Introduction

There are two ways that glass can be shaped and manipulated. It can be molded while in its hot state, or it can be cut, like stone, in its cold state. The Venetians were champions of this first method, and their blown glass pieces were considered the best in the world at the height of their production during the Renaissance (Figure 1). Towards the end of the eighteenth century, however, many of the glassmaking guilds had shut down and the production of glass in the city was rapidly declining.

At that same moment, the British were developing their own method of glassmaking, which utilized the second method, cutting and engraving the glass while it was cold (Figure 2). This second method had been used historically, though not to the same extent and proficiency as the British at this time (Figure 3). As a result, England soon came to hold a monopoly over the glass making industry in the early nineteenth century, supplanting the previously dominant Venetians. There was, however, a renewed interest in Venetian glass during the mid-nineteenth century in Britain that coincided with the revival of glassmaking in Venice. British interest was initiated by a fascination with antiquity and the exotic, and was supported by the collecting practices that arose from travel.

There has been little scholarship on the collection of Venetian glass by the British beyond an examination of the technical or aesthetic qualities of the pieces themselves. I attribute this neglect to its designation as a “decorative art.” While the focus of my paper will not question the term “decorative arts”, nor its marginalized place within art historical discourse, I do find it important to mention because I believe it has led to the underdeveloped scholarship on Venetian glass, its impact on British taste and, more broadly, their collective identity.

Despite its fragile nature, glass held a certain level of permanency in the early modern mind, as its colour does not fade, and its shape does not distort over time. While it can be viewed as an object of utility, and a part of the visual and material culture of Victorian Britain, it is clear that glass also carried greater meaning at this time. Venetian glass acted as more than a collected object, for ownership allowed the British to contrast the foreign glass with their own manufactured cut glass, and thereby underline their own national identity as progressive, modern and industrious. This paper will explore the role Venetian glass collecting in Britain played in establishing the modern identity of industrial Britain, and in so
doing, it will expose the way that the British viewed the “authenticity” of the glass produced during the revival of glass making in Venice at this time.

Revival of Venetian Glass

Though ancient glass was produced using the plastic method, manipulating it in its hot state, the geometric patterns of cut glass corresponded with neoclassical ideals of the eighteenth century. Often the glass produced would be engraved in stereotypical Greco-Roman motifs and took inspiration from architectural design. The fascination with antiquity and the popularity of neoclassicism influenced interior design as well, which utilized cut glass to manufacture chandeliers (Figure 4). While Venetian chandeliers were still produced in the seventeenth century fashion (Figure 5), they struggled to compete with the British cut glass that dominated in popularity and taste in the early nineteenth century.

Gothic Revivalists, however, embraced Venetian blown glass. John Ruskin, in particular, advocated the Venetian method of glass production, stating:

all cut glass is barbarous: for the cutting conceals its ductility, and confuses it with crystal. Also, all very neat, finished, and perfect form in glass is barbarous: for this fails in proclaiming another of its great virtues; namely, the ease with which its light substance can be moulded or blown into any form.

For Ruskin, the Venetian’s were more truthful to the material quality of glass in their method of production, and therefore engaged in a superior means of manufacturing. Furthermore, he argued that, “The more wild, extravagant, and grotesque in their gracefulness the forms are, the better. No material is so adapted for giving full play to the imagination” (Figure 6). William Morris also favoured Venetian glass, indicating that it embraced creative design and epitomized craft production over machine-made goods.

Promotion of Venetian glass, by theorists like Ruskin and Morris, launched an interest in the foreign items in Britain. A collection of Venetian glass pieces was provided by a single donor and displayed in the Crystal Palace at the Great Exhibition in 1851, where it was received with great interest and admiration (Figure 7). And in 1852, Venetian examples were featured in the glass display at the South Kensington Museum, which would later become the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Meanwhile, in Venice, a commission to restore the mosaics in San Marco initiated a revival of glass making on the island of Murano, located north of the main city center (Figures 8 & 9). Antonio Salviati’s company was selected as the supplier, and he would soon become the leading figure in the revival of the glassmaking industry in Venice. At the same time, a museum of glass was established in Murano which displayed pieces of ancient glass found throughout the Roman Empire as well as items from the Renaissance that were donated by Venetian families. In addition, a school of design was set up in Murano that trained students in the tradition of glass blowing. The school used antique and Renaissance glass pieces from the nearby museum to inspire the designers of new pieces, and to guide them in the practice of various glass making techniques, such as millefiori, seen in both the Renaissance and nineteenth century examples. As a result, much of early glass production in Venice during this period of revival was inspired by historic pieces (Figures 10 & 11).
The restoration and promotion of glass production in Venice in the mid-nineteenth century, led by Salviati, corresponded with the burgeoning interest in Venetian glass in Britain, so that by the time Salviati displayed pieces from his company at an exhibition in Britain in 1862, the public was highly receptive to the foreign glass forms. He soon set up showrooms in both Venice and London, which advertised the new products that were available from his workshop (Figure 12). Further dissemination of his designs was made possible through catalogues, which pictured the various pieces available for purchase. The pieces that were advertised resembled the antique and Renaissance pieces that were the source of practice and inspiration for the students at the school of design in Murano and which appealed to the British fascination with antiquity.

Collecting in Britain

The British were captivated by antiquity during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and looked upon art and artifacts from the classical period as objects of ‘curiosity’. Curiosity, at this time, was a term that was used to describe an attitude of fascination towards colonies or foreignness. Often, curiosity was expressed through literature; however, there is a material result from this fascination that takes the form of collecting and display (Figure 13). Historically, the term ‘curiosity’ carried a negative connotation, as a “lawless and asocial” practice, motivating rogue exploration and capture of foreignness. In the nineteenth century, however, empiricism legitimized curiosity as it stabilized England’s colonial aspirations and cultivated cultural development. As a result, curiosity became a very important tool of imperial Britain, as it became a means of colonizing and a way to assert power. Edward Said explains the implications of curiosity in Culture and Imperialism, where he states:

The power of an imperial society…takes the discursive form of reshaping or reordering of “raw” or primitive data into the local conventions of European narrative and formal utterance…When it came to what lay beyond metropolitan Europe, the arts and the disciplines of representation…depended on the powers of Europe to bring the non-European world into representations, the better to be able to see it, to master it, and above all, hold it.

The collection of items from afar, as is evident, provided the holder with a great amount of power. Italy, or southern Europe more generally, complicates this argument, however, as it was not colonized by Britain. And yet, their fervor for collecting art and artifacts from these countries replicated the kind of accumulation that was occurring across the empire. To explore how this replication of collecting practices operated, it is vital to look at the interest the British had in the south, and what power collected objects could provide to a potential owner.

The British viewed Greece and Italy as exceptional, for they were foreign countries that contained traces of former, superior civilizations. It was in these lands that the British found themselves to be students, rather than teachers. John Pemble, a scholar who explores the English fascination with Greece and Italy indicates that:

Nowhere else was the Anglo-Saxon so willing to acknowledge a sense of inferiority. Victorians
and Edwardians were not generally accustomed to seek elevation and enlightenment from lands other than their own. Italy and Greece…were the only countries where such a quest was admitted [and] few people really doubted that beyond the bounds of southern Europe the role of the British was to civilize others, not to civilize themselves.\(^{31}\)

A connection to these countries, established through travel and acquired goods, could, therefore, endow the British with the knowledge and history held by Greece and Italy. Additionally, possession of art and artifacts from these lands functioned to civilize its owner, in the sense that it provided the possessor with the qualities associated with ancient Greece and Italy, and in return made the owners themselves a curious object.\(^{32}\) So the interest in Venetian glass, fostered by figures like Ruskin and Morris, was additionally supported by national, imperial desires to possess these types of relics.

There was also an interest, particularly towards the end of the nineteenth century, in the history of glass. There were many articles written during this time that traced the various developments of glass production in ancient Rome, Syria – or more generally the East – and inevitably, Venice.\(^{33}\) Contemporaneous research into the medium further legitimized the collection and ownership of Venetian glass, for its ancient lineage could now be traced.

Furthermore, collecting practices that were carried into the nineteenth century from the Grand Tour had in impact on the acquisition of Venetian glass. Bringing souvenirs and works of art home from travels abroad was common convention and a large motivation for travel. The final goal of this process of collecting was in the display of the acquired items in the home.\(^{34}\) For example, on display within a wealthy English home a painting by Venetian artist Canaletto of the Piazzetta in Venice is hung above the fireplace, and various porcelain pieces are displayed along the mantle, and extend onto an adjoining shelf (Figure 14). The display of collected items indicated that the collector possessed taste and was well-travelled, while the ownership of foreign or antique goods made reference to the past or a non-metropolitan world, which captured the imagination of the modern British individual. Moreover, to witness another’s display of curiosities and souvenirs allowed the viewer to receive the same power, social value and status awarded to the collector.\(^{35}\) In this way, simply witnessing these collections provided the individual with acceptance into the rarefied world of the collector and their interest bestowed further value onto the objects themselves.\(^{36}\)

As curiosity shifted in this period from an enthusiasm into a commodity,\(^{37}\) the issue of authenticity became far more prevalent. The collection of Venetian glass was particularly fraught with notions of authenticity at this time, for the revival of the glassmaking industry was founded on the replication of antique and Renaissance forms. A consideration of the Victorian definition of ‘authenticity’ is required in order to understand how this affected the British collection of glass, and more broadly, what value the collected object contained as an ‘authentically’ Venetian item.

**Authenticity**

James Buzard, who writes on European tourism, literature and culture, describes authenticity during this period as “a concept ‘not given, but “negotiable”’ in society,”\(^{38}\) indicating that it was not a fixed term, but
rather was tied to perception and expectation. During this period, when Venetian glass was highly prized, the authenticity of the product in Victorian terms must be considered. For there was a desire to collect antique and Renaissance items, as well as the imitation pieces that were being produced in Venice by companies like Salviati’s. The question brought forward here is whether the British purchased these revival era pieces for their resemblance to the more ancient forms, or for their own merit as a piece of contemporary glass, and what this indicates about the ‘authenticity’ of the nineteenth century pieces.

It is evident from various British press releases that pieces produced by Salviati’s company were often mistaken for antique originals, for these texts warn collectors to be wary of the potential for mistake. However, these releases also praised the quality of nineteenth century Venetian glass, indicating that there was no sentiment of feeling deceived or tricked into purchasing a counterfeit item, but rather that they were simply similar items of quality and design that were produced at different times, which were easily mistaken for the other. It is surprising, however, to come across so many accounts, which emerged as early as 1866, of mistaken purchase, for early Salviati pieces were often crudely manufactured in comparison to those made in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries (Figures 15 & 16). Furthermore, Salviati’s designs were often a compilation of various elements from a variety of antique pieces, so the items were not always archaeologically exact. A small liqueur glass produced by Salviati’s company exemplifies this type of selective design and assembly (Figure 17). This nineteenth-century piece features a colour scheme, a dragon-like creature, the inclusion of gold leaf, and finally the latticino technique, all of which can be found in glass pieces from the Renaissance (Figures. 18, 19, 20 & 21). In the late nineteenth century, the designs became so fanciful and elaborate that they were no longer able to act as a functional item, but, rather, they were solely meant for display (Figure 22). Despite all of the stylistic differences that separate nineteenth-century glass from its antique and Renaissance prototypes, the British consumer expected Salviati’s productions to be exact to antique forms and therefore perceived them as such.

Phillip Vannini and Sarah Burgess, who write on authenticity in culture, self and society, provide a more broad definition of ‘authenticity’ that may be useful for our understanding of the authenticity of nineteenth-century glass. They state that, “authenticity refers to the condition or quality of realness. When we say that something is authentic, we mean that we find it genuine, the real thing, and not false, counterfeit, or an imitation." The misguided purchase of nineteenth-century glass was not considered a result of fraudulent advertising, or intentional deception. Instead it spoke to the quality and perceived accuracy of the pieces, despite the difference in formal qualities. This indicates that the ‘authenticity’ of Venetian glass produced in the nineteenth century was distinguished by the British not by its ability not to imitate antique glass but rather to evoke the same sense of quality, craftsmanship and spirit of its ancient predecessors. In this way, the authenticity of Venetian glass was a negotiated quality, rather than an assigned value.

It is clear that the value of a piece from the Renaissance or antiquity was different from the nineteenth-century pieces, however, it is not clear whether one was necessarily valued as greater than the other. Indeed, as much as the antiquated pieces were sought after, those of Salviati’s company also garnered immense interest and were viewed as a collector’s item. Nineteenth-century Venetian glass
encapsulated the lineage and spirit of the past and its context within a collection, as an ‘authentic’ part of that tradition is significant.

**British Identity**

The collection of glass not only established Britain as a place of cultural refinement and taste, but also gave the holder power. In bringing the glass into the metropolitan English context, the British were better able to see Venetian glass pieces as objects of art, rather than objects of utility like their own cut glass. This differentiation acted to assert Britain’s identity as a modern, progressive and industrious nation. One way in which Venetian glass acts to sustain this image is through collecting and displaying. Barbara Benedict, a literary scholar, writes:

> these items often represent fetishized labor: objects that were once designed for use are reinvented in the cabinet’s space as souvenirs, art objects, or artifacts. Moreover, the objects themselves often vaunt wasted work, and this waste becomes part of the power displayed in the virtuoso’s collection.

Venetian glass collected by the British epitomized this kind of fetishized labor within a collection. The later, more fanciful productions that were designed for display could be viewed as a challenge to this idea, for its utility cannot be revoked (Figure 23). However, those pieces in particular ultimately allowed the labor invested in the elaborate item to be fetishized through its very uselessness. The fanciful display of items also emphasized the utility and functionality of British cut glass pieces.

The fascination with labor, and asserting power or control over labor, in respect to collecting, brings into greater focus the fundamental function of Venetian glass in Victorian Britain. Its presence acted as a frame of reference or contrast to British cut glass, which was mass-produced using industrial machinery. This contrast allowed the British to prevail as modern and progressive, for their treatment of the material was better suited to contemporary needs (Figure 24).

The sentiment that British cut glass was a modern, and therefore a progressive treatment of the material was of great importance and relevance in England. One contemporary wrote on the suitability of glass as a modern material and the advancement of its manufacturing by the British. He stated:

> No material so commends itself to the tendencies of modern times as does this, so clear and pure is it and so perfectly favorable for the reception of almost every sort of shape. New and unexpected results indeed open out to us here. If among others glass industry would but again consider how ancient nations produced thick, hardly transparent glasses...[and] We have already stated that the Venetians have again taken up their old art with great taste and success, ... it is undeniable that just in most modern times, partly by borrowing from excellent old models, a greater impulse has been imparted to it... it is not too much to assert, that, through the gigantic advances of Chemistry... and the cheapness of production, the glass manufacture must necessarily reach a height it has never before attained.

Here the Venetian revival of ‘their old art’ is praised, yet it is made clear that Venetian production methods were not exploiting the
glass material to its full potential or utilizing modern industrial methods in its manufacture. It is in this way that Britain was able to position itself as a progressive, industrious and modern nation, able to appreciate the past while embracing the future.

British cut glass could also be viewed as a continuation of the history of glass; by aligning themselves with ancient Rome and Renaissance Venice, Britain positioned themselves as the next great empire able to produce and hold a monopoly over the glass industry. Indeed, by associating themselves with the ancient lineage of glass, collectors created connections to antiquity while highlighting British improvements made through modern, technical advancements. In doing so, Britain was inserted into the narrative of the evolution of glass production. The imperial aspirations of the British were, therefore, emblematized in this symbolic capture and display of the former empire.

Conclusion

While nineteenth century Venetian glass appealed to the British for its novelty and allusion to antiquity, it operated within a much larger apparatus, asserting British imperial power, prosperity, and industrial ingenuity. The collection of Venetian glass can therefore be viewed not only as a method of acquiring status, taste, and power for the individual but also for the nation.
Notes


4 Klein, 145.

5 Ibid., 150.

6 Ibid., 180.


9 Klein, *The History of Glass*, outlines early glass production, and addresses its manufacture in both eastern and western civilizations.

10 Ibid., 145.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., 150, 182.


15 Ibid., 392.

16 Klein, 183.


19 Liefkes, “Antonio Salviati and the Nineteenth-Century Renaissance of Venetian Glass,” 283-4. Liefkes’ article offers a brief but comprehensive study of Salviati, his company, and the revival of glass making in Venice under his leadership.

20 Osborne, *Venetian Glass of the 1890’s*, 15.

21 Ibid., 15.

22 Klein, 169.

23 Liefkes, 284-286.


26 Ibid.


28 Ibid., 99.


31 Ibid.


34 Thomas, *Entangled Objects*, 143.

35 Benedict, *Curiosity*, 43.

36 Ibid.
37 Ibid., 3.


39 Osborne, *Venetian Glass of the 1890’s*, 19.

40 Liefkes, 288.


42 Ibid., 104.

43 Marjorie Morgan, *National Identities and Travel in Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave, 2001), 7. While Morgan does not address the collection of Venetian glass specifically, she does discuss the ways that a “home” culture is established through travel to foreign places, and the study of cultures different from their own.


45 Klein, 145-150.

46 Paulus, 67.
Images

Figure 1. Blown Glass Vessels, Venice, 17th c. (Victoria and Albert Museum) – [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1826/perfume-sprinkler-unknown/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1826/perfume-sprinkler-unknown/)

Figure 2. Wine Glasses, England, 1790-1800 (Victoria and Albert Museum) - [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O2585/wine-glass/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O2585/wine-glass/)


Figure 4. Chandelier, England, c. 1815 (Victoria and Albert Museum) - [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O3310/chandelier-unknown/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O3310/chandelier-unknown/)

Figure 5. Chandelier, Salviati & Co., Venice, c. 1870 - [http://www.cmog.org/artwork/chandelier-4?page=8&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=264](http://www.cmog.org/artwork/chandelier-4?page=8&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=264)

Figure 6. Scallop-Shell Vase, Salviati Dott., Venice, 1880-1895 - [http://www.cmog.org/artwork/scallop-shell-vase?page=2&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=72](http://www.cmog.org/artwork/scallop-shell-vase?page=2&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=72)

Figure 7. Left: Cinerary Urn, Venice, 1860-70. Right: Neoclassical Vase, Compagnia di Venezia e Murano, c.1870. - [http://www.metmuseum.org/research/metpublications/European_Decorative_Arts_at_the_Worlds_Fairs_1850_1900_The_Metropolitan_Museum_of_Art_Bulletin_v_56_no_3_Winter_1998_1999?Tag=&title=&author=gere&pt=0&tc=0&dept=0&fmt=0](page 39 of PDF)

Figure 8. Map of Venice, Jacopo de’ Barbari, 1500 - [http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft238nb1nr&doc.view=popup&fig.ent=http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/data/13030/nr/ft238nb1nr/figures/ft238nb1nr_00001.jpg](http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/view?docId=ft238nb1nr&doc.view=popup&fig.ent=http://publishing.cdlib.org/ucpressebooks/data/13030/nr/ft238nb1nr/figures/ft238nb1nr_00001.jpg)


Figure 10. Bottle, Venice, 16th c. (Victoria and Albert Museum) - [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1386/bottle-unknown/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1386/bottle-unknown/)

Figure 11. Vase, Salviati & Co. Venice, 1872. (Victoria and Albert Museum) - [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O191/vase-venice-murano-glass/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O191/vase-venice-murano-glass/)
Figure 12. Illustration of Salviati’s showroom from a promotional brochure of the early twentieth century. - http://www.sinaiandsons.com/catalogue/19th%20Century/Micromosaic/Salviati%20Mosaic%20Panel.php (Image 5)

Figure 13. The Peacock Room, 49 Princess Gate, Harry Bedford Lemere (photographer), London, 1892. (Victoria and Albert Museum) - http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O21625/the-peacock-room-49-princes-photograph-lemere-harry-bedford/

Figure 14. Lady Carlisle’s Sitting Room, Charles Latham (photographer), England, c. 1907 - http://www.lookandlearn.com/history-images/M823501/Lady-Carlises-Sitting-Room

Figure 15. Dragon-Stem Goblet, Venice, 1630-70. (Corning Museum of Glass) - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/dragon-stem-goblet?page=23&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=695

Figure 16. Goblet, Salviati & Co., Venice, 1866. (Victoria and Albert Museum) - http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O4646/goblet-salviati-c/

Figure 17. Small Liqueur Glass, Venice, c. 1880-1900. (Corning Museum of Glass) - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/small-liqueur-glass?page=3&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=102

Figure 18. Cup, Venice, c. 1670-1730 (Corning Museum of Glass) - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/cup-48?search=collection%3Af86f5e57b84668b5edc507d1c292660f&page=97

Figure 19. Goblet, Venice, c. 1650 - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/goblet-114?search=collection%3Af3bf375f5efef0d358d1d1219243ef41&page=96

Figure 20. Goblet, Venice, 1475-1500 - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/nuptial-goblet?search=collection%3Af3bf375f5efef0d358d1d1219243ef41&page=101

Figure 21. Covered Jar, Venice, c. 1570-1600 - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/covered-jar-1?search=collection%3Aa16d43979c6bec883986e92fd1b6ac41&page=2

Figure 22. Vessel, Compania di Venezia e Murano, Venice, 1885. (Corning Museum of Glass) - http://www.cmog.org/artwork/vessel-shape-sea-horse?page=23&query=venice&goto=node/51200&filter=%22bundle%3Aartwork%22&sort=bs_has_image%20desc%2Cscore%20desc%2Cbs_on_display%20desc&object=700

Figure 23. Standing Cup, Salviati & Co., Venice, before 1868. (Victoria and Albert Museum) – http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O228525/standing-cup-salviati-co-messrs/
Figure 24. Dish, England, c. 1830. (Victoria and Albert Museum) - http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O1038/wine-glass-george-bacchus-and/