

## WHO



**Mdina Glass** was set up in Malta by two Englishmen, Michael Harris and Eric Dobson in 1963. Harris left Malta in 1972, Dobson continued running Mdina Glass until the early 1980s, when it was taken over by Joseph Said, a Maltese glassworker who had trained at Mdina Glass. (**Mdina** is the name of Maltese former capital city, located just 2 kilometres away from the firm's base.)



The firm was the first to commence the manufacturing of glass blown objects in Malta. Joseph Said, who is the current owner, was the first Maltese glassmaker and originally in charge of the design and production techniques at the firm. He became sole owner of the company in 1985, after which he invested in new equipment and researched new production methods. The company won the International Award for Tradition & Prestige in Brussels in 1987 and the Malta Achievement in Industry Award for Crafts in 1992.

## WHAT

Mdina Glass mainly produces mouth-blown decorative glassware, branching more recently also into stained glass, lamp works, uplighters and glass fusion techniques. The products have successfully been branded as a core Maltese souvenirs (along with filigree and lace products), and nowadays glassblowing has consolidated its position as an 'invented tradition' in Malta, developing a heritage product in such a short space of time. Products can also be designed and customised to client specifications. Mdina Glass products compare very favourably with foreign competitors. Their main disadvantage is that they may lack the style and design of their Italian counterparts, which lead the industry internationally. To counter this weakness, new Italian glassmaking techniques have recently been incorporated so that the products are even more unique and stylish in terms of both in colour and design.



Until 1992, locally available crushed glass was the basic raw material. At that point, however, the decision was taken to shift to a raw material imported from Italy and the Netherlands which is of much higher quality. This switch did make the product more expensive (mainly because of higher freight and transportation costs associated with importation), but it also allow the firm to achieve a desirable, higher level of excellence. Moreover, the cost of raw material is low when compared to the labour costs incurred in such a labour intensive activity.



These initiatives have pushed up the overall quality standards of the glassblowing industry in Malta. There are two other local competitors: their founders were initially employees at Mdina Glass who decided to branch out on their own.

## WHERE

Mdina Glass has its factory at the Ta' Qali Crafts Village, the centralised location for craft-based production in Malta. The firm has been participating in various international Trade Fairs and tapping foreign markets. It was clear to the firm that exports were crucial for its survival since the local market was simply too small. Although Mdina Glass sells mainly to tourists visiting Malta, yet it has succeeded in exporting 35% of its products worldwide. Its main threat comes from unfair competition of imported glass products which are generally of inferior quality and which sell at cheaper prices. These are sold as authentic Maltese glass souvenirs in the crafts village and in retail outlets when they are actually fakes imported from overseas locations where wages are cheaper.



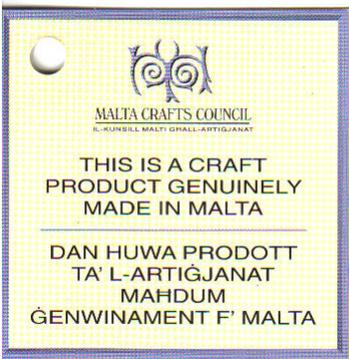
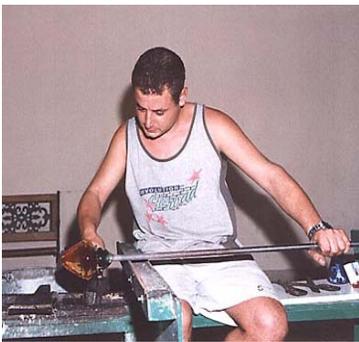
Apart from selling its products to tourists who visit Malta, Mdina Glass exports to Greece, USA, Russia, U.K., Cyprus and the Netherlands. Exports to other countries have been erratic and are generally 'one off' orders. On the basis of experience gained, the firm is now targeting 'niche' outlets such as special galleries. A retail outlet has also been opened in Valletta, the capital city, to tap into Malta's growing cruise-ship tourism market. Personal links with tour leaders and taxi drivers ensure that the Mdina Glass factory at Ta' Qali Crafts Village is on the tourist itinerary. Furthermore, some domestic sales have picked up because of a growing interest by a more affluent Maltese middle class in choice interior home and office decor.



## INTERNAL SUPPORTS

Throughout the years, Mdina Glass has expanded its knowledge, skills and business acumen. While basic process and product developments have taken place, products produced by the firm continue to reflect a strong sense of tradition, culture and typical Maltese characteristics that make the products truly local.

The firm remains very much a family-led business, with responsibility being gradually shared with the upcoming, second generation. In 1996, Joseph's eldest



daughter Nevis joined the firm and now runs both local and export sales. A second daughter Pamela joined the team in 1999: she now runs the firm's retail section which lies adjacent to the manufacturing and production facility. This means that visitors to the Mdina Glass shop can actually observe the production process in the factory alongside. In 2000, Olivia, Joseph Said's third daughter and a university graduate, joined the firm and assumed responsibility for manufacturing and production.

Most of the 35 employees are highly flexible, skilled and specialised glassmakers who over the years have learnt and perfected their glassmaking skills. They are trained by the owner and senior employees 'in-house': quite essential since there is no training infrastructure for glassblowing elsewhere in Malta. All workers also benefit from a production bonus scheme. With their unique talent come the uniqueness, colour and design of traditional handmade glass products, which are evidently essential ingredients for the survival of the decorative glass industry. In 2002, Mdina Glass started engaging a number of professional interior designers to further develop its products and diversify the business.

Meanwhile, Olivia regularly visits the Veneto region in Italy, a world centre for new glass compositions, colours, forming techniques and artistic skills. There, she attends specialised courses in new techniques and design, returning to Mdina Glass with fresh ideas.

## EXTERNAL SUPPORTS

There are drives by state-funded agencies in Malta to facilitate the export orientation of small local firms. However, in the opinion of the firm's ownership, these initiatives are not enough.

The firm enjoys subsidised rent at the Ta' Qali Crafts Village, although it paid for all the costs of an extension to its current premises.

A Malta Crafts Council has been set up to urge local entrepreneurs in expanding businesses for both local and export markets. It also intends renovating the Crafts Village and introduce a certified genuine Malta Craft Label. This will allow customers to identify the genuine Malta product, in contrast to cheaper, lower quality imitations imported from elsewhere.

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Website: { [HYPERLINK  
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Activity: Mouth-Blown  
Stained Glass Quality  
Products  
Employees: 35  
Established: 1963  
Contact: Joseph Said  
(Managing Director)

*Mdina Glass has been successfully indigenised after being initiated by non-Maltese entrepreneurs. Over more than four decades, the firm has successfully marketed its original products to a growing and diversifying international (mainly tourist) market which now recognises the Mdina Glass manufactures as intimately connected with Malta. Their products represent a skill & craft 'tradition' which has been creatively invented and nurtured 'in house'. The firm is managing well the transition to second generation, women-led, family management.*