

A historical black and white aerial photograph of the island of Murano, Italy. The island is densely packed with buildings, many of which are industrial in nature. A white outline highlights a specific area in the center of the island, which is the former site of the Moretti family-run company. The word "MORETTI" is printed in large, bold, white capital letters on the roofs of several buildings within this highlighted area. The island is surrounded by water, and a lighthouse is visible on the left side. The overall scene depicts a bustling industrial hub from a past era.

# GLASSY

## *The Story of Moretti*

One of the heirs to the exquisite glassmaking tradition that began hundreds of years ago, Marta Moretti talks with DAMN° about the glorious past and the desired future of the defunct site of this former family-run company, as she takes us on a quiet tour round the remains. It is a bittersweet experience, as the abandoned structures are still evocative of the days when the business was prospering, with the spirit of the craftsmen still palpable; while the desolation as well as the deterioration that naturally overtakes buildings that are no longer occupied, are prevalent. The wish now is to encapsulate the memory while devising a new function.

TEXT Sandra Hofmeister

Historical view of the island of Murano,  
including the company factories and Ulderico  
Moretti property  
Photo © Moretti Archive



The iconic Il Trittico collection by Carlo Moretti: Ovale (1977), Asimmetrico (1985), and Cartoccio (1983)



The site of the former factory  
Photos: Marlene and Lucia Schwemer



The brick buildings of the former factories are now industrial monuments.  
Photo: Giorgio Bombieri



Brothers Giovanni and Carlo Moretti in their showroom in Murano, which was designed by their friend Gaetano Pesce in 1964  
Photo © Moretti Archive

The Moretti family is closely connected with the Murano glassmaking tradition. Many of the precious Moretti glass objects are housed in design museums worldwide. However, the family's glassmaking tradition came to an end several years ago. The vast and partially decayed site of the former workshop on the famous glassmakers' island near Venice still reflects the glory of former times.

Most tourists who visit Murano only stay there a couple of hours. Leaving the Vaporetto water-bus station, they make their way through the straight-forward tourist route, eat an ice cream cone, and acquire one of those kitschy glass souvenirs offered by numerous shops and mostly made in China. But just two steps further and round the corner, on the other

side of this Venetian-glass island, ordinary everyday life in the sleepy marine village next to a lagoon in the Adriatic sea is ticking along nicely. The scenic places and walkways are quiet and in more-or-less good order, but many areas are abandoned.

"When I was a child, I often came here to visit my grandfather in his factory", says Marta Moretti. She stands on the pavement of a wide and peaceful canal that leads from the lagoon to the heart of the island. The high brick wall of Fondamenta San Giovanni dei Battuti lines the waterfront, hiding the vastness located behind. Ulderico Moretti & C. is written in faded letters on the reddish-coloured wall that boasts an impressive portal. "That was the entrance to my grandfather's office", Marta Moretti informs,





Calici da Collezione goblets, set of six glasses in Murano crystal, hand-blown and hand finished

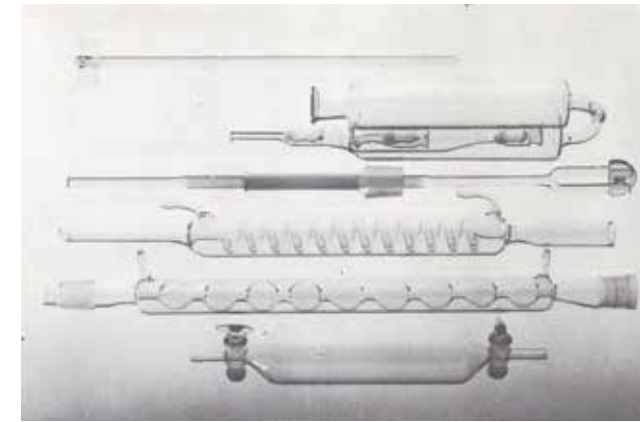
remembering the old days when Germano Moretti was still alive. Marta Moretti is one of the heirs of a centuries-old family history that recently came to an end. Even though Carlo Moretti is an established producer of artisanal Murano glass, the Moretti heirs in Italy and Germany are no longer directly involved in the business. After the closure of the Ulderico Moretti factory in the 1970s, part of this huge area in the heart of Murano has been rented-out for events.

As Marta Moretti opens the wooden entrance door, she asks us to be careful of the crumbling walls and drooping structures. A collapsed roof has caused a curtain of rubble to land on the old glass furnace. The 6000-square-metre zone on this side of the massive wall is a labyrinth of leftover buildings, small and medium in size, some of them industrial monuments from the beginning of the 20th century. There was even a changing house for the artisans. Some of the impressive brick and stone buildings are still preserved, though their pipework and wiring are dangling. Courtyards and passages link the singular spaces where the craftsmen performed several functions daily. More than 300 people worked here

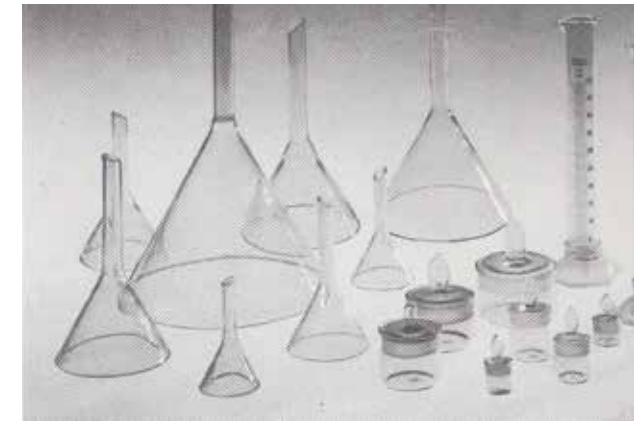
in the 1960s. A red clocking-in terminal mounted on the wall serves as evidence of this. In the long, dark hall that reaches almost 100 metres, the decorative glass rods were produced by two men. With a glass bowl in the middle, they would each pull the softened glass in opposite directions until the object was properly formed. The cultural memory of the buildings and their powerful historical value remain alive, although nature has taken over, with brushwood and grass sprouting from every gap and corner.

FROM A TO Z

At Moretti, all sorts of glass receptacles for use in chemical laboratories, as well as reflectors and thermometers, were made during World War II, when the workshops were fully active. As a consequence, the sons – as well as Marta Moretti's grandfather – did not have to join the military. The master glassblowers used these moulds artfully to make vases and other objects. The family's glassmaking story actually began in the second half of the 19th century, when Vincenzo Moretti, an autodidact, became



Glass vessels for use in chemical laboratories, reflectors, and thermometers, all produced in the Moretti workshops during World War II  
Photo © Moretti Archive



an expert at preparing glass grindings at Salviati. He was one of the most important protagonists in the renaissance of the so-called murrine – an antique Roman technique of hot-worked glass mosaic, like millefiori, which has since been forgotten. Vincenzo Moretti set up his own company together with his sons – they delivered the glass for the celebrated mosaic in the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II in Milan, and in the 1930s, the blown-glass light bulbs for the street lamps on the Piazza San Marco. But in the 1970s, the family business, as with most of the others on the island, came into great difficulties, mostly due to the heavy competition from abroad and the extra cost of producing large numbers of handcrafted items. Even if Ulderico Moretti's season reached its end, the glassmaking knowledge acquired over nearly a century created offshoots. The most significant of these is Carlo Moretti, the artisanal company established in 1958 by Germano Moretti's two sons, Carlo and Giovanni, and situated just a few blocks further along the same canal. The new business rapidly conquered the international market with its hand-blown decorative glasses, vases, and chandeliers. Due to its knowhow in delicate design, Carlo Moretti became a trendsetter for expressive colours and glass forms. The formulas were written down in a secret book containing all of the family's glassmaking knowledge, which was passed down from one generation to the next. "Every company has its own formulas and ingredients that make the glass so outstanding", Marta Moretti explains, while mentioning the special Moretti red, distinguished by its distinctive tone.



The site of the former family-run company, 2014  
Photo: Giorgio Bombieri



The site of the former factory  
Photo: Giorgio Bombieri



The Moretti brothers: Cesare, Carlo, Andrea, Giovanni, and their sister Bruna in Cortina d'Ampezzo, Italy in the 1940s

Carlo Moretti glasses from Murano became internationally famous for their remarkable design, an example being the goblets – where opalescent colours are used in combination with pure Murano crystal – that have been adopted into the Calici da Collezione. “To create these objects, glass was blown into moulds made of pear wood”, Marta explains, showing us a large pushcart full of the old, rotting forms. “There was also a carpenter whose workshop was close by (he is still there -Ed.) – he was devoted to producing the moulds.”

#### A FAMILY STORY

In the 1960s, the Moretti brothers set up a showroom on the island, designed by Gaetano Pesce, a young artist friend of Carlo Moretti’s – still a student at the time. He also developed the company logo, which remains the brand’s signature, and designed several experimental glass objects together with his friend. The precious glassware by Carlo Moretti is collected by international museums from Israel to France. One can also find these treasures in the permanent collection of the Museum of Modern



The long hall, where decorative glass rods were once produced by two men  
Photo: Elia Spandri



A pushcart full of old moulds at the site of the former factory  
Photo: Marlene and Lucia Schwemer



The former changing house for the artisans, 2015  
Photo: Marlene and Lucia Schwemer



Bosco, by Carlo Moretti, vases in Murano crystal, hand-blown and hand finished, 1993

Art in New York, among others. In 2013, after the two brothers died, the glass furnace was sold to a Holding, including the brand name Carlo Moretti together with its illustrious designs, mouldings, and glassmaking formulas.

“We are very concerned about the future of this area”, says Elia Spandri. The young Italian architect, based in Munich, is another heir – his mother and Marta Moretti’s deceased father are brother and sister. Developing the whole zone means finding a potential investor, one who strongly wishes to retain the cultural heritage, gently adapting it to a new use. “The ground has a lot of potential; it’s a free space with amazing possibilities, such as student workshops, artist residencies, or exhibition spaces for a foundation. What we need is an overall concept.” Spandri is full of zest, keen to find a good architectural solution. His cousin Marta Moretti, based in Venice, is passionate about the history of Murano glass and is trying to preserve the family heritage for the new generation. Together with the other heirs, she wants to keep the memory of the family tradition alive and maintain an eye on the future, which is fundamental to the cultural history of this glassmakers’ island. •

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