

## Still Sparkling After 700 Years



Glassmaking is Murano's ancient art, revered by doges and tourists alike.

By ANDREW FERREN

It was the sort of thing that would never happen to George Clooney: As I stepped off the packed vaporetto onto the island of Murano, I slipped on the rain-slicked dock and my trolley bag went click-clacking across the dock's wooden planks. When neither the suitcase nor I fell into the Venice Lagoon, my audience — a boat full of amused Italian passengers — went back to their cellphones and newspapers and the vaporetto chugged off toward Venice.

It was an inauspicious start to a journey that many a trusted tastemaker advised me not to take. Despite the fact that vintage Murano glass is avidly sought by museum curators and interior designers around the world, there is a prevailing sense that contemporary Murano has lost some of its mystique; a trip to the island is usually the purview of package tour operators and first-time visitors to Venice.

Rumors that some of the "Murano" glass sold on the island is actually made in China or Mexico haven't helped; nor has a global recession that's been particularly harsh to southern Europe and its artisans who create exquisite but often expensive wares.

But in just one day in September spent poking around the island, it was abundantly clear that talented artisans are still creating gorgeous glass objects. And blending the latest technology with ancient techniques has been Murano's recipe for survival for the last seven centuries.

Glassware, of course, has been around for millennia — the Romans produced beautiful pieces — but the knowledge and techniques were eventually forgotten and lost in Europe during the Middle Ages. Its revival is traced to the Republic of Venice's trade with the Middle East, where glassmaking traditions had continued in Byzantium and the Muslim world. Through their trading partners, the Venetians learned the secrets of production and established a thriving industry that produced elegant blown glass and mirrors, which quickly became coveted symbols of style and status across Europe.

After repeated fires at the factories leveled parts of the city, the doge moved all glassmaking enterprises to the small island of Murano in 1291, creating what some call the world's first industrial park. Besides containing the risk of fire, the move controlled comings and goings to ensure that rival empires did not pilfer talent or techniques.

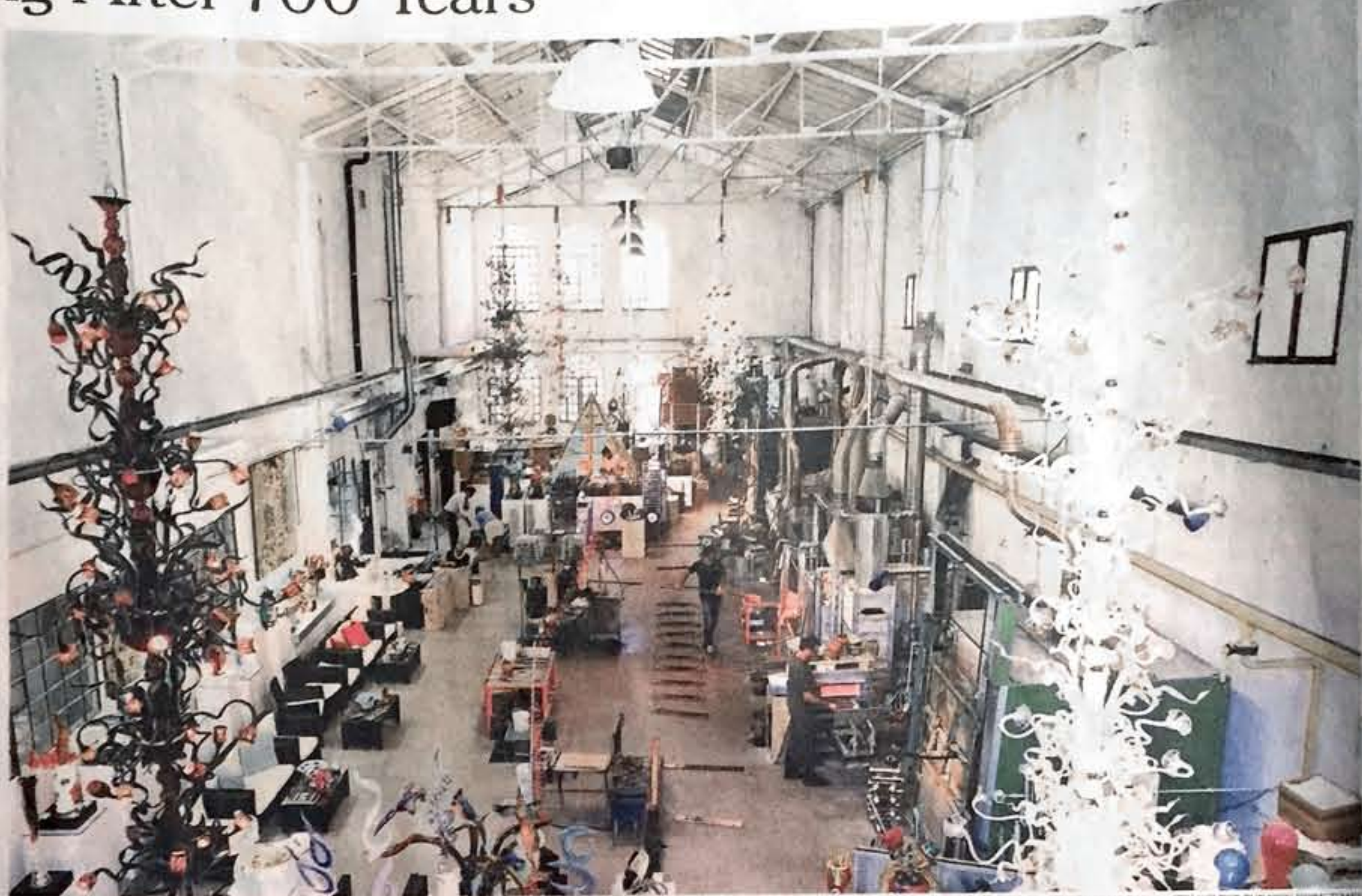
Today Murano still maintains an industrial vibe, resembling a gritty micro-Venice with a largely working-class population of 7,000 residents and an annual influx of more than five million tourists. There are some photogenic canals and bridges and even a lighthouse, but much of the island is a maze of nearly deserted lanes winding through a dense jumble of seemingly derelict factories. The retail action is mostly confined to the main streets, which are packed with the showrooms of well-known manufacturers like Seguso, Venini, Barovier & Toso, Cenedese and Mazzega and smaller stores selling a wildly diverse array of off-brand objects to suit every purse.

Because I wanted to avoid the hawkers and product overload while learning a lot about Murano in a short time, I hired a guide, Guido Lion, from the bespoke travel operation IC Bellagio. Mr. Lion arranged a tour that allowed me to visit several maestros in trusted workshops like Cenedese (now owned by Seguso) and walk through their showrooms with no impulse to buy but rather to trace the history of glass production and innovation.

As is the case today when the best way forward seems to start at the intersection of cutting-edge technology and quality, so it was after World War II, when Gino Cenedese opened a glassworks that became an incubator of innovation in the 1950s, '60s and '70s. The introduction of gas furnaces and torches suddenly allowed maestros to work at consistently higher temperatures and to create ever thicker and more sculptural pieces of clear glass; these are highly prized items by collectors of midcentury design.

After Cenedese's museumlike displays, it took a minute to adjust to the creatively chaotic atmosphere at Massimiliano Schiavon's vast shop and showroom, where the ground-floor furnaces are nestled amid product displays and continuing projects, such as the black glass vintage movie camera that was being made during my visit as a wedding gift for Mr. Clooney.

Mr. Schiavon's work betrays an affinity for vivid colors and exceptionally large



PHOTOGRAPHS BY FRANCESCO LAURICCI FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



bowls, vases and platters — some more than 30 inches in diameter. Most are priced upward of 2,000 euros. He also designs collections that reveal the 21st-century glassmaker's ability to mimic other materials like that movie camera as well as Navajo weavings or African tribal baskets.

The Schiavon atelier had been recommended to me by Francesca Bortolotto Posati, the dynamic chief executive of the Bauer Hotel group, whose lobbies and halls are clad with Murano glass objects commissioned from Seguso by her grandfather in the 1940s. Several years ago, when I interviewed her for an article on Venice's luxury hotels, she was wearing a stunning necklace I assumed was onyx or agate until she told me it was "just glass" made by a lovely girl on Murano. "Her father was a maestro, and now she makes these gorgeous and very modern pieces."

That's how I met Manuela Zanvettori — a jeweler who doesn't wear much jewelry — and how I purchased a year's worth of glass gifts for female friends.

"I don't like the weight and feel of things around my neck or wrists," Ms. Zanvettori said as she pulled out a tray of rings in her light-filled atelier a few steps off Murano's bustling Fondamenta dei Vetrai. "But I can wear rings, and these are so substantial that you really feel 'dressed' with just this one piece."

The large and luminous glass rings look simultaneously modern and medieval, like the chunky bing you might see on a pope or cardinal's finger in an old-master portrait. The fact that they cost just 25 euros (about \$39, at \$1.23 to the euro) takes away the sting of worrying that they might break. In contrast, her new Air collection is almost futuristic, with pendants and earrings composed of nearly weightless bubbles of clear glass filled with delicate shavings of gold, silver and copper.

Artisans who focus on just one type of product — say, jewelry, mirrors or chandeliers — are nothing new on Murano. Fratelli Barbin is a family-run enterprise that has



made mirrors since 1600. Stepping into its showroom offers a sweep through the intervening 444 years in palace décor, ranging from mirrors in massive baroque frames to curvy 18th-century styles made entirely of an elaborate mosaic of hand-cut black and mirrored glass. A 20-inch-high vanity mirror might cost \$350, and something in the 10-meter-tall range first created for one of Philippe Starck's hotel interiors can easily run you \$40,000. According to Guido Barbin, who has worked in the family business for 55 years, the mirrors are all hand-silvered in house and all relief decoration is carved by hand rather than etched with acid. An intricate pieced mirror can take up to two weeks to assemble.

While the niche firm Andromeda hasn't been around for 400 years, it can perhaps rival Barbin in terms of its luxury hotel presence, although Andromeda's creations hang from the ceiling rather than the wall. Chandeliers in all their variety are the specialty of Andromeda, which works with designers like Mr. Starck, Karim Rashid and Tobia Scarpa to create one-of-a-kind lighting fixtures. For home use, it has simpler lines, such as the streamlined Sublime chandeliers and sconces in pale shades of turquoise and jade.

Just as the introduction of gas to the furnaces unleashed an era of innovation on Murano, so now is LED lighting technology. Well-placed LED lights can turn the glass rods and discs of a typical chandelier into a sort of luminous fiber-optic cable, setting

Top, the Massimiliano Schiavon glassworks on Murano; top left, a vase made there. Center, Giampaolo Seguso inscribes a vase in his atelier. Above left, a canal on the island. A glass ring, above, and a necklace with gold shavings, left, both by Manuela Zanvettori.

### IF YOU GO

**WHERE TO SHOP**  
**Massimiliano Schiavon** (Fondamenta dei Vetrai 63-64; massimilianoschiavon.com)

**Livio Seguso** (Fondamenta Venier 32a; livioseguso.it)

**Manuela Zanvettori** (Fondamenta dei Vetrai 122; manuelazanvettori.com)

**Fratelli Barbin** (Calle Bertolini 31; fratellibarbin.com)

**Andromeda** (andromedamurano.it)

**Seguso** (Campiello San Maffio 2; seguso.com)

**Antonio Seguso** (antonioseguso.com)

**Mazzega** (mazzega.et)

**WHERE TO EAT**  
**Ristorante Al Vetrai** (Fondamenta D Manin 29; 39-39-3913-5156). Try the papardelle with crab and the sea bream.

**Trattoria Ai Frati** (Fondamenta Venier 4; aifrati.com). Highly recommended: the fish salad and risotto.

The structure above with the glass rods and discs of a typical chandelier into a sort of luminous fiber-optic cable, setting

At Seguso, among the oldest and most revered names on the island — going back generations to 1397 — the trend is toward custom everything, including the tour available to visitors. Rather than marching crowds of tourists through its operation, Seguso has created "Night in the Furnace" dinner events and "Glass Experience" tours for six or fewer guests, who typically pay \$200 to \$300 a person to spend several hours seeing every aspect of the glassmaking process and its long history in the hands of Seguso maestros.

The current generation's grandfater Archimede Seguso, was a pioneer in revolutionizing the industry in the mid-20th century. The prolific family has had many ventures on the island, withstanding the tides of taste and fortune.

"In past centuries there were hundreds of furnaces working on Murano; today more likely dozens," said Antonio Seguso, grandson of Archimede who branched off on his own in 2012.

Until the 1980s, one of Archimede's sons, Livio Seguso, had his own factory but the commercial business to explore grew from a purely artistic perspective, creating totemlike sculptures of wood, steel or marble supporting glass discs. Later works were wall mounted or even suspended from ceiling with interlocking circles of steel glass. His studio and gallery is on the Fondamenta Venier near Murano's mission of the Rialto Bridge; while it maintains irregular hours, a call or email in advance usually secures an appointment.

Not far from Mr. Seguso's studio, Murano's Glass Museum is expanding its plays of modern and contemporary glass. But more newsworthy is that elsewhere in Venice, Murano glass is also being celebrated as fine art. Across the lagoon, an exhibit at the recently opened Stanze del Vetro on the island of San Giorgio Maggiore features exclusively on local glass. The current play features luminous works by Tomo Buzzi, an architect whose collaborations with Venini in the 1930s simultaneously revived ancient Etruscan motifs and needed a way of creating lustrous colored glass that appears dusted with gold. The exhibition (on view through Jan. 11, 2015) free.

So even as people may lament that Murano — and indeed Venice — risks being lowered out by tourism and losing its authenticity, it's good to know that decades now someone might mount an exhibit of stunning glass creations from the year