

collecting design...

with Daniella Ohad Smith.



Claude Lalanne and the Sensual Table

Last fall, a group of bronze furniture designed by the French husband-and-wife team of Claude and Françoise-Xavier Lalanne, for the Wallace garden at Colonial Williamsburg in the 1980s, was auctioned for millions of dollars. Collectors of 20th-century design were thunderstruck. Residents in the Hamptons and Westchester County, who, throughout the 1980s, had acquired fountains, outdoor furniture, and storage units, sculpted in the forms of wild animals, have known the work of the Lalannes. Their work as decorators for top Parisian couture houses had become synonymous with superb craftsmanship, and whimsical baroque design, but the recent sale moved the Lalannes' work up to the top of the A-list of 20th-century collectors.

While wandering the fantastic exhibition, *Feeding Desire*, at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum, I came across a silver flatware set by Claude Lalanne. For new collectors of 20th-century design, it is rare to find work by the Lalannes on public view. This exhibit offers a chance to become acquainted with Claude's creative vision.

The set, a dream of every collector, demonstrates Claude Lalanne's unique aesthetic executed with magnificent casting techniques, complicated natural forms, and a baroque aesthetic, while promoting a more provocative table. Looking back across five centuries of exceptional flatware design, the exhibit, open at the Cooper Hewitt until October 29th, showcases the museum's extensive collection of hundreds sets of flatware, cutlery, and other accessories for the table.

Unlike her husband's giant, massive and heavy work, Claude Lalanne has always been interested in small-scale objects, creating sinuous light, and exceptionally feminine detail. From the first time I was exposed to

have not taken away from its modernity. The pieces are still avant-garde, of the moment and completely unexpected and exciting.

Lalanne belongs to a group of designer who from the 1960s onwards were searching for alternative aesthetics to mass production modernism. When design was dominated by geometrical vocabulary and clean, minimalist lines, they were seeking to redefine good taste. This generation of innovative artists of the postmodernist era replaced the quiet elegance, neutral proportions, muted colors, and simple forms, with an extraneous extravagance and sensuality. Dining, the Lalanne service reminds us, is not solely about stainless steel and disposable culture, but



Flatware, place setting. Made by Claude Lalanne (b. 1924). France, 1966. Silver. Museum purchase from Decorative Arts Association Acquisition Fund in honor of John L. Marion, 1990-137-119. Photo: Matt Flynn

her work, I have been an admirer of her empirical approach, the richness and sensuality she has successfully achieved while revisiting Renaissance and Rococo forms, through organic impulse and a strong commitment to truly great craftsmanship. Her casts are often taken directly from natural leaves, shells, and twigs in methods practiced by Renaissance silversmiths. The sculptural set on view at the Cooper Hewitt was made in 1966, but the decades that have passed

can be also artistic, innovative, sensual, and almost aristocratic. The set reflects Claude Lalanne's love for beauty and food, and her ambition to turn dining into a special occasion. It is a live testimony that flatware is integral to the ritual of dining and can transform a simple meal into a great social celebration.

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