

Art glass from Saint-Prex (1928-1964)

MUSÉE ARIANA, GENEVA, 25 NOVEMBER 2014 – 17 JANUARY 2016

Founded in 1911 in the commune of the same name in the Canton of Vaud, the Saint-Prex Glassworks was devoted to the hand-crafted, and later industrial, production of items for everyday use, such as wine bottles. Focusing less on these utilitarian articles, this exhibition spotlights the art glass section, active from 1928 to 1964. From the early trials and experimentation to highly accomplished creations, the originality of the glassware and the array of decorative techniques employed will not fail to surprise both connoisseurs and the uninitiated.

After acquiring its first piece of Saint-Prex glass in 1931, the Musée Ariana did not add to its modest collection until 1990, with the donation of two beer bottles. Since then, no less than eighty-two recipients (including forty-two vases) have joined this ensemble, as a result of twenty-six gifts and two purchases. This temporary exhibition presents the finest specimens, and is enhanced for the occasion by loans from the Musée du Verrier de Saint-Prex (Vetropack SA) and the Musée historique et des porcelaines, château de Nyon.

The creations of the Saint-Prex Glassworks, still a familiar sight in Swiss households, are now a precious heritage for future generations. A (re)discovery not to be missed!



View of the glassworks in 1919, *Verreries de St-Prex 1911-1961*

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History of the Saint-Prex Glassworks

“Nothing is possible without difficulty, without effort, without struggle, not even a glassworks.”

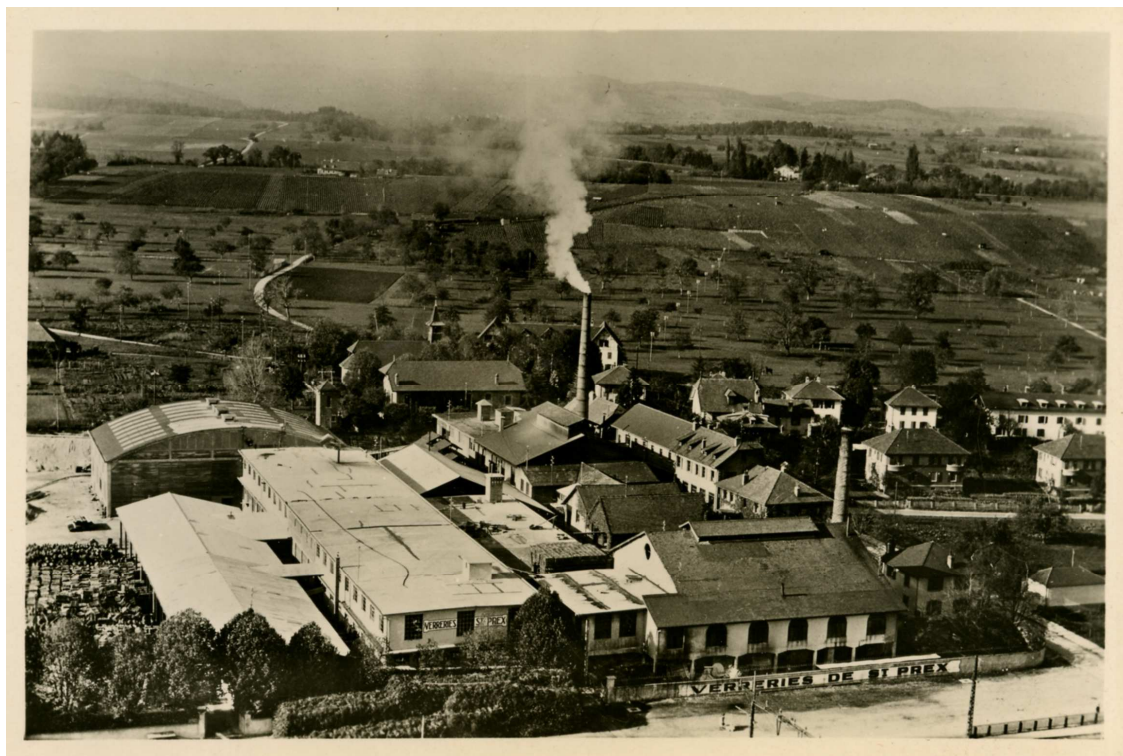
Henri Cornaz, 1918

It was in the heart of the Canton of Vaud's vineyards that the industrialist Henri Cornaz (1869-1948), backed by thirty-eight shareholders (wine producers and merchants), founded the Saint-Prex Glassworks on 11 February 1911. This choice was determined by the presence of raw materials – large sand deposits of excellent quality – and many potential clients – the winegrowers – since the company first concentrated exclusively on bottle production.

It was a courageous and risky venture, for glassmakers in Switzerland were struggling to survive: from the 18th to the early 20th century, their numbers had dwindled from fifteen to five. The glassworks did in fact get off to a difficult start, due to the lack of a skilled workforce. In 1912, to resolve this issue, Henri Cornaz acquired the Semsales glassworks (Canton of Fribourg) founded in 1776, and brought its experienced employees to Saint-Prex. The company was then renamed “Verreries de St-Prex et Semsales réunies SA”.

Growing demand transformed it into a flourishing enterprise, with bottle production increasing from one million before the war to ten million units in 1930! To meet the expanding orders, Henri Cornaz began renting the Wauwil glassworks in 1915 (set up in 1879 in the Canton of Lucerne) and two years later purchased the one in Bülach (founded in 1890 in the Canton of Zurich).

Workers' houses were built in Saint-Prex and the small town soon became a “real miniature industrial city” where Catholics and Protestants lived together. The industrial site was further extended by the purchase of land near the station to facilitate the transportation of raw materials and finished goods.



Aerial view of the glassworks in 1945



Catalogue, 1930s-1940s, drawing by
Martin Peikert

The history of this company traversed two world wars, the Great Depression and the advent of industrialised production methods. Switzerland had indeed long been reliant on the importation of glass objects, but Saint-Prex succeeded in supplying the national market. In order to reduce dependency on grape harvests for the sale of its bottles, the glassworks diversified its activities by making bottles for drinks of all kinds (liqueurs, lemonade, beer, etc.), and more especially by launching the manufacture of containers for the food processing, chemical, pharmaceutical and cosmetics industries. Major national and international brands (Maggi, Sinalco, Nescafé, Hero, Henniez, Coca-Cola, Bepanthène, Colgate, etc.) conserved their products in glass recipients from Saint-Prex, which thus found their way into every Swiss home.

The emergence of articles such as storage and preserving jars, salt cellars, butter dishes, lemon squeezers, feeding bottles, jam jars, small bottles, pepper pots, fruit dishes, plates, ice cream dishes, ash trays, inkpots and furniture legs were aimed at a target customer, namely, the Swiss housewife. "These easy-care, clean and transparent containers are a must for the well-run kitchen!"



Building on the site of the former furnace (after 1947)
Verreries de St-Prex 1911-1961

Semi-automatic bottle production began in 1919, when Henri Cornaz acquired machines that could perform the work of the glassblowers. In 1928, however, he ventured into art glass production, enabling the glassmaker's trade to survive somewhere between art and craft. In 1930, new machines, imported from the United States to meet the rising demand, supplanted in turn the workers known as "gatherers". Always at the cutting edge of technology, the glassworks built new gas furnaces in 1933, and later electric ones, to replace the old coal furnaces demolished from 1947 onwards. In 1940, machines and employees kept the factory running 24 hours a day thanks to the implementation of a three eight-hour shifts staff rotation system.

In 1959, the Wauwil factory was acquired, and in the following year business reached record levels with sixty million pieces sold! Four hundred workers were employed, with half of them coming from outside Switzerland (mainly from Italy and Spain). On 26 January 1966, the three companies were amalgamated under the name of Vetropack SA, with each one specialising in a particular colour of glass: Wauwil (brown glass), St-Prex (green glass) and Bülach (clear glass).

In the early 1970s, the company pioneered the production of green glass from recycled glass. Indeed, it encouraged glass recycling in several communes (initially without public subsidy). Ten years later, 105'615 tons of glass were collected in Switzerland – that is, 16.5 kg per inhabitant – and today, 90% of recycled glass is melted down to make green glass, due to sorting by colour.

In the 1990s, the Vetropack group expanded outside Switzerland with the purchase of Moravia Glass in Kyjov, in the Czech Republic, and another glassworks in Austria. In 2002, high costs in Switzerland led to the closure of the Bülach site.

Today, the Saint-Prex works are devoted exclusively to the production of bottles and jars.



Édouard Elzingre (1880-1966), "Traditional crafts at the St. Prex Glassworks", drawing, c.1930 (?) / Stages in the making of a vase (from left to right): blowing, working the vase on the glassmaker's bench, gathering, mould blowing and annealing.



Machines and workers c.1941
Verreries de St-Prex 1911-1941 – Photo: Gaston de Jongh

Art Glass from Saint-Prex

Overly dependent on the grape harvests for its bottle production (resulting in fluctuating demand), the Saint-Prex Glassworks began to seek new markets in the 1920s. Consequently, in 1928, it opened an art glass section, which enabled it to diversify its activities despite its limited size. It then drew on a specialised foreign workforce, who made not only vases, but also dishes, boxes with lids and lamps.

According to René Dreyfus, author of a text published in 1981 entitled “La Verrerie artistique à la Verrerie de St-Prex, une symphonie de formes et de couleurs, 1928-1964” (*Cahiers Vetropack*, n°2), art glass production at Saint-Prex can be divided into the following three distinct periods.

The early days were marked by empirical testing, aimed at identifying potential customers. The studio adopted simple forms and traditional ornamentation for its articles in line with popular taste. Clear, transparent, sandblasted glass was decorated with stencilled motifs applied with the aid of compressed air gun, without a second firing to fix the colours. Inspired by foreign models, experiments were also carried out into the production of iridescent glass and the use of fused enamels. As only a limited number of these articles were made, few examples still survive today.

In 1930, a second period began, characterised by a more traditional artistic orientation. The outer surface of the vases, generally of blown green transparent glass (more rarely brown or clear), was enamelled, followed by a second firing. This gave them the appearance of sandstone, reminiscent of Eastern ceramics. Tests with acid etching were carried out too. Some pieces were thus decorated with Greek mythological scenes, revisiting the iconography of Attic ceramics. Such articles, however, do not appear to have been very widespread. During the 1930s, the Saint-Prex Glassworks also commissioned artists to create new forms. The ceramist Paul Bonifas (1893-1967), for example, worked with the factory to prepare items for the National Exhibition of Fine and Applied Arts of 1931 in Geneva. For this occasion, he designed and supervised the manufacture of the models, assisted for two months by an Italian glassmaker trained in Murano. Certain geometric volumes found in his black glazed pottery sometimes appear to have been transposed, literally or partially, into the Saint-Prex glass. Conversely, this experience in turn probably influenced some of his later ceramic creations.



Paul Bonifas, black glazed pottery
c.1928, H. 31,2 cm / 1929, H. 21 cm / c.1930, H. 28,5 cm / c.1934, H. 33,7 cm

From 1935 to 1964, the art studio focused largely on the production of pieces in transparent bottle-green glass. Part was left plain, while the rest was embellished with external enamelling in black, red-black or blue-black graduated shading or in crackled gold or silver. The same form could therefore be decorated with any of these techniques, resulting in a wide range of different combinations. From this time on, each model was clearly documented, and illustrated catalogues, sent out free to customers on request, were used to promote the collections. In addition, from 1936 onwards, the pieces were marked with a new company label printed in

gold on a silver ground, depicting a glassblower. In 1938, trials began in the field of cut and engraved crystal. However, the examples produced were not intended for sale, consisting of vases and dishes made for the National Exhibition in Zurich of 1939, or gifts commemorating important events. The use of black body tinted and moulded glass gave rise to the production of other types of vases as well as bookends (in the form of a rearing horse). The outbreak of the Second World War led to these models being discontinued in autumn 1939.



Printed marks, sometimes in gold
(1928-1936)



Printed company label in gold on silver
(from 1936)



Printed series labels in red on a yellow
ground, bearing reference numbers
(from 1928 ?)

A promotional catalogue dating from 1935, entitled *Verreries de St-Prex, une nouvelle branche d'activité*, shows us that at the time articles from the three periods described above were still produced in parallel. However, forms that had existed from 1928 onwards were mostly gradually eliminated in favour of new lines.



"Decorated articles"
First production period



"Enamels" and "Engraved enamels"
Second and third periods



Bottle-green transparent glass
Third period

The slow trend towards industrial production ultimately prevailed over the art studio. In 1964, the old furnaces were demolished to make way for automated machinery. The Saint-Prex Glassworks then entered a new era, forcing it to abandon this area of activity once and for all.

Painted decoration on sandblasted glass

One of the techniques developed at the end of the 1920s was glass frosting using the technique of sandblasting, whereby a jet of sand propelled by compressed air produces a matt surface that is no longer transparent but remains translucent. In addition to its aesthetic effects, it would appear that this process was also used to mask imperfections in the glass. This opalescent background, which serves as a support for the painted decoration, is characteristically partially tinted with shades of blue, red or orange. Stencils were cut of the motifs, and the colours were applied in successive layers with the aid of an airbrush. The pieces were not given a second firing to fix the decoration (the colours were probably not vitrifiable). This pictorial layer, therefore, is not adhered to the surface of the glass, which explains its poor state of conservation, as it is often flaking off and incomplete.



Models for airbrush designs on pasteboard, Saint-Prex Glassworks (c.1930)



Vases, Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)

The Saint-Prex Glassworks adapted its goods to popular taste and offered its customers a large selection of glass items of simple shapes bearing a variety of decorative motifs. The repertoire was extensive and included stylised floral designs (gentians), birds (cranes) and landscapes (sailing boats on Lake Geneva, lakes and mountains, windmills, sunsets). Travel and exoticism, particularly Japan (women in kimonos) and Egypt (temples, palm trees), were also themes developed at Saint-Prex. Such pieces corresponded to the contemporary fashion for oriental style ornamentation and for Far Eastern aesthetics. The designs were influenced by the art of xylography developed in China, Korea and Japan. Perspective was rendered by means of a composition in successive tiers, with an element in the foreground and a shaded background.

The Saint-Prex glassmakers very probably reinterpreted the aesthetics of Art Nouveau glass developed at the end of the 19th and early 20th century by Gallé, the Nancy School, the Loetz manufactory, the Pantin crystal glassworks and the Muller brothers. Nevertheless, a technical transformation can be observed here, as painting on glass has replaced acid etching (on multilayer glass) and since the designs have been simplified considerably.

In addition to figurative motifs, abstract, geometric or highly stylised plant forms also embellished the vases that come closer to Art Deco.

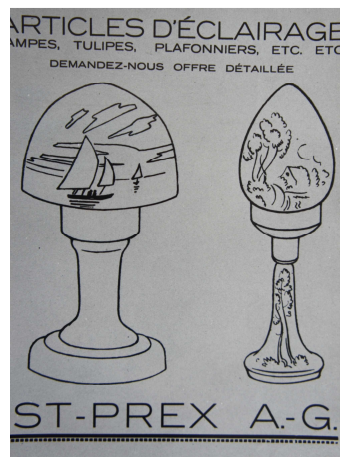


Boxes, Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)



Saint-Prex Glassworks, decorative design (c.1930)

The technique of frosted glass with airbrush designs was mainly used to decorate vases, but also boxes, sweet boxes and, later, lamps. The latter were presented at the Comptoir de Lausanne in 1930 and subsequently at the *Tir cantonal* (cantonal shooting competition) in Morges in 1932. The Saint-Prex Glassworks then produced a special and extensive lighting range: ceiling lights, “tulip” lamps, table and bedside lamps, etc. Here again, the forms recall those created by Gallé or the Pantin crystal glassworks.



Articles d'éclairage (c. 1930) ; and Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)

These types of frosted glass items already appear in the 1928 catalogues and still feature in ones from 1935. It is indeed surprising that René Dreyfus described this period as “kitschy” in his article of 1981!

From Art Nouveau to Art Deco

The early years of the Saint-Prex Glassworks were marked by the artistic effervescence of the Art Nouveau and Art Deco movements. Their influence is clearly visible in a section of the production from the 1920s to the 1930s. As well as floral motifs, the Saint-Prex Glassworks borrowed other typical Art Nouveau forms, as exemplified by the vase from the Musée historique et des porcelaines, château de Nyon. The technique employed – that of multilayer glass – was revived at the end of the 19th century largely thanks to Émile Gallé and the Daum manufactory. The rarity of pieces of this kind perhaps indicates that they were the result of experimentation, rather than objects intended for mass production.

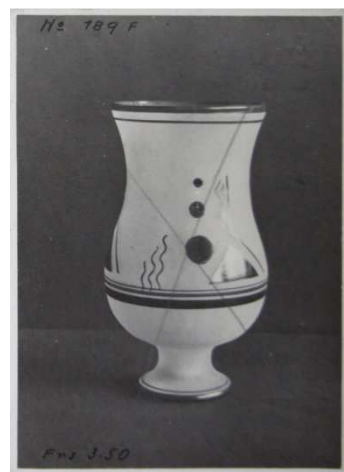
Art Deco, with its pure geometric lines, found an ideal medium for expression in glass. At Saint-Prex, the silhouette of the different models was thus enhanced by surface treatments that often alternated sandblasted and frosted glass, and by painted black enamel highlights. Photographs in a promotional catalogue dating from around 1930 indicate that certain shapes enjoyed long-lasting popularity (for example, the vases with base and flared sides [N^{os}. 185 and 186], while others were rapidly discontinued [N^{os}. 166, 179 and 189]).



Vase, Saint-Prex (1928-1935)
Musée historique et des
porcelaines, château de Nyon



Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)
"N° 179 / Frs 4.- / N° 166 / Frs 3.50" and "N° 189 F / Frs 3.50"



Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)

N° 185 / Black and white frosted glass / height 21 cm / 4.80 Frs. ; and N° 186 / Black and white frosted glass / height 21 cm / 4.80 Frs.

Acid etched decoration

Towards 1930, the adoption of the technique of acid etching offered the art studio new decorative possibilities. Its iconographic preferences then seem to have been Greek mythology, strongly influenced by Attic ceramics of the 7th – 5th century B.C. with their black and red figures. The scenes from Antiquity are indeed treated similarly, with figures represented in profile in a frieze around the belly of the recipients, shown with comparable postures, clothing and stylised plant ornamentation.

Historical subjects were also a source of inspiration. The one depicted on the walls of a vase from the Musée Ariana probably refers to the 5th song of Homer's *Iliad*. Diomedes, King of Argos is wounded by an arrow shot by the Trojan archer Pandarus. The former is helped by his companion Sthenelus, who pulls the arrow from his shoulder. Diomedes calls for vengeance, invoking the goddess Athena. She appears on the battlefield (armed with the aegis, bristling with snakes), and fulfils Diomedes' wish by giving him back his strength.



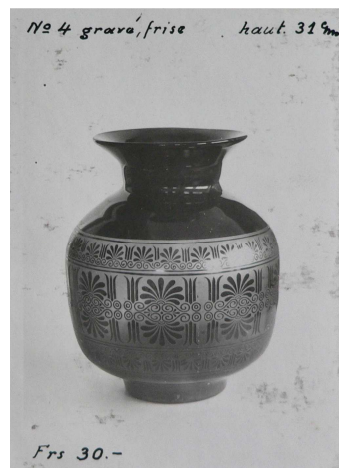
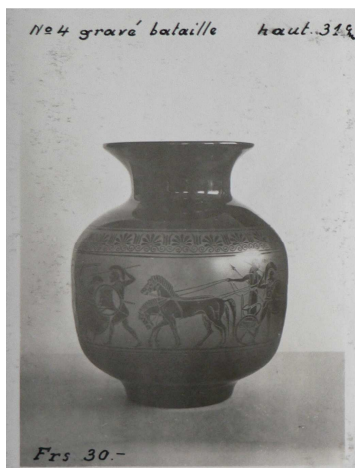
Etching plate, Musée du Verrier de Saint-Prex



Vase with historical motifs, Musée Ariana
Photo: Nathalie Sabato

For each piece, the subject was first etched into a metal plate (by acid etching and/or with a burin). It was then transferred to the glass (serial reproduction process), to be acid etched in its turn. Some of the motifs engraved on the steel plate exhibited in the showcase served as models for those visible on two of our large vases.

From an old promotional catalogue, we know the sale price of several of the art studio's articles around 1930. Although most of them cost between one and five francs, the market value of the large engraved recipients could reach as much as thirty francs, which represented a sizeable sum at the time. This difference probably denotes a much more costly manufacturing process.



Saint-Prex Glassworks, promotional catalogue (c.1930)

N°4 engraved battle / engraved, frieze / Height 31 cm / 30 Frs. ; and N°1 ant. / Height 11 cm / Lion s 4 Frs. / frieze 3.50 Frs.

Enamelled decoration

Evidence of the use of airbrushing in the art studio of the Saint-Prex Glassworks can be found from when it opened in 1928. The first colours applied by this means were not fired a second time, which explains why some motifs are partially incomplete today. From the start of the 1930s, this defective process was practised in parallel with, and then gradually replaced by, the employment of enamels and a supplementary firing.

At Saint-Prex, the enamel (a vitrifiable substance tinted with metal oxides) was therefore pulverised with the aid of a jet of compressed air. This stage, as well as creating decorative effects, also made it possible to mask imperfections in the glass if necessary (we should not forget that the basic output was in the form of green transparent glass articles). The selected items were thus coated on their external and internal surfaces (upper part only), with a layer of opaque enamel. As the inner and outer bases of the recipients were left bare, the original transparency of the object can be seen at these points in the light. Black was often used on its own – recalling the black glazed pottery of Paul Bonifas – or was sometimes combined with red or blue in graduated shading. The piece was then given an additional firing to permanently fix the enamel.

According to the small monograph written by Jacques-Édouard Chable (*Verreries de St-Prex, 1911-1941*, Geneva, 40 p.), this painstaking work appears to have been carried out by female employees only.



Chable J.-E., *Verreries de St-Prex, 1911-1941*, Geneva, p. 31
Photo: Gaston de Jongh



Vase with red and black enamel (1935-1964),
Musée Ariana – Photo: Nicolas Lieber

Crackled gold or silver glass



Green glass, blue enamel and crackled gold

Les The pieces with crackled gold or silver decoration are probably the most well known articles produced by the Saint-Prex Glassworks. Indeed, it is not uncommon to find examples of them still today in antique shops or at a flea market.

These objects were made from green glass, the same used for the bottles, whereas clear, brown or turquoise glass was more rare for this type of product.

Each piece was first covered with transparent blue enamel and then brush painted with gold or silver. The irregular crackling appears during the firing process that fixes the decoration. It is explained by the different melting points of the enamel and the layer of gold or silver

(the variations in temperature produce random and irregularly spaced crackling of different sizes). In most cases, the gold or silver completely covers the outside of the piece, with the inside remaining blue, while the original colour of the glass can be seen on the base.

This technique was mainly used to decorate vases. There are examples, however, of pitchers, small bottles (sometimes with a handle), bottles for Armagnac, lamp bases (in the shape of a vase or "ball") and, less commonly, dishes, all produced from the 1930s to 1964.



Vases and small bottle, Musée Ariana
Photo: Nicolas Lieber

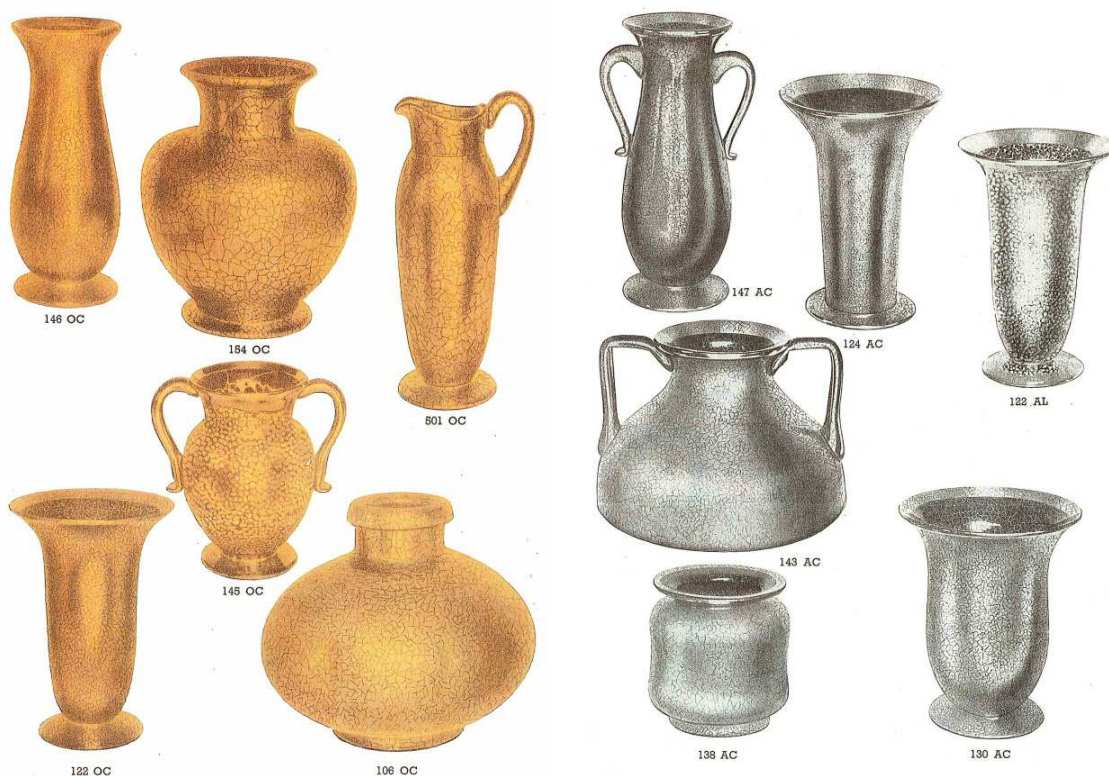


Table glassware

"Like us, some glasses will survive, while other broken ones will soon be replaced. Symbols of the fragility of things in this world, they accompany people throughout their lives..."

J.-E. Chable, *Verreries de St-Prex*, 1911-1941

In addition to the well-known vases, the art section produced other everyday objects. Indeed, Saint-Prex offered its customers a whole range of glassware for serving and consuming drinks, which set off their contents while at the same time embellishing table decorations. This is borne out by the advertising, posters and promotional literature aimed at the hotel and restaurant sector, as well as at Swiss households. Some of these, moreover, portray modern, elegant women using these recipients (see the promotional calendars).

The *Décoration* catalogue, sent out free to customers on request, presents a vast collection of art glass pieces, with vases and lamp bases depicted alongside jugs and bowls. There are innumerable utilitarian articles, mainly carafes, small jugs, pitchers, water jugs (ones with lids for restaurants) and all kinds of glasses (for cider, squash, orangeade, schnapps, beer, wine, as well as rustic, cellar and table glasses, goblets, etc.). There are also impressive complete services with matching carafe and glasses, for liqueurs, orangeade or wine.

These pieces were made from green, brown, turquoise or clear glass that was rarely enamelled, and which came in different finishes including smooth, frosted, satin and iridescent. The models all came in different sizes – corresponding to glasses for water, red or white wine, Malaga wine or liqueurs – and were given names like "Gibraltar", "Campari", "Tonhalle", "Mazagran", "Imperial", "Lucerne" or "Stephani".







Cruchon
No 909

| | | 3/4 | 1 Lit. |
|--------|-----|-------|--------|
| Lisse | Fr. | 230.— | 250.— |
| Givré | „ | 280.— | 300.— |
| Satiné | „ | 280.— | 300.— |

En couleur: Fr. 20.— en plus



Verre orangeade
3 dl.

| | | |
|--------|-----|------|
| Lisse | Fr. | 25.— |
| Givré | „ | 40.— |
| Satiné | „ | 40.— |
| Moiré | „ | 50.— |

En couleur: Fr. 10.— en plus.

20 Prix par 100 pièces, départ St-Prex.

Commemorative and Promotional Glassware

Glass articles made at Saint-Prex also provided a medium for inscriptions used for commemorative, promotional or tourism purposes.

When the glassworks opened in 1911, a commemorative bottle was created to mark the event. Throughout its history, the company produced other such pieces: a glass plate inscribed with the menu for 11 February 1931 for its 20th anniversary celebrations; in 1961, a bottle for its 50th anniversary bearing the inscription “the right bottle for the right wine”; and fifty years later, another bottle for the company’s centenary.



Samples on display at the Comptoir de Lausanne in 1930, *Verrerie de St-Prex 1911-1931*

The glassworks participated regularly in trade fairs and exhibitions. It was present at the Comptoir de Lausanne in 1930 and 1932, with special pieces being created for each occasion. This was also the case for the large National Exhibitions, such as the ones in Geneva in 1931 and Zurich in 1939. These events enabled Saint-Prex SA to display and promote its products, to demonstrate its savoir-faire and above all, to reach potential clients.

The manufactory also produced objects for the tourist industry, as shown by a souvenir ashtray from Neuchâtel or a vase representing the town of Saint-Prex. It had its own promotional ware depicting views of the factory or featuring inscriptions like “St-Prex, green, semi-clear, clear and brown glass”, etc.

In its catalogues, Saint-Prex gave its customers the opportunity to have all sorts of glasses engraved for celebrations, shooting competitions, fêtes, etc., using either the sandblasting or acid etching techniques or decorated with black or coloured designs. Many associations and clubs of all kinds ordered such personalised items, for example, the Lausanne Stamp Collecting Society in 1938 or the Geneva Lambretta Club in 1956. In 1967, the glassworks produced bottles for the Swiss table football championships in Lausanne and for the 13th Western Switzerland PTT ski championships at Château-d’Œx. Gymnastic events (for example, the 1931 Canton of Vaud gymnastic festival in Yverdon), as well as mountain climbing or shooting clubs (such as the Lucerne shooting competition of 1937) were not to be outdone. There are also souvenir items of the Lausanne International Dog Shows of 1960 and 1968.

These articles mainly comprise vases, with or without handles, bottles and glasses. Apart from the latter, which are made from clear glass, most are of blown green glass and painted with an airbrush in red and black enamel. Some examples exist, however, of crackled silver commemorative pieces. The first enamelling, as well as the addition of images and inscriptions (often in gold), were carried out by the women in the decoration studio. For these limited series, the required motifs were either hand-painted or printed by image transfer (a vitrifiable transfer which could be multi-coloured) and applied by the female employees. The decorative elements were permanently fixed by an additional firing at 600°C.

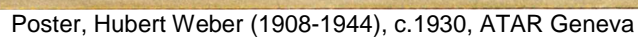


Decorated glasses after additional firing, *Verreries de St-Prex, Une nouvelle branche d'activité*, 1935, p. 20



The decoration studio, *Verreries de St-Prex 1911- 1941*, p.30
Photo: Gaston de Jongh

Luxury hotels also figured among the glassworks' clients, such as the famous Lausanne Palace, which ordered vases as New Year's Eve souvenirs in 1934, probably as a gift for its privileged guests.



Poster, Hubert Weber (1908-1944), c.1930, ATAR Geneva