

In Struggling Murano, a Design Intervention

The Venetian island, famous for its glass, has long been on the wane, but 700 years of expertise is a terrible thing to squander.

By **Ray Mark Rinaldi**

June 7, 2022

This article is part of our Design special report previewing 2022 Milan Design Week.

Can high design reverse Murano's decline?

Could one transcendent lamp, or a single game-changing wine goblet, or a fruit bowl created on the Venetian island by one of today's top designers restore the reputation of this glassmaking capital, whose legacy for handmade craft dates to the late 1200s, but whose relevance has dwindled in an era of cheap, mass-produced goods?

Perhaps not just one of those things, say the international designers and artists who are currently collaborating with Murano glass workers. And realistically speaking, reversing Murano's fate would be a monumental task, especially at this pivotal moment when soaring gas prices, caused by the war in Ukraine, have forced small, independently-owned factories to shut down their furnaces.

But maybe the wave of one-of-a-kind pieces they are making hand-in-hand with Murano's craftspeople — and showing off at high-end showcases, such as Milan Design Week — could help carve out a new niche for its products, restore some prestige, bring back tourists, even inspire Murano's departing younger generations to stick with the family business.



The designer Ini Archibong holding one of his glass works as an example of newer products attractive to consumers. Franck Jurey

Designers like Ini Archibong, an American based in Switzerland, who created the latest iteration of his Gaea Pendant lamp on the island, are holding up their creations as examples of how Murano's glass experts, famed for their extravagance, could dedicate more of their technical skills to developing sleek products that are currently popular with luxury consumers.

“One person seeing the potential and believing in it and bringing attention to it could inspire one other person who could inspire one other person,” he said, on a video call from Murano.

The first of 10 limited editions of Gaea was recently unveiled at the Milanese gallery Rossana Orlandi in an exhibition of products manufactured by the design company Sé.

The new pieces update Mr. Archibong's original 2018 design — a graceful glass teardrop suspended on a rope of irregular beads. The designer described it as “as a floor lamp hanging from the ceiling.”

The new lamps are more sophisticated, Mr. Archibong said. He credits the glass masters with helping him add intricate textures to the surface and transitioning the piece from white glass with an added layer of color to actual colored glass.

Specialized glass made by multiple companies on the island, is at the root of Murano's reputation going back centuries, as are the creative contributions of the artisans, said Sé's founder, Pavlo Shtakleff.

“They're not just manufacturers, these are artists,” he said. They “have this in their blood.”



Two views, above and left, of Luca Nichetto's “Mecha robot,” which he designed for the 2021 Punta Conterie exhibition “Empathic — Discovering a Glass Legacy” in Venice. Luca Nichetto



Aware of the challenges facing glassmakers on the Venetian island, Mr. Nichetto has invited international designers to make pieces in Murano. He has also opened a second studio in Sweden. Luca Nichetto

Authentic collaborations are exactly the sort of thing the designer Luca Nichetto, one of Murano's most visible advocates, believes could advance the island's reputation. He grew up there and got his start creating for the lighting company Foscari, before going on to design numerous products for other global brands and opening a second studio in Sweden in 2011.

He is familiar with Murano's troubles, such as competition from low-quality trinkets imported to Italy and passed off as "Murano glass" to tourists, and a decline in the number of people interested in collecting legacy art glass.

Then there is a perpetual shortage of skilled labor that has grown more acute over the last three decades as the children of Murano's glass masters decide they do not want to spend their lives as factory workers. Glass making is hot and physically demanding, and the prestige of doing the labor has faded along with Murano's standing.

Current events have compounded an already bad economic situation. Factories were forced to shut down during the coronavirus pandemic, and rising gas prices have prevented many from reopening. Italy gets much of its natural gas from Russia, and supply squeezes have pushed prices beyond what small, family-run operations can afford.

"They have passed from 10,000 euros (about \$10,700) a month for a bill of gas to 70,000 euros a month, and for a little factory that is not sustainable at all," Mr. Nichetto said. "So what they do is close and say they will wait for the price of gas to go down, but they have a limited amount of time to survive."

All of those problems make it unlikely that Murano will ever return to making glass in the quantity it did in previous centuries, Mr. Nichetto said. But he hopes that an appeal to high-end design enthusiasts will avert a total collapse.

He has been at the forefront of a movement encouraging creative partnerships. Last September, he organized an exhibition in Venice called "Empathic — Discovering a Glass Legacy" featuring collaborations between Murano workers and top designers like Marc Thorpe, Noé Duchaufour-Lawrance and Elena Salmistraro.

He is also among the stars of a current exhibition in Venice, "Forme del Bere" (Forms of Drinking), featuring updated versions of classic Murano drinking vessels.

If genuine Murano glass cannot catch on with the masses, maybe it could attract well-heeled consumers who travel to Venice, Mr. Nichetto proposes. If its status were restored, it might lure young people back into the industry the same way artisan food movements have attracted new generations to old-school beer making and bread baking.

"I still believe that there is a way to reinvent Murano," he said.



The New York artist Judi Harvest's Murano glass bats. Judi Harvest

The New York artist Judi Harvest has approached Murano's crisis from a different angle. Since the 1980s she has worked closely with glassmakers on the island and has witnessed the industry's decline firsthand, in particular the shrinking of the Giorgio Giuman workshop.

"I watched them go from approximately 70-something people all the way down to the father, the two sons and the woman that helps them in the office," she said on the phone from Manhattan.

Her goal is to bring attention to the region and its economic situation through her art. In addition to creating colorful glass pillows and developing precision glass replicas of regional crops like radicchio, she has made a series based on bees, forming both the insects and their hives out of glass.



Ms. Harvest's garden designed to attract bees for a small honey operation. Judi Harvest



Glass vessels by Ms. Harvest, who works in New York and Venice. Judi Harvest

As part of the project, Ms. Harvest cleared an abandoned patch of land on the glass factory's grounds, built a garden to attract bees and started a small honey operation, which now supplies local restaurants and retailers.

The garden is something of a tourist attraction, but also serves as a metaphor. Bees are endangered, just like Murano's glass industry, and she wants people who visit the garden and see her work around the world to get the connection.

She has also taken an interest in bats, another endangered pollinator, and is working with architects in Murano to set up functional bat houses in the garden. Along with that, she has created a series of bat sculptures — made from Murano glass, of course.

"I feel responsibility as an artist working there to do everything I can to help them," she said.