

Maestro Gianni Toso, Master of Murano

by Marcie Davis



Thirteen hundred fifty years and counting! That's the lengthy family legacy of Maestro Gianni Toso. With 700 years on his father's side and 650 on his mother's side, his glass ancestry is impressive. "It's in my DNA," he chuckles.

Growing up steeped in Venetian tradition gives Toso a unique window on the world. Though originally a master glassblower, it was his flamework that brought him fame. "When I worked in the glass factory, I was limited in my creativity. In 1972, I was invited to represent Italy at the International Glass Symposium at the Museum Bellerive in Zurich working with seventeen other artists from all over the world." Among the sainted seventeen were some names you might be familiar with, including Marvin Lipofsky and Dale Chihuly.

Toso was one of the undisputed founding fathers of the studio glass movement. "I saw the other artists' enthusiasm and started to think in a different way—not only about making a living with glass, but also about the potential market to buy fine art. In the glass factory, I was just one of many master glassblowers making production. It was very distressing after all of the high culture that I acquired in the fine arts academy for master glassblowers in Murano. So I started lampworking—nobody taught it to me—and with the first oxygen tank I had, one week later, ten small animals."



From Venice to America

Now a legend and visionary known for his narrative religious and cultural scenes, Toso continues to create and inspire. Some of his most well-known motifs are his chess sets. Originally conceived because of their economic viability, they've become stark commentaries on opposing ideologies.

"We had two philosophies in Venice; one was the branch of Orthodox Jews and the other was the branch of Orthodox Catholics. Two philosophies. They face each other." Additional casts of characters that found their way into chess sets include Hellenists and stock members of the *commedia dell'arte*.

"In Venice, on every corner is a piece of art. They have a fantastic history of classical music and five different *commedia dell'arte* theaters. There is a big cultural happening, but glass is dead. It's repetition, repetition. The best-skilled glassblowers in the world are there, no doubt, but from the cultural point of view the glass culture in Venice is dead. I saw the potential—the future of glass—in the United States."

Toso decided to make a new life for himself in America. Currently residing in Baltimore, he loves his adopted country. With a reverence for the American Constitution that is uncommon even among those born here, Toso believes that America is a modern extension of Venetian culture. This unique viewpoint is based upon the fact that Venice was the only republic in Europe at a time when virtually all governments were monarchies. Surprisingly, there are startling similarities in the structure of the Venetian government and the origins of our own.



Taking Up the Standard

"American glassblowers must pick up the cultural treasure, not just the technique of Venezia, if we want the glass studio movement to continue. . . . My goal was academic, not just to create another glass factory. That was the reason why in 1972 I accepted to become a member of the International Glass Studio Movement, because we participants agreed with Harvey Littleton. He introduced the concept of studio glass, moving glass production from the factories into the artist's studio. For centuries, each big Murano glass family (such as Toso, Seguso, Barovier, and Moretti) had its own distinct production. This was before the industrialization of the glass factories, when the emphasis shifted to mass production. Make it good! Make it quick! And make it again! The individual was without identity and could pass easily and namelessly from this earth while the furnaces rumbled on."

There were strict traditions within the way these studios functioned, and women were central in the success of this old model. "Women had a very important function in our society. They were the bookkeepers, the administrators, the designers. And also they were the toughest critics. Whenever we made a piece of glass, like typical men, we would offer the work to the women. If they picked it up and said, 'It's okay,' we were sure we did not have a market. But if we made something that stimulated their sensitivity and they said, 'Oh, I want this piece,' then we were sure that we had a successful design on our hands."





Why is Toso so confident that the future of glass is on U.S. soil? "The students have a very good basis for making a glass culture here, because at the colleges and universities they teach glass as an intellectual medium, not just as production." He feels that this attitude is essential for the evolution of the art of glass.

Biblical Beginnings of Glass

Much of Toso's glasswork depicts traditional Jewish life. His Orthodox religious practice and personal research have given rise to an uncommon view of the genesis of glass. "We have the tradition from Pliny. They say that glass was brought to humanity by Phoenicia where they made a bonfire in the desert, but that is not documented. The only document we have is in the Bible. Moses, before he died, gave a special blessing to each tribe. Zebulun, the tenth son of Jacob, was given the blessing that says, 'From the sandy beach you will go to make a treasure unto the world.' We have two very learned medieval scholars, Rashi and Seforno, who believed that Zebulun's blessing refers to the secret of glassmaking.

"The first time I went to Israel, I looked around at all of the beaches and, with the exception of one, they consisted of yellow sand. Why yellow sand? Because the mineral dolomite is the main component of the sand. Yet south of Haifa in the area where Zebulun lived there is a small river that flows from Mt. Carmel. Where that river meets the Mediterranean Sea, the sand is white. Why white? Because the sand on that beach is quartz, and quartz is the main mineral required for making glass.





“In 1978, *Archeology Today* covered a team of archeologists excavating in the old city of Jerusalem who discovered a glass factory. There was evidence of lampworking as well as glassworking. They found glass pipes, each no longer than twelve inches, that showed each step of the glassmaking process, from the first bubble to the final object. This archeological evidence is more convincing than Pliny’s anecdote regarding the origins of glass and who invented it. Until we have more information, we must accept that the first blowpipe was made by the Jewish people in Jerusalem a few thousand years ago.”

The fact that Venetian home-boy, Gianni Toso, refutes the long-held assumption that Romans invented the blowpipe is disquieting and unsettling! Yet it blends perfectly with the lively and opinionated spirit of one of the great glass academicians and artists of our time.

FLOW ■

To find out more about Gianni Toso and to see examples of his work, visit www.giannitoso.com. To hear him, fiery and articulate, in a Glasscaster podcast, go to www.fireladyproductions.com.

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