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THE WORLD'S OLDEST
CRYSTAL COMPANIES ARE
BRANCHING OUT BEYOND
THE CHANDELIER TO
EXPLORE NEW IDEAS
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new series of vases by Zaha Hadid. The partnership between the master glassmakers and the world-famous architect and designer has resulted not only in a decidedly alien aesthetic, but a fresh approach to the medium overall, says Lalique's creative director, Marc Larminaux, who saw in the architect a spark of the crystal house's original founder. 'I believe she has the same philosophy as René Lalique,' he says. 'I have a feeling if he was working today he would do something like this, it fits in some way with the art nouveau philosophy of his time, inspired by nature and its way of organising shapes, the geometry... it's a way for us to step into contemporary design.'

Crystal is the heart of the Lalique brand, says Larminaux, who explains that the possibilities stretch far beyond its traditional uses in ornaments and chandeliers. 'We want to offer the possibility of home decoration and furniture, so we established Lalique Maison, and our interior architecture service in the past few years... we are unique in offering crystal wall panels, and today we're able to do some very large panels to construct the space. We are also interested in using crystal to adorn the body: perfume and jewellery. We're moving back into high jewellery, quite a challenge but very exciting for us.' Hadid's pieces are the latest flagships in the company's art department.

Over in Austria, Lobjmeyr is in its sixth generation as a family business. Like Baccarat, a frequent purveyor to the imperial court, this esteemed company is a proud pioneer of Austrian/Bohemian crystal production but is now initiating some seriously stylish collaborations with a new generation of designers. Lobjmeyr's latest launch is the Ripple light, designed by London based, RCA-trained duo, Poetic Lab. While the illustrious Austrians are more used to creating impressive chandeliers, these small lights, contained in a small bubble of rippled glass, are no less compellingly beautiful, casting hypnotic shadows like water on the walls.

Over in the Czech corner, Moser credits its founder Ludwig Moser (1833-1916) as 'one of the most outstanding personalities of glass manufacturing in the world'. Once the court suppliers of emperors, shahs

and kings, today the company's leading edge comes from its ability to produce ecologically friendly lead-free crystal, in iconic colours. This year, a key launch comes courtesy of Czech designer Ctvrtník Jan. The Tangram vases (shown on the cover), he says, are inspired by the ancient Chinese game of the same name. 'I stretched the geometric Tangram shapes into three dimensions and began toying with a few triangles and blocks to develop geometric vases, composed of different volumes turned slightly to each other. By pulling the diagonal shapes and sharp angles I created a game of vistas and colour transitions.'

The House of Waterford, in its namesake city in Ireland, has (like many Irish companies) endured its share of trials and tribulations over recent years, but a heritage that dates back to 1783 and a fond place in the hearts of many have not only kept it afloat but taken it from strength to glittering strength. Its vast chandeliers hang in prestigious locations from Westminster Abbey to Windsor Castle and it is responsible for the 2,688 crystals that make up the famous 11,875lb New Year's Eve Ball that is dropped each year in New York City's Times Square, but what is now getting the company noticed is new collectables from John Rocha and Jo Sampson. Sampson's Couture is a limited-edition collection of objets d'art in crystal, copper and turned wood that can be combined to form striking silhouettes. Not a chandelier, but still deliberately designed to make a statuesque statement. And there's more to come from Irish crystal, launching at Rossana Orlandi's influential gallery during Milan's Salone, April 8-13, is new company, J. Hill's Standard. Taking their cues from the established crystal brands - they're working with leading designers, and the first collection will feature pieces by Martino Gamper and design duo of the moment, Scholten & Baijings.

Collectors, take note: between them, these companies are proving that a bright future for crystal is on the cards. Just beware of glassy imitations, as with all the magic arts, charlatans abound. ■

baccarat.com; hillsstandard.com; lalique.com; lobmeyr.at; moser-glass.com; saint-louis.com; waterford.co.uk

Far left: the exquisite limited-edition Harcourt chess game designed by Japanese studio Nendo to mark Baccarat's 250th anniversary. The set costs £17,700 and each piece is carved to resemble the original iconic Harcourt glass first produced in 1841, when King Louis Philippe of France ordered a ceremonial chalice. Above left: Waterford Crystal is working with some hot new names to produce exciting contemporary glassware. These two pieces from the Couture collection, designed by Jo Sampson, are produced in crystal, copper and turned wood and cost £4,100 (left) and £4,650. Above: the architect Zaha Hadid has lent her magic touch to Lalique with this extraordinary black crystal vase, £11,100