

SERPENTS , DRAGONS AND BEASTS
OF THE NIGHT:
JEWELS BY RENE LALIQUE

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Rene Lalique

Art is the visual representation of the ideas of a culture. The art? The jewelry of Rene Lalique. The culture? France in the late 1800s, a time of great social, political, and spiritual change. Lalique translated this theme of change into a visual philosophy of beauty in metamorphosis. As an art nouveau artist, he used the character of flowing line found throughout the movement in combination with issues facing that society to make commentary on life in that time. Current to his time were many diverse philosophies. Lalique put his own into a visual language, put progress in perspective, and showed us his direction.

Rene Lalique was born in 1862 in France and died in 1954.¹ At the age of sixteen, he began a two-year apprenticeship under Paris jeweler Louis Aucoc, and then went to England to continue his studies and become involved in the art nouveau movement.² In 1881 he returned to Paris to work for various firms, and between 1890 and 1893 he studied glass techniques in his workshop.³

Lalique's jewelry is a fascinating visual representation of one man's view of the times in which he lived. If "art is nature seen through a temperament,"⁴ then we need to look at what Lalique portrays with this in mind. France was in turmoil with the Franco-Prussian war of 1870.⁵ The

old Napoleonic order was in decline and demands of freedom by both men and women, and heralders of social reform were encouraged by the advent of industrialization. France was making the change from an agricultural community to a life of mass production. The availability of cheaper mass-produced items challenged the artist's role in society, and Lalique was in England to see the beginnings of the arts and crafts movement revolt against the lack of individuality of these items.⁶ Back in France, the Impressionists' rebellion against academic formal teachings, and the Symbolists in poetry, later to be expressed in art, concentrated on the inner idea, or dream (thanks to Freud) as a reaction against the harshness of the realities of the new industrial age.⁷ There also existed a diversity of philosophy from Tolstoy's "art as the communication of feeling" to Hume's formalist theories to Nietzsche's existentialist nausea in response to a world without guidelines. Nietzsche's approximate proclamation, "I did not kill God, I found him dead in the eyes of my contemporaries," gives you a vivid picture of his world of no hope.

Lalique had other influences as well; the opening of Japan to trade with the west in 1857 had its effect on him.⁸ The Japanese use of line, it could be argued, inspired much of the linear movement in art nouveau. But for this author, the migration period in Europe, 6 c. BC or 8 c.,

also a time of great struggle, may have been his greatest influence. Lalique's contemporaries were looking back in history for other influences and found a connection with the great change in the art of the migration period. Its dynamic animal forms, usually dual forms, expressed the life giving or taking struggle between man and beast as the period progressed. Renewed animation between man and man also expressed life-threatening struggles.⁹ These changes parallel the struggle art nouveau artists felt with chaos. Politically, economically, changes in the agro-industrial base also could be conveyed with the same themes and duality. Lalique reflected much of that metamorphosis in his work as well.

In botany, the discovery of new species, especially flowers, and the successful importation of exotic orchids affected art nouveau. These new advances in science encouraged the metamorphosis theme with its deeper understanding of nature, from plant and insect life to the change of seasons. The rediscovery of nature by these city dwellers was an important aspect of blending both nature and the new scientific and technological developments that promised to improve the quality of life. The French chemist, Louis Pasteur, is an outstanding example of a scientist whose advances saved lives. "His discovery that many diseases are caused by germs was one of the most significant steps in the development of modern medicine."¹⁰

He was responsible for the development of pasteurization and anthrax and rabies vaccines,¹¹ while technology provided human essentials at a cheaper price.

As a jeweler, Lalique explored techniques not used for centuries in his own culture that were introduced by the Japanese, such as enameling. In 1869 the Kensington Museum displayed three small tablets illustrating the Japanese cloisonne process. The firm of M. A. Falize, Aine, was the first to attempt to revive this art by emulating this technology.¹² This helped make enameling popular and accessible for future artists like Lalique. New materials were available as well like ivory, bone, horn, tortoise shell, and cheaper stones such as chrystoprase, used not so much for their monetary but visual and tactile qualities. Although Lalique was successful in blending these new materials with traditional techniques, a feeling of unease in his work may be more directly related, not to him as an individual or these blendings, but to his view of where society was headed.

Lalique's reaction against the turn his culture was taking is strongly represented in his disturbing images of duality, multi-leveled and at a first glance ambiguous. From a purely visual standpoint, actual distance is the first duality apparent; from five feet away the object appears to be one thing, from one foot away it is another, no less real, simply different. Psychologically, from five

feet, it is a pretty, shiny, colorful, harmless object that draws you closer to admire it. From one foot it may turn into a rather disturbing or even terrifying image, not any less formally beautiful. This distortion of nature to create fantasy is seen in his dragonfly brooch (Fig. 1) done in gold, ivory, chrystoprase; and plique-a-jour, an enamel technique likened to tiny stained glass windows, gives fragility to the piece. It appears at first to be a lovely dragonfly, but at closer inspection we see a slender beast with gorgon claws swallowing a nude female with a headdress of insect eyes and delicate wings. As a symbol of the struggles and even martyrdom of women, and perhaps metaphorically all humans, the exotic nature of the piece titillates the senses. As the piece metamorphosizes from its first appearance of beauty to a shockingly different scene, it creates the surreal sense of a normalcy of the ferociousness of nature. His images consistently harbor a serenity (particularly on the faces of the women--lambs to slaughter?) that may be the most disturbing aspect, considering their predicament. The dreamlike imagery, derivatives of nature, are easily manipulated by Lalique to fool the eye, yet must represent an actuality as well, perhaps a metaphorical trap. I refer to a trap because in many instances his work has a woman in some way contained by a supposed natural element or a mythical beast. Lalique's art almost always is a living creature that forms

the containment, unlike most art nouveau artists who contain their women in line symbolic of plant life, a more contrived and decorative motif. Current symbolist philosophy of the time included a distrust of women. One example of this aspect of distrust, secrecy, and eroticism can be seen in Gustave Klimt's paintings with the pronounced patterning obscuring the figure (Fig. 4). For every one of Lalique's works I find that supports this illusion (Fig. 3), I find another that alludes to the woman as trapped, such as his gold and enameled pendant with baroque pearl drop (Fig. 2). It portrays two women whose swirling hair is actually crows swarming about their heads. The royal blue of the crows and their angular treatment suggest a thorny crown relating, not so much evil or a question of whether or not she should be trusted, but a complacent martyrdom conveyed in a serene smile. Did Lalique feel a pained expression would convey ugliness? Would he hesitate to use it? Did he feel we would see it anyway? The presence of a certain shyness or the suspicion and distrust the illusion creates cannot be denied. As in this brooch (Fig. 3), the tattered-edged poppies have faded from their former glory and the patinated silver gives the piece a dark glow of evil. The expression of the glass and opalescent enamel face is menacing. At this time in history, strong, intelligent women were demanding freedoms previously unheard of and were beginning to lead

alternative lifestyles like actress Sara Bernhart. They were encouraged by industry because of the need for a large labor force. All of this can be taken as a metaphor for a larger picture. Men as well as women were struggling for new freedoms, politically and economically, which may explain why Lalique may have felt compelled to mask much of his statement with the use of women. He was selling his work, after all, to the upper class, the only patrons who could afford it. Since his statements for social reform would not be appreciated by the bourgeoisie, it was necessary to hide or shield his meaning with illusion, duality and fascinating imagery. He and other art nouveau artists did take chances; previous to that time it was considered bad taste for a woman to wear the female form.¹³

Lalique also used traditional Christian motifs in bright, daring ways. In the serpent brooch (Fig. 5), he uses plique-a-jour's transparent luminous light coupled with colorful opaque enamel areas to form the effect of patterning and depth. This splendidly ferocious beast is by no means the timid sneaky snake of Eden, but an unabashedly proud image, which provides a very different time-altered view of evil. In the company of civilized people, if you talk loudly enough you are sure to be embarrassingly ignored by those who should be refuting you. You are then left to do what you set out to, normalize evil. Your only enemy? Those with the vision to see it

and act, like Rene Lalique, who proclaimed it to a world unfortunately not listening.

The art nouveau movement did not simply go out of style, it was rejected, not so much for its visual style, but for what it communicated to us. The sharp move away from its naturalism to a more industrial, geometric, cubist ideal left the movement towards the rediscovery of nature behind. These concerns brushed aside in the face of progress. There are too many lessons we could learn from the past so as not to make the same mistakes in the future.

FOOTNOTES

Graham Hughes, The Art of Jewelry (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1972), pp. 113-4.

J. Anderson Black, the Story of Jewelry (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1974), p. 273.

Hughes, p. 113.

Emil Zola.

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Gyula Laszlo, The Art of the Migration Period (Florida: University of Miami Press, 1974), p. 17.

Academic American Encyclopedia, "Pasteur, Louis" (Connecticut: Grolier Inc., 1984), Vol. 15 P, p. 107.

Ibid., p. 108.

Lawrence A. Coben and Dorothy C. Ferster, Japanese Cloisonne (New York: John Weatherhill, Inc., 1982), p. 125.

Vivienne Becker, Art Nouveau Jewelry (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1985), p. 20.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1

Rene Lalique, Dragonfly Brooch, 1898. Gold, ivory, chrystoprased, plique-a-jour enamel. Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon. (Black, The Story of Jewelry, p. 274)

Figure 2

Rene Lalique, Brooch/Pendant, c. 1898/1900, 18-carat gold and enamel with a baroque pearl drop. Schmuckmuseum, Pforzheim. (Cartlidge, Twentieth-Century Jewelry, p. 17)

Figure 3

Rene Lalique, Brooch of black patinated silver, enamel and glass, c. 1898/1900. (Becker, Art Nouveau Jewelry, p. 59)

Figure 4

Gustave Klimt, Detail of Diningroom Mural, mosaic and enamel on marble, c. 1905-08, Palais Stoclet, Brussels. (Arnason, History of Modern Art, p. 83)

Figure 5

Rene Lalique, Serpent Brooch, gold and enamel, 1898, Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon. (Black, The Story of Jewelry, p. 271).



Fig 1



Fig 2



Fig 3



Fig 4



Fig 5

Postscript

I have included an additional bibliography on Lalique of which I could not obtain for this paper. I was sorry to find so little written about Rene Lalique and so little insightful analysis of that period of time in history. Reference to art nouveau may provide us with valuable insights into our development in the 1960s-1970s where many of the same issues plagued the period, unwanted war, experiments with drugs and a movement for more equality in the treatment of women to name a few. Not to mention the subsequent denial of the importance of these issues at the end of the art nouveau period, but the parallels of that type of denial today in the late 1980s someone out there must think too much consciousness is not good for the masses.

That means us,

Tracy Tisdale

ADDITIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

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Art et Decoration, "Rene Lalique." Paris, Vol. VII, 1899, pp. 13-22.

Geffroy, Gustave. Rene Lalique. Paris, 1922.

Collectors and Museums in Possession of Pieces by Rene
Lalique

Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon

- 1 Dragonfly Brooch
2. Serpent Brooch
3. Bracelet, gold, enamel, diamonds
4. Cockerel hair ornament

Musee des Arts Decoratifs, Paris

1. Brooch, gold and enamel
2. Chain and pendant

Austrian Museum for Applied Arts, Vienna

1. Brooch, gold, enamel, pearls

Schmuckmuseum, Pforzheim

1. Brooch/pendant, gold and enamel with a baroque
pearl drop

Collection of His Royal Highness Prince Ludwig Von Hessen
and Bei Rhein, Schloss Wolfsgarten, Germany

1. Pendant

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

1. Silver - gilt buckle
2. Hair-comb, gold, enamel, glass and topaz