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## NEW LIGHT ON VENETIAN COMEIO GLASS

### *The Compagnia Venezia Murano and the imitation of Roman Cameo Glass*

The Venice and Murano Glass and Mosaic Company Limited (known as Compagnia Venezia e Murano or C.V.M.) was at the forefront of the revival of Murano glass during the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>1</sup>. It also had a special interest in Archeological glass and it produced fine, though little-known, cameo glass works.

Their first achievements in this field were shown at the 1878 Universal Exhibition in Paris. The show was seminal for the C.V.M., which won several awards for its classically-inspired works. A chronicler remembers that, among many other glass works, the Compagnia showed:

*A single bowl formed of two layers of glass, blue and milky white, engraved in high relief in imitation of Roman cameos<sup>2</sup>*

In 1884 at the Turin National Exhibition, the School of the Museo Artistico Industriale of Rome presented cameo glass made in Murano and carved by one of its pupils: Attilio Spaccarelli. An unfinished and unsigned cameo glass cup representing the Battle of Constantino, after Giulio Romano in the Vatican, was purchased by the state for

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent assessing of the vicissitudes of the C.V.M. see Bova in Bova and Migliaccio 2013, vol. IV: 17-23.

<sup>2</sup> «L'unica coppa formata da due strati di vetro, azzurro e smalto latteo, incise alla foggia dei cammei romani con alto rilievo», *La Voce di Murano*, 30 aprile 1878, see also Revi 1967 revised edition: 170-172. In 1956 Revi saw several examples of cameo vases made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at Pauly and Cie.

the Museo Vetrario<sup>3</sup>. It is not surprising that this elaborate piece was left unfinished. The painstaking process of producing cameos requires great strength and dexterity.

A newly discovered ewer dated the year of the Turin show and carved with an elaborate scene of Amazons in Battle, represents the heights to which the cameo technique was taken by its engraver. This finished piece is the earliest signed and dated Spaccarelli cameo glass known (Fig. 1).

The ewer was produced for the Compagnia Venezia e Murano; this is proved by the fact that the 'A' for 'Attilio' on the signature is engraved so as to combine an upside-down 'V' and an 'M' which were both the initials of the Compagnia Venezia e Murano and of the leading glassmaker of the company, Vincenzo Moretti, who is known for signing with his initials only.

Spaccarelli went on to produce a fascinating group of cameo glass with Bacchic subjects: such works were highly acclaimed and they were shown at several exhibitions where they won prizes.

In 1887 a cameo glass bowl with a Bacchic dance framed by vine leaf motifs attracted attention at the Venice Exhibition, where it was particularly praised. The reviewer of the show gives an insight into the lengthy production process, revealing that it took Spaccarelli nine months of wheel engraving on a glass blank produced by Vincenzo Moretti<sup>4</sup>.

A vase on metal foot with a running frieze of bacchantes and a maenad, signed and dated 'A SPACCARELLI. 1887. INCISE V. Murano', no doubt matches the beauty of the pieces exhibited at the 1887 show and, arguably, might be one of them (Fig. 2).

There are only three known signed glass pieces by Spaccarelli

<sup>3</sup> First published as Spaccarelli in Barovier 1974, Figs 9-10. See also Bova and Migliaccio 2013, vol 5, no. 1.

<sup>4</sup> «dopo nove mesi di faticoso lavoro di ruota» rappresenta una «rida bacchica che corre intorno alla coppa principale, staccando in altorilievo bianco su fondo blu e contornata da tralci e pampini... tale da emulare il famoso vaso portland esistente nel Museo Britannico», La mostra della Comp. Venezia Murano in *L'Esposizione artistica Nazionale Illustrata, Venezia 1887, catalogo della mostra, Venezia 1887*, in Bova and Migliaccio 2013: vol. 5 no. 2, this might be the bowl now at the Museo Vetrario, Murano: see also Barovier Mentasti 1982: nos. 221-222.

(dated 1884, 1887 and 1891). No other works by the Compagnia were ever signed and this proves how exceptionally the cameos were considered at the time. The vase is also the first to acknowledge the acronym of the C.V.M. next to that of the artist.

At the 1889 Rome exhibition, three small cameo glass amphorae incised by Attilio Spaccarelli were exhibited by the Compagnia Venezia e Murano, as noted in the catalogue. The subjects are not known<sup>5</sup>.

Spaccarelli received top prize (diploma d'onore con lode) at the Third Murano Glass Exhibition in 1895, the show held alongside the first Venice Biennale, for a vase decorated with figures in three layers: «for the marvellous cameo glass vase in Greco-Roman style in three layers black, white and light blue». This is probably the third known signed and dated piece by Spaccarelli, a vase of 1891. One of the chroniclers of the 1895 show remembers that the vase was 'of 1891'<sup>6</sup>. The same vase was later shown at the 1898 Turin Show<sup>7</sup>. Obviously these extraordinary pieces were used as showpieces and brought to several shows.

Spaccarelli seems to have been the only known engraver known involved in this brief Venetian cameo glass adventure<sup>8</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> *Tre anforette in vetro a due strati, incise a cameo da Attilio Spaccarelli, allievo della scuola annessa al Museo Artistico Industriale di Roma. Compagnia di Venezia e Murano, Venezia* (Roma, Museo artistico industriale IV ESPOSIZIONE 1889 ARTE CERAMICA E VETRARIA, Catalogo delle opere esposte...raccolti per cura di R. Erculei direttore del Museo, 254-255).

<sup>6</sup> Santini 1895: 14, «Alludesi ad una stupenda coppa incisa sul vetro ad imitazione degli antichissimi vetri dall'artista Spaccarelli romano nel 1891».

<sup>7</sup> The 1891 vase is in the collection of Martin Cohen on loan to the Corning Museum of Glass, see Whitehouse 2007: no. 44. Tonini 2004 is an in-depth study of the vase. For the controversy raised by some of the works shown at this show, which were apparently not new and already seen, including the cameo vase, see Barovier Mentasti. 1977: 148.

<sup>8</sup> In his introduction to the section on Cameo Glass in Whitehouse 2007, the author mentions a 'white-over-blue vase' in a private collection signed by E. Montani, Roma; evidently other Roman engravers collaborated with Murano glassworks. See Whitehouse 2007: 17.

*'Spaccarelli incisore e cesellatore' (Spaccarelli engraver and goldsmith)*

Little is known of Attilio Spaccarelli. As a pupil of the Scuola Artistico Industriale in Rome he presented his works at several National exhibitions during the 1880s. He was an extremely versatile artist. In 1883 he presented a crystal vase mounted in silver at the Esposizione di Belle Arti in Rome<sup>9</sup>. In the Exhibition catalogue his address is listed: Via della Croce 6, Roma.

A year later in Turin, while showing the unfinished cameo glass cup with the Battle of Costantino, he also presented another cup with the same subject made in metal and decorated in enamel, and also a plate modelled in wax with a rendering in low relief of a bust by Mino da Fiesole. The plate, which was meant to be executed in glass in three layers (obviously in cameo glass) was particularly praised<sup>10</sup>. He participated in the show as pupil of Professor Luciano Bizzarri who taught wax and clay modelling for goldsmith work. This implies, in a new discovery, that Spaccarelli was primarily a goldsmith. This would certainly not be a unique instance. The talented cameo glass artist Alphonse Lechevrel was previously a medallist and gem engraver and carving glass is not stylistically and technically different.

Spaccarelli's skill in forging metal is confirmed by the fact that in 1886 at the Exhibition of Metalwork Objects of the Museo Artistico Industriale of Rome he exhibited a small cup in bronze chased with an elaborate classical motif including figures and grotesque masks<sup>11</sup>. The decoration on the cup was probably akin to the decoration on the metal foot on the 1887 vase on Fig 2.

It has been suggested previously that the metal foot might be a replacement, but on taking the vase and foot apart, can be seen that they are clearly meant for each other as the cylindrical finial of the vase is still inserted into its metal base (Figs. 3-4).

After cleaning, the iron foot has revealed a classical decoration enriched with silver and gold damascening which is a masterful piece of goldsmiths work. The decoration on the metal foot recalls motifs

<sup>9</sup> *Catalogo Ufficiale* 1883, no. 18, 163.

<sup>10</sup> No. 491 in the show. *Cronaca Illustrata Esposizione Italiana* 1884: 274.

<sup>11</sup> Civelli 1886: no 63, 263.

seen on Spaccarelli glass<sup>12</sup>. Therefore it is now possible to attribute the whole glass vase, including the metal foot, to Spaccarelli.

### *The use of the Antique*

Spaccarelli cameo works reveal a clever and well informed use of iconographic models. Unsigned and unfinished pieces may therefore appear to be convincing original ancient roman cameos; indeed at least two of them have been thought to be ancient<sup>13</sup>. The general conception and colour-scheme of such glass cameos, a layer of white opaque glass carved in high relief on a mostly blue glass ground, are inspired by ancient Roman cameo glass. The prime inspiration was clearly the Portland Vase. Only a photograph is left as evidence of a copy made by Spaccarelli of this most complex and famous piece of cameo from the ancient world<sup>14</sup>.

However, Spaccarelli looked beyond glass to produce his glass cameos. He found plenty of inspiration for his classically inspired works in Rome.

The 1884 ewer in Fig 1 shows an intricate frieze with Amazons in Battle. The dramatic pathos of the scene is rendered by masterfully adapting around the body of the ewer several figures from a Roman sarcophagus in the Musei Capitolini<sup>15</sup> (Figs. 5-6).

Despite the minute size of the ewer, Spaccarelli didn't limit himself to one source. Above the lying figure of an Amazon, the artist has very convincingly incorporated a group taken from a completely different work of art: one of the two "Siris Bronzes" at the British Museum or another version of the same sculptural composition<sup>16</sup>. This embossed

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<sup>12</sup> See a vase at the Ashmolean Museum, Newby 2000, no. 54 and the base of a vase at Murano Museum, Bova and Migliaccio 2013: no. 2.

<sup>13</sup> See Rakow and Rakow 1985: 53-56. Whittehouse 2007: no. 45.

<sup>14</sup> The copy of the Portland vase was seen by Albert Revi in the 1950s at Pauly and Cie. Reproduced in Rakow and Rakow 1985: pl. 15.

<sup>15</sup> Inv. Sen. 786. See Grassinger 1999: vol. 1, no. 94.

<sup>16</sup> Museum no. GR 1833.4-22.1-2. Etruscan versions of this group were probably seen by Spaccarelli in Roman Museums (a 19<sup>th</sup> century copy at the V&A, London, inv. no. 182-1865).

relief from a cuirass shows a Greek warrior holding an Amazon by the hair and raising his knee to kick her (Figs. 7-8).

In producing his series of cameos with Bacchic dances Spaccarelli was inspired by the famous Neo-Attic marble crater (kylix) known as the Borghese Vase, now in the Louvre, which shows a frieze with a Bacchic procession under a band of vine leaves. Spaccarelli uses figures from the Borghese vase on several of his Bacchic cameo works.

The 1887 vase with metal foot on Fig. 2 reveals lesser known iconographic sources. The vase shows a Thiasus: a Bacchanalian procession with four figures dancing around the vase forming a running frieze. All the figures derive from ancient Roman moulded plaques. Three out of four figures are taken from a terracotta relief known as the “Campana Plaque” bought by the Louvre from the collection of the Marquis Giampietro Campana, who assembled the most important collection of such works<sup>17</sup>(Figs. 9-10).

Commercial replica of this and other plaques from the Louvre collection were reproduced in-house during the 19<sup>th</sup> century and perhaps Spaccarelli knew this relief through such a replicas. The figures on the ‘Campana Plaque’ are key to the whole Bacchic group by Spaccarelli, probably all executed close together.

The fourth figure on the 1887 vase, perhaps Dionysus, is taken (with some disparities, such as the hair and position and shape of the staff) from the first figure of a Neo-Attic panel with a Bacchic procession known in several versions, found at both Herculaneum and Rome<sup>18</sup>. The same figure is used elsewhere by Spaccarelli.

In conclusion, Spaccarelli and the Compagnia Venezia e Murano took the art of cameo glass making to a very high level. Their revivalist pieces are almost as rare as the Roman cameos that they imitate and reveal an insightful and informed use of classical sources. Their makers overcame the technical challenges that they faced with their enthusiasm for the art of the ancient world.

<sup>17</sup> Musée du Louvre, inv. CP3894. The Campana plaque is of uncertain origin.

<sup>18</sup> For example a marble Neo-Attic copy at British Museum, BM1805,0703.128.

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Fig. 1 - Attilio Spaccarelli for C.V.M., *Cameo Glass ewer with Amazons in Battle with Greek warriors*, signed and dated: 'A. Spaccarelli 1884'. H: 16 cm. London, Rainer Zietz.





Fig. 2 - Attilio Spaccarelli for C.V.M., *Vase with a Bacchic Procession*, signed and dated: 'A SPACCARELLI. 1887. INCISE V. Murano'. H: 23.5 cm. London, Rainer Zietz.



Figs. 3-4 - Details of base and metal foot of Spaccarelli vase on fig. 2 taken apart.



Figs. 5-6 - Detail of Roman sarcophagus, Battle of the Amazons and the Greeks, 2nd century A.D. Rome, Musei Capitolini, inv. Scu.786 (from D. Grassinger, *Die Mythologischen Sarkophage*, 1999 Vol. 1 no. 94) compared with detail of Spaccarelli 1884 ewer on fig. 1.



Figs. 7-8 - Other view of Spaccarelli 1884 ewer compared with *The Siris Bronze*, a decorative relief fragment from a cuirass, Western Greek, 390-340 BC, found in the river Siris, Southern Italy. London, British Museum GR 1833.4-22 1 (©The Trustees of the British Museum).



Figs. 9-10 - 'Plaque Campana', with a Bacchant and two satyrs revelling, Roman, perhaps 27BC-68AD, terracotta. Paris, Louvre Museum, Inv. Cp 3894 (©RMN-Musée du Louvre), compared with two views of Spaccarelli 1887 vase on Fig. 2.

