

The work of Lalannes moves outdoors

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The artful sculptural oeuvre of Claude and her late husband François-Xavier Lalanne is about to go on display on Park Avenue, Manhattan. From September 13, eight of the French couple's monumental sculptures, including a riotous copper and bronze cabbage sporting chicken feet and a flock of 12 bronze sheep, will make up the first large outdoor Lalanne exhibition in the US. The works, which date from 1994 to 2008, feature in a show organised by the New York City Parks Public Art Program in conjunction with the Lalannes' dealer Paul Kasmin Gallery.

"I've wanted to show their sculpture outdoors for years because for too long it has been like a little secret, with only private collectors owning that work," says Kasmin, speaking from his Chelsea gallery.

At the same time, British admirers will be able to see open-air Lalannes in Sotheby's selling exhibition *Beyond Limits*, which opens on September 14 in the grounds of Chatsworth House in Derbyshire, northern England.

Prices are expected to be high. On Park Avenue the 2008 work "Choupatte (Très Grand)", the cabbage on chicken's legs, measuring more than four feet across, is on the market at \$450,000. Perhaps the prices reflect the sense that there will not be many more such works: François-Xavier died in December last year and his wife is 85, though still working at the couple's home and studio in Ury, a village not far from Paris.

To create their work – which they signed either Les Lalanne or simply Lalanne – the couple cast forms from life employing electroplating techniques. François-Xavier focused on large-scale sculpture, such as his 1964 "Rhinocrétaire", a life-size rhino with a desk in its belly, while Claude generated more fanciful pieces such as exquisite jewellery and Sèvres tea services encrusted with twine.

The Lalannes' work has been growing in popularity for the past few years, although they had been working together for 50 years. At London's Ben Brown Fine Arts, sales shot up 300 per cent between 2005 and 2008. "Clients are from all over the world, with the biggest growth in Asia," says Brown. A high point came in February this year, at Christie's Paris sale of the contents of Yves Saint Laurent's apartment, when a bar with a horn-shaped cocktail shaker by François-Xavier zoomed past its €200,000-€300,000 estimate and sold for a staggering €2,753,000.

It was in 1964 that Yves Saint Laurent and his partner Pierre Bergé commissioned François-Xavier to create the bar in 1964. Gradually they added to their holdings – mirrors cast from lily pads and tendrils by Claude, marble chairs in the shape of doves by François-Xavier. Paris interior designers such as Jacques Grange, who worked on the YSL/Bergé homes, ordered up Lalanne for other commissions as well.

With a range that covers huge installations in anthropomorphic forms, giant topiary shapes of dinosaurs, chairs, desks, jewellery and delicate domestic candlesticks, the Lalannes' work defies categorisation. Although some people saw the work as surrealist, the serious art world viewed the couple as more artisan than artist.



'Pomme de New York' (2007)
by Les Lalanne in Manhattan



'Olympe (grande)' (2009)
by Claude Lalanne

Even in the world of design, Americans took some persuading. In the 1970s François-Xavier created a bed akin to a can of sardines with fish as pillows, and a rhino that could be broken down into various chairs, for Jane Holzer at Daedalus, her artists' furniture company – but with disastrous results. “Sophisticated Parisians adored that work,” says Holzer, “but we didn't sell any at all here because Americans simply didn't understand it.”

Over time, the US design world, most notably the architect Peter Marino, cottoned on to the Lalannes. Today, Marino reports that he uses Lalanne in 50 per cent of his residential work, and he personally owns 30 examples. He says their art resonates with “a wonderful honesty and artistically interpreted statement of nature”. The Lalannes also feature in his commercial projects, including the Chanel boutiques in Beverly Hills and Hong Kong, the Dior Paris boutique, the Four Seasons Hotel New York penthouse and the residential condominiums at 170 East End Avenue. Valentino is a long-standing client, while ex-Gucci designer Tom Ford took on desks topped by alligators for his Madison Avenue men's boutique. Reed Krakoff, creative director at Coach leather goods, commissioned Claude to create “love apples” from casts of his and his wife's lips.

For new collectors the attraction goes beyond a luxury label. “They're drawn to the rarity, the fact that the limited editions are very small, only eight in each, and the craft of the hand-finished surfaces,” says Kasmin.

The fervour shows no sign of abating in the auction rooms. In May at Christie's Paris, Claude Lalanne's 2007 “Banquette Gingko” in copper and bronze jumped over its €20,000-€30,000 estimate price to fetch a hefty €151,000. “Without a doubt, the Lalannes are the hottest French designs of 2009,” says James Zemaitis, Sotheby's New York design specialist.

Joshua Holderman, who holds the same position at Christie's, speaks of a demand for vintage Lalanne. “I have more than a dozen clients seeking particular Lalanne examples, like a sheep for their garden,” he says, adding: “Most would never consider themselves collectors of design.”

This, and the fact that on Park Avenue the Lalannes are the latest in a series of shows that have included such sculptors as Fernando Botero and Jean Dubuffet, indicates that the couple have firmly passed to the art side of the design/art debate.

(source: <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/fcbc1552-98e3-11de-aa1b-00144feabdc0.html>)



'Singe avisé (très grand)' (2008)
by François-Xavier Lalanne on Park
Avenue, Manhattan