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François-Xavier Lalanne, sculptor, dies at 81

By William Grimes

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Sculptures by François-Xavier Lalanne and his wife, Claude. (Jumana El Heloueh/Reuters)

François-Xavier Lalanne, whose menagerie of surrealistic animal sculptures included a cast-iron baboon with a fireplace in its belly, giant turtledoves that doubled as armchairs and a herd of topiary dinosaurs, died Dec. 7 at his home in the village of Ury, south of Paris. He was 81.

The family declined to state the cause of his death, which was confirmed by his wife and partner, Claude.

A painter by training, Lalanne created his own brand of surrealism when, in 1964, he unveiled "Rhinocrétaire," a life-size rhinoceros, whose side folded out into a writing desk. Endlessly inventive, he generated a zoo's worth of animals in the decades that followed: a "landscape fish," designed for the outdoors, with a rectangular hole in the middle that framed the natural scene like a painting; a giant fly, executed in brass, steel and porcelain, which did double duty as a toilet; and, most famous of all, 24 sheep covered in genuine sheepskin. Some of the sheep had faces, while others were shaggy bolsters that stood on sheep legs.

He wanted, he once said, to bring the notion of usefulness to sculpture and to demystify art, which he regarded as a fun house rather than a cathedral. Hence the sheep. "Just the fact that you can squat on it reduces the risk of this inappropriate devotion," he once said.

Lalanne was born in Agen, in southwestern France, and received a Jesuit education. At 18 he moved to Paris and enrolled in the Académie Julian, where he studied drawing, painting and sculpture. After completing military service he rented a studio in Montparnasse, next to that of Constantin Brancusi, who was a decisive influence on his work.

Through Brancusi, Lalanne met artists like Max Ernst, Jean Tinguely, Man Ray and Marcel Duchamp. Just as influential on his art was his brief stint as an attendant at the Louvre, where he worked in the galleries of ancient Egyptian and Assyrian art, surrounded by animal sculptures.

Lalanne managed to find a joke in the situation. "On Tuesdays, when the museum was closed, I couldn't help myself, I just had to saddle up on the statue of the Apis bull," he recalled.