

Murano beads/10/13/04

Joanne Cleaver
1927 N. 52nd St.
Milwaukee, WI 53208
414.259.7928
jycleaver@Jycleaver.com

By Joanne Cleaver

In Venice, fire and water meet...and make glass beads with the temper of both.

Venetian glass is world renowned for its frozen fluidity. Whether it's bent into long, sinuous leaves that petal a flower fantasy Baroque chandelier or form a huge, single, clear drop encasing colored waves, the glass twirled from Venetian furnaces has a style and pedigree that can't be matched anywhere else.

As miniatures of the craft, Venetian glass beads crystallize all the trademark modes of glassmaking. From tiny pearlized globes frosted with lacy lines of gold to smooth modern pendants and drops with all the colors of the sky swirling in them, Venetian beads are a perfect souvenir for those who love glass, beads, or both.

With water all around, the islands of Venice were a perfect setting for the hot, grueling work of blowing glass. But as the craft developed in the high middle ages, even a lagoon a few steps away wasn't enough to quell medieval residents' fear of fire.

In the thirteenth century, glassmaking was restricted by law to the island of Murano, one of the many islands of Venice. A 15-minute boat ride from the northern end of the city, it is the village version of Venice, where canals are crowded by practical flat-bottomed barges hauling construction supplies and taped boxes, not the elegant gondolas of the city. Venice is thick with graceful buildings, ornate churches, and ritzy shops. Tiny by comparison, Murano has a handful of churches, and instead of elegant facades, a candy-dish-bright streetscape of two-story, welcoming stucco buildings.

The discovery of the New World opened up a huge new market for Murano beads. Easily carried, easily portioned, and completely novel to native Americans, seed and bugle beads quickly became the currency of exploration. That resulted in an explosion of beadmaking on the island: more than 4,500 tons of beads a year were exported from Murano at the height of the Renaissance.

This is chronicled at the Museo del Vetro on the island. This Renaissance villa houses case after case of rare, delicate glass objects. A stretch of displays in one wing is devoted to the history and technique of making glass beads, complete with antique tools and illustrations of classic bead styles. Illustrations of beadmaking techniques, circa 1752, and salesmen's sample cards provide a glimpse into an era when even mass-produced beads were precious.

On Murano, the major glassmaking companies are clustered around the main docks of the vaparetto, the public boat system that continually makes the rounds of the islands. They make (and are glad to ship) everything conceivable in glass, from cartoonish octopi to fragile filigreed goblets. Here, you can see the traditional glassmaking craft: glowing gobs of molten glass pulled from a furnace and spun and blown into shapes and hollows.

While the big showrooms do carry jewelry – and a few loose beads – the shops in the interior offer the best variety of beads and jewelry.

Across arched bridges and a few steps in to the cool of the storefronts are artisans who wield tiny torches, adding glass frosting to tiny balls, ovals and straws of glass. Schedules are unpredictable; artisans set their own hours for demonstrations, though the shops are officially open from 9 to 5.

The Cooperativa Vetriaria is a treasure trove of beads just a short walk from the Museo del Vetro. Plastic bins of all beads line the tiny shop. The foil and millefiori beads here come in dozens of varieties and colors. And –surprisingly rare for the area - the shop carries findings for completing a jewelry project, in case you can't wait to wear what you find.

Meanwhile, the craft that was banished for centuries has come back to Venice proper.. A handful of artisans are re-creating the ancient techniques by trial and error in tiny, modern studios that occupy the back half of shopfronts.

At Reva Longa 48, Adriane Penso is painstakingly blending two Venetian traditions – lace and glass – into art beads that are wrapped with enameled filigree motifs taken from antique lace designs.

Since 1850, Costantini has been supplying artisans with the tiniest of seed beads – made in Murano but sold in Venice. Goblets of beads line the shelves of the shop, which also offers a rich but dwindling supply of old-stock beads in hard to find colors and sizes.

American Leslie Ann Genninger escaped her first career, as an investment banker, two decades ago by becoming an artists' agent. Entranced by Venetian glass, she learned beadmaking herself so that she could make earrings for herself. As she mastered the craft – wrapping glass and learning how to decorate beads – she found that she loved designing them more than making them. Now, she directs a staff of two master beadmakers and numerous apprentices and shop staff, who help her stock and operate the Genninger Studio.

This airy studio showcases bowls of loose beads, especially tiny striped bubbles and twisted straws. One Venetian specialty – adding gold and silver leaf or dust to the interior of the beads – emerges here in collections of beads of a single color shot through with the metals.

Beads are woven into the decorative fiber of the city. The famed shops of Venice are rich with hats, scarves, tassels and other fripperies sparkling with beads. Even a pharmacy window display of sunscreen was highlighted by orangey-yellow rays of beads spilling like the sun all around the tubes of lotion.

BOX

In Murano

Museo del Vetro /Glass Museum

Murano, f.ta Giustinian

Open daily from 10 a.m. – 5 p.m ; closed Wednesdays. Admission: 4 euro

Cooperativa Vetraria

Dom. Di Brevetto

Murano

ph 841148188

In Venice

Genninger Studio

2793/A Dorsodero Calle

del Tragheietto

ph. 011-39-041-5225565

www.genningerstudio.com

Costantini

Via Cimitero, 17

30100 Venezia

Tel: ++39 041739274

<http://www.glassbeads.org/>

The Costantini family will take special orders.

We found Dott. Fiona Giusto, an English speaking Venetian native who knows every byway of the city. For about \$110, she will lead a private two-hour tour that includes several hard-to-find bead shops in Venice proper. Fiona.giusto@libero.it ; (0039) 0415234979

Shopping tips

Expect to pay about \$1 per bead on Murano at artisan shops; \$1 - \$3 for individual beads at artisan shops on Venice, and \$10 and up for drops and pendants.

Many shops sell inexpensive bead necklaces with such cheap clasps that they are reasonably priced - \$5 to \$40 – as raw materials.

Shops close erratically and early. If you see something you like, buy it, because it might be impossible to get back to buy it.

Imported Venetian style beads (and all kinds of glasswork) are offered at bargain prices at street stalls and shops. Look for the 'Made in Murano' logo to ensure that what you are thinking of buying was actually made in Venice or Murano. Inexpensive imports from India, say local shopkeepers, are offered as 'Venetian glass,' or 'In the Venetian tradition..''