THE SEVENTEENTH AND EIGHTEENTH CENTURIES
– STUDIES IN COMPOSITION

THE HERITAGE OF RECIPES EXPORTED BY VENETIAN GLASS MASTERS
REVEALED IN A SEVENTEENTH-CENTURY MANUSCRIPT

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INTRODUCTION

The problem of glass masters emigrating from Murano to work in the provinces of the Venetian Republic or in foreign countries was a worrying issue for the Venetian authorities and in the 1271 Capitulare dell’Arte, rules laid down for the fioleri (chapter VIII), we find that a fine was already imposed on expatriate glassworkers and that they were forbidden to return to work in Murano. In one of his articles the historian Luigi Zecchin (1989, 96–101) followed the evolution over the centuries of these laws against the expatriation of the Venetian glass workers. With the same aim of protecting Venetian glass production, in 1285, we find a prohibition on the export without permission from the Venetian territories of important raw materials such as glass cullet, alum, sand and other materials from which glass is made (vitrum, alumen, saltemum, seu alia de quibus vitrum fieri debet); the chance of obtaining permission was denied in 1315 and the fines were increased through the 14th century.

In a decree of the Quartantia, in 1403, the glass masters are warned “not to work in any place outside Murano, under penalty of a fine of 100 lire and of three months in prison.” The Mariegola of 1441 confirms the above prohibitions and also adds a penalty for the boatmen found transporting the forbidden materials outside the border of the Venetian Republic. In 1468 the glass furnace owners asked the Doge to “prohibit the export from Venice of allume catina, and not to give licence for this, due to the fact that from the Fontego dei Tedeschi they export much alum for the false purpose of soap production”, and to confirm the prohibition on exporting also ‘quartz flints, frit, cullet, zucconi, manganese, pots, tools, moulds, or any thing pertinent to the glass production’. They ask also to double the penalties laid down by the previous Quartantia for glassworkers going to work outside the provinces of the Venetian Republic. A decree of the senate in the year 1489 fixed a penalty of 500 lire and one year’s imprisonment for anyone going to work abroad and exporting the craft to foreign countries, and they could be arrested anywhere in Venetian territory; but at the same time if workers had emigrated to avoid personal debts and decided to return, they would benefit from a two-month delay before coming to an agreement with their creditors.

In the year 1549 the Consiglio dei Dieci decreed the public reading in Saint Mark’s Square, Rialto and Murano, of the names of the glass masters and furnace owners considered at the time to be abroad, inviting them to return to Murano within eight or four months, depending whether they were outside the dominions of the Republic or not. If they did not come back and were caught and were unable to pay the fine, they ‘would be condemned to the galleys for four years’. The list included 25 names; but only one, a certain Bastian Saconeto, seems to have obeyed. Another list of five illegal emigrant workers was read out in 1597, with the further proviso that, if taken, they would be ‘condemned to remain chained to the galley oars for five continuous years and to pay a fine of 500 lire’.

As is clear from our summary, the sanctions were truly severe but we do not know if they were also strictly applied nor do we know how many glass masters actually obeyed the invitation to return to Venice. On this argument, Paolo Zecchin (pers. comm.) suggests that the reason why the Dardiu manuscript was found in the Venice State Archive is probably because the codex had been in the possession of a glass master who had emigrated and had been obliged to hand it over to the Venetian authority in order to have permission to return to Murano.

VENETIAN GLASS MASTERS PRESENT IN FOREIGN COUNTRIES

The complete history of the emigration of glass masters has unfortunately still not been written; we do, however, have some interesting information from foreign sources. For example, information on the Venetian glass workers present in Flanders during the 16th–17th century may be found in a book of Jules Houdoy, published in 1873, and from a series of letters written by H. Schuermans in the years 1882–1893. From these texts we know that in Antwerp one Ambrogio Mongarda was the owner of a furnace around 1580; at his death his widow married (1598–1599) Filippo Gridolfi who succeeded to the direction of the furnace under an exclusive privilege previously granted.
by Philip II. Another Venetian working at the Mongarda furnace in 1589, Antonio Obizzo, had illegally left the furnace of Donato Bruno Brisighella at Murano, where he was engaged under contract; he was condemned to four years in the ‘galleys’ and to the reimbursement of the 107 ducats that he had received as an advance.

Antonio Miotti, a Venetian ‘captain’ (?), opened a glass furnace in Brussels in 1623 and later in Namur. When Miotti asked Philip IV for authorisation to do so he emphasized that he would produce, at a lower price, glass of the same quality as that produced in Venice, and gave assurances that he would use the same raw materials, in particular the best quality Barilla (soda ashes) from Spain. Stanislaw Bormans (1880, 464–91), using information repeated later by D. Van de Casteele (1884, 202–8) and by H. Shuermans (Shuermans 1885), cites a document dated 1629 in which a Venetian master, Gasparo Brunoro, was involved in Namur in a contract with Antonio Miotti’s widow, as we shall see later in greater detail.

In 1642 Giovanni Savonetti, banned from Venice with the confiscation of his property because he had introduced his craft in the Low Countries, obtained the exclusive privilege previously granted to the Brussels furnace.

Other information on the presence of Italian glass masters in England may be found in the book by W.A. Thorpe (Thorpe 1949, 114–35). He refers to the presence in 17th-century London of many Venetians working in the Broad Street furnace owned by Sir Robert Mansell, who at the time essentially had the monopoly of glass production. The two glass masters who most interest us are Antonio Miotti, in charge of production in the year 1619, who remained in London until 1623, and Gasparo Brunoro who was engaged for seven years from 1637.

THE MANUSCRIPT

The same Venetian glass master, Gasparo Brunoro, mentioned as present in Namur and London, appears in the title of a manuscript written anonymously in Danzig in 1645 and discovered some years ago in the Casanatense Library in Rome; it is the copy of various notebooks of glass recipes and of other texts. The frontispiece title states that the manuscript was written in Danzig, on 13th January 1645, and the declared subject of the book are the secrets of the many glass masters of crystal and of other literary men. The source of the recipes is not explicitly indicated but it is added that the book, and therefore the recipes it contains, was used and recommended by Gasparo Brunoro, nickname 3 Corone, who was a glass master, an expert in crystal glass and coloured glasses, and a native of Murano, Venice.

Gasparo Brunoro, previously almost unknown to historical researchers, is credited with being the guarantor of the recipes’ validity and he could be the owner of the notebooks copied in this manuscript. He is one of the many glassmakers who fled from Murano in violation of the laws of the Venetian Republic, to export their know-how and contribute to the evolution of façon de Venise glassmaking technology throughout Europe.

In the year 1628 we find him in Namur (Belgium), a glass worker in the furnace of the Venetian Antonio Miotti. Miotti died the following year 1629. His wife, Cornelia van Horen, made an agreement with Brunoro, by which he engaged to employ her son, Sebastiano Miotti, at the furnace. Evidently Brunoro was charged by the widow to carry on the functioning of the furnace after the death of her husband. But, a few month later, Brunoro and Sebastiano Miotti were prosecuted by law for immoral behaviour and forced to leave Namur. We find Brunoro in London some years later, when, in 1638, the Venetian Ambassador wrote to the authorities that a Venetian, Gasparo Brunoro, was in London in the factory of Sir Robert Mansell engaged to work as glass master for seven years (1637–1644). Other Venetians and also some glass masters from the glassmaking centre of Altare in the Monferrato province, were also working in this glass factory.

The manuscript was written in Danzig in the year 1645, so it is likely that Brunoro was there at that time, probably working in a local furnace. Other documents indicate that in the year 1649 he was in Copenhagen and in 1653 he was in Liège standing as godfather in a baptism; he is also mentioned in a list of Venetian glass masters present in Liège in the year 1655. We have no other news of him after that date; we do not know whether he returned to Venice and where he died.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE MANUSCRIPT

The manuscript contains 256 recipes for the production of different kinds of glass and 36 concerning the preparation and treatment of raw materials for glassmaking; about 100 deal with metallurgy, alchemy, medicine and various other subjects. Examination of this document has highlighted that groups of recipes are common to the Montpellier (Zecchin 1964), anonymous 16th-century (Moretti e Tonini 2001) and Darduin (Zecchin 1986) manuscripts, and to Neri’s text. It indicates that a Venetian glass master like Brunoro, working outside Venice, took with him a heritage of recipes covering almost two centuries of Venetian technology. Further regarding the importance of the manuscript, which is due to be published as a monograph annexed to an issue of the Bollettino ICR (Instituto Centrale per il restauro – Roma); we would like to emphasize here its demonstration that the so called ‘secrets’ of Venetian glass masters were in reality often exported and spread in foreign glass environments. On comparing the contents of the manuscript recipes with those in other manuscripts and in Neri’s book, we see that 36 recipes are common to recipes in the Darduin manuscript, 52 to the Montpellier manuscript, 36 to the anonymous manuscript and 50 to Neri’s book.

The sources of the recipes recorded in the manuscript seem to be entirely Venetian but we must underline that the original sources are never mentioned in the manuscript and the ‘masters of Crystal glasses’ in the title are never identified. Neri’s book, published 33 years before, is completely ignored in the manuscript, although many recipes are the same. We can make the same observation regarding the Darduin manuscript, dated 1644 and hence one year before our manuscript was printed.
CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

Whatever the practical importance of the recipes once they were transferred to a foreign country and/or sold by the glass master; we may suppose that the engagement of Venetian masters by foreign glass enterprises was more probably motivated by the skills of the masters than by the stock of recipes they had with them. The ability of the glass masters trained in the Murano furnaces was needed to produce façon de Venise glass objects in imitation of the Venetian products of recognized excellence. The possession of the recipes to produce the glass was important but we must consider that the recipes were strictly linked with the raw materials originally utilized. If there was no access to a raw material prescribed in the recipe, it was impossible to reproduce the same glass and a similar product had to be used, at times with very different results. We are thinking in particular of allume catina ashes (a material imported almost exclusively by Venetians) and of Ticino river flints. In the unavailability of allume catina soda ashes, a possible substitute in North Europe was wood ash, rich in potassium, with the consequence that the glass becomes silico-potassic instead of being silico-sodic, and hence markedly different in its physical (viscosity for example) and chemical properties.

We think that more attention should be paid to these aspects of emigration of Venetian masters, and we think that the combined examination of Venetian and foreign documents could give more precise and interesting information on the transfer of artistic and technical know-how from Venice to other countries.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Mary Rubick for the revision of the English text.

REFERENCES


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