



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The Genius of René Lalique

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

For fans of art glass and *Antiques Roadshow*, the name René Lalique is a familiar one. His sumptuous Art Deco creations in glass are instantly recognizable and much coveted by collectors. But Lalique did not begin as a glassmaker. His father died when he was fifteen, forcing him to seek work. At sixteen, he landed an apprenticeship with renowned Parisian jeweler, Louis Aucoc, whose customers had included Louis Philippe and Napoleon III. Young René soon astounded Aucoc with his meticulousness and innovation, and word spread of his abilities. Remarkably, by age twenty-one, Lalique had Paris' most esteemed jewelers, such as Cartier and Boucheron, clamoring for his services as a freelancer. He had his own studio by the 1880s, stunning Paris with his Art Nouveau designs, including combs, brooches, necklaces, and buckles, but also expanding into decorative arts such as boxes, inkwells,

and letter openers. As his fame grew, so did his pedigreed clientele, which came to include actress Sarah Bernhardt, along with other luminaries of *Belle Époque* elite. By 1898, Lalique had transitioned to glass and acquired his first studio. He was quickly commissioned by François Coty to design perfume bottles, and perfumers Guerlain, Worth, D'Orsay, and Gallet followed as his clients. There was seemingly no end to his success, and Lalique had purchased two additional glassworks by 1910. Coty also opened his first New York store in 1910 and asked Lalique to rework the façade of his retail space on Fifth Avenue with a wall of windows. These exquisite, three-story works of glass feature a stylized network of vines interspersed with poppies, Lalique's favorite flower. Coty was so impressed that he allegedly commented to a secretary, "*Mon Dieu*, Fifth Avenue will now be the envy of the Champs-Élysées." The retail space was later occupied by Henri Bendel, which closed in 2019, but the windows remain in situ on the building façade at 714 Fifth Avenue ([the Bendel windows designed by Lalique](#)).



René Lalique, (French, 1860–1945)

"Courlis" Vase, ca. 1931

Green glass

Gift of Clotilde Möller (92.64)

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The proverbial “marriage made in heaven” came to René Lalique in the 1920s with his introduction to Art Deco. Merging his expertise and taste effortlessly with the new style, he would become indelibly linked to it. Introduced in Paris at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in 1925, Art Deco soon swept through Europe, America, and beyond. In its heyday, Deco was synonymous with glamour, luxury, and urbane refinement. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Lalique studios produced light fixtures, table lamps, vases, decanters, wineglasses, clock cases, bowls, ashtrays, figurines, and hood ornaments. Sleekly elegant and unique, his work during this period came to epitomize Deco chic. He would also continue to land extravagant commissions, such as decoration for the luxury liner, *S.S. Normandie*. For this *Titanic* of the 1930s, Lalique created sets of tableware, glass panels, and light fixtures. The opulent decoration and luxury of the interiors led many to conclude *Normandie* was the most beautiful of the ocean liners. Unfortunately, the ship was seized by the U.S. Navy in 1941, gutted, refitted as a troopship, and renamed the *S.S. Lafayette*. It caught fire and sank in 1942.

Lalique’s genius relied on his expertise with the lost-wax process (or *cire-perdu*). Moreover, he had an innate talent for visualizing how light reacted with different glass, and how glass could diffuse light and change its color. In decorating his pieces, he practiced etching, hand engraving, and wheel cutting with surgical precision, rendering details beyond compare. Finally, René Lalique was a consummate lover of beauty, which inspired him endlessly. In fact, he revealed that his two main sources of inspiration were nature and women, both of which are plenteous in his work. The Museum’s vase is known as the “Courlis” model, the French word for the curlew bird, a long-billed relative of the sandpiper.

World War II shut down Lalique’s studios in France, but he would live long enough to learn that his Alsace factory had been saved by Allied Forces, and thus some of his most prized molds were intact and passed on to his heirs. A few days later, in May 1945, René Lalique died quietly at his home in Paris at age eighty-five. He was buried in Père Lachaise Cemetery with a glass crucifix on his headstone. In spring, his grave is sometimes found strewn with red poppies. ■



“Bacchantes” Vase, ca. 1927

Image from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not verified.



“Victoire,” ca. 1928, hood ornament

Image from art and antiques market for illustrative purposes. Authenticity not verified.