The Economics of Artisanship: A State of Glass
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For years, Venice and the rising world sea level have been the subject of debate among scholars and lay people. It is assumed that the city-in-the-sea will be a bellwether for climate change, and it is possible; according to “The Science of Saving Venice” with research funded by the Venice in Peril Fund, the city is expected to be *under* the sea (for multiple reasons, including rising global sea levels) within seventy-five years. Despite the statistics, the arguments of climate change advocates often fall on deaf ears on the streets.

“Climate Change?” Skeptical looks abound at the mention—in Venice and in America. The science is so young that it is difficult to prove anything concretely, and the idea has not yet integrated itself into the consciousness of the people to an extent that does not require proof. In Venice, there’s an additional cause for skepticism. “Oh, you mean ‘acqua alta’?”- high water “That’s been around for years,” said an acquaintance sitting piazza-side, eating gelato. Her friend, Jane Rushton of Berengo Studios, agreed- acqua alta is *not* a result of climate change, but is a natural process in the lagoon.

In the same way, many view the death of the arts in Venice, namely of glass in Murano, as a “natural process in the lagoon”. “The maestri won’t last much longer,” said Adriano Berengo in his most candid fashion. Berengo owns self-named Berengo Studios, an internationally renowned glass factory that partners with famous visual artists (including Ai Weiwei and Anish Kapoor) to produce unique work. He encourages these artists to “think in a new medium” rather than what they’re used to and then markets the glass pieces to a worldwide audience. In this way, Berengo says he is bringing glass into this century. By the same measure, Berengo believes he is working in favor of the glass arts by employing and training young maestri, sometimes hired away from the factories where their families work, in order to preserve the art against the destructive effects of time.

This seems like a precarious perspective for one trying to *preserve* the glass arts, but Berengo isn’t interested in preserving glass as a museum object; he wants it to live on into the future. This is one side of the argument that has always plagued Venice: to preserve Venice as it is, or to update it for those who live there. Berengo represents only one side of the discussion. The other side is populated by those who work in the traditional glass arts.

Giorgio Giuman is one of the few true glass maestri remaining in business on Murano. His factory, based on Sacca Serenella, is a haven for the glass aficionado. Giorgio and his children work in every method of glass production, including lost wax, for which Giorgio is well-known. He is, in fact, the only remaining lost wax glass master in Italy, perhaps in the world. Despite this, his work is suffering because of the economy, because of the loss of interest in glass, and because of Venice’s decline.

The only thing Giorgio doesn’t have to worry about is acqua alta. “Murano doesn’t get high water,” said Judi Harvest, longtime friend and collaborator of Giorgio’s. Judi has worked with both Berengo and Giuman on glass projects and has acted as a sort of third party conduit between the two men. The battle still rages, for those who want to fight it, between preservation and updating—but Giuman is happy to still be at work. He would do anything to remain a glass artist and to keep his family fed, including ignoring the “future” of the art.As with glass, acqua alta is more of a concern to those who see the direct effects of it. Roberto Nardin, a gondolier whose main traghetto is on Piazza San Marco, says that acqua alta has increased to over fifty instances in one year—almost tripled, in his eyes. The loss of Muranese glass maestri parallels this statistic, at the loss of (according to one remaining maestro) almost one factory per day over the last few years.

Should we preserve Venice against the tide, or go with the flow?

Berengo espouses the latter recommendation, and it looks like Venice’s leadership is on the same page. The MOSE project, an underwater levee system at the mouths of the lagoon, is nearly complete and operational. It promises to bring control of the lagoon system up to the modern era, putting the fate of the tide under human control, but at what cost? Will we lose the delicate balance of the ecosystem that has, historically, flourished—or can we hope to gain a “new” Venice for the modern era?