The scented harmony of Lalique

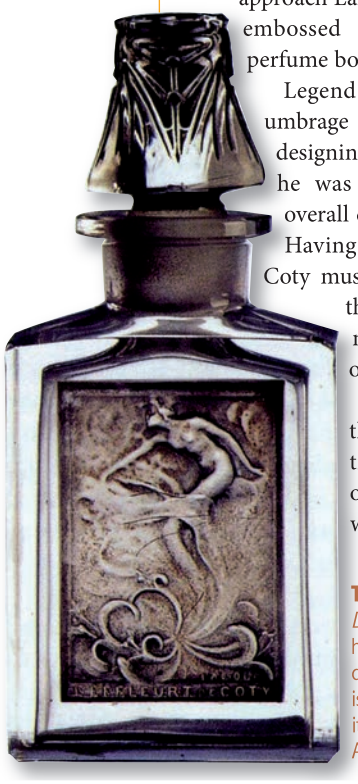
Rene Lalique developed a fascination with the decorative possibilities of glass during the 1880s, whilst engaged in a career that eventually led him to be recognised as France's premier jewellery designer. By specialist expert Eric Knowles.

Give a woman the best product you can compound. Present it in a container of simple, but impeccable taste, charge a reasonable price for it, and a great business will arise such as the world has never seen - the philosophy of François Coty.

After his much-lauded success at the Paris Exposition in 1900, Lalique's interest in jewellery began to fade in the face of the growing number of jewellery concerns that began to emulate his distinctive mix of sculptural and organic forms. Certainly by 1905 he is known to have been designing and retailing decorative bottles, flasks and drinking glasses from his Place Vendome premises.

Two years later, further impetus was provided by an equally celebrated neighbour whose influence was to see Lalique totally immersed in the role of glass designer. That neighbour was François Coty.

Christened Francisco Giuseppe Spoturno in his native Corsica, François Coty had established his House of Coty perfume shop at 23 Place Vendome the previous year, but in 1907 he decided to approach Lalique and ask him to design the embossed gilt paper labels for his perfume bottles.



Legend has it that Lalique took umbrage at being restricted to merely designing such labels, and insisted that he was given responsibility for the overall design of both bottle and label. Having conceded to his demands, Coty must in later years have reflected that this was probably one of the most important decisions of his own career.

Lalique's initial problem was that of production, having at the time no commercial glassworks of his own. The earliest bottles were made by Legras et Cie at their St Denis glassworks in Paris.

These early creations differ significantly from those eventually produced at Lalique's first commercial glassworks at Combs la Ville, which was set up two years later in 1909.

The difference was in the proportion of lead oxide added to the glass mix. Legras incorporated 24%, thereby producing a full lead crystal, whereas Lalique preferred to use 12% to achieve a demi-crystal. This preference was largely due to demi-crystal proving a superior material in allowing for both intricate moulding and a pleasing pale grey hue – full lead crystal offered a much brighter and whiter appearance.

For generations, perfume had been purchased in simple utilitarian flasks and then decanted into the customer's own individual perfume bottle fashioned in glass, porcelain or metal. Purchasing perfume in a ready-made stylish glass bottle did away with the awkward business of pouring the

Top: *Dans la Nuit* for Worth, clear with matt blue staining, designed 1924 (height 14cm). *Dans la Nuit* was the first fragrance launched by Worth, which was the one of the first couture houses to extend its name to luxury perfume. **Above:** *Vers le Jour* for Worth, in toned amber designed in 1926, the year after the fresh and floral fragrance was introduced. This example is 7.5cm high. **Left:** *L'Effleur* bottle designed for Coty in 1908 (height 11cm). The perfume itself, which features floral notes, was launched in 1907. **Right:** *Bouchon Fleurs de Pommier.* A Maison Lalique bottle in clear with blue staining, designed 1919 (height 14cm).

The scented harmony of Lalique cont.

Paquerettes for Roger et Gallet, c.1910 (height 9cm). This style of perfume bottle proved an inspiration for The Macallan Highland Scotch Whisky – the company released a series of Lalique limited edition decanters in 2005 for their 55-year-old single malt whisky.

Cigalia for Roger et Gallet, with the original pressed wooden box presentation. The fragrance was introduced c.1910, and the bottle was designed in 1911.

"A perfume is an intimate object, it is the reflector of the heart."
Emanuel Ungaro

liquid into the bottle through a tiny funnel, and the concept met with near instant approval and a positive uptake.

The collaboration between these two giants of French luxury retail trade proved a huge success, even though Lalique's initial designs were hardly ground-breaking material, making use as they did of clear panel form bottles with the decorative elements restricted to the moulded and frosted stoppers.

Lalique was to eventually design 16 individual perfume bottles for Coty, alongside promotional pieces, advertising signs and tester boxes. It should be stressed however that most, but by no means all, Coty fragrances were packaged in Lalique glass bottles, and one design might be used to retail as many as a dozen essences, each identifiable by their respective embossed paper labels.

The rectangular polished wood tester boxes destined for the shop counters of accredited retailers were usually fitted with relatively simple bottles. Most were made to house a dozen bottles, with the hinged cover and interior applied with an embossed gilt metal plaque. Such plaques featured three typical willowy nude maidens, each holding a small vessel out of which emanated cloud-like vapours that spelled out 'Le Parfums de Coty'. Lalique's signature is visible in the bottom right corner.

Lalique decided to purchase the Combs la Ville glassworks in 1910, having initially rented the site. The factory was situated near Fontainebleau and some 36 miles east of Paris, in an area that boasted high quality silica in the form of sand. The region had attracted glassmakers for several hundred years.

Nicholas Dawes, in his pioneering book *Lalique Glass* – published by Crown in New York in 1986 – suggests that this initial operation probably had a workforce of between 50 and 100 people engaged in manufacturing techniques that borrowed much from the making of wine and pharmaceutical bottles.

Lalique employed two principal methods of production: '*presse soufflé*', where the molten glass is blown by mouth or mechanical means into a twin-section hinged mould; and '*aspire soufflé*', where the same glass is sucked into a mould, thereby creating a vacuum inside.

Never shy to embrace technological advances, Lalique decided to adopt enduring hinged steel moulds. Although initially expensive, such moulds were able to deliver superior numbers of bottles and stoppers, allowing for fine detail and crisp definition. These early perfumes often had such detail further enhanced by the use of coloured 'patine' or staining, a decorative technique that was used to great effect in his rapidly expanding catalogue.

Stoppers were solid cast in half section moulds before being ground with a textured surface that acted as a watertight seal once inserted into a neck with a similarly ground inner surface. It was then common practice for both the stopper and the base of the bottle to be hand engraved, with matching control numbers making later marriages and replacements easier to identify. The choice of each stopper design for any bottle was of paramount importance to Lalique, with some examples displaying integral elongated droppers.

Coty is known to have commissioned Lalique to design 16 individual perfume bottles, and these early commissions –produced between 1909 and 1915 – are keenly sought by collectors as they are regarded as being amongst the finest, and consequently the most desirable, of all Lalique's commercial perfume bottles.

Topping the wish list of many a perfume bottle collector might be *Le Effleurt de Coty* (The Caress of Coty) which was produced from 1908 until 1910. Here Lalique makes use of an upright rectangular panel offering an Art Nouveau image by enclosing a sinuous nymph emerging from a honeysuckle-type flower head, all above an integral moulded label.

The panel and its somewhat incongruous stopper, which is moulded as opposing cicadas, are both patinated in either a grey or sepia brown stain, with the bottle itself polished clear. Should the emphasis of this bottle be considered overtly sensual and fantastical in its play on the female form, Lalique's design for Coty's *Ambre Antique*, created in 1910, is unquestionably classical and sober.

In this design he has taken a slender, near bullet form with narrow neck and everted top rim and depress moulded it with four slender maidens attired in floor-length robes with their hair gathered 'en chignon', whilst holding small sprigs of blossom.

The Romano-Greek figures and the stylised floral stopper are emphasised and delineated, usually with a sepia brown stain against an overall satin frosted surface. Lalique's intaglio moulded signature in bold capital letters is incorporated beneath the feet of one of the women.

He was to revisit his enduring fascination with all things mystical by offering a truly beautiful design for Coty's *Cyclamen* essence.

Having chosen a slender, tapering panel form bottle, he intaglio moulded it with four fairies below each shoulder, their elongated wings falling

towards the base. Each fairy is well defined, often using a green stain, whilst the stopper was in the form of a simple disc moulded with 'Cyclamen, Coty, Paris'. Three slightly differing versions are known to have been made, with the second featuring a plain stopper and the third being given a much narrower collar neck whilst retaining the initial stopper.

That same year – 1910 – witnessed the introduction of one of Lalique's earliest coloured glass perfume bottles. *Au Coeur des Calices* was fashioned in blue glass and modelled as a stylised flower head of squat circular form, incise moulded with the integral label and fitted with a stopper shaped in the form of a bumblebee.

'The heart of the calyx' refers to that part of a flower head or plant from which perfumers are able to extract the essential oils needed in the construction of a complex essence.

The collaboration between Lalique and his neighbour resulted in a dramatic increase in sales for Coty, and consequently prompted other prominent perfume manufacturers to approach Lalique to commission similar bottles for their own range of essences.

As early as 1910 he had produced a remarkable bottle in three sizes for Roger et Gallet's *Cigalia*. Modelled as a clear and frosted upright panel form bottle moulded on all four shoulders with a cicada beetle and a simple leaf form stopper, the ensemble was retailed in an embossed and shaped wooden presentation box featuring a pair of the same insects heightened in silver wash and flanking the integral label, 'Cigalia, Roger et Gallet, Paris.'

The use of stylish presentation boxes as an effective marketing tool became a fundamentally important selling factor for Lalique, and was never a secondary consideration.

In 1910 Lalique also designed his first bottle in which the stopper provided the primary decorative element. *Paquerettes* makes use of a simple clear bottle of relatively squat and shouldered form, and a frosted and clear stopper of crescent or 'tiara' shape moulded with a sunray spray of daisy flower heads on slender stems, all to stunning effect.

Roger et Gallet continued to commission bottles until 1922, when the revived taste in all things oriental once again began to infiltrate western design. Such influences are readily recognised in *Le Jade*, which saw Lalique adopt not only a Chinese snuff bottle shape, but also the use of an opalescent jade green glass detailed with an exotic bird. His choice of presentation box echoed the same oriental exoticsm; covered in black silk, the drop over cover resembled a Japanese Inro.

Early commissions also came from Arys, Rosine and D'Orsay. Introduced in 1913, Lalique's *Ambre D'Orsay* bottle was produced in polished black glass and of tapering panel form. An uneasy sense of the macabre is hinted by the use of a shrouded figure at each corner, lifted by the square section stopper incised with a floral design.

Lalique was wise to the fact that the expanding market for perfume bottles need not be restricted to his perfume industry clientele, and he soon set about designing an '*in house*' or '*maison Lalique*' range to be sold without any content direct to an international public. In so doing, the buyer could then fill the bottle with their preferred essence.

Certainly by 1932, Lalique's celebrated illustrated trade catalogue featured no less than seventy-eight examples of such bottles. His sculptural flair is evident in most, but especially so in those that make use of tiara or horseshoe form stoppers such as *Bouchon Fleurs de Pommier*, introduced in 1919. By the arrival of the 1930s, his '*maison*' bottles continued to favour strong floral elements that appear to be in direct contrast with many of his corporate commissions. Nowhere is this more evident than in the shapes commissioned by Worth for such essences as *Sans Adieu, Vers le Jour* and *Imprudence.*

The decision to adopt relatively radical minimalist forms devoid of any ornamentation reflected the growing demand for the 'Moderne' approach to design, championed not only in France but also in Germany, with the ideals propagated by the Bauhaus.

His ability to offer his clients cutting-edge design demonstrated that Lalique was able to respond to the shifting winds of artistic taste, whilst never compromising the individuality that forever sets him apart from most of his contemporaries.

Cyclamen for Coty, designed 1913 with moulded button stopper, gilt paper label and original presentation box. The fragrance was introduced in 1908.

Lalique by Eric Knowles has just been released by Shire Books. A paperback of 128 pages, the book celebrates the extraordinary jewellery and glass of Rene Lalique, and the glass of the Lalique company up to the present day. It's available from Shire Books – **www.shirebooks.co.uk**

Ambre D'Orsay, a polished black and white stained bottle designed in 1911, the same year that the scent was launched (height 13cm). D'Orsay was a major marketer of perfumes that were promoted as much for their image as their fragrance.

The Romans used fragrant oils every time they bathed, which was typically three times a day. They perfumed their dogs and horses, and at Roman feasts it was fashionable to put perfume on the wings of birds and release them, so the fragrance would be dispersed as the birds flew around the room. They also perfumed their furniture, an act that was revived by the French in the 17th century