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Bronze Beasts Blur Line Between Furniture's Wild Side and High Art

At TEFAF New York, Galerie Mitterrand will show these nature-inspired sculptural pieces by the French artists François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne.

By Nazanin Lankarani

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For its first participation in TEFAF New York, the Paris-based Galerie Mitterrand will present a booth filled with crocodiles. Not slithering reptiles from swamps and rivers, but rather life-size bronze beasts made into ornate benches, armchairs and desks by the French artist Claude Lalanne.

Four crocodile-themed pieces will be among the 12 nature-inspired sculptural objects that double as furniture in the gallery's dramatically lit space on the ground floor of the Park Avenue Armory in Manhattan. The entire booth will be devoted to works by the French artists François-Xavier Lalanne and his wife, Claude, a couple known collectively as "Les Lalanne."

"Claude had a particular affinity for crocodiles," Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand, the gallery's founder, said in a phone interview from Paris. "She would take an actual crocodile, make an exact mold of its body, then take its separate parts and combine them into poetic pieces."

Ms. Lalanne's ultrarealistic, life-size crocodiles — complete with head, feet and scales — were molded from store-bought taxidermy of adult or baby crocodiles. They were treated with an electroplating process that fused a copper coating onto the forms, which were finished in bronze. They were designed to be made into functional pieces that blurred the line between art and design.

"Living with art was part of everyday life for Les Lalanne, which is why their pieces have a function," Mr. Mitterrand said. "François-Xavier used to say, 'Great art is an art de vivre.'"

Mr. Mitterrand, a nephew of the former French president François Mitterrand, first met the Lalannes in 1975 while working at Artcurial, an art editions gallery (today, an auction house). He would call on the two artists to produce multiples, like jewelry or small sculpture series, which the gallery sold. In 1988, Mr. Mitterrand founded his own gallery, and the Lalannes joined in 1990.

Six of the more spectacular pieces — namely the crocodiles and a pair of monkeys — come from the London and Southampton, N.Y., homes of an American collector who has asked not to be named by the gallery for privacy reasons.

The booth will most likely generate great interest among TEFAF visitors, judging by the current market frenzy for the Lalannes. The centerpiece of the booth is the "Grand Banc Crocodiles" (2003), a bronze bench with two large crocodiles suspended below the seat as if swimming among aquatic reeds. A version of the bench was sold by Sotheby's in November 2021 for €2,432,500, or about \$2,812,000. (Pieces by the Lalannes are one-offs or small editions of eight with four artist's proofs.)



Known together as “Les Lalanne,” the French artists and designers Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne were married in 1967 until his death in 2008. Ms. Lalanne died in 2019. Luc Castel/Getty Images



“Claude had a particular affinity for crocodiles,” said the gallery owner Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand. Ms. Lalanne molded the ultrarealistic, life-size crocodiles from store-bought taxidermy, including for the bench titled “Grand Banc Crocodiles” (2003). Claude Lalanne, Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris, via Galerie Mitterrand; Photo by A. Morin

A pair of armchairs titled “Fauteuil Crocodile à queue basse” (2015) features a bronze baby crocodile as a seat back and a crocodile-skin seat cushion. One of these armchairs sold in the Sotheby’s November 2021 sale for €1,525,000 (including auction costs). A crocodile desk titled “Bureau Crocodile” (2007-2015) is a version of a special order that Ms. Lalanne originally made for the fashion designer Tom Ford. She later produced the piece in an edition of eight. One sold in 2017 at a Sotheby’s sale for \$2,175,000.

“Claude worked regularly with celebrity designers and decorators,” said Mr. Mitterrand, naming Yves Saint Laurent, Peter Marino and Tom Ford as examples. “The original crocodile desk was first shown in Tom Ford’s boutique on Madison Avenue under a Lucio Fontana painting.”

The anonymous American collector met the Lalannes in 2007, before prices for these artists had surged, and bought pieces either directly from them or through Mr. Mitterrand. “His collection, part of which he will keep, is a great illustration of the close relationship between collector, gallery and artists,” Mr. Mitterrand said.

The Lalannes met in 1952 and married in 1967. They lived and worked in a picturesque farm in Ury, just south of Paris. Mr. Lalanne died in 2008 and Ms. Lalanne in 2019.

“I made the introductions, and the collector came to the atelier for lunch several times,” Mr. Mitterrand said. “There was magic in that modest farmhouse. Lunch was always a big production at Les Lalanne, and there was always something new and incredible to see in their studio.”



Contrasting Ms. Lalanne's real-life aesthetic is Mr. Lalanne's distinctly simplified style. He made this pair of monkeys, titled "Singes Alternatifs" (2013), out of silver. They will be the most expensive pieces for sale in Galerie Mitterrand's booth at TEFAF New York. François-Xavier Lalanne, Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris, via Galerie Mitterrand; Photo by A. Morin

Besides the crocodile pieces, the gallery will also offer for sale several animal sculptures executed in the distinctive pared-down style of Mr. Lalanne. Among them is a pair of silver “Singes Alternatifs” (2013) — two monkeys perched on a pedestal — the most expensive pieces in the booth.

A similar pair of monkeys was displayed in 2021 inside the Pavillon Français, a cottage on the grounds of the Palace of Versailles, as part of a show titled “The Lalanne at Trianon.” The bucolic setting between the Petit Trianon and the English Gardens of Marie Antoinette welcomed a playful menagerie of sculpted bronze animals dispersed mainly outdoors. Among them, a monumental, pensive gorilla — the “Très Grand Singe Avisé” — sat in a manicured royal garden, a flock of bronze sheep grazed in the fields by the Queen’s Hamlet, and a “Grande Carpe” flew above the still waters of a pond.

“There was a time when the Lalannes were considered ‘decorative’ artists, but the Yves Saint Laurent auction changed that,” said Edward Mitterrand, Jean-Gabriel’s son, in the same phone interview from Paris. He was referring to the 2009 auction at Christie’s Paris of the collection compiled by the fashion designer Yves Saint Laurent and his partner, Pierre Bergé.

“That auction propelled the Lalannes into the realm of contemporary art with sky-high price tags,” Edward said. In the Saint Laurent sale, 10 lots by the Lalannes sold well above their estimates, and two of them surpassed \$1 million. A set of 15 mirrors by Ms. Lalanne sold for €1,857,000; the “Bar YSL,” commissioned by Mr. Saint Laurent sold for €2,753,000, more than 10 times its low-range estimate of €200,000.

“These pieces may technically be furniture,” said Cécile Verdier, president of Christie’s France, in a call from Paris, but, she added, “on the market, Lalannes pieces are not considered luxury products so much as art or sculpture with roots in the surrealism movement. That is why we have listed a Lalannes piece in our upcoming art sale.” (Christie’s was not offered the collection consigned to Mr. Mitterrand.)

On May 11, Christie’s New York will offer for sale Mr. Lalanne’s “Bar Hippopotame II” (1978) — a hippo whose belly opens to reveal a bar — in a 20th-century art evening auction, estimated to sell for \$3 million to \$5 million.

“This is a good time for our client to sell,” Mr. Mitterrand said. “There comes a point when it is hard to sit down on a masterpiece that is worth \$2 million.”



Mr. Lalanne made “Grand chevreuil” (2014) from bronze. François-Xavier Lalanne, Artist Rights Society (ARS), New York/ ADAGP, Paris, via Galerie Mitterrand; Production Studio at Large, Brynn Heminway, David William Baum, Milton Smith