



Carroña, Javier Pérez, produced by Berengo Studio and Venice Project, 2011

Murano's story of commerce and culture

Murano: Fragile
Musée Maillol, 75007 Paris
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Reviewed by Cynthia Rose

Murano: Fragile, a first for France, features six centuries of glass from the famous island. Presented chronologically, 200 pieces take us from the mid-15th century to the present day. As well as illustrating Muranese techniques, the show also demonstrates the dramatically changing tastes to which its makers have catered.

Murano glass culture began in 1291 when, to eliminate fires, Venice forced her glass furnaces onto the smaller island. But ever since the 7th century, glass from the Muslim world had been making its way to Murano's port. Conversely, producers there were completely dependant on raw soda from the Levant.

So it is no surprise their founding inspirations came from Islamic glass, dominant in form and technique up to the 15th century. Yet the island's ties with the Muslim world were a two-way street. In the 16th century, for example, Murano was

making enormous numbers of lamps for mosques. Dusseldorf's Glasmuseum Hentrich has loaned a rare example, created between 1500–20. In a style the Muranese themselves would soon surpass, it re-interprets Islamic techniques that the Muslim world was abandoning. The delicate touch and colours of its gilt and enamel-work are spectacular. In fact, the show's most interesting pieces depict the way Murano making progressed from its initial Eastern heritage.

The island's signature is its unique sensibility, one derived from a symbiosis between the aesthetic and the industrial. The greatest Muranese makers have always conceived their works – and built personal styles – without any real separation between design and technique. Here, from 15th century pieces by Angelo Barovier up to contemporary works by Yoichi Ohira (see 'To the Power of Three', *Crafts* No.229, March/April 2011), this dimension is both a reference and a link. It is equally visible in works like a graceful 16th century bottle with a reversed neck, or the 1921 replica of a vase shown in Veronese's *Annunciation*.

Murano knew several eras of real decline – the inclusion of which demonstrates the breadth of its makers' resources. The first of these turning points arrived in 1797, when Napoleon conquered the Venetian Republic. After that, occupation crippled the glass trade with taxes. In the mid-19th century, there were more challenges, as Europe's glass market

was swamped with Bohemian wares.

At that point, the main Muranese income was making glass beads – which were exported to Africa for use as money. But since their studios were focused on development, they broke out of this slump with new filigree techniques. In a similar fashion, to appease 19th century taste, makers repurposed the *aventurine* they made in the 17th century. This glass with its glittering specks of gold and copper became Victorian bling – visible here in a card table of mind-boggling gaudiness.

Murano's true comeback began in the early 1920s, via well publicised partnerships with modern artists. When such names as Picasso and Chagall came to work with *maestri*, the result was not merely a savvy marketing strategy. It also created a formula for future survival. Ever since, contemporary art has raised Murano's profile and, these days, it has *Glasstress* – its own Venice biennial. The show's presentation of this evolution is disappointing (especially with regard to the key 1920s and 50s eras). But an entire room of recent works by artists has intriguing pieces by Fred Wilson, Thomas Schütte and Erik Dietman.

The exposition was co-curated by Rosa Barovier Mentasti – the glass scholar, author and twentieth-generation member of the island's Barovier glass family. An inexhaustible advocate for her heritage, Mentasti helped originate the first-ever *Glasstress*. She is an able conduit for the *other* Venetian talent, that of razor-sharp salesmanship and merchandising.

Marketing is at the heart of these artist collaborations, pieces such as *Carroña*, by Javier Pérez. That is a huge scarlet *cioche* (a Venetian chandelier), lying smashed on the floor while stuffed crows 'feed' upon it. And like Pérez, most artists find it tough to move beyond the unique surface seduction of the medium. However confrontational or alluring their visions, Murano's glass hermeneutics usually prove stronger.

This has led to many critical murmurs about 'commerciality'. Yet any understanding of Murano has to embrace the fact the island has always leveraged more than just its makers' virtuosity. Forces such as ambition, competition and envy make up an equal part of its fascinating story.

All of them were keys in its elevation to singular art. Many of the commissions visible here were made for famous families – such as the Estes, the Gonzagas and the Medicis. These are some of the finest achievements in the show and remain works whose marvellous character exists in no other form. *Cynthia Rose is a journalist and broadcaster based in Paris and London*