Glassblowers of Venice kept their art so secret that it almost died out

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.11.16

ALBANY, N.Y. — A modern-day glassblower believes he has unraveled the mysteries of Venetian glassmaking that was crafted during the Renaissance.

The Renaissance was a cultural movement in Europe that lasted from the 1300s to the 1600s. During that period, glassmakers’ secrets were closely guarded by the Venetian government. Anyone who spoke of them could be killed.

Specially Skilled Craftsmen

Today’s glassblowers work with gas-fired furnaces and electric-powered ovens called kilns. Their studios are well lit and have proper air ventilation. The craftsmen of Murano, an island near Venice, Italy, did not have such technology. Yet they turned out pieces of art popular in museums today. The techniques, or the methods they used to make the objects, remained sought after for centuries.
William Gudenrath spent years studying Venetian glass collections at American and European museums. He compared them with newer glasswork from Venice. He experimented on his own and traveled to Italy many times. Gudenrath combined all of his knowledge to produce an online guide.

**Guiding Modern Artists**

The guide is called "The Techniques of Renaissance Venetian Glassworking." It was recently posted on the website of the Corning Museum of Glass in New York. Gudenrath teaches Venetian glassblowing classes there. The guide contains photographs, articles and videos.

Gudenrath demonstrates how he believes Venetian glassworkers made goblets, wine glasses and other beautiful art. These works were made using little more than wood-fired furnaces and metal blowpipes and tongs.

The Murano glassmakers added gold paint and colorful enameling to their glass products. Enamel is a cloudy, glassy liquid. These fancy touches needed to be fired at higher temperatures than the glass itself to make them stick. The Venetians could not simply turn a knob to control the temperature of their furnaces, Gudenrath said.

Yet they mastered the tricky art of glass decoration by reheating and shaping the vessel many times after the decorations had been added. This process is demonstrated by Gudenrath in several videos.

"It's just amazing to me that they did what they did in those conditions," he said.

**Guarding The Glassmaking Secrets**

Gudenrath has studied Venetian glassmaking for 25 years. He is a "fantastic resource for artists," said Jutta-Annette Page. She is in charge of glass and decorative arts at Ohio's Toledo Museum of Art.

Gudenrath is 65 years old. He started blowing glass at age 11. When he was a teenager, he became fascinated with Venetian glass. However, finding written details that explained how Murano glass was created was not easy. This is likely because of the many restrictions placed on the trade hundreds of years ago.

To prevent fires in the growing city of Venice, the government ordered glass furnaces moved to Murano. That move took place in the 1200s. The island of Murano is less than a mile from Venice. The government hoped the change would also stop glassmakers from smuggling secrets to competitors. A person who gave up secrets could be killed. The laws were strict because the Venetian government did not want artists in other European cities to learn how to blow glass. They wanted to be the only place where the fancy glass artwork was made.

Spying "was taken very seriously," Gudenrath said.
Napolean Closes Factories

Other European nations knew how to blow glass. This weakened Murano's hold. French military leader Napoleon Bonaparte closed the factories after he conquered Venice. Soon, there were very few glassmakers left. Venetian glass did experience a rebirth in the mid-1800s. Gudenrath said that by then, many of the original, secretive methods had already been lost.

Some of the old techniques have been reinvented. They are being used on Murano today. The island is now home to smaller glassmaking businesses and studios. Yet, they are as lively as ever.
Quiz

1. Select two MAIN ideas from the article:

   1. The Renaissance lasted from the 1300s to the 1600s.
   2. Murano glassblowers used special methods.
   3. William Gudenrath discovered long-secret techniques.
   4. Napoleon Bonaparte had the Venetian glass factories closed.

   (A) 1 and 2
   (B) 2 and 3
   (C) 3 and 4
   (D) 1 and 4

2. Which of the following details should be part of a summary of the article?

   (A) how modern kilns are heated
   (B) the classes Gudenrath teaches
   (C) Gudenrath's glassblowing guide
   (D) the colors Murano glassblowers used

3. In the section "Specially Skilled Craftsmen," why does the author include information about today's glassblowers?

   (A) to show how impressive the glass from Murano was
   (B) to show the great advances that have been made in glassblowing technology
   (C) to show how much safer glassblowing was on Murano
   (D) to show why Gudenrath spent so much time studying at museums

4. What enabled Venetian glass blowers to add so much decoration?

   (A) government protection from spies
   (B) metal blowpipes and tongs
   (C) firing at a higher temperature
   (D) secret sources of colors
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