THE MANUAL OF MODERN LUXURY

Robb Report

THE DESIGN ISSUE

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HOW IT WORKS

The king of Bohemian crystal

***Robb Report* goes behind the scenes with Vlastimil Beránek, maker of the world's most exquisite glass sculptures**

No one does crystal like the Czechs. The chandeliers you'll find in the Hall of Mirrors in the Palace of Versailles, in Milan's Palazzo Serbelloni or Istanbul's Dolmabahçe Palace are all made from Bohemian crystal – and they're the same kind that you'll now find on many of today's superyachts.

Since the 1940s, the Beránek family's crystal sculptures have been among Bohemia's most sought-after treasures. Their atelier was born in defiance of the

This piece, called – perhaps unsurprisingly – *Screw*, weighs 200kg and stands at 2.25m in height including its plinth

Nazi regime, which had all but eradicated glass production in what was then Czechoslovakia. They used peat for fuel and recycled glass bottles as raw material. These days the process is more conventional: melting clean sand to form molten glass and mixing it with lead oxide – the more lead, the more the crystal sparkles.

Vlastimil is a third generation Beránek glassworker and part of the new school of crystal sculpture that has taken the art form to new heights. It's the combination of simplicity, striking colour and sheer size in his work that's put him at the forefront of this unique discipline. His pieces can weigh up to 300kg, sometimes topping 2m, and his latest – a series of seven *Custodians*, the first of which is currently in the kiln – will each have a €2m asking price. 'I've spent my life simplifying my designs to embrace elementary shapes,' says Beránek. 'The sculpture *Smoke*, for example, evokes the last wisp of smoke that appears when you extinguish a match.'

Marek Landa, founder of Crystal Caviar, represents more than 70 leading crystal artists, including Beránek. 'It's a niche but prospering market,' he says. 'Sculptures are often collected as investments. Some of Beránek's pieces, for example, are selling for 10 times what they were bought for three years ago.' **Alex Moore**

The Chameleon (right) is 45cm in diameter, making it one of Beránek's smallest pieces. The work weighs 100kg and sells for £160,000

DESIGNING THE MODEL

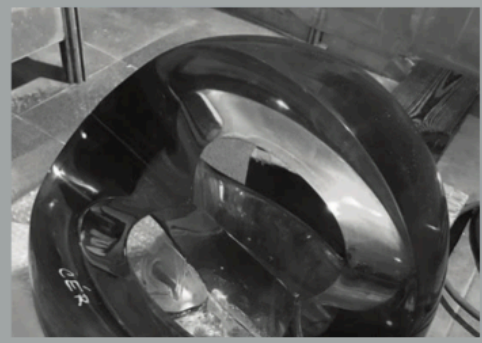
Beránek's first models are miniature versions made from clay, allowing him to tweak the design from the original sketch. Once he's happy with the shape, he makes a scale model using resin or wood (he also makes sculptures using 30-year-old Russian walnut)

MAKING THE MOULD

Using the full-scale model he makes a mould from gypsum, silica and ground marble, and fills it with half-globes of raw material (Bohemian crystal, coloured using different metal ions). Crystal jewellery is usually made from around 48 per cent lead oxide to give it its shine, but Beránek's sculptures have around 24 per cent; he sacrifices shine but halves the weight

THE FIRING PROCESS

The mould is put in the oven and heated to 980°C. Once the crystal has melted, it's left to set at room temperature. For big sculptures this can take up to six months. When the sculpture has cooled the mould is removed and only then can it be checked for cracks and the correct coloration. Sculptures have a success rate of about 70 per cent, largely dependent on the mould not cracking



SANDING AND POLISHING

At this point the sculpture is still dull with a rough surface. Beránek spends hundreds of hours sanding (with diamond grinders) and polishing each piece (with cerium oxide – the same powder used by NASA to polish the lens of the Hubble telescope), until it has reached the desired level of iridescence