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## A Brief Biography of Giovanni Giacomuzzi: Artist and Glassmaker

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# **BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF GIOVANNI GIACOMUZZI: ARTIST AND GLASSMAKER**

**Vincenzo Zanetti**  
**Translated by Lucy Segatti**

*Giovanni Giacomuzzi (1817-1872) was the driving force behind the celebrated 19th-century Venetian beadmaking and glassworking firm of Fratelli Giacomuzzi fu Angelo, one of whose bead sample books is described in the accompanying report. This tribute by a learned contemporary summarizes Giacomuzzi's accomplishments and sheds light on the life of a much-honored master glassworker.*

## **EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION**

Originally published in the newspaper *La Voce di Murano* (The Voice of Murano) on 30 May 1872, this tribute to one of the outstanding beadmakers and glassworkers of 19th-century Venice was prepared by Vincenzo Zanetti, Director of the Museum of Arts and Industry of Murano. It was subsequently published in a slim monograph entitled *Cenni biografici di Giovanni Giacomuzzi: artista e fabbricatore vetrajo* in 1872, by Dalla Tip. Municipale di Gaetano Longo of Venice. A translation of this text is presented below.

While this biography duplicates some of the background material presented in the accompanying report on the Giacomuzzi bead book and folders, it provides additional insight on the man and his achievements, as well as the problems he encountered during his illustrious career. It brings out the human element in the Giacomuzzi collection and shows us once again that there is a story behind each and every bead.

My sincere thanks to the Biblioteca Nazionale Marciana in Venice and to Venetian glass authority

Astone Gasparetto for providing a copy of the Zanetti biography.

## **BIOGRAPHY OF GIOVANNI GIACOMUZZI**

When in our March 15th issue we published the painful news of the death of Giovanni Giacomuzzi, son of Angelo Giacomuzzi and a brilliant, dedicated master of the art of glassmaking, we said that we would write about him at length in the future. We will now try to fulfil that promise.

First, we would like to say that these brief biographical notes that we are about to publish focus primarily on the man as an artist and manufacturer, rather than from a moral perspective. In two very eloquent, albeit very short, obituary notices, his most intimate friends have already spoken about him as a citizen and patriot, as a loyal friend and generous philanthropist, having all the qualities of a true gentleman.

In the hope that perhaps others will want to provide longer and more detailed information on this aspect, we will concentrate on Giovanni Giacomuzzi, the industrious, enlightened, and skilful master of the glassmaking industry. We will look at the artist and the glassmaker. As an artist, Giacomuzzi dedicated his life to the advancement and dignity of his art; as a glassmaker, he held a deep respect for the craft that he had cultivated over many years. This is the special tribute that we would now like to make to the memory of Giovanni Giacomuzzi; this is the flower that we tearfully place on his grave. And since presenting the

model of our best achievers and craftsmen who are worthy of our country's industry can only serve as a noble example to be emulated, we will consider ourselves honored if after reading this account, the masters of the arts and industry in our country will be inspired to follow in the footsteps of their accomplished countryman. That would be by far the best way for them to display their admiration and gratitude to a man who justifiably deserves both. As for ourselves, not only do we wish to express the respect and affection that tied us to him, but also give uncontested evidence that Giovanni Giacomuzzi was among the most distinguished and illuminated glassmakers who for many centuries earned and still bring fame, employment, and wealth to Venice and our Murano.

## I

Giovanni Giacomuzzi was born in Venice in 1817. An artist from a young age, Giacomuzzi learned the family craft from his father Angelo who was among the first manufacturers, craftsmen, and merchants of lampworked beads. He did not learn his father's craft merely as a trade, however, for the purpose of purely material gain and nothing else. Rather, he undertook his craft with a passion to the point of idolizing it, always striving for the noble and useful purpose of not leaving it stationary, but of advancing it and making it the subject of growing admiration and honor both in his own country and abroad. Endowed with a sharp intelligence, an inventive mind, and good judgement, from an early age Giacomuzzi recognized that to achieve distinction, technical and practical knowledge of one's work was not enough. He rightfully considered it necessary to acquire training, but above all, the indispensable element for any artist was to be able to design and, especially, to embellish. The admirable progress made in his studies earned him no less than seven prizes from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts of Venice in only three [nonsequential] years: 1837-1838-1841. And while we are on the topic of training, let us mention that Giacomuzzi was not content to merely design, but also wanted to know the practical methods used in glassmaking, more than empirically. From a scientific perspective, he kept track of his work both by dictating reports and by scrupulously following all the experiments that he

tried over and over again, without ever tiring. No trouble, effort, sleep, or expense was spared in studying the elements of chemistry not only in books, but also by consulting the most reputable of chemists. And he did not stop there. His travels and visits to foreign factories expanded the boundaries of his knowledge.<sup>1</sup> If the painful events during his career as a glassmaker had not made him bitter and deeply deluded, and if life had not been taken away from him while he was still strong, we would have had many other even more stunning examples of his glassmaking talent. In any case, he has left us more than enough works to make him worthy of the first of Venetian industries.

As proof we will first recall the praise that greeted Giacomuzzi in his first field of undertaking, the making of lampworked beads, and we will salute him in his later endeavors of manufacturing enamel glass and glass beads, and producing inlaid works.

## II

In 1838, Giovanni Giacomuzzi, together with his father Angelo, expanded their production by providing new luxury and fashion items not only to barbarian, but even to civilized nations. These included loose seed beads [*margarite*], foil and decorated beads, necklaces, and jewels. All of these were works of great elegance and refined taste which earned more praise because the glass coating that covered them made them inalterable. These works, together with sheets [of glass] with characters traced in *chiarooscuro* with the instantaneous fusion of glass cane, earned them a second silver medal from the Venetian Institute. Giacomuzzi did not stop there, however. The same institute awarded him another silver medal for his admirable beadwork productions, especially for his multicolored beads in difficult-to-produce tones. We have been able to observe and admire some of the test samples that Giacomuzzi worked on, and we have examined with special interest a number of necklaces in truly admirable shades of color. These precious specimens, which were tampered with and damaged during a return trip to Venice from an exhibit in New York,<sup>2</sup> and whose loss would constitute a tragedy, were supposed to have been deposited at the Murano Museum by Giacomuzzi along with other advances in his creations (Giacomuzzi's name often appears

beside other marvellous works at the museum). In so doing, Giacomuzzi would have followed what his colleague in art, Giovanni Battista Franchini, finally did at our persistent urging. Thus, the Murano collection, whose purpose is to conserve and reproduce the finest works of art in glass, would have become even more magnificent and would have allowed our local artists and industrialists, and even foreigners, to admire the work of Giacomuzzi as a glorious tribute to Venice and the fatherland, in the same way that the museum displays the superb work of Franchini and his unsurpassable son, Jacopo. We have not lost all hope yet, however, because we have asked the brothers of our distinguished industrialist, Giuseppe and Antonio (the former an extremely skilful maker of inlaid enamel mosaics, and the second a connoisseur of the art of small beads [*conterie*] who will pursue the road opened for him by his brother Giovanni), to collect Giacomuzzi's works and deposit them alongside those already at the Museum of Murano. These will add one more evergreen laurel branch around the forehead of this brilliant inventor of the yellow-gold glass bead.

But Giacomuzzi must also be recognized as a manufacturer of enamel for mosaics and a worker of inlaid glass enamels.

### III

As we said earlier, it was not just respect and fondness that tied us to Giovanni Giacomuzzi. Irrefutable proof has led us to place him among the most distinguished and enlightened masters of the art of glassmaking, and undisputed proof exists to confirm our assertion. We will cite events and facts that cannot be denied by anyone.

In 1838, the same year that Giacomuzzi, as we just recalled, was awarded a prize for his work with lampworked beads, the [Venetian] Institute bestowed on him even greater recognition for a new kind of production which, for many years, was in very high demand here: the production of enamels for gold and silver mosaics. New colors, such as purple and scarlet, and other bright, softer and mistier colors, earned their innovative creator a gold medal. Obviously, Giacomuzzi had made many repeated attempts and painstaking experiments in order to achieve such a

splendid goal. Even the Institute and the Royal Academy of Fine Arts highly commended the noble and visionary efforts of Angelo and Giovanni Giacomuzzi who succeeded in fully satisfying the overwhelming ambition to offer new materials for the art of mosaics that were made in their factories and were more varied, more splendid, and more perfect [than before].<sup>3</sup> Later, in 1846, Giacomuzzi was awarded a silver medal for other enamel works imitating the finest marbles [which he created] by combining various glass pastes of different colors, and making them into sheets to be smoothed and polished using a grindstone. The quality of the final product was so fine that it could have been mistaken for a work of nature. This successful and beautiful imitation was seen repeatedly in Giacomuzzi's work that we admired, convincing us once again of Giacomuzzi's steady unrelenting skill, and his enormous passion for and complete knowledge of his art. As a result, Giacomuzzi's name became ever more respected and honored. Nor did he rest on his accumulated laurels. On the contrary, these served to spur him on, inspiring his genius and giving meaning to his work.

### IV

In producing such splendidly beautiful raw materials, Giovanni Giacomuzzi had another end in mind: to actually use these valued materials himself. Consequently, he was among the first and most skilled workers of inlaid enamel mosaics, applying this type of work to furniture, especially tables, with a success truly beyond praise. The good taste of the design, the arrangement of the colors, and especially the diligence and infallible precision of the work, made these works by Giacomuzzi invaluable. While we are on the subject, we should recall a very interesting fact in the history of glassmaking that honors Giovanni Giacomuzzi. Giacomuzzi himself invented a completely new type of work in the field of inlaid enamel mosaics, which he called *polimblemata*. This very special type of work was entirely different from any other method being used at the time. It consisted in arranging different pieces of glass shaped like prisms measuring half a foot in length with the different pieces arranged together to form a single whole, and combined in the most elegant designs. Multiple specimens could be had simply by sawing. This was a

massive mosaic which from one end to the other and through the whole thickness preserved the same pattern, and when cut into sections multiplied the design according to the number of sections into which it was divided.<sup>4</sup> This results in an irreproachably precise work with the advantage of costing less because the simplified method requires less time.

The table that Giacomuzzi donated to the Museum of Murano, displaying a generosity equal to his skill, was made using the method just described and is outstanding proof of our claim. That table is one of six works made using the method invented by Giacomuzzi. In addition to the beauty of the inlaid work, the skill of the artist and the glassmaker are seen in the opaque and transparent enamels set all around the column and the base, which perfectly imitate natural precious stones. We will not mention all the other smaller works that were made using the same method, nor the larger, richer, and more colossal works that Giacomuzzi, who was always industrious and enamoured by the art, had envisioned and for which he had prepared designs worthy of the halls of princes and kings.<sup>5</sup>

Such glorious results are obtained by those who always treat art as art, who cultivate art with intelligence and passion, and sacrifice to art their minds, hearts, and hands. Apart from the material profits, which more often than not are reaped only by charlatans, such dedication earns the glassmaker or artist a respected name and everlasting fame, a recognition that masters and amateurs of our national industries never denied to Giovanni Giacomuzzi and, therefore, will not deny to those who will follow in his footsteps.

## V

Giacomuzzi never relented in his glassmaking career. As an artist and maker of lampworked beads, a skilled creator of enamels and mosaics, he also approached the glass-bead industry with the same enthusiasm and with the same passion that he had displayed in other areas. Giacomuzzi knew and, in fact, often said that a glassmaker's most important accomplishment was to ensure respect for his own name, and he proved this with irrefutable arguments. Giacomuzzi always ensured the respected reputation

of his merchandise in foreign countries which awaited it impatiently and, therefore, we cannot be accused of exaggerating when we say that, by making glass beads, Giovanni Giacomuzzi helped to keep the name of Venice in high esteem. If we wish to know Giacomuzzi's achievements in glassmaking from a technical, scientific, and practical perspective, to present his vast knowledge in this area, we need only point to two very important facts—possibly the only ones in our times that have provided a truly new achievement in the field of glass beads: *ruby and carnelian beads [made] without gold*, and the *yellow-gold bead*.

This opens up a vast area which cannot be dealt with in this paper. With respect to the first of the above beads, however, Giacomuzzi produced successful examples, and would have continued to produce even better ones if he had been able to continue those repeated tests that wore him down by requiring that he spend most of his life in front of a fire exposed to the poisonous fumes emanating from the furnaces. After the goldless ruby and carnelian beads, the prototypes of which are on display at the Museum of Murano, Giacomuzzi manufactured the yellow-gold bead and the gold mother-of-pearl bead. For Giacomuzzi, this new discovery was a real triumph. In fact, we maintain without reservation that if Giacomuzzi had not achieved anything else in the glassmaking field, this bead, which imitates the most precious of metals, would have sufficed to earn respect, esteem, and fame everlasting for the name of Giovanni Giacomuzzi. This is confirmed when we consider the expense, efforts, deprivation, sleepless nights, and sacrifices that he endured in order to achieve that long-yearned-for goal and, especially, to turn this exquisite new product to so many rich, beautiful, and fascinating applications. If only he had been understood and supported in his noble intentions and grand ideals of uncovering new sources of work, wealth, and glory for our [Venetian] lagoon.<sup>6</sup> Despite ill health, being exhausted by battles, and having distanced himself from production and trade, Giacomuzzi did not say that he no longer wanted anything to do with glassmaking. He showed his love for his craft and, in particular, for his beautiful gold bead, which he remade and perfected only a few months before his death. For this he had initiated new work and devised more fascinating applications. He studied how to



prepare for a more prosperous future, still inspired by his passion for the art since profit for him was always a last consideration, having sacrificed substantial sums of money. Finally, it goes without saying that Giacomuzzi was honored for the invention and different applications of the gold bead in both Venice and Rome. In Murano, he was awarded a prize superior to a gold medal. The newspaper *La Voce di Murano*, like many other reputable publications, recognized Giacomuzzi's discovery and the advancement it represented. The director of the Museum of Arts and Industry of Murano, where the beautiful bead is still today admired by foreigners, published a pamphlet in honor of Giacomuzzi, lavishing the praise he deserved. Consequently, we urge those interested in these new inventions and who support national arts and industry, to consult both that periodical, which for six years has been dealing exclusively with glassmaking, and the pamphlet.

## VI

And so we conclude our brief biography. But can we claim to have fully described the artistic and working life of Giovanni Giacomuzzi? Certainly not. We have gathered together some of the main points, and even these were only described superficially. We have left out many less important details which would have been very interesting in a story about the art and life of a craft master. To fully emphasize the genius, industriousness, and intelligence of Giovanni Giacomuzzi, we should have mentioned all of his applications, innovations, and refinements.<sup>7</sup> In addition to his passion for the art, we should have spoken about his love for his artists and workers, whose skills and activities he knew how to appreciate and reward, shunning the base and vile exploitation of their knowledge and labor. In addition, we should have spoken about his *Memorie* which he wrote himself on the different experiments he attempted and which we have read with the utmost interest.<sup>8</sup> These included the experiments with ruby beads made without gold, and the manufacture of aventurine. In fact, with respect to the manufacture of aventurine, Giacomuzzi conducted 23 theoretical and practical experiments. With these tests, Giacomuzzi tried to make the unpredictable process for producing aventurine as certain as that for other enamels, and dedicated himself to understanding

the reasons why manufacturing one of the most beautiful and attractive of our glasses is so unpredictable. He only had two more chances to carry out tests but, in 1865, he was denied the possibility of continuing his experiments.<sup>9</sup> These and many other facts would have warranted special mention if instead of this brief account, we had set out to write a detailed biography of this man whom death stole from his relatives, friends, country, art, and industry at the still-young age of 55 years.<sup>10</sup>

Like all men with a mind and heart capable of deep understanding and far-reaching, noble ideas, after so many sacrifices, so many sleepless nights, so much sweat, and deserving of so much merit, instead of encouragement and support, Giacomuzzi, who had dedicated his life to his art and his work, gathered bitterness, suffering, delusions, and disappointments during his career as a glassmaker. "I might be mistaken," Giacomuzzi wrote to us only a few months before his death, "but my conscience is clear of ever having tried to usurp anyone else's projects, nor have I claimed as my own other people's inventions, improvements, or refinements. Rather my own initiatives, and my attempts to improve the development of enamels in Venice, have become the property of others, who by copying my mosaic works and my products, finally claim *themselves to be the only real inventors, the only specialists, the only ones worthy of this art*. I will not name names because I do not want anyone to think that this grievance is the result of personal envy—that is not the case. I respect all those who have sacrificed themselves to the art and even those fortunate in their successes, who are able to enjoy the laurels and fortunes earned. But I cannot deny having suffered greatly in seeing myself stripped of that which through immense toil I had acquired by right and through my own creativity." Further on, with regard to his gold bead, he added, "Do you really think that if my *yellow color*, which you have described in the press with even too much esteem and insistence, had been made by someone else, and had been successfully accepted on the market, that the Giacomuzzi name would have survived? For shame! The laurels, the invention, the application, the honors, the profits would have all gone to that other person. It took a fool like me to waste so much money in a vain attempt to become more than just a good-for-nothing in my life." This is what Giacomuzzi wrote to us.

Justified complaints that tore his exasperated soul apart and that reveal an honest, hard-working man who had become embittered and deluded.

Such is the condition of men who have been endowed with great genius; they find themselves struggling against a thousand adversities that render life painful, rather than fulfilling. In the end, though, these men will always get the respect they deserve. They will always find those who sincerely and without ulterior motives can appreciate their intelligence, their undertakings, their work, and who will honor and respect them.

We too can claim to be among Giacomuzzi's devotees, among those who were not stingy with sincere praise, and who, within their limited means, championed his intelligence and skill. Nor did we wait to make our humble but candid tribute of respect and affection only after his death; we also did so while he was still alive, but listless and dejected. Thus, in these few notes, we have merely expressed what we have thought of Giovanni Giacomuzzi all along. We are certain that along with us, not only his friends, but any right-minded person and anyone who respects skill and hard work, anyone who truly loves our country and that which our country stands for and values, will recognize Giovanni Giacomuzzi as a man worthy of his country. We salute him as a distinguished artist, an enlightened and skilful industrialist, an untiring master of glassmaking. His name deserves to be associated with those of many other notables and, serving as a noble incentive for others to achieve distinction, it should be transmitted with respect and honor to posterity.

## ENDNOTES

1. Giacomuzzi told us that while in Paris he managed to visit a large factory where hundreds of women and girls were employed making lampworked beads. He entered as a foreign visitor and was considered new to the type of work being done in that factory. Imagine the amazement and marvel of the workers when they watched Giacomuzzi, who they assumed to be ignorant of their craft and whom they were trying to teach, sit at one of the benches and create a beautiful bead! Certainly, Giacomuzzi could have taught the Parisian workers that craft, which had one day been exclusive to Venice.
2. Giacomuzzi's creations won awards at the exhibit, which was held in 1854.
3. See extracts of the *Proceedings of the Awards Ceremonies of the Royal Institute of Letters, Sciences, and Arts of Venice and of Milan*.
4. From Giacomuzzi's work, one could deduce, if not completely, at least in part, the enormous difficulties endured by Jacopo Franchini, who wanted, in a supreme effort of art that might never be tried again, to make a portrait run the length of an enamel cane worked using an oil lamp, so that when the cane was divided into countless sections, the portrait was multiplied to infinity. History and the fatherland are duty-bound to never forget such industrious sons.
5. Giovanni's brother Giuseppe, who we mentioned earlier, was his skilled assistant in working on mosaics.
6. Giacomuzzi had conceived and even drafted a program to establish a factory in Venice similar to those in foreign countries, where women and girls could work at the art of embroidery and trimming, using the gold bead he invented. As well as offering a purely Venetian novelty, this work could have evolved rapidly. While supported by some of the most noble Venetian ladies, Giacomuzzi did not have the satisfaction of seeing such an institution become reality.
7. One year before he died, when Giacomuzzi remade the gold bead, he also made brilliant mother-of-pearl beads in gold, silver, ruby, green, and blue. We had asked him to send us samples of the last colors to place beside the others on display at our Civic Museum. Even the gold-colored glass thread, which for its quality and lower price undermined that of Paris, was the work of Giacomuzzi.
8. While a highly educated and enlightened artisan, Giovanni Giacomuzzi was a man without pride or conceit. Having read his report on ruby beads made without gold, we asked him if we could have it published in *La Voce di Murano*. He agreed to our request and sent it to us, but then asked for it back to make some corrections and additions. If we could get the report back, we would be very pleased to publish it. It would be another example justifying the praise with which we have tried to honor Giacomuzzi in these biographical notes.

9. These are his exact words, taken from the above mentioned report. He sent a summary of the report to us in a letter dated last June 3, when we were working on a historical paper on artificial aventurine, which we hope to publish as soon as possible.
10. Not only was Giacomuzzi worthy of his country as an artist and industrialist, but also as a merchant, as is shown, without citing other facts, in two of his publications and an unpublished paper. His book entitled *Prezzi-Correnti* [Market Prices], which he had printed in 1854, is truly a masterpiece in its field. This book underlines Giacomuzzi's practical knowledge and positive ideas, especially on making beads at the lamp. His knowledge is brought to light with such precise ideas and such rational calculations from a commercial perspective, that no one has been able to do likewise. In addressing his publication to Mr. Domenico Bussolin, Giacomuzzi was right in stating that his work was completely original and, as he later wrote again to Bussolin, he was sincere in saying that *his collection of prices had the merit of organizing the confused heap of multiple products that had been created subsequently by chance or on a whim*. Consequently, Giacomuzzi's *Prezzi-Correnti* proved to be very useful, because it included, as Giacomuzzi himself pointed out in the above quotation, all the most commonly used products of that important branch of industry—seed beads, necklaces, lampworked beads—which in itself represents a value of over four and one half million lire of exports for Venice and provides steady employment for thousands of workers in its many different stages.

Let us look at Giacomuzzi's other two works in chronological order. First, the *Memoria* (unpublished) which he presented in May 1854 to the Chamber of Commerce in Venice, with the full title: "*Sulla necessità di riformare e di estendere maggiormente l'esercizio dell' arte vetraria in*

*Venezia con ispeciale riguardo all' industria delle conterie ecc. e sui mezzi di conseguire tale riforma*" [On the Need to Reform and Greatly Expand the Practice of the Art of Glassmaking in Venice, Especially the Bead Industry, etc., and on the Means to Achieve Reform]. In this paper, Giacomuzzi proved himself an enlightened man. His history of the art of glassmaking was very scholarly and, from an economic and commercial point of view, presented some valuable fundamental truths predicting, unfortunately, that which in part actually happened, and will continue to happen if events surrounding Venice's premiere industry continue to follow their current course.

Finally, Giacomuzzi's other work is "*Progetto di un' associazione delle fabbriche di conterie in Venezia per migliorare le condizioni attuali di questa patria industria*" [A Plan for an Association of Beadmakers in Venice to Improve the Current Conditions of this National Industry]. By publishing this paper in November 1861, Giacomuzzi once again revealed the noble sentiments that inspired him and the lofty and valuable ideas that he nurtured in order to promote and strengthen the benefits, prestige, and dignity of his art.

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