

crosslines



raise a glass

Here's to Bernard Pictet, glasswork's reigning innovator

OFTEN DISMISSED AS FRAGILE OR BRITTLE, GLASS IS actually capable of great strength and versatility. At least in the hands of Paris-based Bernard Pictet. Ateliers Bernard Pictet has achieved recognition for novel techniques—usually associated with woodwork or metalwork—and their equally novel results. Besides running fluid and electric current through glass, Pictet has succeeded in strengthening it to astonishing levels. Still skeptical? Just ask architects Jean Nouvel and Peter Marino, designers Yves Taralon and Patrick Jouin, or artist Giulio Paolini.

How did you enter the glass business?

Back in 1976, during my first year at law school, I had a decorator friend. He knew an elderly man with a glass atelier, which he was selling. I'd always wanted my own business, but I'd never felt a particular attraction toward glass until I set foot inside that workshop. Straight away, I could sense that glass was an untapped medium.

In what way?

Glass is the most chameleonlike of substances. It can adopt any appearance and fulfill any function. Furthermore, each type of glass has its own properties. Leaded glass protects against radiation and other dangerous rays. Heat-resistant borosilicate glass is good for neon signage and oven-proof dishes. Surgeons use glass substrate to coat artificial joints.

Over the past 20 years, what developments have been most significant?

The major change has been the development of glass as a structural element. Glass used to be perceived simply as something to fill holes. Then, in the '80s, people like the Irish engineer Peter Rice

started making self-supporting walls of glass, as at his greenhouses in the Parc de la Villette in Paris. It's interesting to note that glass is now capable of supporting over 25,000 pounds per square yard.

What are the limitations?

The major problem was always thickness. This is due to the annealing process. For a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch sheet, it takes an hour or two. For a telescope lens that's 27 inches thick, you need two years!

Then how do you produce such thick slabs of glass?

We came up with a method involving ultraviolet glue. After invisibly sticking together numerous sheets to create a large block, we use sandblasting techniques to sculpt the glass into any form a designer could dream of. For a palace in Riyadh, we recently made a table whose legs are 16 inches thick.

What are some of your other innovations?

I've been developing glass as a medium for fluid and electricity. Before, everyone passed wires and pipes through wood, metal, and stone. Nobody thought of doing the same with glass. It was such virgin territory, in fact, that I managed to register a patent for something that's as easy as pie. You take two sheets of glass and hollow out a channel in both. You glue them together—presto, you have a hole that runs through the middle.

How would you describe your collaboration with architects and designers?

For me, they're like composers. I interpret their music.

Do you specialize?

Our commissions are mainly corporate. We created the reception desk for Elizabeth Arden's office in the suburb of Neuilly. For a Paris company, we came up with a radar security door with access limited to card holders. It was one of the first uses of glass as a vector for electronics. The architect Odile



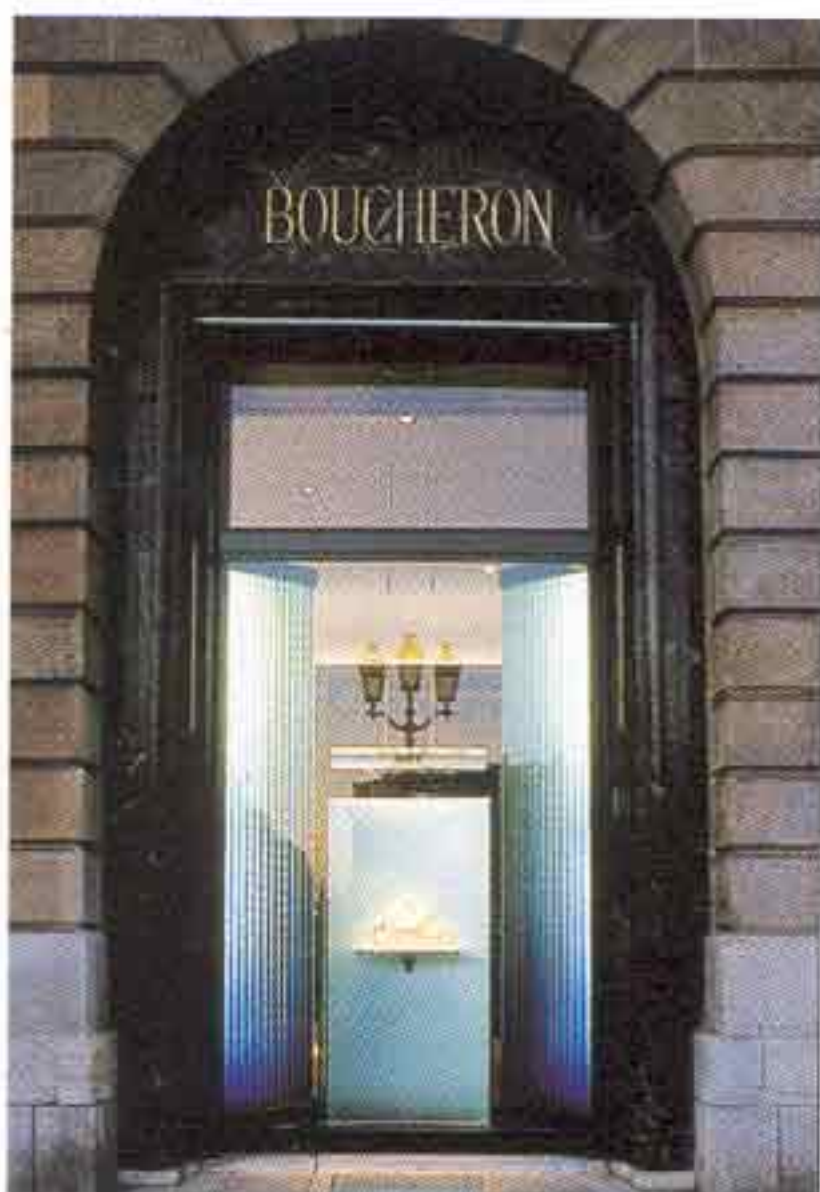
Decq also hired us to devise telephone booths for UN-ESCO. The phone cables pass through the glass beams from which the booths are suspended.

You've worked on numerous boutiques, too.

Yes. For Boucheron's windows on the Place Vendôme, we did the glass "cushions" on which the jewels are displayed. We've worked several times with Peter Marino, most notably on tabletops for Chanel, and we've just received a mural commission for the Rue Cambon flagship. Furthermore, we fabricate up to 40 chandeliers for Cartier each year.

You also collaborate with fine artists.

Indeed. For Jean-Charles Blais, we made a 3,200-square-foot glass "fresco" for the Pôle Universitaire Léonard de Vinci. For Giulio Paolini, we produced 48 glass cubes as part of an installation for the Palais des Beaux-Arts in Lille.



Which project are you most proud of?

I'm really happy with the entrance of the Louis Vuitton headquarters in Paris. Instead of wooden beams on the ceiling, you have 36-foot glass beams. Normally, these would be held in place by exterior stainless-steel supports, but for the first time ever I placed them inside, so electricity can flow through. The beams are also lit by interior fiber optics. It's quite a technical exploit.

What makes you smile?

A New York millionaire with a glass bathtub. Peter Marino just asked me to make one.

—Ian Phillips

Opposite, clockwise from center: The glass master at Valorisation de l'Innovation Dans l'Ameublement, a Paris design center. A screen-printed laminated-glass table that he fabricated for Christian Ghion and Patrick Nadeau's joint exhibition at VIA. A screen for the same exhibition. A glass fountain for Sylvain Dubuisson. Mikimoto's ultraviolet-glued display fixture, to be lit from below by fiber optics. Part of a carved-stalactite partition for Philippe Starck's Taschen bookstore in Los Angeles.

From left: For a corporation in Paris, Bernard Pictet fabricated 2,200-pound security doors of glass and oxidized copper. His small glass "cushions" appear in Boucheron's windows on the city's Place Vendôme.