

GLASS.
TRANSCENDING
MATTER

THE
CIRVA
COLLECTIONS

24.04.2026
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INTRODUCTION

Founded in 1983 at the initiative of the French Ministry of Culture, the International Glass and Visual Arts Research Centre (Cirva) was conceived as a bold creative utopia. Dedicated to the study of glass, this unique laboratory operates at the crossroads of the visual arts, design and the applied arts and, in its early days, even harboured industrial ambitions.

Cirva hosts artists in residence from around the world, many of whom with little or no experience of working with glass. They encounter an extraordinary pool of expertise: highly skilled technicians, alongside chemists and engineers, whose knowledge enables the material to take on the contours of the artists' imagination. What emerges from this encounter are projects that are as technically ambitious as they are conceptually rich.

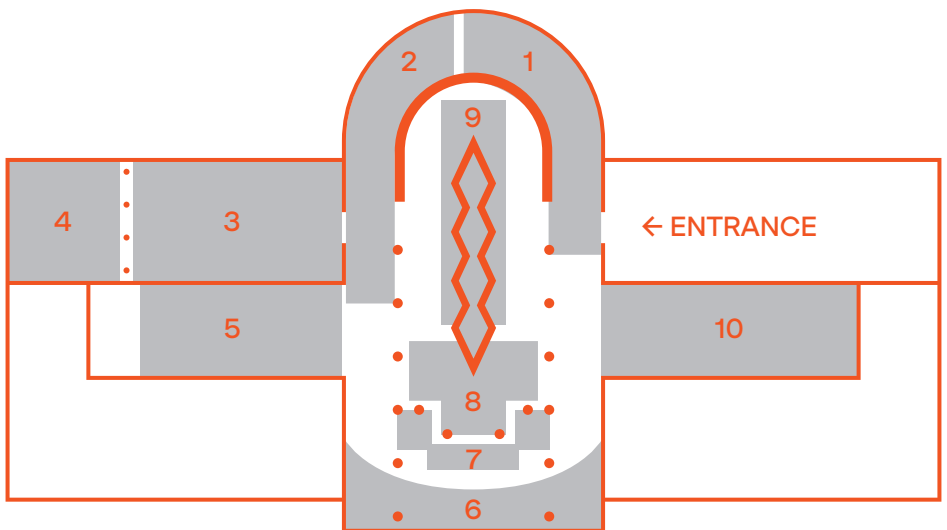
In 1986, this singular art centre took up residence in Marseille, in a former factory in the La Joliette district. Encircled by a mezzanine, its vast central nave is punctuated by the imposing bulk of the furnaces, the vertical lines of ventilation shafts and the suspended light fittings.

This retrospective of the Cirva collections invites visitors to explore research projects that cast a contemporary gaze on a material shaped by human hands for millennia. Through a series of themes, it puts design and visual arts into conversation, adopting a resolutely transdisciplinary approach. In this, it mirrors the spirit of Musée Ariana which, as Swiss Museum for Ceramics and Glass, seeks to broaden the way we look at the present day through the works it displays.

TIMELINE

- 1 APRIL 1982** Opening of the exhibition *New Glass – Contemporary French Glassmakers: Art and Industry* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris. Jack Lang, then France's Minister of Culture, commissions the ceramicist and teacher Jean Biagini to undertake a study and strategic review with a view to establishing a centre for artistic training and research.
- 28 OCTOBER 1983** The "Centre international du verre" is founded in Aix-en-Provence at the initiative of artists, representatives from the business community, cultural and academic institutions and the Ministry of Culture.
- MAY 1984** Cirva begins its activities. It is led by Evert Endt, Jean-Michel Grau and Yan Zoritchak.
- 1 FEBRUARY 1985** Françoise Guichon is appointed Director of Cirva.
- JUNE–11 JULY 1986** Cirva relocates to Marseille and is officially inaugurated there. The "A" in the acronym "Cirva", which had previously referred to its base in Aix-en-Provence, now stands for *Arts plastiques* (the visual arts).
- 1987–1989** The Centre national des arts plastiques launches the public commission project *30 Vases for Cirva*.
- 1988–1989** The painter Pierre Soulages conducts research at Cirva to develop a new type of glass as part of the public commission for the stained-glass windows of the Abbey Church of Sainte-Foy at Conques (1986–1994).
- 1992–1993** The designer Gaetano Pesce carries out a study at Cirva for two chandeliers intended for the Palais des Beaux-Arts de Lille.

- 31 MARCH 1995** The Institut national de la propriété industrielle grants Gaetano Pesce and Cirva a patent protecting the invention of the "Mistral" technique: "a process for projecting glass particles at high temperature".
- 1999** The beads for *Kiosque des noctambules*, a Paris Métro entrance on Place Colette designed by Jean-Michel Othoniel, are prototyped at Cirva.
- 2001** Prototypes of glass components are developed for a lighting installation created for Pierre Huyghe's exhibition at the French Pavilion of the 49th Venice Biennale, in collaboration with the artist Philippe Parreno and the graphic design studio M/M.
- 31 MAY 2010** Isabelle Reiher is appointed Director of Cirva.
- 2011** A partnership is established with the Design Parade in Hyères (Var department). The winners of the Grand Prix awarded by Villa Noailles are invited to Cirva for a research residency culminating in the creation of a vase.
- 20 SEPTEMBER 2019** Stanislas Colodiet is appointed Director of Cirva.
- 2023** The Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem) in Marseille commissions the artist Mathilde Rosier to create *Champ de visions*: dozens of glass "eye-seeds" are sown across the façade of the museum's collections store.



EXHIBITION SECTIONS

- 1 THE ORIGINS OF GLASS
- 2 UNLEARNING WHAT WE THINK WE KNOW,
REINVENTING WHAT WE BELIEVE WE UNDERSTAND
- 3 A CHAOTIC MATERIAL
- 4 THE FATE OF OBJECTS
- 5 A MYSTERIOUS MATERIAL
- 6 PROSTHESES AND GRAFTS
- 7 CONTAINING AND OBSERVING THE WORLD
- 8 THE FOURTH DIMENSION OF GLASS
- 9 SHAPING WITH FIRE
- 10 THE MYSTERY OF *LE PETIT ANGE ROUGE DE MARSEILLE*

Myths surrounding the birth of glass, archaeological artefacts and even geology itself continue to fire the imagination of contemporary designers and artists.

Glass has been worked since Antiquity, first in Mesopotamia and later in Egypt. The Roman historian Pliny the Elder (1st century) recounts a tale in which Phoenician merchants, having lit a great fire on a beach, inadvertently discovered glass.

At its heart, glass is born of silica, transformed by intense heat. Sand, which is especially rich in silica, is therefore the essential raw ingredient in its production. There are also naturally occurring glasses, most notably obsidian, a volcanic rock that vitrified under the force of molten lava.

At Cirva, artists rewrite these stories for themselves, experiencing the formation of glass at first hand, close to the furnaces, face to face with the molten material itself.

When artists and designers were invited to take up residence at Cirva in the late 1980s, some admitted to a certain reluctance about working with glass, then widely perceived as bound by a somewhat staid tradition. Such preconceptions quickly fell away once they discovered that the centre functioned as a laboratory, a place where new approaches could be invented, and where existing techniques might be unearthed, diverted or even wilfully disrupted.

Some residencies focused entirely on technical experimentation, leading not to finished objects but to the development of new processes. Cirva has preserved many such technical trials in its archives, and a selection is presented in this section.

In 1995, the designer Gaetano Pesce and Cirva were granted a patent for the "Mistral" technique. Through this innovation, they made clear their ambition to build bridges with industry, opening up possibilities for wider application beyond the studio.

According to physicists and chemists, glass is neither entirely solid nor entirely liquid. This in-between state — matter poised between two conditions — has long captivated artists and designers.

Scientists describe glass as an “amorphous solid”. At first glance, glass objects are clearly not fluid; they do not flow. Yet their molecular structure is said to be “disordered” or “amorphous”, a characteristic more typical of liquids. And indeed, when heated to a sufficiently high temperature, glass does liquefy. Beyond a certain threshold, it becomes supple enough to be blown or moulded at will.

Artists and designers delight in these transitional phenomena, shaping forms that seem to capture movement itself and the very life of the material. The philosopher Jean Baudrillard evocatively described glass as “the miracle of a fixed fluid”.

While many of the research projects developed at Cirva explore the ways in which glass objects are made, others turn their attention to how they circulate: to the life of an object once it has left the studio.

Artists and designers cast a fresh eye on use and patterns of consumption. Objects are conceived as agents capable of shaping, even transforming, society. Creators experiment with original and alternative channels of distribution, at times adopting a critical stance towards commercial practices and attempting to sidestep the conventional rules of the market.

Such projects play deliberately with the often-porous boundaries between contemporary art, design and craft. Is the piece in question a work of art or a functional object? Once released into the world, what status does it truly hold?

Glassmaking centres have long been shrouded in mystery. One thinks of Murano, the island facing Venice, whose workshops were once so closely guarded that, in the Middle Ages, glassmakers were forbidden to emigrate. Likewise, Bohemia, with its capital Prague, is famed as a city of alchemy.

Yet certain Czech and Italian master glassmakers (the *maestri*) agreed to share their secrets with artists invited to work at Cirva. The Czech-Canadian artist Jana Sterbak, for instance, collaborated with Czech blowers to create a *Glass Planetarium*. Watching molten glass spinning at the end of a blowpipe, she was reminded of distant images of planets captured by astronauts and satellites. That association gave rise to her *Planetarium*: "It was in seeing the material pass 'naturally' from magma to sphere that I found myself approaching images of the origins of the solar system [...]. Transparency, weight, minerality, the passage from a semi-liquid to a solid state: all this makes glass a magical substance."

Glass may be a product of nature or the outcome of human intervention. Natural glasses are formed during volcanic eruptions or through the crystallisation of rock. Yet today glass is also manufactured on an industrial scale, underpinning everything from architecture to cutting-edge technologies. This dual identity fires the imagination of artists at Cirva, who create entities poised somewhere between biology and technology.

These hybrid forms, woven from glass and vegetal matter or incorporating fragments of the human body, resonate with the thinking of the philosopher Donna Haraway. In her *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985), she writes: "In short, the certainty of what counts as nature — a source of insight and promise of innocence — is undermined, probably fatally."

From alchemists to chemists, glass has been the material of choice for creating an inert environment suited to experimentation. It can contain and preserve a substance, shielding it from external interference. Its transparency offers a further advantage in scientific practice: the glass walls of a test tube isolate the elements within while allowing chemical reactions to unfold in full view. Glass also makes possible the manufacture of optical instruments that enhance, and at times dramatically extend, human vision. At Cirva, a number of artists and designers have used glass variously to preserve, to scrutinise or to reinvent a fragment of the world.

“Glass occupies space without occupying it. It alters space by its presence, yet thanks to its limpid clarity it does not disturb it. It contains without concealing, protects without disguising, encloses without imprisoning; it catches the light and makes it dance, yet does not halt it.” With these words, the writer Jean-Charles Gateau suggests that glass is a living material. Our perception of it shifts according to the currents of light that pass through it: over the course of a single day, it may seem to dissolve into its surroundings, only to reappear moments later.

Time, understood both as duration and as weather, reflecting the dual meaning of the French word *temps*, shapes the way we experience glass. It is not merely a material occupying space; it is a luminous environment unfolding through time. Some artists precisely choose to explore this fourth dimension.

To work with glass is, inevitably, to enter into a partnership with fire, an element that looms large in the mythology surrounding it. In the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (1853), the writer and art critic John Ruskin describes the cloud of smoke rising above the island of Murano. In Venice, glassworks are known as *fornace*, a word that translates as "furnace" or even "inferno". At the heart of the workshop stands the crucible, holding hundreds of kilos of molten glass. Around its glowing presence, the entire rhythm of the studio is organised.

Fire is deeply ambivalent: it embodies desire and knowledge yet equally suggests danger. Its use evokes both the memory of primal gestures and the might of heavy industry. Artists and designers in residence at Cirva work in close proximity to this elemental force in order to give shape to glass.

Glass has long been bound up with visions of the future: cities beneath glass domes, the conquest of space or the foretelling of destiny through a crystal ball. It acts as an interface between worlds, separating and connecting them at once through a play of reflection and transparency. To create with glass is, in a sense, to practise a quiet form of magic.

An enigmatic masterpiece within the Cirva collection, *Le Petit Ange rouge de Marseille* traces an arabesque motif composed of 333 glass spheres of identical size, animated by the shimmer of a deep hue known as "Venetian red". This colour is notoriously difficult to achieve; its formula was entrusted to Cirva by a Venetian master glassmaker. It was in Venice that the American artist James Lee Byars, renowned for his pursuit of perfection, expressed the wish to create this work. As for its title, it retains its mystery. For James Lee Byars, the sphere was the very form of a question. One must therefore accept that the question remains open and simply surrender to its allure.

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ARTISTS

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ARIANA

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de la céramique
et du verre
genève

swiss museum
for ceramics
and glass
geneva

schweizerisches
museum für
keramik und glas
genf

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**MUSÉE D'ART
MODERNE ET
CONTEMPORAIN**
SAINT-ÉTIENNE
MÉTROPOLE

CIRVA



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