

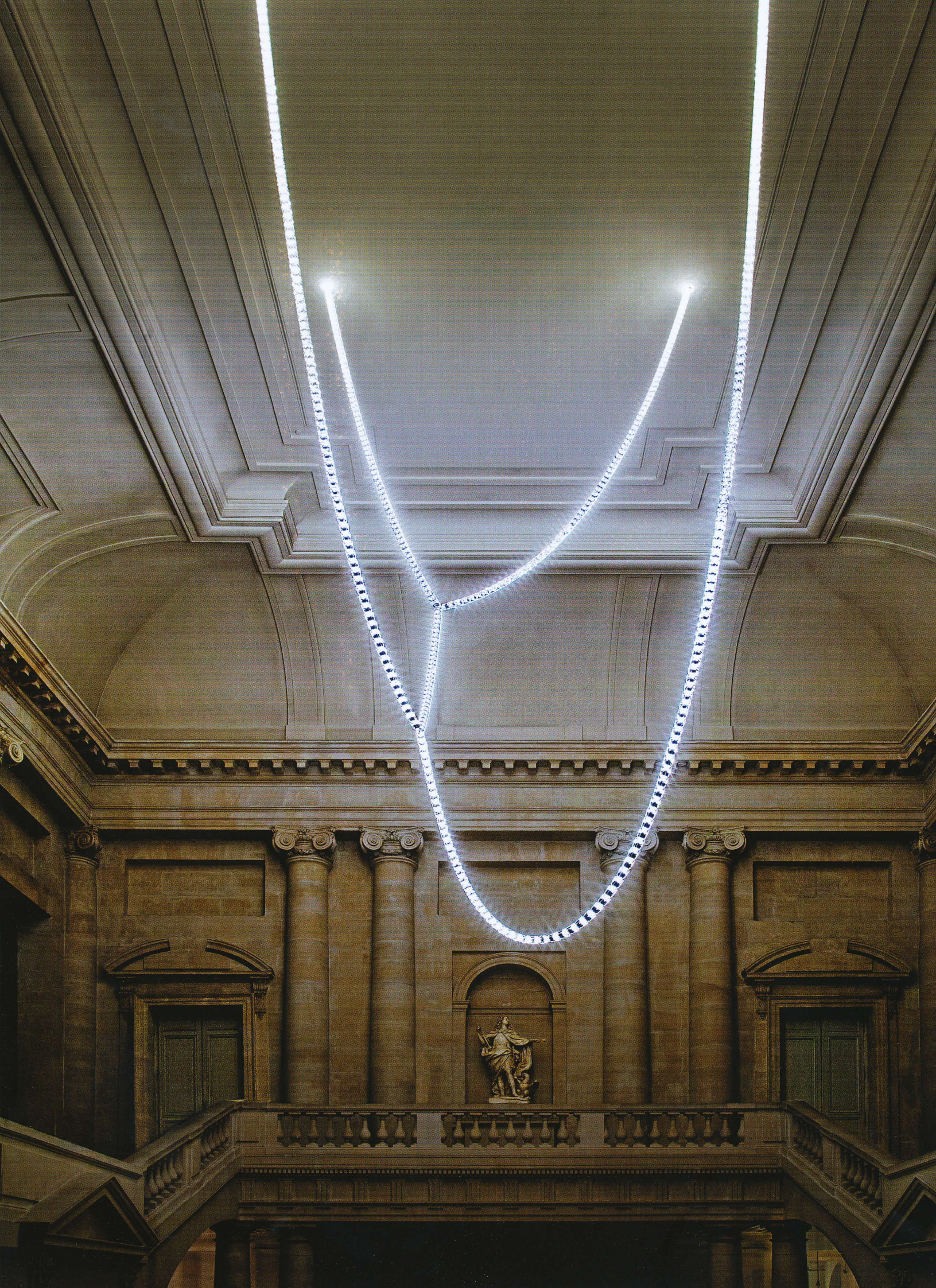
Salt

Celebrating Crystals from Swarovski

NEW AGE

IRIS APFEL
SISTER BY SIBLING
STEPHEN WEBSTER
JEAN PAUL GAULTIER
MAISON MARTIN MARGIELA
ÉRIC VALLI





PALACE OF WONDER AND LIGHT

SWAROVSKI HAS COLLABORATED WITH THE FÊTED FRENCH BOURULLEC BROTHERS TO CREATE THE FIRST PERMANENT CONTEMPORARY ARTWORK TO BE COMMISSIONED BY THE PALAIS DE VERSAILLES: THE GLORIOUS, GROUNDBREAKING GABRIEL CHANDELIER

WORDS MICHAEL PRODGER

The room in the Palais de Versailles – that great swagger of a building – that perfectly symbolizes the theater and glamour of Louis XIV's reign is the Galerie des Glaces, or Hall of Mirrors. The Sun King had the palace built to reflect his own magnificence and, in its most commanding space, the reflections were both literal and dazzling. Built between 1678 and 1684, the room is lined with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. Lit by 20,000 candles, it became a corridor of light and the showcase for both the King and his extraordinary new abode.

Work on the palace started in 1664 and, by 1710, it had largely achieved its current form. For the next 350 years, as both a building and a symbol, it was intricately bound up with French history: during the Revolution, Louis XVI and Marie-Antoinette were escorted from their rooms and taken to Paris and ultimately the guillotine, while, more than a century later, it was here that the signing of the Treaty of Versailles brought the hostilities of World War One to an official close.

Today, the palace is a museum, but it is nevertheless a living one. Its latest addition, filling a gap that had

been there from the start, harks back to the visual drama of Louis' Galerie des Glaces. In 1772, the architect Ange-Jacques Gabriel designed a spectacular staircase for the main entrance, to herald the *grands appartements* above, frequented by king and court. However, there had never been an eye-catching feature to define the space – until, that is, the palace's current custodians announced that there was to be a competition to create a spectacular chandelier. Fifteen candidates were considered and, in 2011, it was announced that Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec had won the coveted commission.

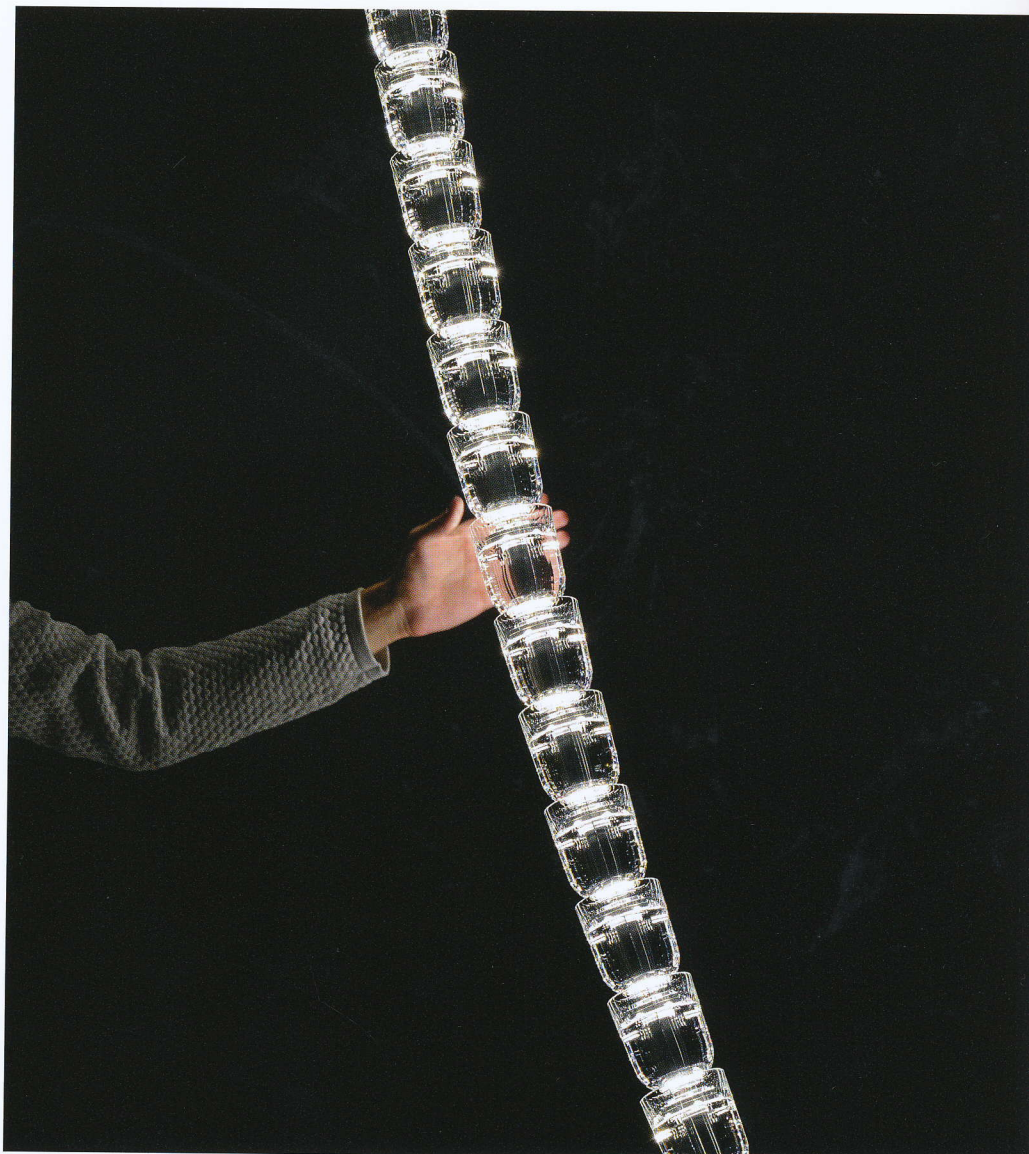
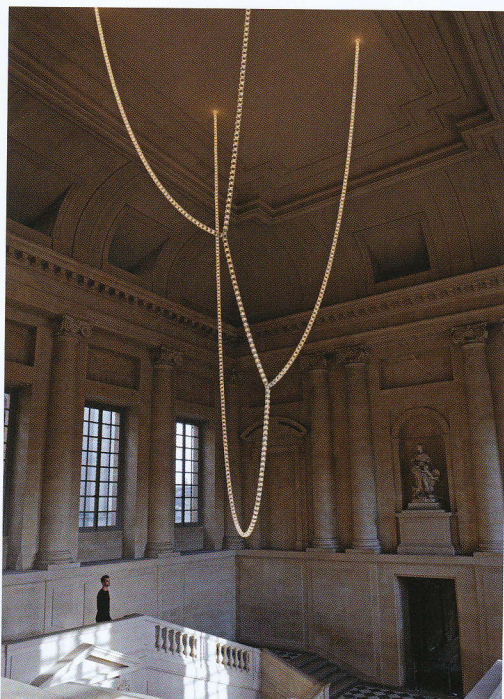
The Gabriel Chandelier is the palace's first permanent contemporary artwork and takes the form of a 12m chain of light strung from the ceiling in three loops. The Bouroullec brothers decided on crystal, they explained, because 'all the other chandeliers at Versailles were made of this material and this would ensure a link between past and present.' Their design called for 500 individual pieces of crystal, inside each of which is a block containing LED lights, and the way the crystals are cut diffuses the light to give an atmospheric glow rather than a sharp illumination.



LIGHT SHOW

This page, top: The Palace de Versailles' Galerie des Batailles. Middle, left to right: Carla Sozzani and Azzedine Alaïa; Ronan Bouroullec and Erwan Bouroullec; Vanessa Seward and Bertrand Burgalat. Bottom, left to right: Audrey Marnay and Virgile Bramly; Cédric Morisset, Alexandre Mattiussi, Nathalie Dufour and Anthony Vaccarello. Opposite: The Gabriel Chandelier in full and in close

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The brothers were keenly aware that the Gabriel Chandelier was neither a temporary artwork nor a piece of utilitarian lighting, but rather a feature that would be integral to the historical space and ‘installed, perhaps, for 100 years’, so they spent an entire year refining their design. Their decision to ask Swarovski to collaborate on the project was a natural one – not only is the house synonymous with crystal, but it has been a presence at Versailles for three decades, having helped create lighting systems that have modernised the palace without compromising its integrity.

The Bouroullec and Swarovski already know each other well. The brothers had previously taken part in Swarovski Crystal Palace, which began as an initiative to rethink the modern chandelier and, over the years, has become an art project per se. Among the designers who have also been involved in it are Ron Arad, Tom Dixon and Hussein Chalayan. The Gabriel Chandelier could almost have sprung from the same initiative.

Swarovski has many years’ experience as a patron, and of initiating and funding modern-art projects in historic buildings. Indeed, new ways of looking at and

enhancing important architectural spaces has become something of a hallmark of the crystal house. In 2011, for example, Swarovski commissioned minimalist designer John Pawson to create a groundbreaking piece, entitled ‘Perspectives’, for the London Design Festival. Earlier this year, the piece was placed beneath the cupola of the Basilica di San Giorgio Maggiore during the Venice Biennale. The Swarovski Foundation has also pledged to restore the statue of St George that tops the Basilica.

In the Gabriel Chandelier, the Bouroullec brothers sought to achieve a piece that seemed natural rather than forced, so the swags of their string of light fall in curves defined by gravity. They also had to contend with what they call ‘two contradictory imperatives’: to create something contemporary and ‘distinctly associated with our time’ that would nevertheless not jar with the 18th-century setting. It is the weight and length of their crystal string that gives the chandelier its form – and ‘a very natural and organic aspect’ – and allows those opposing demands to be balanced.

The Bouroullec knew the effect they wanted, but it was their collaboration with Swarovski’s technicians

that ensured it functioned properly. The chandelier is no simple string of lights: the LED cluster in each of the crystal ‘beads’ is, in effect, an individual lighting system. Creating light is easy, but creating the right sort of light – sophisticated, mysterious, hard to place – needs exceptional craft: if their work didn’t enhance the space for which it was designed, then they would have failed. As the brothers put it: ‘There is no other company dealing with crystal that has achieved this level in terms of research, innovation and technical excellence.’ The result is truly a homage to Louis XIV’s palace, and transforms the staircase into what might be termed an *escalier des glaces*.

In 1784, a courtier wrote that ‘most of the people who come to the court are persuaded that, to make their way there, they must show themselves everywhere, be absent as little as possible at the King’s *lever*, and show themselves assiduously at the dinners of the Royal Family... in short, they must ceaselessly work at having themselves noticed.’ How this man and his peers must have wished there was something akin to the Bouroullec’s magnificent chandelier to marvel at during those long hours spent trying to catch Louis’ eye.