



The Bead Society of Greater Washington Newsletter

VOL VII NO 3

PUBLISHED IN WASHINGTON, DC

JULY - SEPT 1990

Shopping for Beads in Venice

by Diane Fitzgerald

Now that I was on my way to becoming the "Bead Lady" of Minneapolis, it was natural that my annual vacation would take me on a pilgrimage to the most renowned bead capital of modern times--Venice! My bead business, Beautiful Beads, was barely five months under way and my copy of "The History of Beads" hardly broken in, when my sister said, "Let's go to Venice!" How could I refuse?

The only thing more prevalent in Venice than canals, is, you guessed it, beads. Every shop displays beads and the variety is amazing. Of course, most of these are beads for tourists--the multi-colored millefiori beads seem to be everywhere. When I asked one of the shopkeepers, "Who buys these?" she responded, "Americans." It's funny though, I don't recall ever seeing an American back home wearing one of these necklaces. They must be "the thing" to bring home from Venice.

With necklaces in such profusion, one must ask where do they come from? Who strings all these beads? That's not an easy question to answer. Finding the actual source of beads required some snooping, but recalling my training as an investigative reporter, I

suspected that it would either be a very young person who would tell me or a very old person--these people have less stake in the status quo and will sometimes share what they know.

One wizened old man selling lace told my sister that 99% of the lace available in Venice
(continued on page 2)

NEXT MEETING

July 12, 1990

7:30 pm

Don't miss this special
BEAD CONFERENCE FUNDRAISER
to be held at **ARISE:**
6925 Willow Street, NW
Tel: 291-0770

The speaker will be Claire Wilbur of the Gekko, back from Indonesia with a slide lecture on old glass beads from Java.

The lecture will be followed by a bead sale and raffle. Details in Announcement column on page 5.

(continued from cover)

and supposedly made on the island of Burano, famous for its needle lace, is actually imported from China. That doesn't surprise me. The handful of experienced elderly lacemakers we saw on Burano could never have produced the stock of lace tablecloths, doilies, napkins, collars, and other items we found. The same gentleman told us he suspected that many of the beads came from China also. This wouldn't surprise me either considering the economics of the bead industry and the wages that the Chinese work for.

It wasn't that I hadn't done my homework before I left. I called and questioned every source I could before I left. I found out how to say "bead" in Italian--perle. I looked in the yellow pages. Not much help. I questioned the people in the U.S. who import beads. Everyone said, "No one will let you see them make the beads. They want to keep the process a secret." They were wrong. I saw and photographed bead makers in a factory and spoke with one young woman who has taken up beadmaking as a career. The process is no secret, but if they're doing it at home, they are worried about paying taxes on income they make "under the table" (black work as they call it) and other regulations they may be violating.

It's also difficult to buy loose beads in Venice. People shrug their shoulders when you ask where you can buy unstrung "Perle." Yellow pages, even with a translator, weren't

any help, but eventually the dam broke. One shop had a small number of unusual necklaces. They bore no resemblance to the standard fare on the street. I admired them and asked where the beads came from, and could I go there and buy some? Yes, she would call for me to see if I could have an appointment. I could and went right over.

Less than a quarter of a mile down the Cannaregio at 970, north off the Grand Canal, is the factory of Paolo Darin. In 1985, Darin purchased the company, R. Mazzucco, and has continued in the bead making industry. He is gradually trying to train young women to make beads and to reestablish the skill level of Venetian beadmakers, but as he says, it's not easy. Young people want a job in the post office or something more glamorous. And indeed, it didn't seem like an occupation I could do day after day, year in and year out.

Nothing about the building at Cannaregio 970 would give you a clue that behind the steel gates and concrete exterior there was a bead making establishment. The sign simply said, "R. Mazzucco." The street was almost deserted. A young woman who spoke no English answered my ring and led me in. After a brief wait, Paolo Darin, a tall dark-haired man of about 40, came in. I said I was interested in buying beads and seeing bead making in progress if possible. He spoke English fluently, fortunately.

At first, he was reluctant to even talk to me, but I had brought along a copy of "The Bead Primer," by Elizabeth Harris so that I could use it in a pinch to explain with pictures what I was after. I could see that he wanted the booklet and I offered it to him. That broke the ice. We talked about the difficulty of the bead business--the problem of recruiting, training, and retaining beadmakers; the ever-tightening regulations of the Italian government both in the area of pollution control of the acids used to dissolve the copper wire on which beads are wound and the taxing of homework mentioned earlier. No doubt there

are other safety considerations for the workers which are being regulated, making manufacture more costly and difficult. I came away with a much improved sense of what it takes to make a bead today and why they cost what they do.

Like bead lovers everywhere, he had a small box of odd beads on his massive dark desk. He showed me an unusual bead and said, "See this bead: the skill to make it has been lost. No one knows how to reproduce it." Knowing little about the nuts and bolts of the bead making process, I could only murmur sympathy. He and others I spoke with estimated that there may be fewer than 50 highly skilled beadmakers left in Venice today. Next he showed me a small plaque with six cane chips mounted on it. These were so small that I could barely make out what was depicted on them. He valued them at over \$2,000. But other beads which he manufactures were contemporary and beautiful while others were traditional Venetian glass beads. Some were in colors such as red and black that he said were made for the Japanese market.

Finally, I asked if I could see the factory area. No problem. We went back to a somewhat darkened room where two women sat at a bench making the common millefiori beads we saw everywhere. Their faces were protected by a transparent shield and a bright orange flame shot out of the gas jet. A foot or so in front of each worker was a small oven where a supply of glass was kept molten. Simple tongs were used to shape the bead after applying a piece of cane. It looked much like the sketches in the "Bead Primer." I got two pictures with my old Stereo Realist (3-dimension) camera. Then Darin had a call and the time he could devote to me and my questions was over.

He asked me to send him whatever books I could on beadmaking and beads. I suggested that he attend the 2nd International Bead Conference in Washington, DC and explain the Venetian beadmaking industry. He said several

of the beadmakers in Venice (evidently there are several!) could perhaps get together and send one representative. But he just shrugged when I asked where else I could look for beads. So back to the hunt.

By this time my sister was getting the hang of the search. On the lookout now, she spotted a 27" x 39" poster of antique Venetian beads. This dramatic poster depicts a collage of beads at different magnifications set against a black background. Its title line reads, (for those of you who read Italian) RIFLESSO MAGICO DI PERLE VENEZIANE; COLLEZIONE ARNALDO DI GASPERI - EDIZIONI P.B.M. FOTO E GRAFICA DI MARIO STAINER - ENZO D'AMBROSI; SELEZIONI: EUROCROM 4 (TV) - STAMPA: GRAFICHE MARINI TREVISO/VILLORBA; COPYRIGHT 1989 TUTTI I DIRITTI RISERVATI. I was told that the poster was printed for a past exhibit of beads from a private collection. I hope the poster becomes available in the U.S.

My sister's sleuthing also brought us to the shop of Paolo and Francesca Scarpa. This couple travels the world to find beads, talismans and artifacts and assembles the eclectic ingredients into museum quality, one-of-a-kind necklaces with a strong ethnic feel. Price ranges run between \$100 and \$10,000 and all are classified as antiques.

Turned on to our finds and seriously hunting now, we next came across a rare coin and stamp dealer. In a small cup at the back of his window were a few chips from bead canes. I wanted to see them closer and went in. Bruno Martin, a shopkeeper in his 70s or 80s, spoke no English, but we communicated without it. I admired the cane chips and he wrote down that they were produced in about 1850. Their price range was upwards of \$200 each. He showed me several more. The best one was about a quarter inch in diameter and through the magnifying glass I could see the tiny Rialto Bridge and scalloped edge surrounding it. Impressive to say the least.

In other stores, such as Ditta S. Vischio, we

found a limited number of loose beads in a variety of styles, but mostly ready made jewelry and necklaces. At Lapis, a store with a modern, high tech atmosphere, we found both new and antique beads. Arnaldo de Gasperi, the owner, had been in the antique business previously. He mentioned that the bead business is expanding, especially among the Japanese tourists.

Parapamiso, a third store, was similar to Scarpa's in its ethnic emphasis. Michel Paciello, the owner, began his business about 16 years ago by selling mostly Indian items. About four years ago he turned to African beads and items, and now travels much of the year searching for beads and antique or primitive jewelry. He noted that the book, "The History of Beads," by Lois Sherr Dubin, has increased the popularity of beads. The store of Georges Mion, a few blocks from Lapis, carried some antiques and clothing as well as beads and many seed bead necklaces. However, the owners told me that they would be going out of business shortly, but that they may reopen in Spain or southern France.

On Murano, the island to which the glass makers had been moved in 1292 to protect Venice from fire, we talked to M.L. Bon. A woman of about 30, who she has taken up beadmaking and produces necklaces from her own and antique beads.

Unfortunately, our stay in Venice was short and our time to leave for Paris came just when we had hit our stride. No doubt we had missed much. Our train to Paris left that evening and I dreamed of beads as the train clicked along the track. Venice was all that I had expected and more. It was clean, somewhat crowded with tourists and the late fall weather pleasant.

If anyone would like to discuss Venice and its beads further, or would like specific directions to these shops, please call or write me: Diane Fitzgerald, Beautiful Beads, 63 South First Street, Minneapolis, MN 55401; 612-333-0170 (shop) or 333-5483 (home).

In Venice:

Paolo Darin

R. Mazzucco, SNC

Produzione Perle a Lume e Bigiotterie

Palazzo Surian - Canarregio, 970

Venezia

Tel. 041-717016

Partita IVA 02027650270

Paolo and Francesca Scarpa

Merceria S. Salvado 4850

Venezia

Tel. 86881

Bruno Martin

Antiquariato Filatelico Numismatico

Studio

S. Giov. Grisostomo. 5781

Telephone: 5225540

Filmar-Vendite per Corrispondenza

Post Box 215 Venezia-Italia

Privato

San Polo, 1954

30125 Venezia

Telephone: 521158

Ditta S. Vischio

Biggoterie

S. Salvador 5025-5026-4839

Venezia

Telephone: 5227856

Artigianato Veneziano

di M. L. Bon

30141 Venezia - Murano

Viale Garbaldi 8/A

Telephone 736794

Paropamiso

Michel Paciello

S. Marco Frezzeria n. 1701

Telephone: 5227120

30124 Venezia

Lapis

Arnoldo de Gasperi

Castello, 4618

VENEZIA TEL (041) 522-6039