

Glass & Poetry

Mila Tenaglia and Letizia Airos (September 25, 2014)

Guardian of a millennial glassmaking tradition, Giampaolo Seguso invites us into his studio in New York, where he talks about the history of a craft whose roots stretch way back to the Venetian Renaissance.

Murano harbors the oldest techniques in the art of Italian glassmaking. The little island in front of Venice is the place for glass. This is where the art and industry of glassmaking was born, and there's no better place on earth for learning the craft. Giampaolo Seguso has known it for as long as he can remember, seeing as his family has been making glass for six centuries. "This type of craftsmanship was born and evolved in Renaissance Venice because to create beauty, men must copy nature," says Seguso. "The greatest, most spiritual thing we can do is transform what we see into art, create by copying the creator. It began in Venice because the place itself is a miracle, an extraordinary endeavor of human and divine effort: it's the true communion."

Glassmaking for 22 generations

Seguso was born into a family that has been making glass for 22 generations. Artist, philosopher and poet, he spent a lifetime shuttling back and forth between Venice and New York until twenty years ago, when he opened a branch of his company, Seguso Viro, here in New York. His work is on display at MOMA, the Guggenheim and hundreds of other museums around the world. Engraved in each piece is one of Seguso's own poems, little pearls of wisdom writ on vases, glasses and paperweights. "I love synthesis," says Seguso. "I transform the metaphors of my life by creating poetic objects in glass."

From glassmaking to poetry

In his hands, Seguso holds a diary-like book that turns out to be a copy of *My Page is Glass: Poems*, the collection of verse dedicated to his son Pierpaolo. "I realize he is the one who understands me the most," explains Seguso.

"I discovered I was a poet thanks to my wife, whom I loved very much. She was my muse. She loved flowers, gardens, greenery. Her grace practically knocked me over and that's when I began writing. I think I simply became a poet courting Daniela. She was my first reader. In the end I didn't discover I was a poet, I discovered I was in love."

Coming to America

Seguso's voice is warm, calm. His intense eyes seem to preserve many past lives. His relationship with his father Archimede was fractious. One of the most important glassmakers in the twentieth century, Archimede founded the extraordinary Italian glassware manufacturer Vetreria Archimede Seguso in 1948, where father and son worked side by side until Giampaolo was almost 50. Then came the break. "It was dramatic," says Seguso.

Eager to embark on his own artistic path, Seguso founded Seguso Viro in 1993, which rapidly expanded into the American market, leading to the creation of Seguso Viro USA with offices in New York. The trick, explains Seguso, is to "achieve a contemporary look using ancient Renaissance techniques."

Seguso Viro, in fact, has a strong international appeal that fuses classic craftsmanship with experimental techniques. "With the help of my son Pierpaolo and our team, we succeeded in



understanding American tastes and trends. We want to communicate the authentic essence of Murano. And here there's a strong sense of youth culture."

A soloist and his orchestra

Walking through his studio in New York, Seguso admits that he has never directly crafted the glass. "I realized I was more of a conductor in this occupation," he says. "I know I'm a terrible soloist, but I have the ability to direct the orchestra. I have a gift for playing and writing music. The most beautiful compliment I ever got was that I wasn't a glass master, I was a master of glass."

"Five of us work on an object," he continues. "Each of us has to know how to do his part at the right time. It becomes like a ballet, a symphony concert. In the moment, we're all involved in a creative act, where fire plays the lead role, hands down. You have to follow the rules. If you don't, the object will break. It is a very delicate operation."

A sense of artisanship

The sense of artisanship is palpable when it comes to this bottega-style job, as if little had changed since the 1300s. The bottega becomes a place of worship. "First there's the altar, our oven," says Seguso. "Second there are the movements, which are made with great care. Once the glass is placed in the annealer, it can sit there for 12, 24, even 42 hours, depending on the thickness of the object. During that time you don't know whether the object will turn out well. And that's where the third element comes in, the waiting, which is marvelous. Finally you have the revelation, and after two days you see for the first time what you have done. It's like giving birth!"

There the maestro stops, inspired by his latest creations, which he shows us with equal amounts of pride and affection. "Glass, for me, is the only material that can reproduce the colors of the Venetian lagoon."

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