

François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne

Animal, vegetable, mineral

Apr 8th 2010
From The Economist print edition

Go to Paris for one of this spring's most enjoyable exhibitions

A SCULPTED grasshopper that measures six feet (1.85 metres) in length stands at the entrance to the private apartments at Windsor Castle. Made of brass, steel and Sèvres



porcelain, it was a gift to Queen Elizabeth from President Georges Pompidou after her state visit to France in 1972. It was an arresting, witty and practical offering: lift up the creature's back and the interior serves as a wine cooler. The grasshopper was made in Paris by François-Xavier Lalanne, who, since the 1960s, had exhibited with his wife, Claude, as the Lalannes.

Unlike Claes Oldenburg and his wife, Coosje van Bruggen, the Lalannes did not collaborate so much as co-create. These independent artisan-artists made their pieces out of metal, but he hammered and riveted while she moulded. In their choice of subject matter they were polar opposites. He favoured animals; she vegetation. Nevertheless, as a 150-piece retrospective in Paris demonstrates, seen together their works produce an echoing harmony. At once punchy and dreamlike, this is a hugely attractive show.

Visitors are greeted by a bronze rabbit, 11 feet long with ears blown back as if by the wind. Its feet, however, are hooves and its tail is that of a bird. The large bronze cat also combines elements of several creatures. When young, Mr Lalanne worked as a guard at the Louvre, where he studied its Egyptian collection. The influence of Hindu deities is also clear. Among his other works on view are a rocking-chair bird, a series of life-sized rhinos and a gorilla whose chest opens to reveal a safe. Many of Mrs Lalanne's pieces are fashioned from sinuous vines and leaves twisted into candelabra, garden benches, jewellery and gates. Their debt to Surrealism and Art Nouveau is obvious. So is their droll, devil-may-care inventiveness.

Mr Lalanne died in December 2008. His widow chose Peter Marino, an architect-decorator and longtime friend and Lalanne collector, to design this exhibition. The result is a mixture of intimate and public spaces; cosy rooms and sweeping, contemporary-gallery-style vistas. Some walls are covered in ivy. Part of the vast central court is a turquoise reflecting pool which has no water, but is filled with frogs and graceful waterfowl. It is backed by sand dunes on which two shaggy camels rest. Elsewhere in the court a flock of life-sized sheep straggle across a field of AstroTurf. It was sheep on rollers that launched the Lalannes' career. In 1966 Mr Lalanne sent a herd of 24 woolly ones to the Salon de la Jeune Peinture. Each could be sat on; together they became banquettes or beds. They were hailed as three-dimensional Magittes. The Lalannes were on the art map.

Alexander Iolas, champion of the Surrealists, became their dealer and introduced the Lalannes to America. A year after the Salon, the Art Institute of Chicago gave them a show, and *Life* magazine a four-page spread. "Baby" Jane Holzer, known as one of Andy Warhol's "superstars", asked Mr Lalanne to make one of his rhinos in leather. That beast, which breaks into a set of comfy-looking chairs, was shown in the early 1970s at the influential Castelli gallery in New York. It is one of the works on loan to the Paris show.

By the 1980s Mr Iolas's gallery had closed; minimalism and conceptualism were in vogue in America. It was not until 2007 that a dealer named Paul Kasmin began to represent them in New York. Their work was snapped up by a new generation of young collectors. Two years later, he organised a display of Lalanne sculptures along the traffic islands on Park Avenue, including Mrs Lalanne's bronze of a big, big apple.

The artists' greatest admirers have been in France. A room in the retrospective spotlights Yves Saint Laurent's acquisitions. Among them are a modernist bar by Mr Lalanne and a group of mirrors by his widow. At Christie's Yves Saint Laurent/Pierre Bergé sale last year the Lalanne bar sold for more than \$3.5m, over ten times the top estimate, and the ensemble of 15 mirrors for nearly \$2.5m, twice the estimate. The whopping prices and global coverage of the sale introduced the Lalannes to a new audience. Ben Brown, their London dealer, reports that his biggest problem now is not finding buyers, but works to sell.

The Lalannes have always occupied the borderland between high and decorative art. Some critics feel they did not break new ground; others the opposite, that they drew serious attention to this terrain. Rob Wynne, a New York artist who is represented by the same Paris dealer, will surely not be the only one to see the influence of the Lalannes on artists, such as Barry Flanagan, a Welsh sculptor known for his giant bronze hares, or the famous fish lamps made by Frank Gehry. In the Lalannes' world the down-to-earth and the funny merge with the fantastical and baroque.

"Les Lalannes" is at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris until July 4th. "Lalannes" opens at the Fairchild Tropical Botanic Gardens, Coral Gables, Florida in December 2010.