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# The Surrealist Legacy of Claude Lalanne

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As a retrospective of her work sets to open in London, we reflect on the illustrious career of Claude Lalanne, the French sculptor who stole the hearts of Yves Saint Laurent, Serge Gainsbourg and more



François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne *Photography by Pierre Boulat*



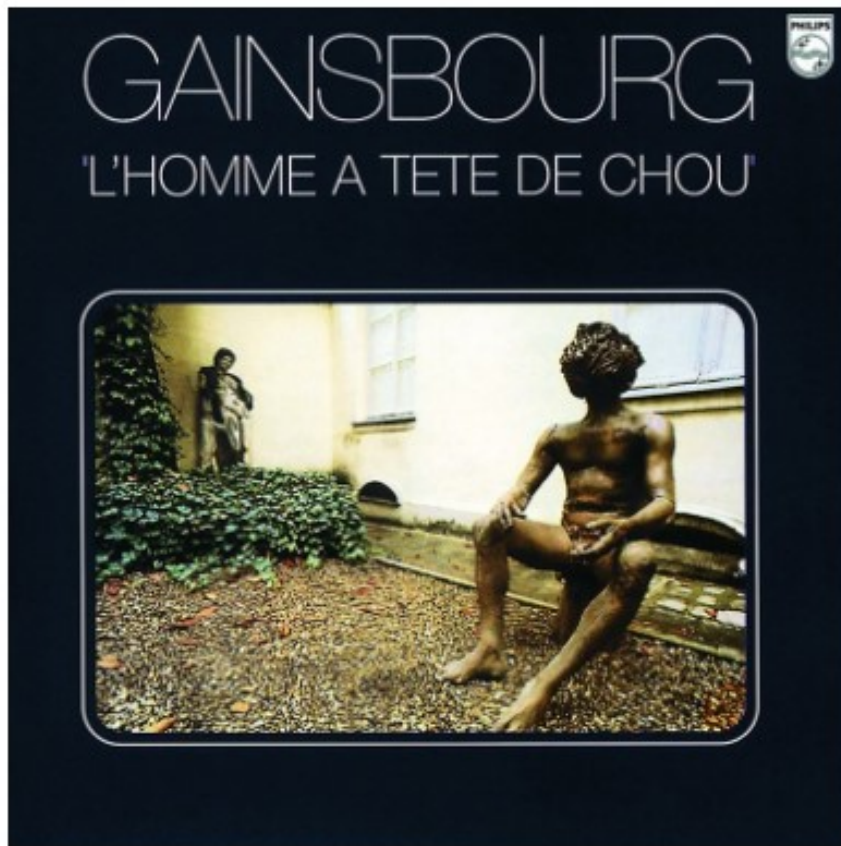
**Who?** Born in Paris in 1925, 92-year-old **Claude Lalanne** is one of the art world's longest standing surrealist pioneers. She initially studied architecture before a pivotal encounter with the painter Francois-Xavier LaLanne in 1952, with whom she fell in love and married in 1967. After their marriage, each turned to sculpture as their creative medium of choice, going on to work collaboratively as 'Les Lalanne' until Francois-Xavier's death in 2008.



Yves Saint Laurent in his garden with sheep by Les Lalanne and models wearing the Haute Couture A/W69 collection with sculpted busts and waists by Claude Lalanne

Les Lalanne were Montparnasse neighbours of sculptor Constantin Brancusi (who would pop by in the evenings bearing vodka, cigarettes and plums) and also befriended fellow artists Salvador Dalí, Man Ray, Jean Tinguely, Niki de Saint Phalle and James Metcalf. Their work rejected 1950s and 60s abstraction in favour of a unique surrealist style, with some of their most famous pieces including the life-sized gilded *Rhino-Desk*, the faintly-unnerving *Bird-Bed* and the ironically awkward *Fly Toilet*.

Claude designed windows for Christian Dior and Yves Saint Laurent commissioned her to create sculpted busts and waists in bronze for his A/W69 Haute Couture collection, which fitted over billowing blue dresses dubbed 'Les Robes Lalanne'. Saint Laurent also asked Lalanne to design a series of zoomorphic sculptures for the Paris apartment he shared with Pierre Berge, while other jet-set collectors of her work included Valentino and Gianni Agnelli. But it was not until Serge Gainsbourg chose her strange nude sculpture *L'Homme à Tête de Chou* ('Man with the Head of a Cabbage') for the cover of his 1976 album of the same name that she gained popular recognition.



Serge Gainsbourg, L'Homme à Tête De Chou album artwork

**What?** Now, a forthcoming retrospective at the Louisa Guinness Gallery in London brings together much of Lalanne's poetic small-scale sculpture and jewellery for the first time, many of the pieces from across her 50-year career having never been shown before, and offers 'a rare glimpse into her surrealist world'. Her work is both striking and accessible, possessing a whimsical beauty as well as a utilitarian function. Lalanne draws uncanny inspiration from natural forms; she frequently transforms ephemeral shapes from her garden at Ury (south of Paris) into lasting copper gems via an electroplating process and these, alongside a seductive and delicately handcrafted jewellery box, form some of the show's most notable highlights. Characterised by an infectious curiosity about the world around her and motivated by an intense desire to re-enchant our experience of it, Lalanne reiterates her husband's philosophy that 'the supreme art is the art of living'.



**Why?** Claude Lalanne's extraordinary body of work reminds us that everyday objects, both natural and constructed, possess a life of their own – totemically imbued with a fluid set of both personal and collective meanings. Copper-cast objects become, for Lalanne, performative spectacles; decoration of both the body and the home a joyous curation of the unconscious. In common with other Surrealists, Lalanne's sculptural collisions create radically new associations. Her work isn't just eye-grabbing, it doesn't just confound our expectations of what sculpture or jewellery can or should be, it is easy to live with and it gently encourages our curiosity, subtly provoking us to question how we live and why.

*Butterflies et Bijoux is at Louisa Guinness Gallery from June 9 - July 29, 2016.*



**Claude Lalanne**  
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