

# Laura de Santillana Beyond Matter

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Gallerie dell'Accademia di Venezia

## English

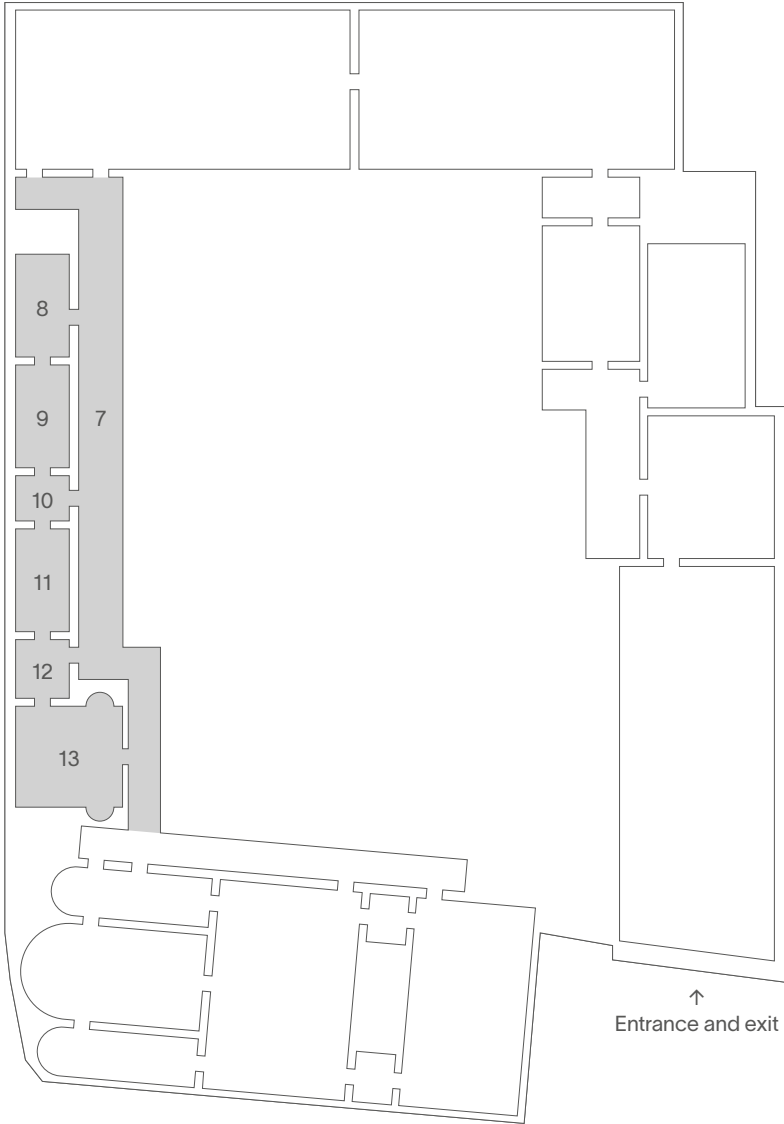
“Laura de Santillana: Beyond Matter” showcases some of the most iconic works by Laura de Santillana, an internationally renowned glass artist who continually pushed the boundaries of her material.

For De Santillana, glass was both a starting point and a challenge to overcome. Her practice was influenced by philosophical and theological reflections from South Asian and East Asian religion and culture, where the tangible and intangible, the physical and the spiritual, merge seamlessly. Her sculptures beckon us to reflect on the absence of metaphysical and spiritual dimensions in our contemporary lives.

The exhibition places sculptures crafted in the Murano tradition in dialogue with works produced in the Czech Republic, where De Santillana developed the “slumping” technique. Over six years, from 2013–2019, she mastered this innovative method of glass making.

The first three rooms display Murano sculptures arranged in “theoretical clusters” that highlight recurring gestures, both formal and aesthetic, that are essential to understanding the later Czech works. While the Czech sculptures are significantly larger and usually more experimental than their Venetian counterparts, they boldly stand as advanced and daring interpretations of the very concepts De Santillana was exploring in Murano.

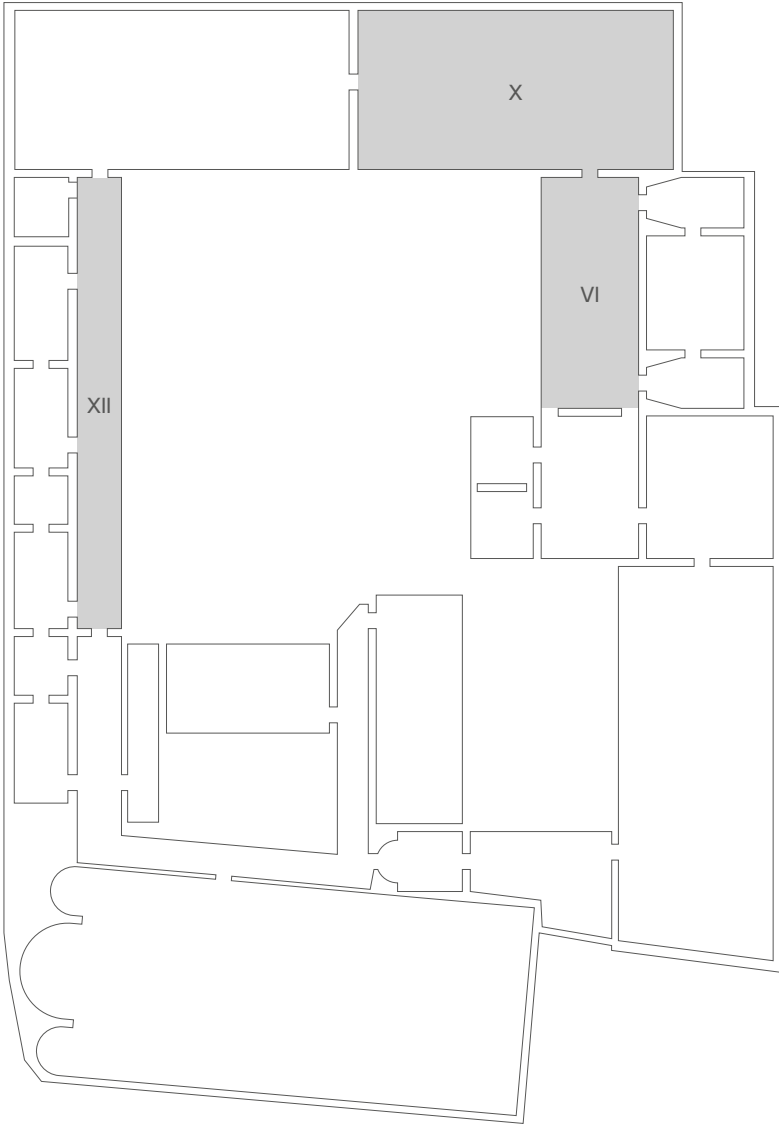
# Ground floor



Room 7 Seriality  
Room 8 Flattening  
Room 9 Framing

Room 11 Incisions  
Room 13 Color

# First floor



# Ground floor

# Room 7: Seriality

“I think in glass”, Laura de Santillana once declared.

Initially recognized for her role as a designer in the family’s business, Venini, and as the artistic director at EOS, De Santillana made significantly fewer design objects after Venini was sold in 1985. From the early 1990s, De Santillana would say that she was driven to create objects devoid of function — self-contained sculptures where glass becomes secondary to a profound aesthetic experience.

While she distanced herself from design, its principles continued to influence her art, especially the idea of seriality. Upon identifying a desired sculptural form, which she called the “initiator piece”, she would methodically explore its many variations. Each piece in

the series would build on the previous, and collectively they present a cohesive narrative.

Within this hall, visitors will find some of the artist’s most ambitious works: the *Twins* and *Triplets*. These artworks were produced in the Czech Republic between 2013 and 2019 using the “slumping” technique. This method involves reheating blown glass cylinders in kilns, which led to the distinctive liquefied effect within these sculptures. Perfecting this innovative technique, which defined De Santillana’s later creative years, demanded six years of dedicated experimentation.

Although the process behind these pieces was methodical — specific angles, temperatures, and timings — it is the interplay of chance and meticulous experimentation that truly defines them.

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| 1. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>118 × 36 × 16 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic       | 6. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>121 × 35 × 21 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic   |
| 2. <i>Twin</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>122 × 41 × 14 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic          | 7. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>120 × 48 × 16 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic   |
| 3. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>118 × 48.5 × 28 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic     | 8. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>121 × 36 × 16 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic   |
| 4. <i>Twin</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>121 × 41 × 13 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic          | 9. <i>Triplet</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>120 × 48.5 × 28 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic |
| 5. <i>Twin (840°)</i> , 2016<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>118.5 × 40 × 15 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic | 10. <i>Twin</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>121 × 41 × 13 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic     |

# Room 8: Flattening

Chance is a central element in glassmaking, and especially so in De Santillana's creative journey. The unpredictable nature of glass, combined with the swift, decisive moments it demands, led De Santillana to develop an unspoken language that often took form in subtle cues — a quick look or a few hushed words — effectively making the glassblower an “extension of her own hands”.

In 1999, while collaborating with master glassblower Simone Cenedese, De Santillana noticed the glass taking an unexpected turn. Reacting instinctively, she signaled Cenedese to embrace this deviation and continue flattening the collapsing blown cylinder, giving birth to the red *M8* sculpture that is displayed here.

This unconventional result stands in stark contrast to traditional glassblowing, which largely emphasizes rounded forms. Instead, De Santillana's technique results in an almost two-dimensional, canvas-like shape. Trapped within this flat, rectangular form lies an ethereal presence — possibly the lingering breath of the maestro — giving rise to unique patterns and intriguing imperfections. Following the inception of *M8*, De

Santillana would create hundreds of artworks based on this form. Drawing comparisons to ancient artifacts, these works were often referred to as “books”, “tablets”, or “steles”, emphasizing both their physical appearance and their evocative, timeless nature. De Santillana even designed a custom bookshelf in her home to hold and display particularly significant “tablets” she made over the years.

The quintet of tablets on display here exemplify the use of different techniques. Some underwent cold work for a matte finish, others boast metallic leaf applications, and some reveal uneven pressure-induced reliefs. While each piece possesses its distinct character, a consistent “serial” investigative method binds them. And when illuminated, they metamorphose. With every viewer's movement, radiant edges, emerging colors, and shimmering surfaces burst forth.

Within this flattened rectangular canvas, De Santillana created layers of complexity through a refined expressive language. This form, with its aesthetic research, allowed her to definitively break with industrial design, marking a point of no return in her creative process.

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| 11. | <i>M8 Pensée de feu</i> , 1999<br>Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass<br>34.5 × 25 × 3.6 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy                              | 14. | <i>(In 8.Vo) Untitled</i> , 2018<br>Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass, copper leaf, iridescence<br>27.3 × 18.3 × 3.3 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy |
| 12. | <i>(In 8.Vo) Lichen</i> , 2018<br>Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass, aluminium leaf, gold leaf<br>27.5 × 18.5 × 4.2 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy | 15. | <i>Ciel Terrestre</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and compressed glass, copper leaf, silver leaf, iridescence<br>33.5 × 33 × 4 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy    |
| 13. | <i>Nox</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and compressed glass, iridescence<br>33 × 30 × 6.5 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy  | 16. | <i>Untitled (Pavo)</i> , 2017<br>Hand-blown and compressed glass, copper leaf, iridescence<br>28 × 18 × 2 cm<br>Produced in Murano, Italy                  |

# Room 9: Framing

The Japanese concept of *engawa* denotes a covered veranda bridging the gap between a home's interior and its exterior, offering a space for relaxation. This term captures the "threshold" concept evident in De Santillana's sculptures.

Since her first trip to East and Southeast Asia in 1989, De Santillana's artistic research has been deeply influenced by Eastern philosophies. During these journeys, she became captivated by empty frames, photographing and collecting them. These frames poetically straddle the line between "inside" and "outside", standing as poignant thresholds that both bind and separate spaces.

In De Santillana's sculptures, there lies a powerful union between the interior (or core) of the artwork and its external frame.

Unlike traditional artworks where the frame might simply act as a boundary or complement, in De Santillana's works, this frame plays a more integral role — it becomes part of the artwork itself, inseparable from its essence.

No longer content with the mere suggestion of an internal space, De Santillana introduced materials that would underscore its presence. Using materials such as metallic nets and gold leaves, she highlights and sanctifies these interior spaces. Pieces like *Tav. I* capture this dynamic perfectly, where glass, reminiscent of supple flesh, drapes over and guards a metallic endoskeleton. These materials not only provide texture and contrast but also emphasize the 'inside' she wished to accentuate.

17. *Tav. I*, 2007  
Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass, metal wire net inclusion  
32.5 × 30.5 × 5 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy
18. *Untitled*, ca 2004  
Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass, metal inclusion  
26 × 26 × 3.6 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy
19. *Kumran (Infant)*, 2005  
Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass, silver foil  
35.2 × 31 × 6 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy



# Room 11: Incisions

De Santillana's approach leans towards abstraction. She aspired to purify form rather than seek figuration, yet there's an undeniable anthropomorphic presence in her works. Many sculptures, like those displayed here, possess body-like features derived from intentional incisions: a navel observed in *Blessure*, and a gilded backbone evident in *Untitled*. The artist herself anthropomorphizes her works, referring to the top opening of these sculptures as a "mouth".

It is almost as if she treats these openings as wounds, sealing them with gold leaf, a nod to Kintsugi, the Japanese technique where broken pottery is mended with

lacquer infused with powdered gold or other precious metals.

However, not all incisions are deep. Some are shallow and vertical, made with precision without compromising the piece's interior integrity, such as in *Egyptian Partitions*. This vertical pattern, suggesting a link between the celestial and the earthly, becomes prominent in the Bohemian *Twins* and *Triplets*, where it resembles a spine.

The incisions serve to both expose and injure the sculpture's essence. While materials can be torn, only a body can be wounded. This sentiment is embodied in the red piece titled *Blessure*, meaning "wound".

20. *Untitled*, 2006  
Hand-blown, shaped,  
compressed and cut glass,  
silver foil inclusion  
45 × 21.5 × 4.8 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy

21. *Mirra II*, 2005  
Hand-blown, shaped,  
compressed and cut glass,  
silver leaf  
53 × 24.5 × 5 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy

22. *Blessure*, 2003  
Hand-blown, shaped  
and compressed glass  
29.5 × 33 × 5 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy

23. *Egyptian Partition*, 2013  
Hand-blown, shaped and  
compressed glass, iridescence  
57.5 × 23 × 6 cm  
47 × 21.5 × 6.5 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy

# Room 13: Color

*"It was as if I found myself with painting tools in hand. As if I had bags full of colors already inside the works. The first [Flag] sculptures reminded me of canvases due to their two-dimensionality, but they had such a tangible substance that they inevitably became three-dimensional. I cannot imagine doing anything more painterly than with glass".*

Laura de Santillana

For De Santillana, color was not just complementary to form; it stood as its own distinct language, independent and equally expressive. De Santillana's interest in color began at Venini, and it developed into a central element throughout her career. From 1989 onwards, she embarked on global travels, immersing herself in non-Western traditions that enriched her understanding of color and form. Her extended research on color is exemplified in the *Flags* series, of which *Primary Colours* is a prominent example. This artwork, crafted with the intricate *incalmo* technique, draws the viewer's attention to the junctures of color, simultaneously highlighting and veiling these crossover points with an opaque finish.

In the early stages of her career, De Santillana often obscured the natural qualities of glass, opting for darker shades and matte finishes, as seen in pieces like *Primary Colours*. However, a shift emerged when she began experimenting with transparent crystal. This allowed her a glimpse into the sculpture's inner world, profoundly enhancing her appreciation for colors and their interplay with light. A testament to this change is *Sleeve*, resplendent in its ability to harness and project light.

Interestingly, while most of her creations shy away from allegorical interpretations, the *Sleeve* series is a notable exception. To craft this series, born from overlaying various blown cylinders, the artist draws inspiration from the color palettes and draping forms of the overlaid sleeves worn in courts during the Heian period in Japan (794 AD–1185 AD).

Within the spiral staircase stands a rare colored *Twin*, the result of extensive research with the "slumping" technique. In 2013, her interest in uranium glass led her to the Czech Republic in search of unique colors. However, she soon discovered that only crystal and opal could endure the slumping process. Over time, she meticulously developed a few resilient colors, with this *Twin* being a particularly rare success.

24. *Primary Colors*, 2011  
Hand-blown, shaped and compressed glass  
44.1 × 47 × 5.5 cm  
Produced in Murano, Italy

25. *Sleeve*, 2016  
Hand-blown and cut glass  
88 × 35 cm  
Produced in Czech Republic

26. *Twin*, 2017  
Hand-blown and slumped glass  
120 × 40 × 13 cm  
Produced in Czech Republic

# First floor

# Room XII: Bohemia

De Santillana produced works in Murano, the United States, and the Czech Republic. In each place, she faced new techniques, collaborators, work cultures, and color options. This significantly influenced her approach to experimentation and the possibilities to create her artworks.

In Murano, De Santillana further developed her expressive language. She fostered lasting relationships with her collaborators, deepening her expertise and infusing every creation with distinct details and intricate patterns. A keen knowledge of the material empowered her to explore new concepts, spanning diverse shapes, colors, and finishes. In the United States, she was introduced to larger-scale projects demanding specialized teams, distinct technical skills, and bespoke production methods. Despite the cultural adjustments, her adeptness in the universal lexicon of glassblowing and a shared passion for the craft ensured her visions were precisely realized. On the other hand, De Santillana's initial venture into Bohemia

presented considerable challenges. Drawn initially by the region's celebrated uranium colors, it was the allure of the vast potential the slumping technique presented that anchored her there. However, this pursuit proved challenging. Her collaborators, engineers who worked in an industrial context, struggled to assist in the realization of an ambitious artist's vision. Perhaps it was this very setting, a place of rebeginning and recalibration, that emboldened De Santillana to be audacious with her experimentation.

The sculptures showcased here represent six years of honing the slumping technique. Diverging sharply from traditional glassblowing, this method melts glass in large kilns, resulting in sculptures that appear forever on the verge of liquifying. Their smooth backs are shaped by molds they rest on in the annealing kiln, Bohemian color emerges compact yet layered, and the slits, bubbles, and folds reflect the "sweat" of these sculptures in the ovens, bearing direct witness to their experience.

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| 27. | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>74 × 39 × 10 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic    | 30. | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>71 × 39 × 9 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic    |
| 28. | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>75.5 × 39 × 9.5 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic | 31. | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>74.5 × 39 × 10 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic |
| 29. | <i>Untitled</i> , 2019<br>Hand-blown and slumped glass<br>74.5 × 39 × 10 cm<br>Produced in Czech Republic  |     |   |

# Room X: 7 Elements

This stand-alone installation represents the culmination of the artist's experimentation in Bohemia. Between 2013 and 2019, Laura de Santillana grappled with the challenge of crafting sculptures that could stand independently. Unable to find a solution during this intense experimental phase, she devised unique configurations that eliminated the need for a traditional base. Partly because of this, these sculptures exhibit an unusual dynamism as they are mounted on rotating bases that permit adjustments to each cylinder's orientation. De Santillana's enduring interest

in the symbolism of architectural elements, particularly columns, can be found in this seminal sculpture. Viewed in dialogue with Paolo Veronese's 16th-century masterpiece, *The Feast in the House of Levi*, a monumental painting with distinctive structural symmetry, *7 Elements* highlights De Santillana's desire to craft stable solutions for vertical glass works. Unlike the columns in the painting behind, De Santillana's glass pieces exude life, movement, and a hint of humanity, with vivid colors accentuated by their arrangement.

32. *7 Elements*, 2015  
Hand-blown and slumped  
glass on steel base  
178 × 270 × 45 cm  
Produced in Czech Republic
33. *Liquid Orange Red*, 2011  
Hand-blown, shaped  
and compressed glass  
58.5 × 63.5 × 8 cm  
Produced in Seattle, USA

Laura de Santillana  
Beyond Matter

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