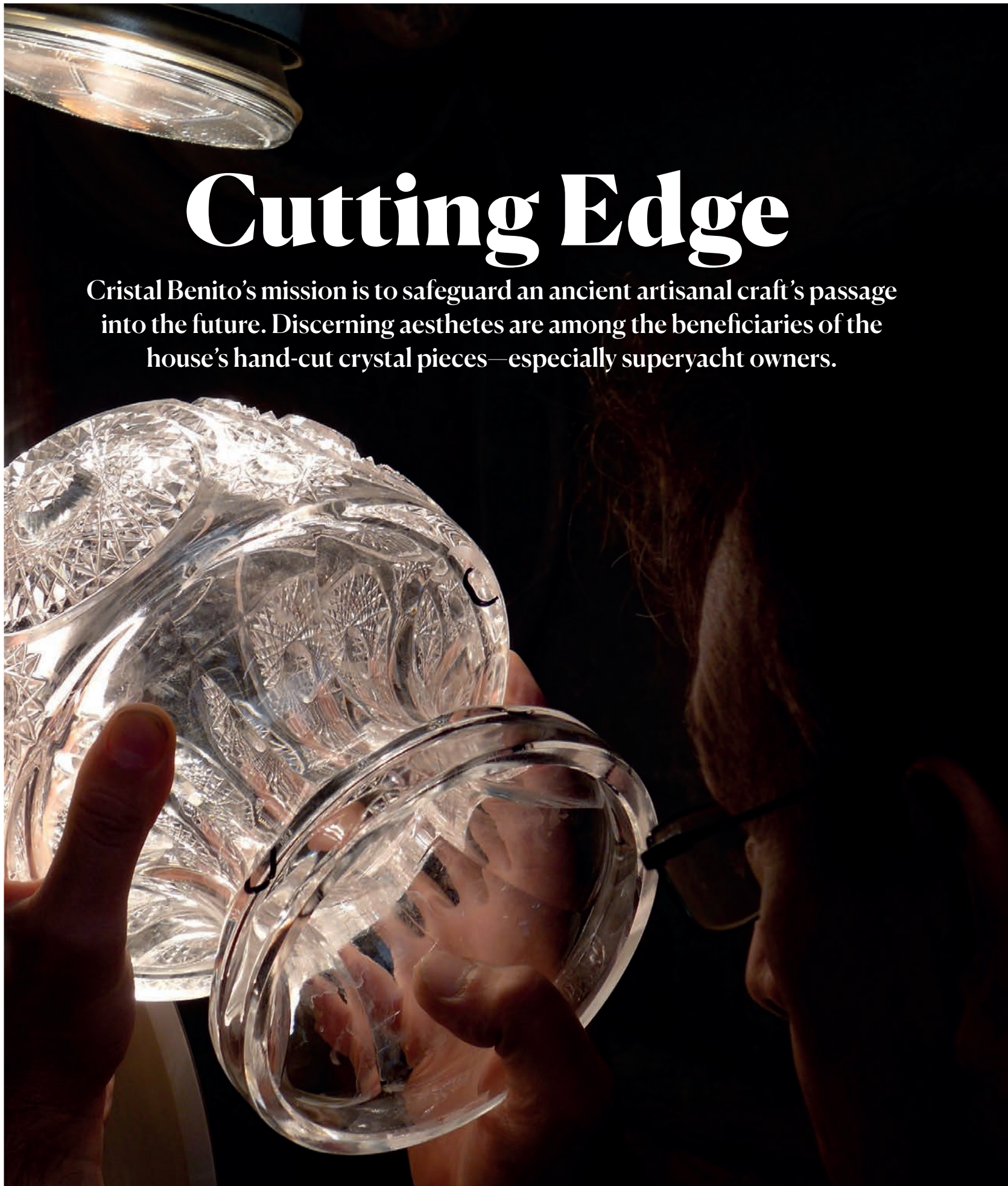


Cutting Edge

Cristal Benito's mission is to safeguard an ancient artisanal craft's passage into the future. Discerning aesthetes are among the beneficiaries of the house's hand-cut crystal pieces—especially superyacht owners.



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We see it in the timeless integrity and heritage of Chopard's haute horology. We see it in the unadulterated creative vision of fashion brands from Tod's to Giorgio Armani to Chanel. We see it in every glimmer and sparkle of jewellery giant Graff's radiant output.

The core values of a family business chime in perfect harmony with the basic tenets of crafting the finest offerings in the world of fine living. And the concept of succession—the idea that artisanal skills, methods, values and philosophies remain purer when passed from parent to offspring—is at the heart of this reality (it's telling that premium brands are so vocal about their "DNA").

There is no better example of this truth than Cristal Benito: a maison which has bequeathed the craft behind hand-cut crystal down three generations since its founding in 1952, but whose story begins a couple of decades earlier when José Benito came to France from his native Spain in 1925 and, alongside his brother, founded a perfume bottle stopper workshop in Colombes, northwest Paris.

José's son Martin was just 14 years old when he displayed a rare talent for crystal cutting whilst serving as an apprentice at a notable Parisian house (the "32 Facet Star" he designed was soon gracing vases, amphoras, planters and candy boxes all over France and beyond). Noting his son's gift, José set up a studio devoted to the craft on the site of the old corking workshop, where activities had been halted by the Second World War, and named it Cristal Frères in honour of his sons.

Crystal—a word which derives from the Greek for "ice"—has beguiled humanity for time immemorial. As well as the Greeks, civilisations including the Mayans, Sumerians and ancient Chinese have employed the material and its derivatives in their rituals. Human fascination with the material lives on: these days, just over seven decades after its founding, the unique pieces created by Cristal Benito are beloved of the world's leading interior designers, and grace the world's most illustrious luxury stores, hotels, palaces—and, in particular, superyachts.

BRUNO FARAT



« OBSIDIAN CORNET BRUSH »
Sconce bronze
Limited edition of 99 pieces
Diameter: 11 cm
Height: 52 cm

The Beauty of Clarity

As well as outstanding artisanal aesthetics, what draws discerning clients to Cristal Benito is the maison's heritage, according to the founder's grandson, director and master of art Franck Benito—who became instantly passionate about the artistic nuances of crystal cutting aged 19, when he joined his father's workshop.

"The identity of our brand has been built up over the course of our history," he tells *Robb Report Monaco & Côte d'Azur*. "It really took off with my father Martin Benito and his collection of decorative objects—vases, jardinières, bonbonnières, Fabergé eggs, and so on—and in particular his very sophisticated cut, the 32 facet Star."

The expression "Standing on the shoulders of giants" springs to mind when it comes to Benito's understanding of, and devotion to, artistic legacy. "Today, my role is to continue the identity that my grandfather began: continuing to create the objects that came from his imagination, and adding my own creations—such as my wall sconces—as well as by adding types of design, size and sculpture to the existing collections such as bamboo effects, honeycomb effects and so on."

For the most discerning consumers of high-end products, a beautiful object's romance, mystique, desirability is also connected to the amount of artisanal ingenuity that has gone into creating it. At Cristal Benito, this ingenuity begins at the drawing-board stage. "I always draw my shapes freehand, as my father did before me," explains Benito. "These shapes are then forwarded to the crystal-maker to be mouth-blown into suitable moulds in the required colours. You need to have a very precise idea of what you want, so that the crystal-maker can shape and cut the object exactly as you wish."

There are many considerations, Benito says, beyond aesthetics: "Crystal that's too thin cannot be cut deep, while crystal that's

too thick will make the piece too heavy and impractical to cut," he says. As such, the drafting stage involves a significant amount of anticipation—of understanding today how a work in progress will behave tomorrow: "If the roughing work—as in the drawing of patterns on the form and the first stage of carving—is unsuccessful or poorly placed on the form, the piece will be thrown away and will have to be remade," he says.

The actual cutting stage, Benito says, is equally demanding—and painstakingly intricate. "Crystal cutting takes a long time to learn, because you have to do it over and over again before you can claim to have truly mastered it," he says. "There are so many combinations you have to master—several kinds of cut and

patterns on several kinds of objects with very different shapes. In addition, you need to be able to hold a heavy object for many hours without losing precision: strength, resistance and delicacy are not always easy to combine, and only tireless practice makes this possible."

Just as a composer must become accomplished at a musical instrument before they can begin weaving magic, the crystal cutter's capacity for innovation—once they have learned the intricacies of their craft—comes off its leash. "With hand-cut crystal, there are no limits to your creativity: you can indulge your imagination, because it's the tool that's adapted to the object, not the other way round," Benito says. "I profile my wheels by hand so that I can cut exactly the patterns



I want—or that which has been requested of me. The hand is no less precise or perfect than the machine; it is, above all, much freer and more flexible."

Of course, the artisanal endeavour does not come to an end when the cutter's work is complete: bronze mounts, silver plating, leather, enamel and straw marquetry are all among the extra treatments which, like the designing and sculpting of the crystal, involve centuries-old tradition and time-honoured skill. "These finishes require working with highly specialised craftsmen, each in their own field," says Benito. "I only work with craftsmen who are highly recognised in their expertise. Our combined expertise enables us to create truly unique and exceptional pieces every time."

The Life Aquatic

Crystal has historically adorned the most lavish settings on the planet—from royal courts to luxury hotels via opulent places of worship and plush seats of government. Increasingly, though, Cristal Benito's wares are adding some vitreous lustre to palaces of the floating variety. "Yacht owners, like owners of fine residences, love exceptional objects and custom-made items created just for them," he says of the specific commissions the brand now receives from the denizens of the world's most exclusive marinas. "As a craftsman dedicated to luxury items, I'm

used to responding to very specific requests, each one adapted to a particular interior style. Crystal and glass are materials whose transparency and colours are reminiscent of the sea, making them a natural fit for yachts."

Such kudos do Cristal Benito's creations hold within the superyacht community now, the maison works directly with architects and decorators, such as Zuretti and Winch, who specialise in making yachts "ship-shape", in the most distinguished sense of that word. "They order most of the pieces for their own customers," he says. "My wall sconces are the most frequently commissioned cut-crystal items, but I also make table decorations, such as vases and bowls." A glance over these pages will offer an idea of this brand's incredible



« BALL OF WOOL »
Black enamelling sconce
Limited edition of 37 pieces
Diameter: 16 cm
Height: 32 cm



« CRAZY YEAR »
Art Deco sconce
Limited edition of 99 pieces—black enamelling
Diameter: 17 cm
Height: 46 cm

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repertoire when it comes to adding a crystal flourish to nautical environments.

Being an expert at creating a specific product inevitably entails becoming proficient at restoring such items to their former glory—another of Cristal Benito’s in-house specialisms, and one which Benito says requires similar creative experience and zeal.

“Designing brings you into contact with many different objects, and both imagination and logistical thinking are constantly called upon,” he explains. “This enables me to mentally approach a piece to be restored with more assets, determining how best to restore an item, always bearing in mind the need to preserve the original identity given to it by its creator.”

Restoration, of course, is a delicate art. Straddling the line between preservation and renovation, it involves augmenting what remains of the past, in the present, for the delectation of observers in the future. This can require imaginative speculation—a prime example being when Cristal Benito was

tasked with revitalising a candelabra at the US Embassy. “Many parts were missing, lost or broken in such a way that they could no longer be restored,” explains Benito. “So we had to imagine the parts in order to restore these candelabras to their former magnificence.”

On other occasions, it’s not parts of the artefact that are missing, but the equipment used to create them. “When it came to Villa E-1027—a seaside house designed between 1926 and 1929 by Eileen Gray and Jean Badovici in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, Alpes-Maritimes—we took part in a restoration by creating large cut-glass panels to clad partitions, furniture doors and exterior joinery,” recalls Benito. “Originally, the glass was diamond-printed and ribbed—industrially produced in the 1920s. The machines no longer existed, so these glasses had to be reproduced identically by hand. Several hundred hours of work were required to meticulously cut these panels.”

To borrow another popular expression, it was a labour of love. Actually, one of devout

passion would be more accurate. Keeping the past alive in order to enrich the future is a noble undertaking. This is Cristal Benito’s raison d’être: whether it’s making new, original pieces for its clients’ delectation, or restoring pieces from the past, for posterity.

But there’s another way in which this maison is keeping the past alive. Franck Benito and his colleagues are also “passing the torch” when it comes to the transference of the artisanal human skills that make this possible.

“Transmission is at the heart of this award,” Franck Benito says of being named Master of Art by France’s Ministry of Culture in 2017, having already been recognised as a Living Heritage Company since 2006. “I see myself as the result of my father’s transmission of know-how, and have a duty to pass that on to future generations,” he says. “Crystal cutting is an art form which must never be lost.”

Please see cristal-benito.fr for further information and enquiries.