Here's to life as it truly is. Where art isn't a picture painted on canvas, but the imprint left on your soul. Where food isn't a seven-course meal served in a restaurant at a five star hotel, but the aroma that gets your taste buds working before the meal's begun. Where music doesn't adorn the shelves of music stores, but leaves you humming it all day long. Here's to life in more colours than the eye can see. Welcome to Jet Life.

CRYSTAL

A touch of {g}lass

Wear it, meditate on it, showcase it. That it enjoys pride of place is crystal clear

TEXT DEVYANI JAYAKAR

The unequivocal reflection of reality by the mirror in Snow White; the search for the elusive girl who fit the glass slipper in Cinderella; the magical crystal ball of soothsaying gypsies; the impenetrable 'glass ceiling' in work places and the vulnerability of 'people living in glass houses'... innumerable metaphors and associations describe the many nuances and shades of meaning that glass has in our lives.

SUCH A LONG JOURNEY

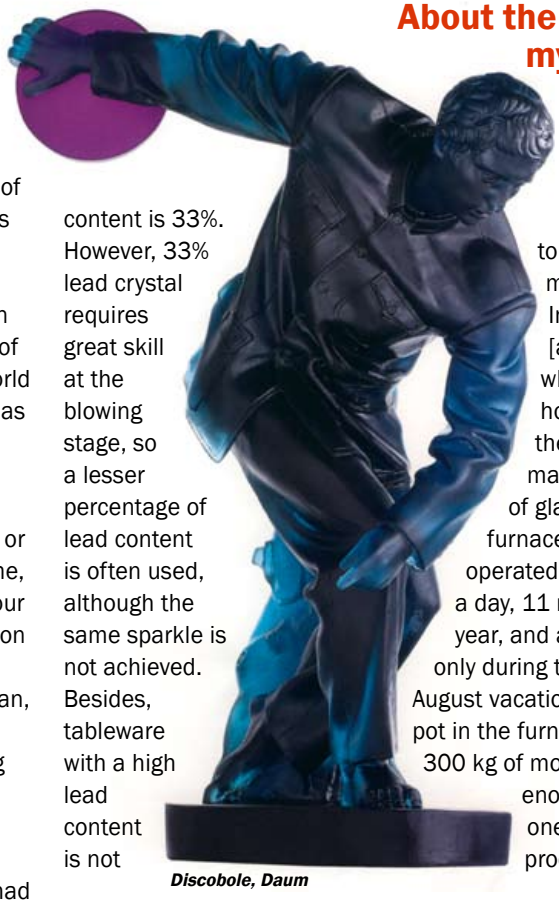
No one knows exactly when or where glass was first made. It has a genesis which has been long and difficult. Evidently, it originated in Mesopotamia, as far back as the 3rd century BC. By the 1st century, glass blowing revolutionised glass production. Blown glass drinking vessels, the oldest glass form in civilisation, have been shown in depictions of Da Vinci's 'The Last Supper' and other dinner scenes. But before 1850, crystal utensils were

Toucan, Swarovski

About the intense colours and myriad subtle shades of Daum, Vinod Talreja of L'Artiste, Mumbai says, "with colour, there is life."

used mostly by royal families, as glass was rare and expensive to make. Founders of many of today's top crystal makers used to serve royalty, by designing and making crystal dishware and even exotic furniture. The Hall of Mirrors at Versailles is world famous, and our Maharajas were not far behind with their *sheesh mahals*. Today, apart from being a pendant round your neck or a decoration for your home, crystal is also a part of your cell phone and the cover on your watch.

In 1676, an Englishman, George Ravenscroft, discovered that by adding lead oxide to the silica component, a far more brilliant, sparkling glass could be produced than had ever been made before. Lead crystal had now been born. Besides its higher refractive index, lead crystal was also softer than regular glass, making it easier to cut. The maximum lead content is 33%. However, 33% lead crystal requires great skill at the blowing stage, so a lesser percentage of lead content is often used, although the same sparkle is not achieved. Besides, tableware with a high lead content is not considered safe to hold food or drink. Waterford from Ireland has been manufacturing superior lead crystal and its chandeliers hang in Westminster Abbey, Windsor Castle and Kennedy Centre.



Discobole, Daum

All Venetian glass is soda glass, whereas Bavarian glass and lead crystal have a potassium base. Soda glass solidifies slowly, allowing the long process of hand-working. Even so, it needs to be reheated in the furnace every 4 -5 minutes, to maintain malleability. In Murano, [an island which houses all the Venetian manufacturers of glass] furnaces are operated 24 hours a day, 11 months a year, and are closed only during the annual August vacation. Each pot in the furnace holds 300 kg of molten glass, enough for one day's production.

Elephant head, Daum

A CUT ABOVE

The art of glass sculpture is a new and dramatic step in the history of glass. Moulded, pressed and engraved glass figures, such as those produced by the French houses of Daum, Lalique and Galle were a hallmark of the Art Nouveau and Art Deco styles. The Bauhaus influence in Europe also left its stamp on glass works, and masters such as Barbini and Seguso on Murano revolutionised the glass industry by applying the fluidity and freedom of blown glass to large, heavy solid pieces. While Lalique concentrated mainly on colourless, frosted glass, Daum chose to take the high road of colour in its satin finished crystal, [almost never clear glass] drawing inspiration from Nature, flora and fauna. About the intense colours and myriad subtle shades of Daum, Vinod Talreja of L'Artiste, Mumbai says, "with colour, there is life." Often using the 'lost wax' moulding technique, there is a precision of contours that is impossible to achieve with blown crystal. Lalique and Daum have even created pieces specially for the Indian market, based on religious themes.

Baccarat, also from France, have often reinterpreted the classics with impertinence, and have made furniture, jewellery, tableware, chandeliers and perfume bottles for a discerning clientele.

Rosin, a Venetian master glass worker, in a

Papavero Rosso, Venini, Murano

Dorora, Swarovski

remarkable understanding of the zeitgeist, has recreated the works of Picasso, Chagall, Jean Cocteau and Le Corbusier in glass. This was challenging, he says, because these artists never gave any thought to the difficulties of interpreting and recreating their works in a medium such as glass. The story goes that the early glass-makers of Murano were not allowed to leave the island, for fear of their skills reaching the outside world. Even today, Venetian glass making is dominated by family run businesses, and Murano performs the function of being a link between the ancient and modern techniques of glass making.

Swarovski from Austria, manufactures a faceted clear crystal which refracts light in brilliant rainbow shades. Imitators don't even come a close second. Aftab Patel, master franchisee, Swarovski [India] says, "it is the technical precision of the facets which contributes to Swarovski's uniqueness." Swarovski is also the innovator of a method of sticking small pieces of crystal together with a special glue, to form flowers, animals, clocks and other pieces. The presence of the brand is felt in sculptures, miniatures, jewellery, eyewear, binoculars, chandeliers and couture [by providing embellishments for the fashion industry].

Butterfly, Swarovski

This diversity is perhaps unparalleled in the field of crystal manufacturing. Their original logo, an edelweiss flower, was changed in 1988 to the swan, now recognized worldwide.

Steuben's [a division of Corning, USA] forte is contemporary pieces, generally in clear or frosted glass, without the use of colour, some of them based on geometrical forms. A few pieces are very large and complex, and of museum quality.

Kosta Boda and Orrefors sculptures from Scandinavia are avant-garde in expression, with some of their pieces having a contagious playfulness. Glass master Engman's fantasy of animals in glass captivate the child within, and Bertil Vallien's mysterious heads, well known to collectors, are represented at the foremost museums in USA, Europe and Japan.

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Cheval harnaché, Daum

DEFT HANDLING

The plastic and chromatic properties of glass make it an ideal sculptural material. Besides, glass is permanent – barring breakage or re-melting, glass lasts forever. It does not oxidize, rot, decay, or decompose. Its transparency allows the incorporation of light itself as a sculptural element. The turbulence of material allows the sculptor artist to

work visually with light and form.

Working in glass is hard, heavy and hot. It combines the physical strength necessary to lift upto 20kg of glass on the end of a long rod, with the delicate manual dexterity of the sculptor. The hot glass is gathered and worked at the end of a long rod which must be constantly rotated even during the sculpting itself, so that the piece does not slump and lose its shape. This explains why there are almost no women in glass making.

Inspite of the utmost care in production, many pieces break during the long cooling process of annealing, or must be discarded because of cracks and flaws. As for the world of 'techniques' employed at each stage of manufacture and finishing, the descriptions can be endless. It is like wanting to take all the letters of the alphabet and put together all their innumerable possibilities of combination. A piece which may seem like a serendipitous accident, the trained eye of the connoisseur recognises as the product of many years of experimentation and complex teamwork. Very often, the price of a piece of crystal is dictated by the complexity of the techniques that have gone into its making, and the skill of the glass master in executing them. This, in addition to the more obvious considerations of brand, quality, and numbered or limited edition pieces.

As any master glass master will testify, there is an ineluctable rite of passage to working in glass – the tongues of flame licking the furnace, the magma of glowing molten glass, all contribute towards a surreal experience. Glass is mutable, unpredictably protean and difficult to tame. But for all its fragility, it is extraordinarily suited to animating the most audacious creative impulses. Frozen in the instance of its mutation, glass is stretched to the limits of the possible in the hands of a master artisan. But it is a capricious material, whose rules no one knows completely. There is an irrational aspect to it. Dashes of colour change shape. Stripes become irregular. The creator and creation have to unite in an extension of the artists will.

Venini, Murano

Monofiore Opalini, Venini, Murano