

GIULIA MUSSO

THE GLASS MUSEUM OF ALTARE AND ITS ACTIVITIES:
THE RESTORATION OF TWO XVII-XVIII CENTURY
FURNACES

The Glass Museum of Altare, located in Liguria, Northern Italy, preserves an exceptional heritage. Though its collection is essentially limited to items from a period a little over a century – glass exhibits from 1650 to the present day –, the museum provides an invaluable continuation to a very old tradition.

Villa Rosa, a beautiful Liberty Style building dating back to 1906, hosts it. It is one of the many Art Nouveau buildings built in Altare at the beginning of the 20th century that can still be admired. It is the most homogeneous Art Nouveau building in the town and stylistically it represents quite an achievement.

Its pastel colours and graceful lines accompany the visitors throughout their visits and sometimes almost overshadow the glass collection itself, as most of the exhibits are objects in transparent glass.

In the gardens of Villa Rosa is located a small furnace used for demonstration and production of blown glass. It stands in a 70 sq. m. area including two blast furnaces, a hardening furnace and several tools necessary to blow glass.

The Glass Museum organises events and exhibitions in a constant effort of self-renewal thanks to the contributions of internationally renowned artisans, artists, designers as well as some of the most important museums of the sector.

A Foundation, the Institute for the Study of glass, runs it and

its aims are the promotion of historical and scientific study of glass and its art, with special attention to the tradition of Altare, along with the promotion of the knowledge on how glass is produced by providing young people with opportunities of advanced learning.

The furnaces, object of this article, fall within the goals the Institute aims to achieve.

They date back to the 17th and 18th centuries and have been neglected for 20 years. The Institute has been seeking funds for their restoration for several years.

Discovered in 1991 in the factory area of the Racchetti's family, they currently represent the best-preserved evidence of glass production in the town of Altare.

The museum contains just few items from the 17th and 18th centuries – most of them, in fact, are from the 19th and 20th centuries –. Only five baskets, made from white open-worked glass and dating back to the end of the 18th century can be admired.

Not much from that period has reached the present day, as the 18th century was very rather difficult for Altare and its production.

In the 18th Century, in fact, the Kings of the House of Savoy made several decisions that seriously damaged the glassware production and economy of Altare.

In 1723, King Victor Amadeus II started the production of crystal in Turin, i.e. not far from Altare, thus starting a strong competition in the production of white glass.

Some decades later, in 1759, such plants moved to Chiusa Pesio, even closer in nearby Piedmont, and an agreement was made with the local monks for the exploitation of woods while people from Altare were forbidden to trade in areas close to their town. As the production largely focussed on simple objects for everyday use very little has reached the present day.

The two furnaces are the most significant evidence of glass production during the 18th century.

They are located in a long building consisting of two parts. One has retained its cover. The other is without roof, with a large

brick wall containing two old kilns. Only one of the two kilns is well preserved and still clearly visible.

This furnace has the shape of two halves of a melon; either of each could produce 30 Kg of glass.

It had three sections. In the lower one wood was burnt. In the middle one, the melting process took place. In the upper one, the annealing was carried out. Central openings connected the three levels. Still intact are the parts where wood was burnt and the top.

The furnace has a circumference of 10.50 m. A 2m high corridor runs around it and in the past it led where wood was dried, on one side, and to another furnace, a few feet away, and currently in bad condition. The area where wood was burnt still presents four clearly visible square openings that allowed air to reach the wood for combustion.

It is difficult to date it precisely. It would take extensive studies on glass archaeological finds.

From records of the same period, we may infer that it dates back to the 18th century.

We know that the first acts of the Racchetti's factory dates back to the 16th century, but reliable data on the existence of the factory site can only be found in 1618.

Towards the middle of the 19th century in a nearby area other furnaces with new technical characteristics existed that followed new and innovative criteria. The old furnaces were then abandoned though, luckily, not destroyed.

The period of activity of the two furnaces can be therefore placed towards the end of 17th and the beginning of 19th century.

They may also help dating two paintings in the main churches of Altare.

These are two 16th and 18th century paintings, now visible in Saint Roch's and Saint Eugene's churches respectively, where we can see Saint Philibert (glassmakers' patron) and a glass furnace very similar to the found ones.

Its rescue and conservation require financial help that the Institute for the Study of glass has not received yet. Their decline

over a period of twenty years becomes evident when comparing the photographic surveys carried out at the time of their discovery and a recent one. Alas, so far, they have endured twenty years of abandonment.

An urgent intervention is now essential. Only one of the two furnaces presents some undamaged parts. It is the last existing furnace, listed by the Italian Archaeological Superintendent Authority, much admired by French and Italian archaeologists as an important element for the understanding of glass making.

The Institute for the Study of glass is trying to find the financial resources to restore these two XVII Century furnaces; is therefore seeking funds for a research project, archaeological excavations, conservation plans and enhancement of the site.

In fact, it is possible that more evidence of considerable historical interest lies buried.

REFERENCES

- Brondi Badano, Maria and Luigi Bormioli. 2014. *Ricette vetrarie altaresi*. Genova: SAGEP, 2014.
- Chirico, Mariateresa. 2009. *Il Museo dell'Arte Vetraria Altarese*. Albenga: Tipografia Bacchetta.
- Orsini, André. 2009. Le vieux four à verre d'Altare. *La Route Européenne Des Verriers. GenVerre* 6:130-134.
- Saroldi, Ernesto. 1994. Antiche strutture vetrarie localizzate ad Altare e Montenotte. *Alte Vitrie* 1:18-21.



Fig. 1 - Villa Rosa, home of the Glass museum of Altare (© Museo dell'Arte Vetraria Altarese).



Fig. 2 - Villa Rosa, home of the Glass museum of Altare, detail of the interior (© Museo dell'Arte Vetraria Altarese).



Fig. 3 - Outside of the antique furnace of the old glass factory Racchetti (Photo by Vinicio Saroldi, 1992).

Fig. 4 - Antique furnace of the old glass factory Racchetti (Photo by Alberto Saroldi, 2012).



Fig. 5 - Altarpiece with San Filiberto, Oratory of San Rocco. Altare, 1590 around.