

CRYSTAL CLEAR

Journey behind the scenes at heritage glassmaker Lalique, where a passionate new leader is bringing a century-old vision back to life.

BY STEPHANIE DRAX | PHOTOS BY GUNNAR KNECHTEL



The temptation to touch is overwhelming. Spun on the end of a gathering stick, a bulb of liquid crystal looks like golden candy. The viscid syrup requires skillful manipulation as it quickly cools and I prudently resist the urge to reach out: This “candy” is 2,100°F (1,150°C).

It's a rare privilege to visit the hearth of the Lalique crystal factory in the Alsace region of northern France. I'm cautiously standing in the hot-glass studio amid nine strong men who, like generations of glassmakers before them, expertly tease this concoction of sand, potash and lead oxide from furnace to mold. I dodge their path as they work in unison to produce the brand's iconic Vase Poseidon, a clear vessel flanked by two seahorse-shaped handles, with symphonic precision.

Founder René Lalique, the man dubbed “the Rodin of transparencies” by author Maurice Rostand, would surely be proud. This year marks the 70th anniversary of his death and yet his eponymous crystal still resonates. Today's success story, however, can be attributed to two aesthete entrepreneurs operating almost a century apart: René Lalique himself and Silvio Denz, the Swiss perfume magnate who in 2008 acquired the then-struggling company and swiftly revived it.

Could Lalique – an avant-garde artisan who broke new ground in glass – have imagined a 21st-century global lifestyle brand spanning decorative objects, jewelry, interiors, fragrances, art, architecture and a luxury boutique hotel? Absolutely, Denz tells me: “René Lalique had already created his luxury lifestyle empire 100 years ago. He was a genius with great talents. At most, I consider myself the guardian of his legacy.”

Indeed, in his time, René Lalique's achievements appeared limitless. Born in 1860 in Aÿ, in the Marne region of France, he began an apprenticeship in Paris at 16 to the renowned jeweler and goldsmith Louis Aucoc. Five years later, Lalique was designing for top firms such as Cartier and Boucheron and attracting private clients,

including the iconic French actress Sarah Bernhardt. In 1900, at the age of 40 and exhibiting at the prestigious Exposition Universelle, René Lalique was the most celebrated jeweler in the world.

Drawing inspiration from nature (the precursor to the signature flora, fauna and females of his later work), Lalique's Art Nouveau experiments with novel materials such as glass, enamel and ivory caused a sensation. He took a commission in 1907 from François Coty to design labels for the perfumer, but insisted on designing the glass flask too.

By introducing romantic shapes and embellishments in the decoration of those bottles, Lalique invented the concept of branded perfume packaging, transforming it from a practical chemist's vial into a seductive vessel.

René Lalique made emotion tangible in glass: He was the first to capture in a bottle the essence of scent and spirit, the basis of all perfume advertising today. Fragrance houses Roger & Gallet, D'Orsay, Molinard and Molyneux soon clamored for his skill. And as his penchant for glass grew, he was simultaneously tiring of the widespread plagiarism of his jewelry designs. In 1911, he chose to refocus his career by committing to glassware. By 1921 he was able to open the factory in Wingen-sur-Moder.

The forests and rivers surrounding the Alsatian village in the foothills of the Vosges provided the wood, sand, ferns and water needed to fuel and work the glass; several other glassmakers (Baccarat and Saint-Louis among them) were already in the region. Lalique embraced Art Deco design and propelled his factory into mass production – from tableware and lamps, statues and car mascots, to the interiors of ocean liners and of the Orient Express.

With a desire to introduce Lalique into every person's home, he declared: “We must put within their reach models that will educate their eye, we must popularize the notion of aesthetics. Works of art cost too much. Let's change all that!” In his lifetime, he created over >



MESSAGE IN A BOTTLE (Opposite) Yves Klein's Winged Victory of Samothrace cast in glass by Lalique; (top) inside the Lalique Museum; (inset) Silvio Denz was an avid Lalique flacon collector before taking over the company in 2008.



**Lalique
Savoir Faire**

Lalique produces up to 250,000 items per year, and a single piece requires up to 40 individual tasks. Here we highlight the rigorous technical process.

Creation Studio

The Lalique design team in Paris visualize their ideas using drawing, modeling and – in recent years – digitization and 3-D printing.

The Mold

Lalique has amassed 6,000 original molds since its inception. Technicians carve new molds or use existing ones to replicate a motif.

Hot Work

Molten crystal is harvested from one of several 2,550°F (1,400°C) furnaces using a gathering stick. Clear or colored crystal is turned, cut and smoothed with wood to eliminate imperfections; it can be blown quickly to create volume and then placed into a mold. It is slowly cooled in an annealing oven.

Cire perdue or Lost Wax

Particularly intricate or high relief designs are created using a combination of plaster and wax. A mold is heated to “lose” the wax, and liquid crystal is poured or blown in. The crystal cools and the mold is carefully broken open to reveal the object.

Retouching and Engraving

After one of several steps of quality control, surfaces are reworked to smooth imperfections. Engraving is used to precisely define the decorative details.

Satin Finish

This effect is typical of Lalique and is achieved by sandblasting or matting, an acid engraving process.

Polishing

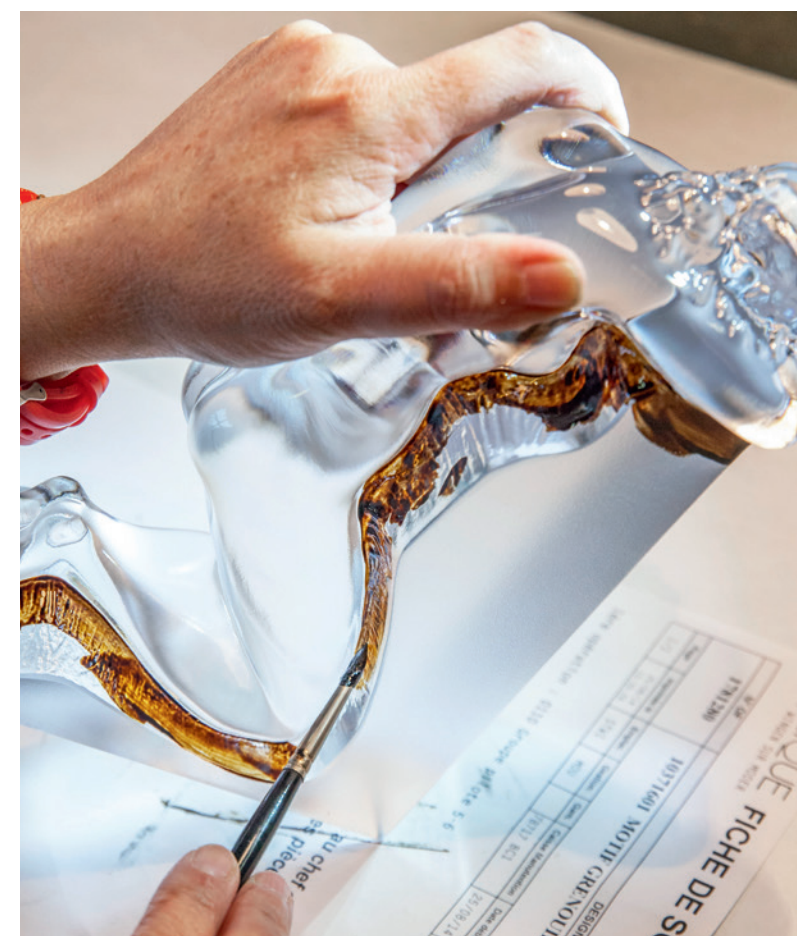
A polishing wheel accentuates contours and creates shine and radiance.

The Signature

Pieces that survive the elimination process are hand engraved with the Lalique signature, “Lalique, France.” Only two artisans are allowed to perform this final task.



FIRE POWER
A glassworker expertly manipulates the intricate Vase Poseidon. Each Lalique piece is the work of dozens of craftsmen. Even the 100 Points wine glass, for example, requires the combined skills of 15 people.



MAKE-OR-BREAK MOMENT
(Clockwise from top right) A lineup of Lalique for Bentley Flying B Paperweights await inspection; all Lalique pieces undergo a stringent vetting, in which 60 percent are rejected; only the perfect receive a final signature, and only two craftsmen are qualified to etch it.

“René Lalique’s DNA is our daily code, our eternal guideline.” – SILVIO DENZ, CEO

1,500 models and registered 16 patents. At the 1925 Paris Exhibition, René Lalique was feted as the unrivaled master of glass. The furnaces of the Lalique factory have been firing ever since.

I’m led to the cooler climate of quality control where an employee sits scrutinizing a tumbler for flaws – small stones, bubbles, and cracks. It’s one of 700 small items he will check today, 60 percent of which will be eliminated, bringing new meaning to the notion of “crystal clear.” When Marc Lalique took over after the death of his father in 1945, he channeled the business into crystal production. Adding 24 percent lead to glass increases the clarity, sonority, density and possibility of light refraction – all the qualities that are now synonymous with Lalique. His father had resisted the change to crystal, wanting his decorative objects to be affordable, but Marc believed the exquisite designs deserved added radiance.

It’s in the finishing studio that I fully appreciate Lalique luminescence. Here, rows of technicians use precise tools to breathe life into crystal tortoises and tiny fish, rearing horses and red apples. (Lalique is epitomized by the contrast of satin and polished finishes applied at this stage.)

The Lalique Cactus table – Marc Lalique’s renowned one-ton creation, held aloft by unfurling spiked branches – commands attention, but I’m drawn to the ethereal beauty of Révélation Bacchantes. The René Lalique vase design reveals a circle of soft sculpted female nudes suspended in a crystal block. As the sunlight permeates their matte contours, the figures become vivid, like dancing ghosts.

The spirit of Lalique seems infinitely applicable in the hands of the brand’s creative director, Marc Larminaux. The designer is tasked with balancing the Lalique heritage – calling on an archive of vintage motifs that are crucial to the brand’s identity – with the technology and innovation required to drive the company forward.

“René Lalique’s DNA is our daily code, our eternal guideline,” explains Denz, who sold his perfume business Alrodo to Marionnaud in 2000 and remains the



Co-Branding through the Decades

René Lalique had an innate sense of marketing and his auspicious collaboration with perfumer Coty was the first of many brand alliances. Since Silvio Denz took ownership of the company in 2008, Lalique has engaged with several global powerhouses to honor René Lalique’s vision and capitalize on new materials and new markets.



**1925
Citroën**

René Lalique designed 29 glass mascots for car hoods that could illuminate with increased speeds via a bulb connected to the car’s accelerator. For Citroën, he created one such mascot featuring five horses – les “Cinq Chevaux” – designed for the 5 CV.



**1951
Nina Ricci**

The intertwining dove flacon by Marc Lalique for Nina Ricci’s L’Air du Temps was named “perfume bottle of the century” by the Fragrance Foundation in 1999.



**1992
XVI Winter Games**

Marie-Claude Lalique’s Olympic medals for the Albertville Winter Games were the first of their kind – made of crystal and set in gold, silver and bronze.

CRAFTSMANSHIP



world's largest collector of René Lalique flacons, having spent 17 years sourcing more than 650 mint-condition bottles. "There is no future without a past. It's important to stay up-to-date without forgetting where we came from; Lalique always adapted his creations to the trends and movements of the day."

When Marc Lalique's daughter Marie-Claude took the company reins after her father's death in 1977, she refreshed Lalique designs by adding color; she had previously added a range of jewelry and in 1992 launched the first Lalique fragrance. However, Marie-Claude sought retirement in 1994, selling the company to glassmakers Pochet (she died in Florida in 2003). Subsequently, as 21st-century consumer tastes shifted away from classical crystalware, Lalique fell into financial decline.

When Denz took control of the business in 2008, part of his revival and brand positioning strategy was to marry Lalique's savoir faire with the talents of other luxury titans. Collaborations with celebrated personalities such as architect Zaha Hadid and global brands including Bentley, Ferragamo, Montblanc and Steinway, have enhanced the products and created mutual synergies.

Direct commissions are also increasingly popular: "Clients are looking for bespoke, limited-edition pieces – masterpieces of craftsmanship," says Denz. Recently, a Middle Eastern royal – for whom Lalique had created 5,000 gold-rimmed, insignia-engraved goblets – requested a crystal bust of his wife. A laser reading

captured her exact measurements and the finished sculpture weighed 200 pounds.

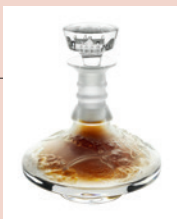
True admirers and aficionados of Lalique can now stay at Villa Laliq, the brand's recently opened, five-star boutique hotel in Wingen-sur-Moder. Set in René Lalique's former home, the property is a traditional Alsatian-style house built in 1921.

The decor is a clever mélange of eras: Original Lalique family furniture is integrated with Lalique Maison, the brand's Art Deco-inspired interiors collection designed by Lady Tina Green (wife of British retail tycoon Sir Philip Green) and her business partner Pietro Mingarelli. Each of the six suites is uniquely designed by the duo, and the hotel restaurant (which includes a 20,000-bottle cellar, of which many are drawn from Denz's own collection), was created by renowned Swiss architect Mario Botta.

My Lalique immersion ends with a tour of its dedicated museum, which opened in Wingen-sur-Moder in 2012. It's a grand finale: The contemporary space features a vast array of René Lalique's work, including many exquisite perfume bottles on loan from Denz.

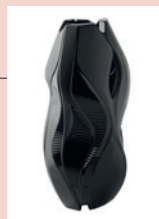
I'm drawn to a small, unassuming tear-shaped vessel, with a motif of swimming fish. I'm told it was Lalique's first attempt at an embellished bottle, which he made over a hot stove in his Paris apartment in 1893. The mold caught fire and the flames soon engulfed his kitchen, but before making his escape, Lalique made sure to salvage the little bottle. In the heat of that moment, even the glassmaker couldn't resist his creation. ■

GLASS HOUSE
Visitors to Wingen-sur-Moder can now stay at René Lalique's former villa, which has just reopened as a sumptuous Art Deco-style hotel and Michelin three-star restaurant.



2010
The Macallan

This enduring relationship with the Scotch distiller has produced six decanters, including The Macallan 64 Year Old Cìre Perdue, which cradles the brand's oldest whisky. In 2010 the bottle set a record for Scotch, selling for US\$460,000 at Sotheby's.



2014
Zaha Hadid

The sculptural Visio and Manifesto vases were a collaboration between the Iraqi-born architect and Lalique.



2015
Damien Hirst

The controversial British artist channels his imagination into a selection of decorative panels designed in partnership with Lalique.