

JAMES JACKSON JARVES: COLLECTING VENETIAN GLASS FOR AMERICA

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ABSTRACT

James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888) assembled one of the finest museum collections of Venetian glass in the United States. In advocating for art museums in America, Jarves urged that individuals of means and knowledge should undertake the formation of collections for public benefit. In 1881, Jarves' doctrine was put into practice when he gifted nearly 300 works of Venetian glass to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. With only five percent of Jarves' collection now on display, it is one of the aims of this paper to reassert the legacy of collectors like Jarves. As such, this study also will illuminate an increased interest in the applied arts, the dichotomy between hand-crafted and mass-produced goods, and the revival of the Venetian glass industry.

KEYWORDS

JAMES JACKSON JARVES | VENETIAN-REVIVAL GLASS | METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART | MASS-PRODUCTION | CUT GLASS

RESUMO

James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888) reuniu uma das melhores coleções museológicas de vidro veneziano nos Estados Unidos. Na defesa dos museus de arte na América, Jarves incitou a que indivíduos com meios e conhecimentos deveriam empreender a formação de coleções para benefício público. Em 1881, a doutrina de Jarves foi posta em prática aquando da sua doação de cerca de 300 obras de vidro veneziano ao Metropolitan Museum of Art. Com apenas cinco por cento da coleção Jarves agora em exposição, um dos objetivos deste artigo é reafirmar o legado de colecionadores como Jarves. Como tal, este estudo irá também ilustrar um aumento do interesse nas artes aplicadas, a dicotomia entre bens produzidos em massa e bens artesanais, e o renascimento da indústria de vidro veneziano.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE

JAMES JACKSON JARVES | REVIVALISMO DE VIDRO VENEZIANO | METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART | PRODUÇÃO EM MASSA | VIDRO LAPIDADO

...Venetian is unlike all other glass. Its highest merit and greatest value consist in its virtually being incapable of being used for other purposes than to administer to the human craving for beauty, perfections, the supreme aesthetic ideal of the moment, restless, ever-changing, and never-satisfied, because beauty is rooted in the infinite (Jarves 1882, 187).

James Jackson Jarves (1818-1888), American art critic, collector, and Vice-Consul in Florence, assembled one of the finest museum collections of Venetian glass in the United States. In advocating for art museums in nineteenth-century America, Jarves urged that individuals of means and knowledge should undertake the formation of collections for public benefit “rather than simply to acquire and hoard for private pride or enjoyment” (Jarves 1882, 179). He believed that the display of such collections in museums would make art accessible to the wider public, and in turn the country would benefit by actively helping to cultivate the tastes and knowledge of its citizens. Museum collections exercised a powerful influence on the development of style and taste in the late nineteenth century, and they provided an education in the arts — something that Jarves felt the United States desperately needed.

Having survived the Civil War, and amidst labor unrest, unregulated urban growth, and anxieties about identity, the United States transformed into a prosperous new nation, and for the first time, major cities consciously asserted themselves as international tastemakers. New York City, for example, became America’s cultural capital, and it achieved a heightened level of sophistication in painting, sculpture, and decorative arts. “Not only was there a desire to display wealth and social prestige [in the private sector], but there was a sense of moral obligation to inform and educate the public as to what was good, beautiful, and in correct taste” (Pilgrim 1979, 111).

Adding to America’s cultural capital, Jarves’ doctrine was put into practice in 1881 when he gifted nearly 300 works of Venetian glass to the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. In organizing his collection of glass for the Metropolitan, Jarves deliberately set out to add to the young nation’s “aesthetic capital” by making art accessible to the American public (McNab 1960, 91). The collection consists of a wide variety of vessels and decorative forms from the Renaissance, as seen in a delicate tazza from the sixteenth century, to such revivalist glass of the nineteenth century as a deep cobalt goblet from Salviati and Company, richly enameled by Leopoldo Bearzotti around 1868 [FIGS. 1 AND 2]. As such, Jarves believed that of all the people to have made glass, the Venetians, for artistic variety and quality, were the most renowned.

With only five percent of the Jarves collection now on display at the Metropolitan, it is one of the aims of this paper to reassert the legacy of collectors like Jarves whose ambition was to make art accessible to broader audiences. Much of the literature on this American art critic, and in fact most of the works written by Jarves, focus on architecture and fine art, notably his collection of Italian primitives, now in the Yale University Art Gallery. Drawing attention to the decorative arts and to Jarves’ *Art Thoughts*, particularly the chapter on “Minor Arts — Ornament and Decoration,” this study aims to illuminate the increased interest in the applied arts, the dichotomy between hand-crafted and mass-produced goods, and the revival of the Venetian glass industry.

Venetian glass, especially that of the revivalist idiom, functions as an important genre of artifacts. They reflect and reinforce many of the ideas and concerns of the 1800s and remind us of the calamities that affected the Venetian Republic at the turn of the nineteenth century. After decades of being under the control of French and Austrian governments, Venice became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1866. With the glass industry severely weakened, Venetian glass, therefore, stands for the survival *and* revival of a community — a community that emerged enthusiastically to recover the history and glory of its past.

During the Renaissance, the production of Venetian glass was a successful enterprise; yet unfavorable economic and political conditions in Europe led to its decline in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The Republic lost its independence to the French in the spring of 1797 when Napoleon conquered Venice. This was followed by several months as a democratic municipality and the first period of Austrian rule, when the Veneto was ceded to the Hapsburgs in the Treaty of Campo Formio, 17 October 1797 (Dorigato 2003, 172). Next came the annexation of Venice to the Napoleonic Kingdom of Italy in 1806 and a second Hapsburg occupation from 1814-1866, briefly interrupted by the Venetian rebellion of 1848-1849. Following the Third Italian War of Independence, Venice became part of the Kingdom of Italy.

The fall of the Republic confirmed the end of Venice's political and social balance, and it also led to the collapse of the city's economic prosperity (Mentasti 2010, xiii). Between Austrian and French rule, the local market, including the glass industry, was increasingly impaired. This was in part a result of the abolishment of the glassmakers' guilds by Napoleon, particularly of the *Arte dei Vetrai* in 1807. The guilds had protected and promoted the craft from both an organizational and commercial standpoint (Barovier 2004, 9). To further the blow, heavy customs tariffs were imposed on the import of raw materials, a measure designed to protect the Austrian and Bohemian industries so that foreign competitors could prosper (Barovier 2004, 10). By 1820, there were only 16 glassworks active on the Venetian island of Murano, and only five were producing blown glass (Dorigato 2003, 172). The number of furnaces dwindled as did the glassblowers technical expertise. The glassmaking industry survived, only partially, due to the production of glass beads for European colonies — objects that the art critic John Ruskin believed to be “utterly unnecessary” as there was “no design or thought employed in their manufacture” (Ruskin 1867, 166). The production process was monotonous and alienated the maker from his work and his product.

The second half of the nineteenth century, however, saw the recovery of Venetian glass. Antonio Salviati, a lawyer from Vicenza, was the entrepreneurial force behind the revival of glassmaking in Venice. Interested in the restoration of the mosaics of Saint Mark's, Salviati set out to know the few glassmakers in Venice still able to make glass tesserae to replace those in the Basilica. Upon meeting the Muranese glass artist Lorenzo Radi, Salviati set up a mosaic workshop in 1859 giving him the task of manufacturing mosaic tiles and himself that of marketing. Radi's work with not only mosaics but also chalcedonic glass fascinated Salviati, thus inspiring his “Grand Vision” — a dream of once again firing up the furnaces of Murano so that blown vessels could be sold to connoisseurs and collectors in shops throughout the world (Barr 1998, 19). According to Sheldon Barr, the ramifications of Salviati's exposure to Radi's creations resulted in nothing less than the revitalization of the entire blown-glass industry (Barr 1998, 19).

Continuing his promotion of Venetian glass, Salviati exhibited his workshop's mosaics at the International Exhibition of 1862 in London to much acclaim, and he received immediate commissions for such prominent buildings and monuments as Westminster Abbey, Saint Paul's Cathedral, Windsor Castle, and the Albert Memorial (Rudoe 2002, 308). Salviati's glass also caught the attention of the archaeologist Sir Austen Henry Layard, excavator of the ruins of the Assyrian city of Nineveh. Like Salviati, Layard was interested both in the revival of historic glass and in the contemporary use of mosaics. After the Veneto became part of the Kingdom of Italy in 1866, foreign investment was permitted, and soon Layard and others, such as the historian William Drake, became shareholders in Salviati's company (Osborne 2002, 18).

In Venice, meanwhile, the antiquarian Abbot Vincenzo Zanetti founded a school for glassmakers in 1861 with the support of the island's mayor Antonio Colleoni. An associated museum, the *Museo Artistico Industriale del Vetro* (later the *Museo Vetrario*), opened in 1864 (Rudoe 2002, 308). An important drive for the revival of glassmaking in Venice was the foundation of the *Museo Vetrario*. Its intention was to promote traditional Murano techniques and to provide artists with direct access to examples

of Roman and Venetian glass (Edwards 1997, 40). This collection of historic glass was assembled by Zanetti, and it included examples of ancient glass found throughout the Roman Empire, notably at a time when archaeological discovery was popular. The collection also comprised Renaissance glass donated by local Venetian families (Osborne 2002, 15).

The opening of the museum, and the rising interest in Venetian glass, prompted Salviati to turn his attention to blown glass, and with the financial support of Henry Layard and two of Layard's associates, Lachlan Mackintosh Rate and William Drake, he founded Salviati & Company in 1866. It had storefronts on St. James's Street, London, and Campo San Vio, Venice (Rudoe 2002, 308). Such support is a reflection of the renewed interest in Murano glass shown by foreign markets.

The Venetian glass industry prospered once again, and the city became a tourist destination. Wealthy travelers stayed in its majestic hotels and many English and American expatriates made Venice their permanent home (Mentasti 2010, xix). This most certainly was brought about by industrialization and the subsequent growth of family fortunes. As a result, numerous other glassworks were opened in the last two decades of the nineteenth century thanks to the growing interest and success of the Venetian style. As production increased, Salviati glass was found in shops in London, Paris, and New York. Tiffany & Company, for example, stocked Salviati glass in its Fifth Avenue store in New York City (Osborne 2002, 19).

Exposure in America increased in 1881 when New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art received the Jarves collection of Venetian glass. Jarves, originally from Boston, Massachusetts, moved to Paris in 1851 and settled in Florence the following year. It was in Europe that Jarves became passionate in his desire to fill American museums with European art. Upon moving to Florence, he began collecting the Italian primitives for which he is most known.

Aside from his own personal interests, Jarves was instrumental in advising other American collectors in their purchases of Italian art. In 1880, for example, Jarves persuaded Cornelius Vanderbilt, a trustee of the Metropolitan, to purchase from him a collection of old master drawings and present it to the Museum (Rudoe 2002, 312). These arrangements put Jarves in contact with the Museum's Director, Louis Palma di Cesnola. On March 30, 1881, he wrote to Cesnola from Florence regarding his collection of Venetian glass:

My dear Sir,

I have been preaching to others to give to the Museum, & now I would like to practise, in a humble way...what I wish I was able to do on a large scale. Recalling to you what I wrote Mar. 15th regarding the collection of about 200 pieces of old Venetian glass, & the offer of a gentleman to buy it for 50,000 francs to give to the Museum, I would now state that I propose to make it my own personal gift... (Steegmuller 1951, 276).

The glass was accepted, and as an expression of gratitude, on motion from Vanderbilt, Jarves was elected as a Patron of the Museum (Steegmuller 1951, 276).

On July 3, 1881, Jarves wrote to tell of the packing and dispatch of the glass from Livorno, and by this time the collection had grown significantly. Correspondence between Jarves and Cesnola indicates that between January and July 1881, it grew from 80 to 280 pieces (Rudoe 2002, 312). When Jarves writes of the collection in *Harper's New Monthly*, he discusses its breadth:

Chance at first threw in my way a few specimens of the earlier Venetian glass. These suggested the idea of attempting to obtain a sufficient number to fairly illustrate the various types which have given celebrity to Venice in this line from the fourteenth century to the nineteenth inclusive, representing, as far as possible, its mediaeval rise, its best and most nourishing period of the later Renaissance, its

gradual changes and decline at the extinction of the Republic by Napoleon I, and the revival of the art in our own time (Jarves 1882, 177).

Through his correspondence with Alexander Nesbitt, then a keeper at the South Kensington Museum in London and author of the *Catalogue of the Collection of Glass Formed by Felix Slade* (1871) and *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Glass Vessels in the South Kensington Museum* (1878), Jarves was able to procure some glass for his collection from Abbot Zanetti, founder of the *Museo Vetrario*. These objects consisted of “a selection of the most interesting and oldest pieces, of the duplicates and types therein preserved” (Jarves 1882, 177). Zanetti further writes that they “were collected by me during ten years past and are genuine and faithful representations of the Muranese ancient work” (Jarves 1882, 187).

With regard to glass of the revivalist idiom, in June Jarves wrote to Cesnola, “there are about 50 pieces of the modern Salviati glass...” (Rudoe 2002, 312). Like many of the decorative arts of the nineteenth century, revivalist glass followed the aesthetic of the historicist style, in this case capturing the glory of Venice’s past. As a result, Venetian revival glass looked to Roman and Medieval models as well as Renaissance and Baroque forms. The imitation of ancient vessels is evident in a bowl from the Jarves collection made by the Venezia-Murano Company, ca. 1881 [FIG. 3]. A comparison with an unusual Roman gold-band mosaic drinking cup, made from fused canes of blue, green, brown, and white mosaic glass surrounding bands of gold leaf, reveals and underscores the area’s long history of excellence in the production of glass [FIG. 4].

Not wanting to neglect the important contributions of his own day, Jarves intended that the revivalist glass would form a nucleus of the collection. Although Venetian glass of the nineteenth century imitated earlier styles, glassblowers profited from advances in glass chemistry, and they were able to produce more dramatic and richer colors. They also captured the nineteenth-century desire for overembellishment, therefore giving insight into the era’s sense of style and taste. Glassblowers, for example, incorporated elaborate and difficult zoomorphic forms into their work including dolphins, dragons, seahorses, and serpents [FIGS. 5 AND 6]. Overall, the Jarves gift reveals a diverse array of styles and provides a strong representation of the revivalist idiom.

The Jarves collection also acts as a starting point for future gifts of Venetian glass to the Metropolitan, an institution whose foundation contributed to the preservation and awareness of America’s past, present, and future. Desiring a cultural expression of their new power, wealthy Americans developed “a taste for European art and enthusiastically imported it to provide a stamp of sophistication and respectability for themselves” (Weinberg 1976, 1). In turn, many of these works came to form the core collections in American museums such as the Metropolitan. Following Jarves’ lead were Henry G. Marquand, an American financier, philanthropist and collector, and Edward C. Moore, artistic director of Tiffany & Co.’s silver studio and chief designer. Their collections of European glass, and other works of art, entered the Museum in 1883 and 1891 respectively. Such actions point to the admiration of Venetian glass from a connoisseur and collector’s standpoint.

In Britain, however, reformers were passionate about the medium and its production for additional reasons. The Venetian revival involved more than the recovery of the glassmaking industry and the creation of beautiful works of art. For British reformers, John Ruskin and William Morris, the enthusiasm for early Venetian glass had a moral basis (Reflections of Venice 1986, 3). Both Ruskin and Morris felt it “represented the only legitimate approach to the manufacture of glass and that unless there was a return to these principles which had governed Venetian glass in its heyday, nothing beautiful could ever be produced” (Klein 2000, 183). As Dan Klein duly notes: “Venetian glass for them was a philosophy, not just a decorative style” (Klein 2000, 183). British reformers deplored the tastelessness of mass-produced glass, and they believed that artistry and grace could grow only from the workman’s respect for his materials. Creative physical

labor, that is the worker's intimate familiarity with his craft, was one of Ruskin's basic principles (Osborne 2002, 17).

In Ruskin's influential text, *The Stones of Venice*, he writes of an excursion to Murano and the prevailing glass industry. Here he belittles mass-production, and much of the glass of the Victorian era, stating that: "Our modern glass is exquisitely clear in its substance, true in its form, accurate in its cutting. We are proud of this. We ought to be ashamed of it" (Ruskin 1867, 168). He goes on to say that "...all cut glass is barbarous: for the cutting conceals its ductility, and confuses it with crystal" (Ruskin 1867, 392). He continues by arguing against its perfection and precision — glass was meant to be blown into imaginative forms, "the more wild, extravagant, and grotesque in their gracefulness...the better" (Ruskin 1867, 392). Taking these ideas into consideration, he asks buyers of cut glass to choose whether they will make the worker a man or a grindstone (Ruskin 1867, 168). Ruskin, therefore, finds humanity in Venetian glass, and he praises its imperfections, its inventiveness, and its ability to connect the artist with his craft.

Jarves, an acquaintance and follower of Ruskin, whose books *The Stones of Venice* and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* influenced the beginning of his studies, found truth in Ruskin's writings and added further to his discussion (McNab 1960, 97). Jarves found that the modern age "holds to cheapening and multiplying articles, rather than to their artistic worth. Hence its productive energies tend to substitute mechanical for aesthetic excellence, and to employ machinery in place of fingers. Everywhere we meet lifeless repetitions of the emasculated ancient, or wearisome ones of modern invention, *manufactured*, rather than *MADE*..." (Jarves 1869, 322). We again return to the estrangement of the worker from the product and a decrease in artistry.

Like Ruskin and Jarves, when Charles Locke Eastlake (1836-1906), nineteenth-century architect and furniture designer, came to the subject of modern glass in his famous treatise, *Hints on Household Taste*, he dismissed British and Bohemian glass in favor of the superior virtues he perceived to be found in Venetian glass (Edwards 1997, 37). He also advocated that it had the ability to advance public taste, and it served as an example of what constituted good art (Eastlake 1874, 137). Eastlake, therefore, encouraged the purchase of Venetian glass proclaiming that even the smallest example "should be acquired whenever possible, and treasured with the greatest care" (Eastlake 1874, 136). Venetian glass illustrated good design and skill that was absent in cut glass. Overall, both Eastlake and Ruskin considered cut glass contrary to the medium's nature; it was devoid of fluidity and creativity (Edwards 1997, 40). On a humorous note, the Egyptologist and architect Somers Clarke deplored the prevailing fashion for cut glass, noting that it was nothing more than "a massive lump of misshapen material better suited to the purpose of braining a burglar than decorating a table..." (Clarke 1903, 108). All of the above provides a glimpse of the era's issues surrounding taste, design, and individuality.

Jarves gives his own opinion on the subject in his book *Art Thoughts*. In his chapter on the minor arts, he takes a less-biased view of mass-produced glass but certainly favors the hand-crafted product in the end. On cut, engraved, and colored glass, he believes that it excels in "transparency, polish, outline, and lucidity of design, — mere mechanical excellences; and we meet, as in all other ornament, a wearisome repetition of the same patterns and styles, each the exact counterpart of the other, to satisfy the modern desire to have sets of objects" (Jarves 1869, 335). This idea of sets also was mentioned by William Morris who attacked the makers of cut glass, and criticized the working methods of the British glass industry, which demanded that each glass should be identical (Klein 2000, 183).

Yet from an economic standpoint, table services, homogenous in all pieces, from various-sized glasses to other vessels, were relatively inexpensive and less intricate than the handcrafted product, and they perfectly satisfied the demand of the emerging middle class (Mentasti 1992, 12). Ironically, Jarves' father Deming, was the founder of the Boston and Sandwich Glass Company, an enterprise that flourished from the

mass-production of cut and pressed-glass tableware such as the pitcher and vase seen in figures seven and eight [FIGS. 7 AND 8]. By the mid-nineteenth century, Deming Jarves estimated that American factories had up to two million dollars invested in pressing machinery and molds alone (Scoville 1944, 204). Production required unskilled labor and as a result tableware was offered at a moderate price. Venetian glass was often too expensive and fragile to meet the needs of the general public while the pressed-glass wares were inexpensive, offered in a variety of colors and patterns, and satisfied the demands of the middle class (Frelinghuysen 1986, 246).

According to Jarves, however, modern cut- and pressed-glass failed in comparison with the older and lighter forms of Venetian glass in its clarity, depth of color, variety, and creative *tours de force* (Jarves 1882, 185). In 1882, he wrote:

The highest aim of the Venetian artist was to overlook prosaic utility entirely in his glass; to invent something so bizarre, ethereal, light, imaginative, or so splendid, fascinating, and original in combinations of colors and design, as to captivate both the senses and understanding, and lead them rejoicing into far-away regions of the possibilities of an ideal existence; in fine, to bind the material captive to the intellectual in art, even when administering to the vanities of life and grosser calls of nature (Jarves 1882, 187).

Whether or not he was influenced by the production methods and output of his father's glass firm, Jarves strongly believed in the principles and beauty behind Venetian glass.

In conclusion, it hopefully has become evident that the Jarves gift of Venetian glass serves as not a static collection but as an active portal into nineteenth-century art, industrialization, taste, and criticism. It also is an indispensable study of the era's reception of glass and the dichotomy between hand-crafted and mass-produced goods. Finally, it is a way to remember the passion of early museum donors such as James Jackson Jarves and those that followed in his pursuit of bringing beauty and knowledge to the American public.

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Harper's Magazine, the oldest general-interest monthly in America, explores the issues that drive our national conversation, through long-form narrative journalism and essays, and such celebrated features as the iconic Harper's Index.Â James Jackson Jarves. = Subscribers only. Sign in here. Subscribe here. = Subscribers only. Sign in here. Subscribe here. Washington Glass Works. "James Jackson Jarves was born Aug. 20, 1818, the son of Deming Jarves, founder of the famous Sandwich Glass Co., and Anna Smith (Stutson) Jarves. After his early education at Chauncey Hall school, Boston, Mass., he planned to continue studies at Harvard University. Because of failing eye sight however, he was unable to attend.Â An unhappy marriage caused Jarves to break with his wife in 1848, leave his governmental position, and return to America for three years where he again participated in a disastrous business adventure, this time involving land speculation in California. In 1851 the Jarves' family (then reunited) settled in Florence, Italy, and there Jarves developed an interest in art - specifically in medieval Italian paintings.