

## The Timeless Art of Italian Glass



At the start of 13th century, the city of Venice was the known world's major hub of glassmaking. Its glassmaking secrets had been refined throughout time as a result of commerce with the Islamic territories of Levant and North Africa. By the late 13th century, glassmakers on the group of islands off the coast of Venice, called Murano, had perfected the art with brilliant methods and recipes.

The secret recipes and decorative techniques of Venetian glass were guarded as if they were classified material. Glass artists enjoyed high social status and accumulated great wealth, but were held captive on the Island of Murano, by the government of Venice, for fear their secrets would be shared with the rest of the world. It is widely believed the glassmakers and their furnaces were isolated on the Murano islands of the Venice lagoon (Adriatic Sea) to prevent fires from spreading in the city of Venice. The fear of fire may have been a factor, but proprietary secrets were the main concern.

Although their captors provided them with the finer things in life, captivity itself made them yearn to leave. The glass trade monopoly was crumbling by the mid 14th century as escapees from Murano plied their trade outside of the Republic of Venice. By the 1600s, Venetian glass secrets were spread around the world.

### **Venetians lose fine glass dominance**

No longer holding the monopoly of fine glass, and unhappily under the rule of Austria, the Venetians experienced a decline until the mid 19th century. The Austrian government preferred Bohemian glass and the import of raw materials to Murano was restricted and highly taxed.

To its rescue came the Fratelli Toso family in 1854 and Antonia Salviati in 1859. Their companies employed the skills and inventions of Murano's glory days, lost for over 200 years, and incorporated ancient forms and methods once practiced by the Phoenicians Romans. Again Murano glass found itself in the welcoming arms of the world. Then, in 1866, Venice freed itself from Austria to become part of the Kingdom of Italy. Glass producers from the region again began to flourish. The wealthy of America routinely enjoyed lengthy tours of Europe and it is estimated that 80% of the Italian glass output was brought to America as souvenirs during the mid 19th and early 20th centuries.

In the 1950's, an explosion of creativity prompted yet another world-wide craving for Italian-made glass. The Toso and Salviati companies were joined by the likes of Vistosi, Venini, Barbini, and Seguso, among others. The glass factories of Italy produced innovative designs to appease the thoroughly modern population who proudly displayed fashionable Italian art glass in their homes.

Fabulous examples of mid-century modern Italian glass can be seen in the background of many films made in the 1930's to 1970s. Sophia Loren, in *Three Coins in a Fountain*, decorated her lavish villa with modernistic Italian glass;

Lolita's mother displayed miniatures in her home before she was run over by a car and her husband ran off with her daughter; nearly all of the "Rat Pack" movies have examples of the most modern Italian glass of the time, to mention a few examples. Take a look into the blurry backgrounds of 1950s movies, you'll find many examples of mid-century modernistic glass design.

The images with this article of were provided by Retro Art Glass ([www.retroartglass.com](http://www.retroartglass.com)). These examples show a range of the décor and styles used during the mid 20th century. The glass was almost always hand-blown. The forms were usually large and heavy, often free-formed. Lavish use of aventurine, cannes, layering, intentional inclusions, optics, unusual colors, flame heated applications, and modernist shapes thrilled the buyers then, and still do today.