

Vetro di Murano: Storie di Mestieri e di Fornaci

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BOOK REVIEW

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Vetro di Murano: Storie di Mestieri e di Fornaci is a book addressing the management-related issues of one of the historical artisan industrial districts in Northern Italy. This valuable historical account delves into the major issues faced by a few artisan glassmaking firms in Murano, Italy, and provides a detailed value-creation picture of the industrial district. The work illustrates how the glass-making craft, deeply rooted in local history and traditions, reacted to the various industrial and productive challenges that characterised recent times. The book is not only useful as it makes industry-relevant data available to a wide audience – both professional and academic – but also because it succeeds illustrating the personal perspectives of a craft that has important economic and historical relevance to the industrial-craft environment in Northern Italy.

The authors take an original methodological approach that includes three researchers' perspectives for data collection, and four participants' 'voices'. The latter have been coded and structured along three main themes: the industry typical productive features; the individual professional experiences within the industry; and the participants' interpretation of the long-term crisis and challenges linked to the glass-making industry. The method also includes a brief but insightful academic section where the findings are discussed against existing literature and used as a starting point to provide strategic recommendations that the authors deem as essential to the industry. The book contains a set of visual materials and an additional interview that corroborates *voices* available in the main findings. The richness of data resulting from this method not only makes the book a valid empirical resource on the historical and artisanal industrial districts in Italy, but also addresses the lack of studies on the back-office dynamics and on how a vocational and creative activity – glassmaking – has shaped itself industrially over the years.

Hence, the oeuvre places itself at the intersection of the existing academic and industry-related literature on the techniques and personal stories around traditional glassmaking and produces nuances on product design processes, aesthetic approaches, and their implication to organisation and vocational practice. To do this, the authors' approach consisted of narrating the overall story with a series of paragraphs where the main issue is briefly introduced, and then followed by interview extracts from multiple participants supporting the statements. This approach to data works consistently with subheadings in order to indicate the main purpose of each section, and determines the success of the book in addressing the limited knowledge on the glassmaking artisanal industry in Murano, thus contributing to business history in this sense.

The first section of the book engages with the academic literature on the business history of the sector, on the industrial relations with the local context, and on the general attitude of the local firms towards a number of critical issues of the industry. In particular, the authors illustrate that the craft glassmaking industry has suffered not just from the

production side – characterised by consistent employment reduction – but also and more importantly in terms of unfair market competition by fake products intended for a mass-market that Murano craft glassmakers are unable to fully approach. This, according to the authors, has devastating effects on the quality of the artisanal glass-making industry in Murano. The second section of the volume is organised in three chapters, each dedicated to a specific aspect of the findings as well as their implications to literature and knowledge of the industry.

Chapter 2 presents the stories on the productive and vocational knowledge of Murano's artisanal glassmaking. The chapter delves into the tales of glassmakers on a number of typical glass products and illustrates the features of and the working conditions typical of the core organisational unit in Murano's glassmaking workshops: *la piazza*. This is done successfully both by illustrating the different core and liminal glassmaking metiers, as well as by explaining the issues linked with gender concentration, hard-working labour conditions, and the firms' attempts to address the lack of vocational education programmes and the need to access workforce from abroad to replenish the local limited supply of labour. Chapters 3 and 4 provide an overview of the organisational and market issues, and of industrial and technological issues, respectively. Particularly, the product and process innovation dynamics are presented from the managerial perspectives of senior glassmakers, and the issues linked to attracting workforce, warehouse relocation, and adaptation of production processes to market tastes and wants, are identified as core challenges of this traditional craft industry, suggesting that the future of the artisanal glassmaking industry in Murano relies on *fragile* perspectives.

The contents of the final chapter corroborate the book's findings and contribute to the knowledge of artisanal craft working and organisational practices. Although literature sources have a limited space in the book, this section expands our understanding of glassmaking practices by listing and examining the (1) tacit skills of craft glassmakers, the (2) repertoire of operations and manual processes of a master glassmaker, and the conceptualisation of the (3) *danza del vetro*. Hence, the book adds to a more detailed picture of the glassmaking *piazza* in terms of its limited replicability as modular productive unit due to the limited human and technical resources, and the low educational level.

Three main literature strands are identified in the book in terms of different craftsmanship industries and experiences. Within those, the authors advocate for a *contemplative* approach to the understanding of craftsmanship which led to making the book useful for the understanding, definition, and theorisation of the phenomenon of artisanal glassmaking in Murano from a detailed historical perspective. However, the book also includes a valuable practical recommendations section where the sector's vocational crisis is addressed by identifying the need to contemplate a new concept of glassmaking firm organised on three levels. This section is particularly valuable because of the authors' ability to articulate the three levels of policy and organisational intervention, but also because it includes epistemological and ontological suggestions for research to be conducted in the same productive context.

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