

**Movies**  
The man who wrote the screenplay for Hitchcock's "Psycho" has a recurring nightmare. It's about scads of creative sequels. /E-8

**Architecture**  
He may be a New Yorker, but Richard Meier, architect of the proposed Getty Fine Arts Center, knows the importance of nature in the city. /E-10

**Art**  
In a spectacular exhibit of Futurism, World War I airplanes hang in Italy's Palazzo Grassi not far from Campari ads and a spiraling collage. /E-12

## This pricey menagerie is more fun than fine art

### Lalannes' beastly furniture has its first L.A. exhibit

By Hunter Drohojowska

**F**or the last decade, furniture by artists, known as functional art, has been all the rage. Whether that means the wildly colored Memphis style of Peter Shire as seen in the film "Ruthless People," or the cool, minimal statements of sculptor Scott Burton, or the impeccable craftsmanship and design of artist Robert Wilhite, its creators are making art that is at least physically accessible and appealing to people.

Artists have made furniture for as long as they have needed a place to sit, but in the 1960s, a young French couple burst on the scene with an entirely fresh form of functional sculpture. Les Lalannes, as Francois-Xavier and his wife, Claude, are called, became overnight sensations in 1965 when Vogue devoted several pages to their flock of chairs in the shape of sheep — long hair, black faces and all.

At a time when most art was abstract and non-functional, the Lalannes caused quite a stir. While their work doesn't look as controversial today, a current L.A. exhibition at the James Corcoran Gallery proves it has retained plenty of charm.

The Lalannes are visiting Los Angeles in honor of their first exhibition here, and to visit their daughter Marie, an artist who lives in Venice and is married to film director Rick Elman.

One of the stars of the Lalanne menagerie is a life-size, bronze hippopotamus that functions as a bar; lift up the side of his belly and *voila!* there are shelves and tubs for storing liquor and ice. You store tins of peanuts and other munchies in his mouth, naturally.

Francois-Xavier Lalanne, who is responsible for the large, muscular animal sculptures, told a visitor to the gallery that he selects his beasts for their symbolic value. "For example, the hippopotamus is an animal of water, so it's good for a bar, or a bathtub."

Following the same logic, a massive bronze gorilla was chosen as a figure of security with a combination safe concealed in his chest. "In French, the word 'gorilla' means 'bodyguard,'" Francois-Xavier explained.

But what about a larger-than-life black cast iron baboon with the fireplace hidden in its tummy? "The French have an expression meaning 'interior fire,' and a man who has that has a lot of energy. And a baboon is very like man..." Oh.

Whether or not the animals are fully symbolic, they are adorable. But they aren't cheap. Converting strong French francs to dollars, these hippos and apes are going for some \$46,000. But the most costly item in the show was designed by Claude — a set of magnificent silverware, selling for \$64,000, that looks as though it had been picked from the garden of the couple's home in Fontainebleau.

Both of the Lalannes owe a debt to the surrealist tradition, but Claude more frankly combines flora and fauna in wholly new creations. Human thumbs grow out of snail shells, a cabbage sprouts bird legs, fennel bunches give birth to baby hands. Her jewelry in the shape of flowers caught the attention of couturier Yves Saint Laurent, who was already a friend and fan of Lalanne sculpture, and he began to include it in his collections.

One of the most famous pieces is the cast gold breastplate from 1969 that was included in his retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Claude also makes bronze chairs and tables that look as fragile as the leaves and flowers from which they are cast. When the sculpture of Claude and Francois-Xavier Lalanne is together in one room, the effect is like a little bit of "Alice in Wonderland."

When the Lalannes first started to make these fanciful items, the atmosphere of the art world was very serious indeed, recalls Francois-Xavier, who speaks English more comfortably than Claude.

"It was just at the end of the abstract period, which was still clashing with Ecole de Paris art. It was not possible to think of useful art," he explains. But the Lalannes' useful art caught the attention of art dealer Alexandre Iolas, who had just opened a gallery in Paris. Their exhibition there in 1965 drew negative reviews from art critics, though the press in general was intrigued.

Four years later, when the influence of pop art and the French Nouveaux Realistes movement gained acceptance, so did the work of the Lalannes.

But neither Francois-Xavier nor Claude have felt close to the world of fine art. "Art is like life," insists Francois-Xavier. "It shouldn't be so serious."

In Paris, Francois-Xavier studied painting at the Academie Julian while Claude studied architecture at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts and at the Ecole des Arts Decoratifs. They have been partners since 1956, sometimes working together, sometimes separately, developing their different styles. A key influence on Francois-Xavier was his job as a guard in the Egyptian and Assyrian galleries of the Louvre.

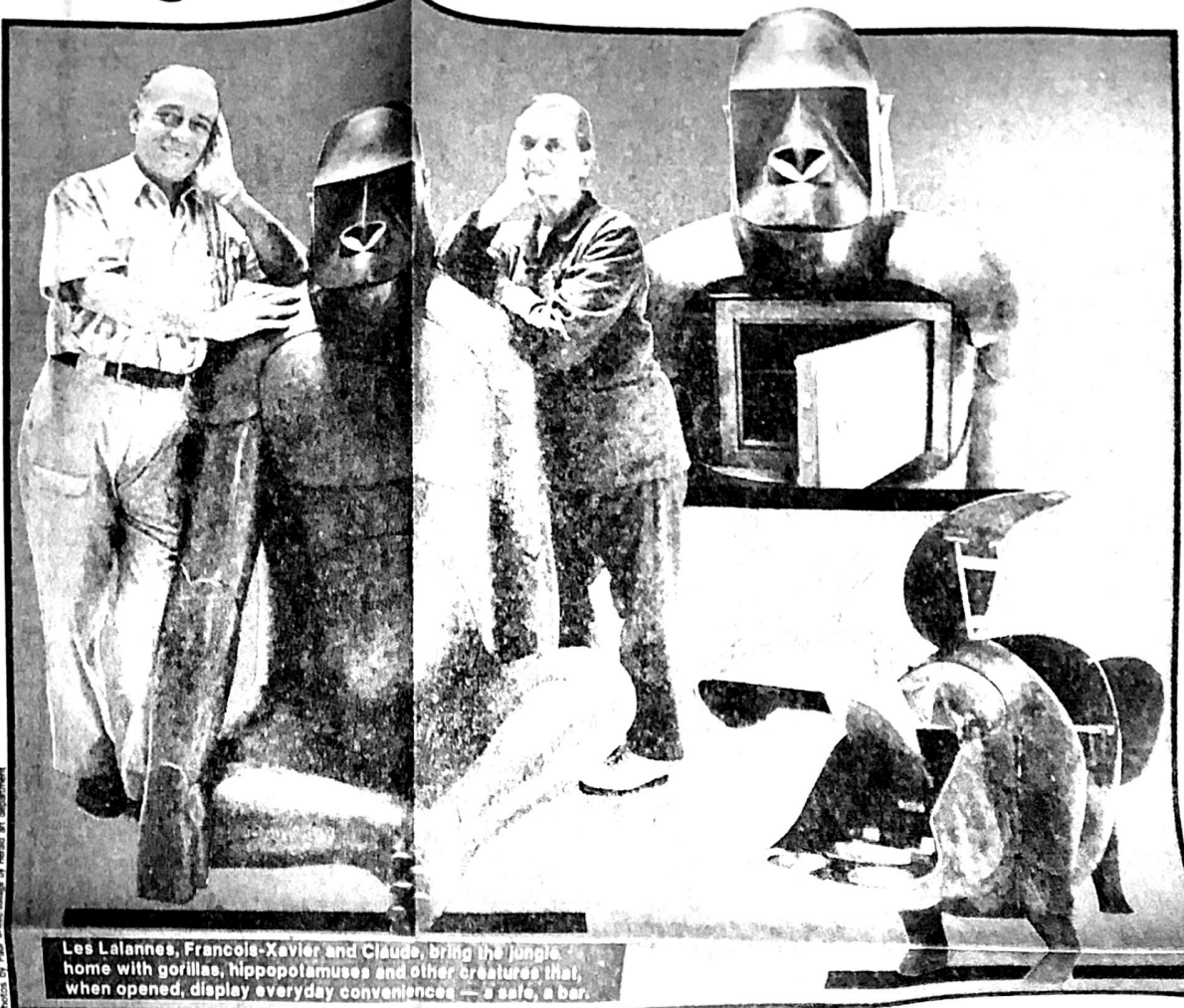
The stylized, massive sculptures of sphinxes, cats and other ancient animal sculptures plus the casual familiarity with rare works of art fueled the appearance and purpose of his art. Claude's architectural training led to her interest in public art projects incorporating gardens and fountains.

In collaboration with architect Kevin Roche, she has just completed bronze furniture and pots for the gardens of the Decorative Arts Museum of the Wallace Foundation in Williamsburg, Va. On this project, Francois-Xavier describes his contribution as unpaid assistant. Then Claude laughingly scolds him.

This city soon will have a Lalanne of its own. The couple has donated a topiary archway spanning a pair of elephants to the Lycee Francais in West Los Angeles, where the Lalannes' grandson is a student.

(The Lalanne exhibition continues through Aug. 2 at the James Corcoran Gallery, 8223 Santa Monica Blvd. Call 656-0662 for information.)

Hunter Drohojowska is a Los Angeles writer and critic who contributes regularly to Style.



Les Lalannes, Francois-Xavier and Claude, bring the jungle home with gorillas, hippopotamuses and other creatures that, when opened, display everyday conveniences — a safe, a bar.