed from blown glass combined with 3D printing and refractory materials (non-metallic materials capable of withstanding incredibly high temperatures). Looking forward it will also be bringing video artists and communications experts on board, hoping to collectively "push the boundaries of traditional craft". Then there is Oikia 3, owned by Rinaldo Invernizzi, 20 per cent of Barovier & Toso, one

ware – "we are also selling the history behind it". So while it sells some of its products encourages buyers to visit the studio and become immersed in the history and its philosophy. Elsewhere, offering a few, very select small pieces they can engage customers in the brand. There is a showroom-cum-café at the Seguso Vetri d'Arte hotel in Venice and they are looking for suitable locations. The idea is to be entirely with Seguso Vetri d'Arte: furniture, tableware, lighting and so on – the experience special. They also offer private tours (with Bellini) and will take in visits to the Seguso Artist Atelier, which is usually closed to the public. "We want to show what is behind the doors and give our guests a completely different from the brutalist tours touted round St Mark's Square," says son Gianluca Seguso. (Tours can also be booked through Seguso Vetri d'Arte.)

ectly through Seguso Vetri d'Arte.) glassware itself, historically much has been for commissions (from €20,000). A glass table and a set of wine glasses were made for Princess Diana, and door handles have been produced for many other special orders include tables, chandeliers, and other special orders. Other special orders include tables, chandeliers, and other special orders. Other special orders include tables, chandeliers, and other special orders.