

A Menagerie of French Whimsy Takes Auction Prices ‘to the Next Level’

A Sotheby’s sale featuring the personal collection of the sculptors François-Xavier Lalanne and Claude Lalanne rakes in \$53 million.



A rhino desk by François-Xavier Lalanne sold for €5.4 million with fees at a Sotheby’s auction on Wednesday. It is among the works in the personal collection of the French artist and his partner, Claude Lalanne. Credit...Sotheby's

PARIS — “Two million!” screamed a voice from the crush of Sotheby’s staff members taking instructions from telephone bidders.

The opening offer for the “Rhinocrétaire,” a welded metal writing desk in the shape of a rhinoceros dated 1991, was almost three times the low estimate of 700,000 euros, or about \$775,000 — and the auctioneer hadn’t even started the bidding. The desk eventually sold to another telephone client for €5.4 million with fees.

The French sculptors known collectively as “Les Lalanne” — the husband-and-wife team of François-Xavier Lalanne, who died in 2008, and Claude Lalanne — are among the few names capable of creating serious excitement in the niche world of design auctions.

They certainly did so Wednesday night, when Sotheby’s raised €48 million from a sellout session of 41 lots, the first in a two-day auction of

works from the Lalannes' personal collection. The low estimate for the entire sale of more than 270 lots was €15.9 million.

Most of the pieces at Sotheby's had been made by the Lalannes in their farmyard studios at Ury, south of Paris, where the couple had lived and worked since 1967. Ms. Lalanne died in April at the age of 93, survived by four daughters. Estates in France valued at more than €1.8 million incur inheritance tax of 45 percent, so the death of a successful French artist is often followed by studio sales.

Blurring the boundaries between art and design, the Lalannes' playfully surreal bronze creations have had a cult following since the 1960s. Gunter Sachs and Yves Saint Laurent were among the Lalannes' early patrons, while more recent collectors have included Peter Marino in the United States, François Pinault and Bernard Arnault.

"As always with this kind of sale, what seems expensive will turn out to look cheap, and the cheap will look expensive," said Ben Brown, a dealer with galleries in London and Hong Kong who has exhibited Les Lalanne since 2007.

Mr. Brown, seated in the front row of the salesroom, gave the second-highest bid for "Rhinocrétaire," the most expensive lot in the auction. "It was the bargain of the sale," he said. "It was a masterpiece."

The eight-foot desk was a unique item by Mr. Lalanne, but most works included in Sotheby's auction were editioned pieces, typically made by Les Lalanne in series of eight.

The Lalannes met in Paris in 1952 and began working together shortly after, though they would not marry until 1967. They worked in parallel, rarely collaborating, each having a distinctive vision.

For Mr. Lalanne, formative friendships with the artists Constantin Brancusi and Salvador Dalí, together with a brief spell as an attendant in the Egyptian and Assyrian departments of the Louvre, inspired animal sculptures that combined form and function in whimsical ways.

Sotheby's sale also included an example of his "Gorille de Sûreté I," a five-foot high gilded bronze gorilla with a safe concealed in its chest. Made in 2006 and from an edition of eight, it sold for €1.9 million, almost four times its high estimate.

And then there were his famous sheep sculptures that function, sort of, as chairs. A trio in gilded bronze, made in 2007, sold at Sotheby's for €2.1 million. In 2011, a flock of 10 sheep of bronze and epoxy stone made \$7.5 million at auction.

Ms. Lalanne, by contrast, found more inspiration in Art Nouveau and plant forms, creating exquisite benches and chairs from exotically-shaped, gilded bronze leaves.

A 2013 example of her garden bench, "Banquette 'Les Grandes Berces,'" from an edition of eight, sold on Wednesday to the London dealer Alan Hobart for €1.1 million. An almost identical bench from a 2009 edition sold for \$615,000 at a Christie's design sale in June, according to Artnet.

"This has taken prices to the next level," Mr. Hobart said of the Sotheby's auction.

He added, however, that he was not surprised by the interest. "It was a studio sale," he said. "They're icons in France, and respected in America and Hong Kong. And their work is just amazing."

Ms. Lalanne had her own sense of the surreal. One of her celebrated bronze "Choupatte" sculptures, which incongruously set a cabbage on spindly chicken legs, sold for €2.2 million, an auction high for the artist. It was bought by the same telephone bidder who bought Mr. Lalanne's rhinoceros and sheep.

What is it about Les Lalanne that inspires such prices?

"Design is supposed to be practical and comfortable," said Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand, founder of the Paris-based Galerie Mitterrand, which has mounted at least 15 exhibitions of Lalanne works since 1990.

But Les Lalanne did more, he added: "They make people dream."