

René Lalique and the Birth of Modern Jewelry

Dear Guests,

I hope you enjoyed the lecture on René Lalique's extraordinary jewelry. As mentioned during our talk, this subject opens onto a broader exploration of Lalique's work, and I hope to revisit it in a future lecture dedicated to his remarkable innovations in glass.

In the meantime, I am delighted to share with you the attached document, which expands on several themes touched upon during the lecture. It offers additional context, examples, and reflections that I hope you will find both enriching and enjoyable. It was a true pleasure to delve deeper into these subjects.

Thank you again for joining me this evening with the Smithsonian Associates! I am very grateful to be able to share my passion for art history with such an engaged audience.

If you enjoyed the lecture, feel free to sign up for my newsletter and explore upcoming talks on www.artwithtosca.com. I would also be delighted if you might spread the word about Art with Tosca among fellow art lovers.

With my warmest thanks,

Tosca

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René Lalique & Sarah Bernhardt

We touched rapidly on the matter of the collaboration between René Lalique & Sarah Bernhardt but there is a lot more to be told about these two creative souls.

Sarah Bernhardt (1844-1923) was one of the most famous actresses of her time, a world-famous tragedian who enjoyed huge success on stage in the last quarter of the 19th century until the 1920s. She directed the Théâtre de la Renaissance in Paris, which provided her with great artistic freedom.

Lalique was commissioned to create stage sets and costumes for her productions. Lalique's designs for Bernhardt were often elaborate and ornate, incorporating his signature use of glass, intricate metalwork, and nature-inspired motifs.

The "Sarah Bernhardt Day" happened on December 9, 1896. The theatre paid tribute to the exceptional actress by organizing a sumptuous dinner at the Grand Hotel de Paris, followed by a gala at the theatre. On this occasion, Lalique was commissioned by the artists, management and staff of the theatre to produce this bronze bust (Fig. 1).

This exceptional bust constitutes an example of how versatile Lalique was. For this creation, he did not hesitate to venture beyond jewelry and glass which he was most familiar with.

For the same occasion, Lalique was also commissioned to produce a series of medals engraved with the actress's silhouette. The medals were generously offered as a commemorative gift to the theatre's 500 guests attending this special day. The example shown below in ivory (Fig. 2) is, as far as we know, unique. Musée d'Orsay curators suggest it might have been spontaneously engraved by Lalique for his friend, the painter Clairin, who was Sarah Bernhardt's acknowledged lover. Her famous frizzy hair is rendered with subtlety: the curls blend imperceptibly into the smoothness of the ivory. There is a perfect balance between material and subject here, helped by a mastery of the delicate technique of glyptic. This portrait, unique in Lalique's oeuvre, remains a leading example in the revival of the medal at the turn of the century.¹

This collaboration helped to establish Lalique as one of the leading designers of his time and further solidified his reputation as a Master of Art Nouveau design.

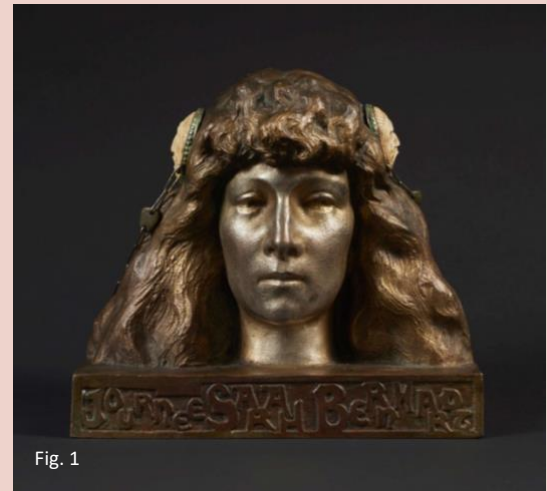


Fig. 1



Fig. 2

¹ Musée d'Orsay, website, artwork's description.

René Lalique and the expression of Love

The subject of couples sharing a kiss is rarely used in the decorative arts and less so in the field of jewelry. This can come as a surprise considering it is a common theme in the pictorial arts. In 1882, the French sculptor Auguste Rodin started working on a sculpted group, "Le Baiser", featuring the story of the ill-fated lovers immortalized in Dante Alighieri's *Inferno*: Paolo Malatesta and Francesca da Rimini. This piece was originally intended to be part of his monumental sculpture, the "Gates of Hell", but Rodin ended up exhibiting "Le Baiser" as a separate work in the pavilion dedicated to his oeuvre, located at Place de l'Alma, as part of the Exposition Universelle of 1900.

Lalique and Rodin corresponded regularly in the 1890s. They were most likely connected through Augustine-Alice Ledru, Lalique's wife. She was the daughter of Auguste Ledru, a famous sculptor at the time and a close friend of Auguste Rodin. Lalique would have been familiar with Rodin's studio and had probably seen the plaster casts before they were shown to the public in 1900.

Lalique's first reinterpretation of Rodin's subject appears to date from 1896-1898 when he carved in ivory a clothed couple in an embrace and sharing a kiss (fig. 3). A few years later, Lalique features a naked couple in a pendant and neck chain, once again in ivory, surrounded by green enameled foliated branches on gold stems bearing diamond-set flowers, one of which cascades over the lovers' faces (fig. 4). Around 1900-1902, Lalique represents the same subject in a brooch where the lovers' hair is made of gold amongst a thick blue enameled foliage surrounding them (fig. 5).



Fig. 3

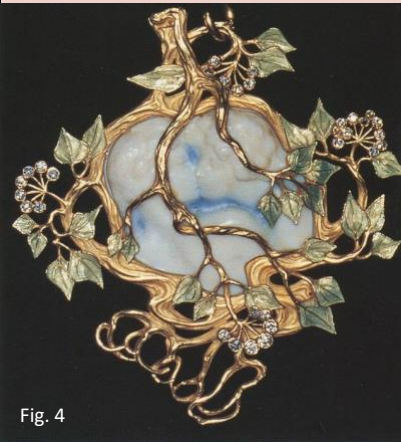


Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

In 1904-1905, Lalique treated the same subject using a transparent material for the first time, in a rock crystal pendant of triangular form. On this example, the couple sharing a kiss are interpreted using the intaglio and cameo technique (fig. 6). That same year, Lalique met Claudine-Juliette le Mesnil in London, while he was visiting his exhibition held at the galleries of Thos. Agnew & Sons.

In 1907, René Claude le Mesnil was born from Lalique's relationship with Claudine-Juliette le Mesnil (1870-1960). Katherine Purcell, from Wartski, London, relates that it is very tempting to suggest that Lalique's lover inspired the renewed interest for this subject of love. The brooch from the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, gifted by René Claude le Mesnil in 1960 also reinforces this idea. The brooch in carved glass (fig. 7), bears the poignant inscription '*Je rêve aux baisers qui demeurent toujours*', translating as '*I dream of kisses that last forever*'. Another revealing motif is the border with chased and patinated thorns, a

foliage symbolizing the suffering, tragic and agonizing nature of their love.

The ring (fig. 8) also represents a couple kissing made of carved glass also decorated with thistles. It is not sure Claudine-Juliette was the intended recipient of the ring, but the inspiration cannot be denied. This jewel is certainly one of the most poetic and expressive demonstrations of the joy and pain of love in Lalique's oeuvre.

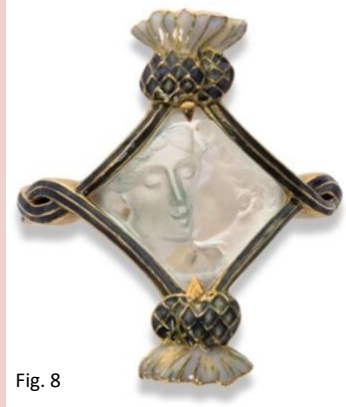


Fig. 8

René Lalique and landscape

In Lalique's jewelry, the representation of nature occupies an important place even if only a limited number of pieces on this theme have been made. The Musée d'Orsay is home to an important collection of personal photographs, taken by Lalique himself, confirming his close affinity with nature.

René Lalique, originally born in the Champagne region countryside, never fully acclimated to the busy urban city life of the French capital. Lalique's time spent in London and surrounding areas during his formative years (1878-1880) must have been a turning point. While in London, he discovered not only art but also the epitome of English literature with the writings of Shakespeare. Additionally, he was exposed to the Arts and Crafts, the English decorative arts movement led by the multifaceted artist William Morris. Lalique had in his personal library, several books in French by the author John Ruskin (who formulated the ideas and values of the Arts & Crafts movements from the 1860s). In some of these books, the English critic and art historian elaborated his ideas concerning nature, trees, and plants.



Fig. 9

During his married life, Lalique travelled in France and throughout Europe. He saw landscapes with the eyes of a photographer. Lalique's granddaughter Nicole recalls a conversation with her grandfather where he explained that the pictures taken on the park of the Clairefontaine property (near Rambouillet) inspired the landscapes of some of his most audacious pieces made at the turn of the century. Nicole also mentions a theme dear to her grandfather: the play of light in trees and in water, as reflected in some of his pictures (Fig. 9). A great interpretation of this theme in the jewelry of Lalique can be seen in the *Dryad and Willows* pendant (fig. 10 & 11).

Some of the drawings and jewelry pieces by Lalique leave one with an impression of melancholy and loneliness, such as the vistas of snow-covered firs of the stunning pendant of a winter landscape (fig. 12). This piece leaves little room for doubt to think it might have been inspired from a Japanese ukiyo-e print (fig. 13).

On larger-scale jewelry pieces such as neck plaques or bodice ornaments, the woody vistas are rendered into long parallel lines of bare trunks as admired on the Gulbenkian Collection choker (fig. 14) and the study for a dog-collar, "*Figures in an undergrowth*" (fig. 15).



Fig. 10

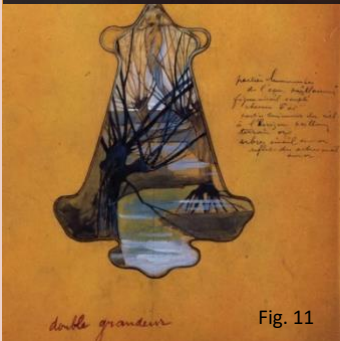


Fig. 11



Fig. 15



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

America's reception of the work of René Lalique

After his immeasurable success at the Parisian Exposition Universelle in 1900, the fame of René Lalique started growing outside French borders and notably reached North America. In the early years of the 1900s, several pieces of jewelry by Lalique entered important state collections (Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Musée du Luxembourg). This drew interest from international periodicals. Shortly after, Lalique was invited to exhibit his craftsmanship in exhibitions across Europe and the United States.

Lalique's break with traditional materials and motifs of the English and American styles of jewelry was a breath of fresh air and a welcome renewal in this field. Amateurs, collectors and craftsmen alike enjoyed Lalique's use of brilliant jewels, shimmering color and a more imaginative use of nature (insects, plants, flowers). In 1902, the American periodical *The Craftsman*, described Lalique's innovative style in a very positive review: *"The fresh and immediate ideas of Nature expressed in the flower-jewels of the French artist-craftsman speak volumes of hope for the continuance of the national art. In him history repeats itself. He has rejected the combinations of lines, the old meaningless symbols used by generation after generation of his predecessors to draw inspiration from plant and animal life; just as the Gothic artists spurned the dead Byzantine decorative principles to create their own vigorous and vital ornament."*² Irene Sargent, writer of the article cited above compared the creative drive of major pioneer designer Louis Comfort Tiffany to the one of Lalique's work in France. She was one of the principal spokespersons and advocate of René Lalique's designs and her writings gradually spread to collectors and others writers who shared reviews about Lalique's work aimed at the general public.

The Lalique exposition in St. Louis refers to the 1904 World's Fair, also known as the Louisiana Purchase Exposition, held in St. Louis, Missouri. Lalique was one of the many artists and craftsmen who participated in this event, showcasing his innovative jewelry style. The exposition was a major event that attracted visitors from around the world, and it was an opportunity for Lalique to introduce his work to an American audience. Lalique's work was well-received at the exposition, and it helped to establish his reputation as a talented artist and designer. This exposure also played a role in popularizing the Art Nouveau style in America and helped to lay the foundation for Lalique's continued success in the American market.

Alice Roosevelt, the eldest daughter of President Theodore Roosevelt, and Helen Gould, a member of a wealthy socialite family in New York were among the first American admirers of Lalique's achievements. Alice Roosevelt was a fashionable and influential woman who helped to set trends in jewelry and other forms of decorative arts. Roosevelt's and Gould's fascination for Lalique suggests that politically and socially prominent families in the United States paid close attention to the latest trends in French decorative arts.



World's Fair, St. Louis, 1904
 Library of Congress Geography and Map Division Washington, D.C.

Another remarkable American collector was Henry Walters of Baltimore, MD. At the St. Louis exhibition, Walters purchased several pieces by Lalique. Lalique created a bridge between the fine arts and the applied arts, a quality Walters appreciated in Japanese decorative arts which he was also amassing in his collection. On the selection of jewels purchased in St. Louis, the most notable is the Pansy Brooch (fig. 16). Like many of the other Lalique creations, the brooch's sheer size and delicacy suggests it might have never been intended to be worn. The Pansy brooch is one of the most stunning examples of the "plique-à-jour" enamel process. The variation of color observed in the blossoms is revealing of the Art Nouveau aesthetic. The Pendant and Necklace "La Source" (fig. 17) constitutes an exceptional example of Lalique's incorporation of entire human figures into his designs. This "bijou" also reflects Lalique's skills in mixing flowing lines, organic forms, and his use of innovative materials, uncommon in classic jewelry, such as the pale orange Mexican opals. "La Source" features a central fountain motif, surrounded by blooming wisteria vines, symbolizing the source of life. It is highly prized by collectors and is considered a rare and valuable example of Lalique's work.



Portrait of Henry Walters, 1938
 by Thomas Cromwell Corner

to regularly put his work before the public. By this point, anyone wanting to secure a meaningful gift for an important person would have the name Lalique on their lips!

In the few years preceding the first world war, Lalique was honored with great recognition in the United States for his overall creative contribution. Many publications continued

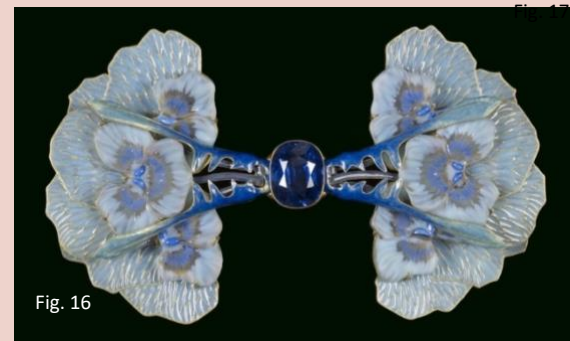


Fig. 16

² Irene Sargent, 'René Lalique: His Rank among Contemporary Artists', *The Craftsman* 3 (1902-1903), p. 68.

A selection of combs

Lalique produced a variety of hair combs over the years, and they are highly sought after by collectors. These combs are often made of horn or gold and feature intricate designs and details, such as flowers, leaves, and other decorative elements.

Below is a selection of some favorites, in addition of the ones in the presentation.



Comb, *Two Peacocks*, 1897-1898
Horn with patina, opal plaques
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris



Comb, *Medallions and Pansies*, c. 1901
Horn, ivory, enamel, gold
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



Comb, *Dancers*, c. 1897-1898
Horn, ivory, enamel
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon



Comb, *Cherries*, c. 1902-1903
Horn, enamel, gold, rose-cut diamonds
Dutch Renaissance Art Collection, Amsterdam



Comb, *Wisteria*, c. 1899-1900
Horn, enamel, gold
Museum of Applied Arts (MAK), Vienna



Comb, *Foliage and beetle*, c. 1902
Horn, citrine
Tessier Sarrou & Associates, Lot 22, Sold 11/10/2017

IMAGES TABLE

René Lalique & Sarah Bernhardt

Fig. 1
René Lalique, Bust of Sarah Bernhardt, 1896
Bronze, ivory, enamel, metal
H. 5.11 in ; Base : 5.9 x 3.3 in.
Musée Lalique, on loan from Property of Shai Bandmann & Ronald Ooi, Wingen-sur-Moder, Alsace, France

Fig. 2
René Lalique, Medal with profile of Sarah Bernhardt, 1896
Ivory - Diam. 10.5 cm
Musée d'Orsay, Paris

René Lalique and the expression of Love

Fig. 3
René Lalique, Haircomb "Two Lovers", c. 1896-1898
Ivory
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

Fig. 4
René Lalique, Pendant and neckchain "The Kiss", c. 1900
Ivory, enamel, gold, diamonds
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

Fig. 5
René Lalique, Brooch "Le Baiser" (The Kiss), c. 1900-1902
Gold, enamel and ivory
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

Fig. 6
René Lalique, Pendant "Le Baiser" (The Kiss), c. 1904-1905
Gold, enamel and rock crystal
Calouste Gulbenkian Museum, Lisbon

Fig. 7
René Lalique, Brooch "Le Baiser" (The Kiss), c. 1904-1906
Silver, carved glass
Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris (Inv. 38337)
Gift of Monsieur R. C. Le Mesnil, 1960

Fig. 8
René Lalique, Ring "Le Baiser" (The Kiss), c. 1904-1905
Pressed glass, gold and enameled thistle decoration
Aguttes, Sold 07/16/2020, Neuilly-sur-Seine

René Lalique and landscape

Fig. 9
René Lalique, La Benneterie, lac et berges boisées
Aristotype
Musée d'Orsay

Fig. 10
René Lalique, Pendant "Dryad and Willows", c. 1900
Chased gold, enamel on gold, "plique-à-jour" enamel
Private Collection, New York

Fig. 11
René Lalique, Preparatory drawing for "Dryad and Willows", c. 1900
Gold, opaque enamel on gold, glass, pearl
Lalique Museum Collection, Paris

Fig. 12
René Lalique, Pendant "Winter Landscape", c.1899-1900
Gold, opaque enamel on gold, glass, pearl
Private Collection, New York

Fig. 13
Kawase Hasui, Senzoku Pond in the Snow, 1928
Ukiyo-e

Fig. 14
René Lalique, Choker plaque "Wooded landscape", c. 1898-99
Gold, opals, enamels and diamonds
Musée Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon

Fig. 15
René Lalique, Study for a dog-collar "Figures in an undergrowth", c. 1895-1906
Indian ink gouache and watercolor on BFK-Rives vegetable parchment
Exhibited at Salmagundi New York, 'Lalique and Mucha: drawing inspiration', March 1 – April 30, 2022

America's reception of the work of René Lalique

Fig. 16
René Lalique, Corsage ornament "Pansy", c. 1903
Gold, glass, "plique-à-jour" enamel, sapphire
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

Fig. 17
René Lalique, Pendant and Necklace "La Source", c. 1902
Ivory, enamel, opals, gold
The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

LITERATURE

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Websites & online pages suggestions

- The online catalogue of the Claude. H. R. Sorbac collection – Sold at Sotheby's Paris in December 2021
<https://www.sothebys.com/en/digital-catalogues/claude-h-sorbac-la-collection-dune-vie-rene-lalique>
- The online collection of Henri Walters's Lalique pieces
<https://art.thewalters.org/browse/creator/rene-lalique/>
- About Lalique & Calouste Gulbenkian
<https://gulbenkian.pt/museu/en/rene-lalique-room/>