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DESIGN

Crystal tricks: crystalware houses embrace a new direction

Waterford, Lalique and Baccarat are attracting new customers with experimental designs and exciting collaborations, reports Henrietta Thompson


BY HENRIETTA THOMPSON
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Think of crystal as a material and the image that comes to mind is one of old world posh. Cut glass, in general, has accents of aristocracy. It is refreshing then, to see a number of crystalware brands wooing new audiences with new, more experimental designs than ever.

Launching this weekend at Maison & Objet in Paris, Lalique will present a collaboration with British artist Damien Hirst to make a series of beautiful colourful panels; a new series entitled Rebel is Waterford's venture into a "dynamic new realm of expression"; and Maison Baccarat launches a range called New Antique by Marcel Wanders.

Working with Hirst was high on the wish list of Silvio Denti, Lalique's president director: "He perfectly embodies his generation of artists, unafraid to embark on experiments, calling into question the strict definitions of art and what constitutes a work of art," he says. The result, called Eternal, takes Hirst's famous butterfly motif and applies it to colourful crystal tiles in three variations: Hops, Love and Beauty.

Far from making a traditionally pretty crystal scene, Hirst sees a deeper meaning in his motif. "There's another element that interests me, which is the tension between the kitsch birthday-card kind of image, the power of love and the reality of the actual insect itself," he says. "It's an interesting example of how we use nature to try and express the inexpressible: love, desire, belief and the eternal. They're really old ideas, butterflies are used in Christian iconography to symbolise the resurrection, and by the ancient Greeks, for the soul. I've always loved that they look identical in life and in death, but when the light shines through these panels, it feels like they're brought back to life in some way."



Lalique and Damien Hirst
Enlarge

Waterford's extensive Rebel is a collection of crystal glassware and accessories with a punk rock attitude, think vases with studs and streetwise martini glasses (alongside giftware, travel accessories and jewellery). It has been designed by longtime Waterford collaborator Jo Sampson and is firmly targeted towards a younger, more fashion-forward audience.

Sampson has been designing for Waterford for four years now as a named designer, having previously co-founded the design agency Blacksheep where she primarily designed hospitality environments, such as bars restaurants and nightclubs. It was the challenge of working with crystal that drew her to Waterford. "There are many contradictory properties to crystal such as strength, brittleness, unpredictability, precision. It's one of the most challenging materials I have worked with."

To Sampson, Rebel is groundbreaking in many ways. "Waterford's footprint continues to be high quality, handcrafted, and design-led, but they wanted a range which targeted a younger, design-savvy consumer," she says. "I have introduced much more than just new crystal pieces, creating a gifting range with beautiful objects that catch the eye and become a talking point; for instance a small ruler, tape measure and even chopsticks. The range is quite diverse yet unified by one concept; the stud. The punk stud is an icon that transcends time and seems to be continually reinvented. I thought it would be interesting to transpose this motif into crystal and create something unexpected."

The theme was then carried through into other objects made in metal. To complement this there are also non-cut decanters (which are still handmade) and perfume bottles. Rough-lux barware? "Barware is the stalwart of the business, but we are making it unique to the Rebel collection by leaving the pieces uncut."

Where Waterford's DNA is defined by the clarity of crystal and depth of cut (something the studded designs can showcase brilliantly), Lalique's is in art pieces and sculptures – collaborations are in the life blood of the French heritage brand, which has long been creating wall plaques, sculptures and interior elements.

Similarly, Baccarat's royal commissions in the 19th century have led to clearly defined and instantly recognisable forms. It makes sense for this Maison to celebrate the ancient Médicis vase in the New Antique range. Marcel Wanders' collection pays tribute to classical forms while bringing it sharply up to date with contemporary lines and wit, in Baccarat's signature red vermillon.


Initially it was the Gen Y consumer that held appeal for Waterford, as well as those all important emerging luxury BRIC markets. But as the range has developed, Sampson has been designing Rebel to have a wider appeal. "The aesthetic transcends age and the product had become much more about an attitude and confidence. I think people of several generations relate to the stud icon."

It's not just a more daring aesthetic that manufacturers are playing with, but also new production techniques. Sampson says she's continually trying out new things. "For instance, the glasses in Rebel have a textured patterned surface created by colour powder being infused into the crystal whilst still hot. The pigments melt to create a beautiful mottled effect."


For all that we might have got stuck in our preconceptions of crystal, innovation has always been at the heart of craftsmanship, says Waterford CEO Pierre de Villeneuve. "Through bold experimentation, the aesthetic of each era has been captured in crystal at every step of the company's history." Meanwhile, Rebel queen Sampson is already designing phase two.

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