

## **Tobia Scarpa in Chicago October 5, 2004**

Tobia Scarpa, glass designer for Venini and son of Carlo Scarpa, was in Chicago for a lecture and exhibit sponsored by the Italian Cultural Institute. Scarpa has designed furniture, objects and architecture over a long and varied career for Cassina, Knoll and Benetton. He now teaches at the University of Venice. The Italian Cultural Institute hosted a traveling exhibit of drawings and objects by Scarpa during the month of October at their headquarters in Chicago.

After the opening of the exhibit and reception at the institute, the crowd walked to the nearby Museum of Contemporary Art where Scarpa gave a talk with slides. As he does not speak fluent English, a translator accomplished the difficult job of paraphrasing the ideas of a design genius. Through the translator, we were treated to the intelligent, clever, humorous, and insightful thoughts on the subject of the synergy of architecture and nature. Robert Massiero, History of Architecture Professor at the University of Venice and author of a book on Tobia Scarpa, finished out the program with his interpretation of a Scarpa drawing created especially for this exhibit.

As glass collectors from the Chicago area, this was a unique opportunity for us to meet the man whose "occhi" vases are one of our favorite designs and part of our Venini collection. The talk began with an introduction by Chicago architect John Vinci, a professor at IIT and the designated "tour guide" for Tobia on this trip. It turns out that Vinci had taken Carlo Scarpa on an architectural tour of Chicago in 1967!

Tobia then took the podium and told us that he started his career at the age of 19, and he is now 70. He referred to his brief period at Venini, but quickly moved on to talk about getting hired to take Massimo Vignelli's place as a product designer when Vignelli moved from Italy to New York. He explained to us that when he takes on a design project, whatever it may be, he thinks of "The Soul of the Project." This is what drives him to create his design solution. The soul of the project determines the outcome. It is a descendant of "form follows function." He also talked of "la fortuna" which translates as "a stroke of luck." He believes that through "la fortuna" he is able to come up with his great designs (although we all know it is genius, not just "fortuna").

He explained that an architect in Italy (much different than America) is 60% art restorer, 30% designer, and then there is 10% left over for "whatever it takes." Buildings in Italy are regarded as important history that must be preserved, and many of the museums designed by both Scarpas incorporate ruins of older buildings preserved into a new, but not intrusive design. He said, "the solutions for restoration come from the technology of our own times."

He complemented us on the city of Chicago, saying it makes him feel good when he looks around. He said he does not see the "obsessive grid" here in Chicago, unlike most American cities. He noted that the "vertical movement" of our architecture makes the cityscape feel natural. He said that New York, although beautiful in its own way, is the ultimate in artificiality because of the obsessive grid.

And now.. what you've been waiting for. As soon as the talk concluded, questions were invited from the audience. First hands up were ours. We had thought to bring a photo with us of our three occhi's, in case there was a language barrier. We handed the photo up to the stage, and asked Mr. Scarpa to comment on the "Soul of the Project" when it came to the occhi vases at Venini. He said that at the time he was at Venini, they were not interested in the design of objects as much as techniques. The technique of making murrines, the long tubes of glass that are stretched, and then cut into small pieces, goes back to the Roman era. But, Mr. Scarpa said that he developed this technique 'by accident' when he was experimenting, to make a murrine that was transparent on the inside, and colored on the outside. He said that he designed one vase, and then they designed more shapes with the technique. And then he said..."ah, but that was a long time ago."

After the talk, he was kind enough to sign our photo. He writes left-handed, and backwards!

As we left the museum after chatting with Scarpa, his wife, and architect John Vinci we felt that "la fortuna" had come to us that evening.

**Source: <http://www.italian-glass.net/>**