

MAKERS | EUROPE | FRANCE | GLASSWARE

Atelier Toporkoff | Stained Glassmaker



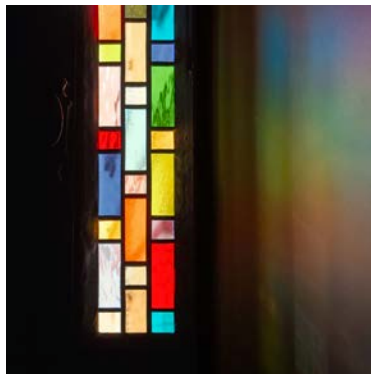
Sophie Toporkoff, photographed by Paul Rousteau.

Tucked away in one of Pigalle's sloping streets, Atelier Toporkoff, specializing in contemporary stained glass, occupies a beautiful historic building whose shopfront strikes a perfect balance between classic elegance and contemporary flair. This harmony comes as no surprise: the space reflects the vision of Sophie Toporkoff, an artist whose creations move gracefully between the ancient and the avant-garde.





CABANA



Sophie Toporkoff's background bridges two worlds — a childhood steeped in the solemn beauty of religious art, and a career shaped by her experience with Martin Margiela and Hermès, where precision, linearity, and geometry defined her aesthetic vocabulary.

How did you begin?

I studied Applied Arts in Paris and later became an art director, first as a freelancer, then for Martin Margiela, and eventually for Hermès, where I worked for the past ten years. So I already had a strong visual background, but no real knowledge of glass — except for an abstract passion I'd had since childhood. My Russian grandfather used to take me to visit churches, and he collected icons. I was fascinated by their flatness.

Another great childhood passion of mine was marbles (the kind you play with in the sand) but what I really loved was looking through them. As an adult, working for big fashion houses, I often thought that some graphic designs would look amazing in glass. It became a sort of private game with myself — imagining those patterns on glass.

At that time, I hoped I'd meet a creative person who could bring those ideas to life, but of course, that never happened. Eventually, I realized I had to be the one to do it. By then, I had climbed the professional ladder, and my work had become increasingly managerial, leaving less and less space for creativity. I wanted to go back to working with my hands.



© Pablo Gonzalez

How did you learn?

I quit my job and spent a year in a specialized school, cutting glass every day, forty hours a week. It's very repetitive work, which means you can actually learn a lot in just one year. I didn't need to learn how to draw or develop a creative vision; what I needed was the technical side. The biggest challenge? Cutting glass.

I say it jokingly, but I'm not really joking. Glass is difficult because its atomic structure is neither liquid nor solid, it's almost made of emptiness. That's why, when a crack appears, it spreads instantly through the entire surface. During training, we practiced with inexpensive glass, but now, when I make a mistake with an expensive piece, it's painful — the sheet is simply ruined. Even assembling the work can be complicated. In fact, nothing about the process is simple or can be taken for granted.

Sometimes everything goes wrong. The paint, for example, reacts to humidity, and there are days when nothing seems to work. It's a demanding craft.



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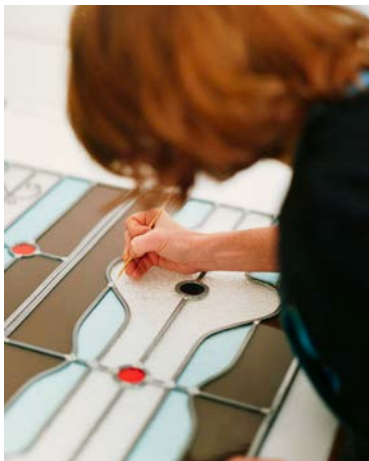
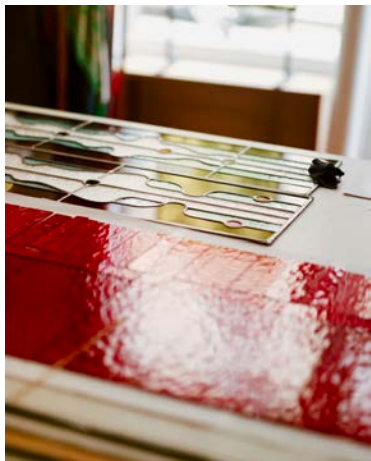
How do you plan, prepare and create your works?

It's a very in situ kind of craft, and I love that it needs to be integrated into a larger architectural context. My clients are typically architects. The first step is to fully understand both their vision and what will harmonize with the building or space that will host the work. I've noticed that even very creative people often struggle to grasp the full potential of glass and what can be achieved with it.

My role is to expand their imagination a little. For that reason, I start by presenting the design in black and white, and once the drawing is approved, we move on to color selection. Once the design is defined, we determine the measurements. Glass can't be scaled infinitely, so proportions are crucial.

Then comes the choice of glass, including texture. I go to Verrerie Saint-Just, which supplied mirrors for Versailles during its construction, and I choose each sheet myself, to check the quality and thickness. Next, I create the cartoon — the full-size drawing of the glass mosaic — where every piece is numbered. The glass is then hand-cut according to that numbering.

I may not have many virtues, but patience and concentration are among them. One by one, the pieces are assembled and each intersection is soldered. If the glass is to be colored, it's painted first, because the pieces must then be fired in a kiln at 650°C before assembly. The final touch might be to paint the metallic lines a darker shade, though sometimes I leave them natural. I usually install the work myself, for safety.



© Sissy and Tiphaine Caro

Who or what most inspires you?

In general, I'm inspired by what I don't know. For a recent project in Venice, for instance, I spent a week immersing myself in Italian and Venetian art — things I was familiar with, but not in depth — and I was amazed by what I discovered. Ten years ago, I would never have said that Gothic art could fascinate me; I was drawn to minimalism, that was my style and my DNA. But now I'm simply curious about everything.

The best and worst things about being a craftsperson?

Mastering the process from beginning to end is probably my favorite part of this work (unlike in a company, where decisions are never entirely yours). Big brands, in a sense, do less research and experimentation. The hardest part is staying sustainable in the market; helping clients understand how time-intensive the process is, and therefore, why it costs what it does.

The music you listen to while you work?



Interview by Sara Pierdonà

Images from Paul Rousteau, Tiphaine Caro, Sissy and Agathe Boudin

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DAIKI HIRAMURA | AINU
WOODWORKER

The Ainu are the Indigenous peoples of northern Japan, with their own language, traditions, and a worldview shaped by reverence for nature and its spirits—the kamuy. Craft sits at the heart of Ainu life, spanning the everyday and ceremonial: carved woodwork such as the Nibutani ita and textile traditions like attus, a resilient bark cloth woven from tree fibers. Born in Biratori, in southern Hokkaido, Daiki Hiramura is among the young makers carrying these traditions forward.

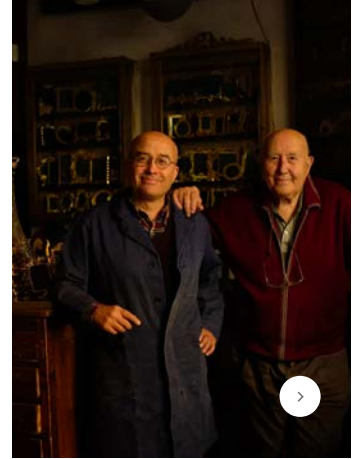
[READ MORE](#)HANNY NEWTON | GOLDWORK
EMBROIDERER

Embroiderer Hanny Newton revives the near-extinct art of straw embroidery from her studio on the Powys-Shropshire border. Trained in metal thread at the Royal School of Needlework, she now works with locally grown grains and meadow grasses to create delicate, place-rooted pieces. In 2024, she received the inaugural QEST Sanderson Rising Star Award for her pioneering use of straw as sustainable gold.

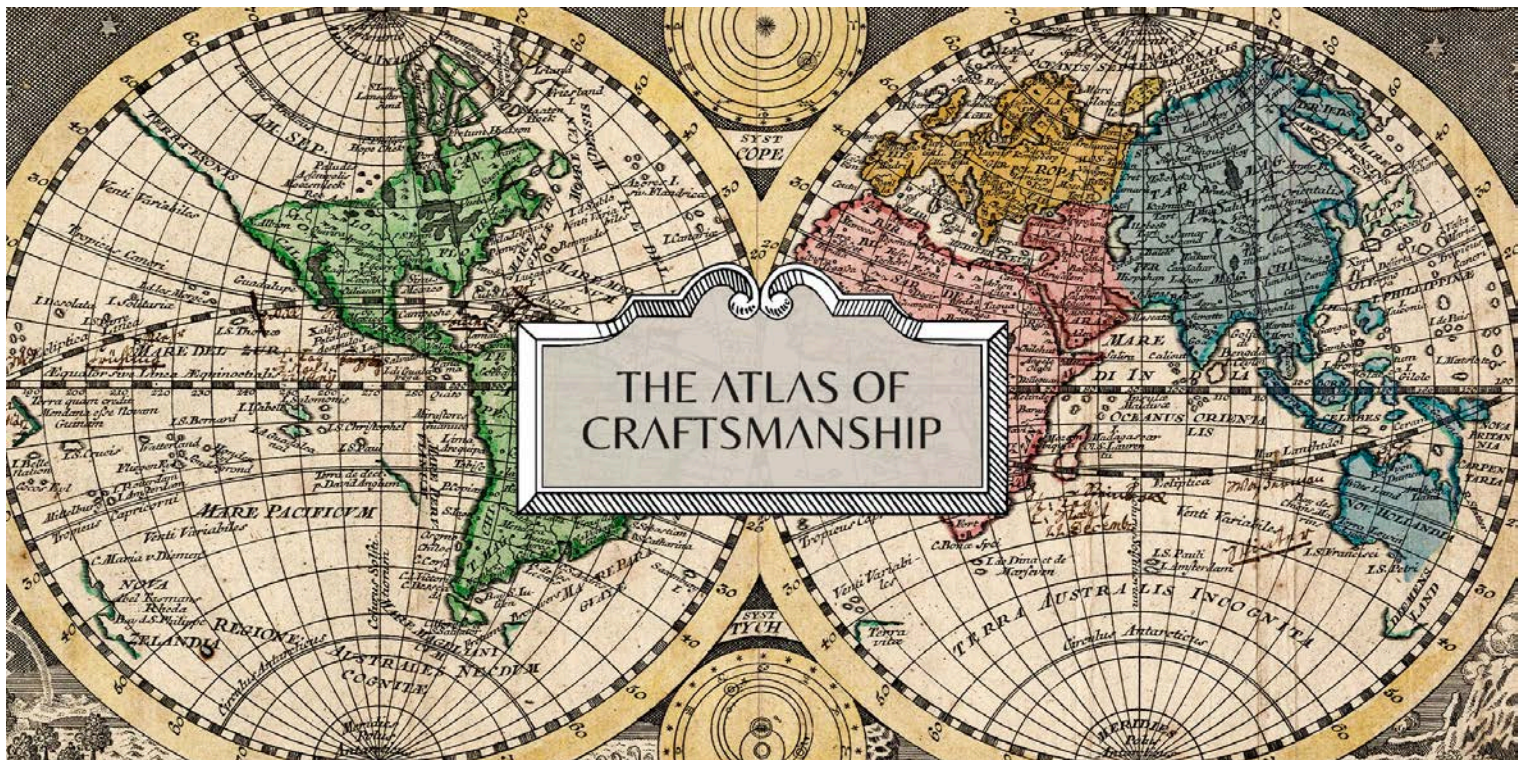
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GIOVANNI BACCANI | GILDER

Giovanni Baccani, the shop famous for its deep-blue fabric paneling, was founded in 1903 in the heart of Florence and remains one of the few surviving artisan ateliers where time seems to stand still. An art devotee, Giovanni began by offering objects that represented the finest Florentine craftsmanship — particularly gilded wooden pieces made using age-old artisanal techniques.

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BRONZE CASTERS

The story of Florentine bronze artisan, Alamberto Bianchi, is in many ways both familiar and extraordinary — and in 1987 was published as a tribute to craftsmanship by the Cultural Commissioner of Florence. Today, together with his son, Duccio, Alamberto continues to create wonder in bronze at their renowned family-run workshops the city, where the community views them as both makers, and custodians of Florence's cultural and artisanal legacy.

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