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The Etablissements Gallé during the 1920s



View of the glass furnace workshop in the Etablissements Galle, undated photograph. Courtesy Private Collection

The last period of the Etablissements Gallé, from his widow Henriette's death in 1914 to the clearance sale of the ateliers in 1936, was paradoxically the most productive and commercially successful, and yet it is the least known. This period is usually dismissed with the suggestion that the Etablissements Gallé perfected the simplest and most cost-effective techniques practiced by Emile Gallé, while giving up on his more ambitious experiments and failing to rejuvenate their line of products with inspired new designs. This summary fails to account for several significant innovations or for the introduction of new designs reflecting evolutions in taste.

The so called "mold-blown" series of vases and lamps from the 1920s is one such initiative: the Elephants, the Arum vases, the Rhododendrons or Cherries lamps are well known models in this technique, in which the glass was blown with compressed air inside an engraved mold. They were introduced by Paul Perdrizet, one of Emile Gallé's sons-in-law, who became the Director of the ateliers in 1914. He was enticed by a new technology promising long-term financial gain at the cost of short-term investment. Although the initial cost of the cast-iron molds was high, the theoretically limitless number of pieces they could produce was a strong incentive. He was also spurred in adopting this technique by the strong success of René Lalique, whom he regarded as a direct rival.

The *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, held in Paris in 1925 was the likely incentive for the Etablissements Gallé to introduce these new mold-blown designs, although there are no known details regarding their participation in the exhibition. Jean Bourgogne, Gallé's grandson and heir, groomed to become the next Director of the ateliers, left extensive notes about his apprenticeship. Writing in



View of the packing room at the Etablissements Gallé, late 1920s, including a white mold-blown 'Elephants' vase on a shelf (n° 1) and, on the table, a 'Plum' mold-blown vase (n° 2). Courtesy Private Collection.

1926, he remarks that the “[cast-iron] molds with relief have been recently in use to produce the large relief pieces such as the oranges, the apples, the elephants and the crabs series, and so on.” This important testimony, which gives also the official generic name of these series, the “vases à reliefs,” is indirectly confirmed by other sources. In his 1974 memoirs as a worker in the Etablissements Gallé, René Dézavelle, placed their creation around 1925.

Another clue in this regard is the proposed 1925 dating of the Elephants model, which is very unusual among the “relief” vases. Large animal-themed designs are a rare instance among the Gallé late glass series. Putting aside the traditional animals depicted on vases and lamps (usually fish, insects and small birds), certain, if not all of the others, can be explained as having a symbolic meaning, linked to topical events. Such is the case of the Seagull and the Polar Bear vases, two models similar in shape and materials (white and translucent crystal) and closely contemporaneous.

The author of these new designs was almost certainly Auguste Herbst, the Artistic Director of the ateliers since 1919. He was the last remaining member of the talented team of artists gathered by Emile Gallé in the 1890s, and thus responsible for most of the larger pieces of the 1920s, such as the Elephants, the Polar Bears, the Seagull (for which he is credited in the press) and probably the earlier mold-blown fruits and floral series.

The creation of the mold-blown series, in 1925, depended on the introduction in the Gallé ateliers of mechanical blowing and the generalization of cast-iron molds. Mechanical glassblowing was invented in 1882 to allow the blowing of larger pieces than was normally possible for a man and to lower the health hazard resulting from this activity. A nozzle connected by a flexible tube to tanks of compressed air filled by compressors was adapted to the blowing iron. For mold blowing, the gaffer had to stand in an elevated position, on a stool or a platform, above the assistant closing the articulated mold around the parison. The gaffer would thus work the iron on a vertical axis, and simply inserted the nozzle into the end of the vertical tube, thus



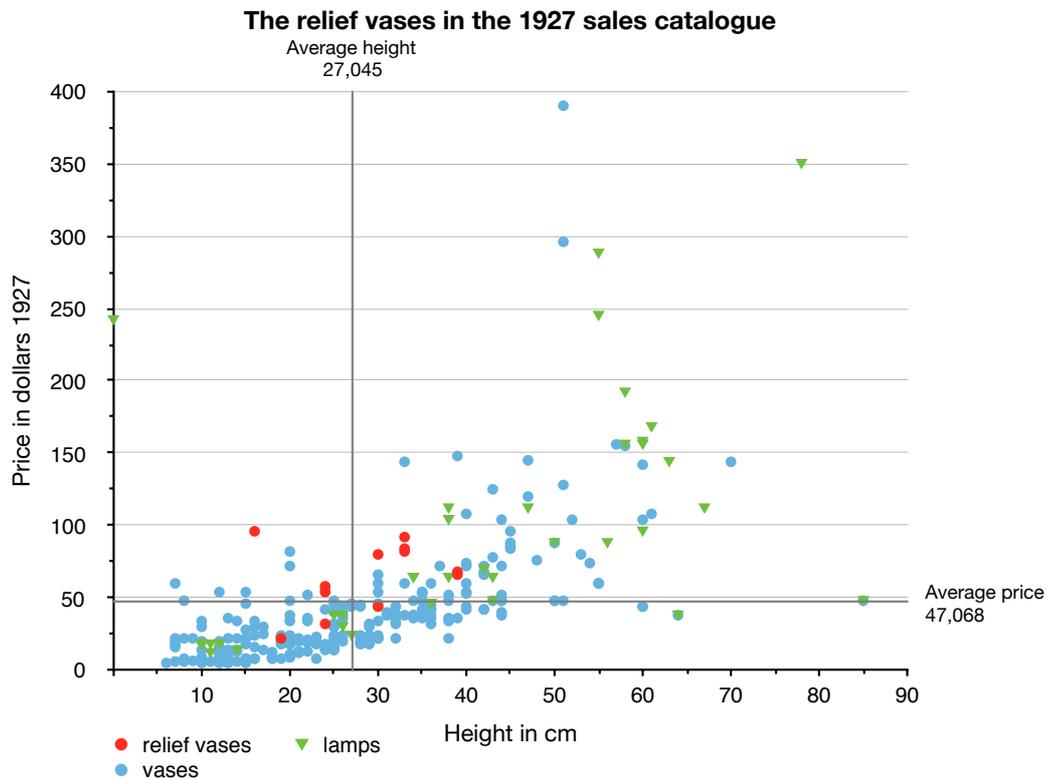
The sequence in the creation of a mold-blown glass vessel: (1). the gafer lowers the paraison of molten glass into the mold by means of a vertical rod attached to a mechanical blowing system; (2). the mold is closed by his assistant and the glass expanded by means of compressed air pumped down the rod; (3). the completed glass vessel is removed from the mold.

pushing a spring releasing the compressed air. This simple system allowed a fast switch between mouth and mechanical blowing while working on a large piece or a relief vase, countering any concern with the lack of flexibility associated with mechanical blowing. According to Jean Bourgoigne, in 1926, only one of the six glassblowers' seats was rigged with a mechanical blowing system. Significantly, the lone equipped seat was that of Julien Roiseux, the most senior and the most talented glassblower, employed since Emile Gallé's time and the one trusted with the largest and most difficult pieces.

In Emile Gallé's time already, the glassblowers were using molds for all the extended series. These were made from wood in a special workshop; they had a limited lifespan and could produce typically from 50 to 200 pieces. They still continued to be the most frequently used after the war. But even in the 1900s, the need for more durable molds led to the making of metal molds, mainly from cast iron. They were expensive as they had to be commissioned from a foundry in Paris. The commercial choice to favor large production series after 1904 led to their increased use. In the 1920s, the Gallé ateliers had a vast assortment of them, in different sizes, for closed shapes such as vases or bottles, as well as for open shapes, such as cups, candy boxes, ashtrays and so on. They were usually made from two or three articulated parts, fitted with handles to open and close them. Only the smaller objects came from a single- part mold. Another major difference was between the molds for rounded pieces and those for angular or irregular shapes (square, polygonal and such): for the former, the glassblower was able to turn the glass inside the molds, whose inner face was coated with powdered coal. This gave the glass a very smooth surface as well as a more brilliant aspect. For the latter, there was no rotation possible and the air pressure needed from the blowing was greater to fill in the mold.

The innovation around 1925 came thus from the new kind of sculpted molds employed to produce the "relief" vases or lamps, as they were known. As the name implies, the new technique allowed the blown piece to acquire an intricate decorative design from the mold itself, whose inner surface had been cast with the negative of the desired motifs. These had been first modelled in plaster, to be sent to the Parisian foundry that made the molds. What set apart the Etablissements Gallé relief vases from the mold-blown series by other manufacturers such as Lalique was the use of multicolor, multilayered crystal. In fact, these vases or lamps were traditional

Gallé series but with the added feature of a higher relief than was allowed by simple acid etching. The mold was the only change in the making of these new pieces: the parison was of the same type and the initial blowing to shape was still made by mouth, before its introduction into the mold. Then, only compressed air was used to fully expand the glass inside the mold. After the piece had cooled, the decorative design was completed with acid etching as before. The technical innovation was minimal but the combination of the high relief allowed by the engraved molds and the traditional cameo engraving and blending of the colors achieved by acid etching could produce some rather spectacular results. These pieces still resembled the popular established Gallé series but with the benefit of the shaped features on the surface catching the light. To achieve a maximum effect from the relief, the motifs used were mainly chosen among fruit-bearing trees, with plums, apples, oranges, cherries the clear favorites. There were a few floral designs (clematis, rhododendron, tulip, and crocus), some sea shells, the famous elephants of course, but no landscapes. The range of decorative themes used for these vases and lamps was clearly restricted to those designed to benefit from the high relief.



The difficulty and thus the high cost of making the relief molds pushed the Gallé direction to limit this technique to medium- sized objects (both lamps and vases), which were nevertheless costlier than conventional pieces of similar size. Prices on the Etablissements Gallé series album from 1927, most certainly used as a sales catalogue, now in the Rakow Library (Corning Museum of Glass), show that, while “relief” vases were not the most expensive items available, they were well on the higher end of the price range. Of 355 different items listed in the 1927 catalogue, 266 are vases of all shapes and sizes, but only 13 are “relief” vases, all medium sized or just above the average. Even if all the known “relief” series are not pictured, the impression of a limited production suggested by this catalogue is well confirmed by other sources: the now incomplete sales catalogue of the main salesman Pierre Perdrizet leads to the same conclusion, as do auction catalogues and the few museum collections that include such works.

Assessing the total number of “relief” pieces produced is an impossible task, given the lack of sales records. According to Dézavelle, the larger vases were produced in no more than 10 to 12 examples, while the smaller objects, such as candy boxes and small vases, were made in series of 20 to 30. This latter figure seems very conservative, but the former is certainly possible for the most prestigious pieces. To summarize, the high cost of the cast-iron molds, the limited use of compressed air in the ateliers, and the

relatively small range of designs that took advantage of this new technique were probably the main factors restricting the production of the “relief” pieces. Another was the rather short period through which the technique was exploited, less than six years, from late 1925 to 1930, compared to the common floral or landscape series, some of which were produced during ten to fifteen years, and maybe longer. This was a spectacular attempt to modernize the Gallé product line, by borrowing a popular technique from contemporary industrial glass production, while respecting the motifs and style associated with the Gallé name, but it was too little too late. It is perhaps telling that the last large prestige pieces produced by the Etablissements Gallé are not “relief” vases: the Seagull and the Polar Bears, designed around 1927, did not reprise this technique, probably for cost related reasons or because the “relief” vases had not met the commercial expectations of the direction.

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