

The Real Info on Copies, Replicas, Fakes and Forgeries in the World of Italian Glass

Fakes and forgeries are rampant in the art world in all forms – painting, sculpture, prints, pottery, and of course, glass. When an art form “arrives,” that is, becomes collectable as an investment, along come the opportunists. This is a function of price. If a real vintage item can be purchased for less than a new version of the same thing, then it makes no sense to forge an item. If the numbers are reversed the motive for forgery presents itself. If the real vintage item sells for two, three or more times the price of a new item, the spread becomes irresistible. If the forger is operating at the factory then his cost is wholesale, which cuts the cost in half making it a four, six or more times payoff. If the forger is smuggling the item out of the factory on his lunch break then it is all profit!

We think that it is important for collectors and dealers to discuss these issues in detail using a common terminology. We would like to propose four categories that collectors can use to describe these questionable pieces: copy, replica, fake, and forgery.

The first classification is the copy. In the fashion world this is called “a knock off.” The most often seen is the Louis Vuitton purse. It looks and smells like a Vuitton at a distance, but upon closer examination, the L and V are the wrong size. The material it is made of is cheaper and less supple. The gold on the clasp is lighter and less rich in content. The lining is thin. A factory in China or Taiwan where copyrights and trademarks are ignored probably makes it. This item sells for much less than the real deal. The motive however is volume. Vuitton has created the demand for the item, but because of its premium price tag, many women can't justify the cost or afford it.

“This piece is from a very famous designer...”

In the glass world of Murano the lesser glass furnaces that lack their own designers make these copies. These items are sold to tourists as souvenirs for hundreds of dollars. Everything about them is smaller, less elegant, more garish, more mass-produced than the real items. We would describe them as “being in the style” of a well-known piece.

Recently in Portafino, Italy we saw several pieces by a long standing but lesser known glass company. One resembled a 1929 striped Cappellin design by Carlo Scarpa and another emulated a leaf covered Rilievi Aurati Barovier & Toso vase from 1940. The saleswomen said “very important glass maker” stressing the quality and desirability of the manufacturer over the piece itself. When visiting this manufacturer's furnace in Murano previously, we saw a room full of vases “inspired” by famous designers...including copies of the famous Cenedese 1960's Contra Punto vase design by Antonio Da Ross. The colors were in new combinations that would never have been produced in the 1950's like Miami Vice blue and Day Glow orange to light green. SOME UNSCRUPULOUS PERSON WITH AN EYE ON EASY PROFITS COULD PURCHASE THESE NEW PIECES, THEN MISREPRESENT THEM AS THE OLD ONES ON EBAY!!! The Seguso factory is still in business and they don't even make Flavio Poli Sommerso vases, but every lesser furnace does.

If it looks like a duck...

The second class is the replica. The Germans and Italians like to call these “reproposta” meaning reproduction. The major companies, Venini and Barovier & Toso, have been making brand new versions of classic designs from as early as the 1920's. These items sell for thousands of dollars and are therefore not for tourists. These are intended for the well-heeled homeowner or decorator with an eye for classic modern design. In the United States these items are sold at fine department stores and jewelry shops. Barbini has re-issued their Vetro Pesante from 1962 which can be purchased new for about \$2700.

The greater fool theory:

The third class is the fake. This is an item that is intentionally made to the exact specifications of a valuable piece. The intention is to impersonate a piece that has been recently sold at auction for a high price: in the multi-thousand dollar range. These pieces are made in Italy and rumors include Czechoslovakia, where glass techniques are highly developed. They may be manufactured using old murrines which come to market occasionally. The market for these fakes is the international collectors and dealers who either don't know or don't want to.

A scenario could go as follows: A fake piece appears at a European auction house and then travels across the Atlantic to an East Coast dealer who has bought it on good faith. “This is from a very famous collection” is often accepted as provenance. Or, a collector picks up a questionable piece from “a friend of the family of a well-known glass blower” and sells it to a dealer who is fooled by what looks like a great piece and a genuine story. Ebay is an international source for these questionable pieces. “Just picked up at an estate sale” appears frequently in the description. To be accurate, these pieces are mixed in with good pieces in all market places to catch the viewer off guard, like a police line up. (Show pictures 2 and 4 of fakes in Murano)

Is it a fake fake or a real fake?

The fourth class is the forgery. This is a new piece (replica) produced by the correct factory (mostly Venini) that has been doctored to look old. In furniture this is called “distressed”. Chains, drilled worm holes, rusty nail remnants, even cigarette burns and drink stains can give a new piece of furniture an “antique” appearance.

Glass can be scratched, buffed, ground and dirtied to appear old. Need some wear to the bottom? Rub it around on the sidewalk! (but not too much). Deep scratches or cracks can reduce the value substantially (unlike furniture). Glass colors do not fade however so a keen eye for color can sometimes tell the tale. Notice that Venini's new pezzati have darker green patches than the originals. Phony labels can be affixed. Inscribed signatures and dates can be forged with a diamond tipped tool. (Photo: bad Venini signature)

The double edged sword of the incredible books compiled in the last decade to document the work of Fulvio Bianconi, Carlo Scarpa, Dino Martens, Archemdi Seguso and others has been to provide all the data needed to create the best fakes and forgeries of their work.

“It has an acid stamp; you just can't see it.”

Venini glass from the 1950's is typically identified by a three-line acid stamp “venini murano ITALIA”. Sometimes it is difficult to see. It can appear or disappear depending on the light it is viewed under. Catalog descriptions can differ from reality greatly. We recently saw many dozens of pieces at a European auction house that appeared to be of classifications three and four. Many of these were pulled from the auction before they could go into circulation. New Venini pieces had their engraved signatures polished off. Most had been replaced with fake acid stamps in a number of styles from three line round to smudged two line and even five line (1930's style) on pieces that should have been from the 1960's. There was a fake 1965-67 style engraved signature on a piece that was probably new, but should have been from the 1950's or early 60's. With the correct fake acid stamp it would soar in value to the \$18,000 range.

In addition, some pieces were manufactured in the style of famous designers without being copies of published or documented pieces (mostly by Dino Martens). A few pieces were so badly made as to appear as “fake fakes.” The surfaces of several Sommerso pieces were ground into battuto to make them into “undocumented” hybrids. The rest unfortunately were difficult to identify, even compared by memory to the dozens of good pieces we own or have seen. These were the “real fakes”. There were many genuine pieces amongst the selection, but they even became suspect as our eyes got used to so much foolery.

Now how much would you pay?

The strange truth to this underbelly of collecting is that these phony pieces routinely sell for big bucks. A Venini mosaic vase sold for over \$52,000 that was rumored to be a fake. A genuine vase in the same series sold privately in 2000 for \$26,000; half the price of the fake! The Dino Martens “fake fakes” (bad colors, wrong proportions, odd fiore) sell frequently for \$3000 to \$4500 while the “real fakes” (perfect colors, accurate fiore) go for as much as \$15,000.

How can this occur? When asked about the psychology of bidding, a glass expert told us “These are fighting prices.” In the heat of battle over a piece, two wealthy collectors can transcend the level of logic one would use in war or chess and let their ego, adrenaline and bank account take over. Each one hopes that the next \$500 or \$1000 bid will be enough to scare off their opponent. Possibly the fact that someone else is willing to bid up the price makes each participant think “it must be real, otherwise they wouldn't be bidding” in a true O'Henry world. Is that other bidder real, or is it the auction house or e-bidder “pushing” the price? Do these pieces really sell, or are the bids for “show”? We think it could be all of the above.

Our best defense as collectors and dealers is to handle and view as many pieces as possible “in person.” Go to museums, go to auction previews, go to reputable dealer's showrooms. Go to Venice, Italy (not Las Vegas) and see for yourself the amazing array of “genuine Murano glass.” Open up the lines of communications with other collectors and share your knowledge. Use our classifications to describe what you have seen so that these bad pieces will be forced out of the market. Knowledge is Power!

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