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Fallon Lee Miller

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Master Artist and Jeweler René Lalique

Fallon Lee Miller
René Lalique is without a doubt, the most important jeweler of the Art Nouveau period. His work was innovative for its time in many ways. The influence of nature on his work, his use of unconventional materials and techniques, and his unique themes were all imperative to his eventual success. As a leader of the Art Nouveau movement, Lalique’s work is ground-breaking and extremely unique.

Works of the Art Nouveau movement were most popular between 1890 and 1914. Art Nouveau, literally “new art”, is the French name for the movement. Though the movement was popular throughout Europe and had a different name for each region\(^1\), it is the French name that is still used today. Siegfried Bing, an art dealer in Paris, is responsible for the popularity of Art Nouveau. Bing persuaded artists to try textiles, furniture design, and other such mediums to create harmony within rooms. He eventually began to broaden his focus by giving a great deal of his attention to foreign artists. He would do this by engaging artists to transform French paintings into stained-glass windows or other media. The artists that he gave attention to included Louis Comfort Tiffany of New York and Henry van de Velde of Belgium. Bing tried to promote this art as an international market, but some critics claimed that by doing this he was denationalizing France. Unfortunately, these accusations caused him to back out of the spotlight of Art Nouveau. By 1900, Bing was exhibiting mostly works by French artists in his gallery.\(^2\)

Despite his retreat from the spotlight, it was merchants such as Siegfried Bing that helped to initially popularize Art Nouveau, which Michael O’Sullivan of the Washington

\(^1\) Stanley Meisler. “Art Nouveau.” *Smithsonian* 31.7 (October 2000), p. 76. Meisler mentions a few of the names that were used when the movement was popular: “Secession in Vienna, Jugendstil in Germany, Stile Liberty in Italy, Modernismo in Barcelona and, most famously, the one that stuck, Art Nouveau in France.”

Post claims, “is one of those things that, like pornography, is easier to recognize than it is to define.” Writers have called the work of the Art Nouveau movement “strange”, “melancholy”, “enigmatic” and “disturbing”, while, in the same article, calling it beautiful and elegant.

The jewelry of René Lalique demonstrates this beauty and elegance. Lalique was born in Ay, France in 1860. He began an apprenticeship with jeweler Louis Aucoc in Paris in 1876. This apprenticeship allowed Lalique to receive useful experience, learning rudimentary skills and the properties of a jeweler’s raw materials. He went to England to study at Sydenham College in 1878. Returning to Paris in 1880, he began to work as a freelance jeweler. While freelancing, he was appointed manager of Jules Destape’s workshop in Paris and in 1885 he took over the business. With this new position, Lalique was able to explore creating innovative jewelry. It is during this time that Lalique allowed himself to depart from the traditional style of his earliest works. He began to use novel and inexpensive materials, including translucent enamels, semiprecious stones, ivory and hard stones.

The most significant influence on Lalique’s earlier works and with his works within the Art Nouveau movement was Japonisme, the “craze in France and elsewhere for Japanese art and design.” Japonisme “took the European and American continents by storm” when trade routes to Japan were reopened in the late nineteenth century by the

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American Commodore Matthew Perry. The most remarkable characteristic was the simplicity of the art, and in its admiration, Western artists noticed Japanese artists’ strong relationship with nature, allowing their art to be “delicate yet powerful.”

Japanese art critic Toyojiro Hida explains that in many of Lalique’s pieces, the “design motifs themselves seem to be taken out of Japanese art.” While this is true, Lalique takes these motifs to a new level. In the comb, Swallows, Hida points out that the subject is of Japanese influence, but the actual design and composition is much more inventive.

Lalique creates the comb from the birds’ wings. This unifies the piece allowing it to flow. In contrast, the following Japanese Bridal Kanzashi Hair Ornament, dated pre-1940, depicts a scene that is simply connected to a piece that allows it to be placed in a

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woman’s hair. The flow between the ornamental and functional sections of the piece that is found in Lalique’s comb is missing from the Japanese set.

Creating jewelry with an influence from nature was not uncommon at the end of the nineteenth century, especially in the setting of gems, being natural themselves. Japanese artists of the nineteenth century were committed entirely to nature. Being a Westerner, this is not the way Lalique looked at nature, but Hida says that, as a Japanese critic, “some [of Lalique’s] pieces of jewelry dating from around 1900 in which bees or small insects are placed on plants to form, not a composition, but a moment in nature, seem to show Lalique’s affiliation with Japonism.”

This oriental, Japanese style that influenced and is sometimes found in René Lalique’s art is the foundation to understanding his themes and how he applied his knowledge of jewelry-making to his designs. As Hida points out, the Japanese influence is present, yet it is more of a unique characteristic than a main idea. It is, however, a starting point for Lalique’s designs. The fusion of Western and Japanese styles is best observed through the actual pieces of art.

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One of the most unique characteristics of Lalique’s jewelry was his unconventional use of materials and techniques. Throughout the nineteenth century, the value of a piece of jewelry rested upon the extrinsic value. Semi-precious stones and other unique materials were not considered to be of any value when used in jewelry.

French poet Gustave Kahn, in answering the question, “Prior to René Lalique, what was jewelry?” gives a perfect answer:

[Jewelry was] obviously ornament, but also a crude kind of luxury. The masterpieces of his predecessors, all founded on the brilliance of diamonds, seemed like portable cathedrals of light…The old jewel was based upon the idea of wealth; the new is built upon an artistic idea.\(^\text{14}\)

Lalique was responsible for changing these values in jewelry design. His pieces are treasured for the artistic originality and beauty that they possess, not the extrinsic value. No matter what materials Lalique used, he had the ability to reveal the distinctive qualities of each individual material.\(^\text{15}\) He revealed these unique qualities introducing the beauty of the semi-precious stone and using a variety of shades of gold, different enamels, irregular stones and materials such as horn. In the tiara, *Cattleya Orchid*, these natural materials allow the piece to incorporate the lifelike depiction of natural elements. The clever combination of translucent enamel and a central vein of diamonds highlighting the ivory flower give the piece its natural appearance. If Lalique had used traditional materials, the colors would not be as realistic as the colors in his enamels.


In the 1890s, Lalique began to incorporate glass as a major material in his jewelry. Previously, glass had only been used occasionally as a replacement material. The fantastic qualities of glass that Lalique revealed, such as its volume and transparency, and the wonderful effects that he achieved when using it in opalescent, enameled, and patinated forms\textsuperscript{17} made it a great element in his pieces. Lalique’s experimentation and “unconventional freedom of expression combined with formal arrangement of fantastic images” allows each of Lalique’s pieces to exist as an entity of its own.\textsuperscript{18}

However, it did take time for Lalique’s unique style to fully develop. Lalique had little success at the 1889 Exhibition in Paris. It was not until 1895 at the Salon du Champ-de-Mars that he had great success, but while many visitors to the event were

impressed, there was still criticism. Many argued that although his work was very good, it could not be worn. The critics who saw a problem with the function of Lalique’s work claimed that his jewelry was only suitable for display. One of his most noteworthy clients was the actress Sarah Bernhardt, for whom Lalique designed jewelry for her to wear on stage. Bernhardt developed a reputation as a serious dramatic stage actress and is considered by many to be the greatest actress of the nineteenth century. Some of her most famous performances include her debut in the title role in Racine’s Iphigénie, Zanetto in Coppée's Le Passant, and the Queen of Spain in Ruy Blas. Complimenting Bernhardt’s stage characters, Lalique’s designs were modeled after flowers, insects and snakes. Initially, the use of his work exclusively on stage confirmed opinions that his jewelry was not appropriate for general everyday wear, but over time his originality won over the public.

The style of dress around 1900 were dresses that “covered the whole body up to the neck, placing the face in a case, as it were, and enframing it in a lace collar, while

Sarah Bernhardt wearing a bayaedere chain by Lalique, a dog collar, and a ring.

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bright pearls and diamonds were chosen to emphasize paleness of complexion."^22
Lalique was prone to design fashionable jewelry that would highlight the neck, shoulders, or waist. Many women of the day would be forced to go beyond the standards of fashion in order to wear Lalique’s work.

The acceptance of René Lalique’s jewelry became so great that many of his unusual designs influenced other French jewelers of the time. The curator of the Musee du Luxembourg called René Lalique’s first public display at the 1895 Salon du Champ-de-Mars the starting point for the change of jewelry from an industry to an art.^23

The world was rushing toward developments in technical, economic and political aspects, and in turn, the art world was forced to follow. The uses of art were changing, and in effect, art itself was forced to change.^24 Lalique’s “modern” style, which adapted to these changes, was becoming more popular. The new style of art was so varied and complicated that almost anything produced around the turn of the century was classified as Art Nouveau. Lalique had the freedom to be more creative and never reserved himself to creating pieces that would be pleasing to the public. Holland Cotter, a critic of the New York Times, calls a “hyper-realistic enamel beetle on a corsage ornament by René Lalique…virtuosically rendered and utterly freakish.”^25 Lalique was not afraid to take risks with his art and it is clear that he was looked upon as a master by the critics of the day.

All of the development in the Art Nouveau world and in René Lalique’s style was leading to his huge success at the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris. The Exposition boasted 48 million visitors and included exhibitions representing forty nations. Lalique’s pavilion stood out as one of the leading displays at the Exposition. His magnificent pavilion at the Exposition, which he designed himself, featured a “wrought-iron grille with butterfly women linked by their spread wings” as the central piece. His showcase featured many horn hair combs with enamels, chrysoprases, amethysts and opals. Henri Vever, French jeweler and contemporary of Lalique, said of Lalique’s display: “You thought you were dreaming when you saw these beautiful things…a cockerel holding an enormous yellow diamond in its beak; a huge dragonfly with a woman’s body and diaphanous wings, enameled country scenes sparkling with diamond dew-drops; ornaments like pine cones.” This “strange and colorful display caused a sensation…It was acknowledged that Lalique had lifted jewelry to the status of fine art.” The unique style of Lalique’s display made him stand out as the new leading artist at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Lalique’s success at the Exposition created a huge international demand for his work and as he thrived, he continued to experiment as he had previously. However, his success allowed him even more freedom. Lalique’s work would now set the standards for almost all modern jewelry. His position as the greatest jeweler of the time is

26 Stanley Meisler. “Art Nouveau.” *Smithsonian* 31.7 (October 2000), p. 82.
undisputed. Although there are others who “command almost the same respect as that of Lalique,” most of them were inspired by Lalique to become jewelers.\(^{30}\)

Lalique continued to explore the many aspects of jewelry making that he had experimented with before his great success. One of the greatest aspects of Lalique’s jewelry as he matured was his choice of materials and techniques. He was never afraid to try something new and outrageous and did not overlook any possible ideas. The combinations of unique materials and effective techniques allow Lalique’s pieces to stand out among turn-of-the-century jewelry. It was probably Lalique’s experimentation more than anything else that allowed him to be so successful.

Lalique preferred to work with gold, usually yellow, but occasionally green gold, and he used the lost-wax process to cast solid-gold pieces. To create his other gold pieces, he usually used fretworking. This is a process in which a plate of gold is rolled, cut out, and “fretted out on the inside to produce the internal detail”\(^{31}\). He would later add enameling and other materials to his gold pieces.

The basic creation of gold pieces is important to the creation of Lalique’s jewelry, but it is not the only thing that made his work so notable among his peer’s work. One of the major techniques that Lalique used, especially between 1895 and 1908, was enameling. During this period, almost all of his pieces included some kind of enameling to add color. The enamel, whose color comes from metal oxides, consists of finely ground glass flux to which a small amount of water is added, allowing it to be easily

\(^{30}\) Charlotte Gere and Geoffrey C. Munn. “Chapter VI: Art Nouveau and Jugendstil.” *Artists’ Jewellery: Pre-Raphaelite to Arts and Crafts*. England: Antique Collectors’ Club, 1989, p. 201. This statement is confirmed through explanations of Gaillard, “who was persuaded to take up jewelry making by Lalique”; Dabault, “whose snake-entwined female figures are particularly close to certain of Lalique’s more exotic designs”; Lienard, “who uses the bee motif which occurs in some of the more modest Lalique pieces”; and several other examples. (p. 204).

applied with a brush. When heated in an enameling kiln, the enamel turns to liquid and adheres to the surface of the gold. Lalique’s favored enameling technique was *champeve* enameling. In this case, “cells were engraved into a plate, leaving only dividing ridges. These latter served either as the figure or as the ground of the motif.”

Translucent enamels allowed the gold underneath to reflect in the light. In *plique-a-jour* enameling, one of Lalique’s most elaborate techniques, he would achieve an effect similar to a miniature stained-glass window. On an openwork gold plate, a copper plate was attached to the areas which would contain the “windows”. After the enamels were melted, applied, and cooled, the copper on the back was etched away, and the glass was exposed to be visible from both sides. He also liked to use opaque enamels applied in several layers and varying colors, which when later cut would appear as a patterned gem. The combination of this effect and the elaborate *plique-a-jour* enameling can be seen in the watch, *Pine Cones*.

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Lalique used stones for the artistic value rather than the cost. He was concerned with matching the stones to his enamels. He favored blue and green stones, as well as warm brown and yellow shades. Diamonds are often found arranged as flower stems and as representations of other natural forms. The unique pairing of diamonds with cut glass produced an effective transparent and white color effect. Lalique also used opals in many of his pieces. He ignored superstitions that opals possessed evil powers and used the translucent stone with its indeterminate color for peacock feathers, flower centers, and to represent water. The use of pearls is another feature of Lalique’s jewelry, serving as highlights and finishing elements for his pieces. The use of the pearl as a final touch can be seen in the ring, Two Couples, the pendant, Two Cocks, and the pendant, Dancing Nymphs.

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Ivory is a material that Lalique used in both forms of flat relief panels and as three-dimensional sculpture. He would make the ivory translucent by investing the ivory

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with soft color and carving the background of the relief panels. He would then place an enameled gold plate behind the ivory, allowing it to glow through “in a subtle tone.”

The three-dimensional use of ivory can be seen in the tiara, *Cattleya Orchid*.

In 1896, Lalique became the first jeweler to use horn, which he valued for its transparency, pliability and malleability. He preferred buffalo horn from India and South America over the cow horn of Europe. Horn was the best material to be used in the production of combs. The comb, *Two Swallows with a Stalk of Oats*, pictured earlier is an example this. Lalique often embellished these combs with gold, enamel, and even precious stones, “which he fixed in place with hidden screws and rivets.” In the tiara below, gold, diamonds, and tortoiseshell are all embellishments to the initial horn comb. The diamonds give the leaves the realistic look of ice.

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Lalique eventually took the step from using glass enamel for color to using glass to provide form in his work. He pressed glass, cut glass, and even enameled glass. Lalique found that using glass gave him the freedom to create the intricate shapes that he wanted. With glass, he could reflect light in a way that he could not achieve with ivory. By 1905, Lalique was almost always using glass in place of ivory and his jewelry grew more and more transparent. Crystal glass plaques were being formed into pendants. Overall, the use of glass gave Lalique many options that he did not have with ivory, gems and the other materials he had used earlier. Nevertheless, he still favored the combination of materials to create sophisticated and unique jewelry, such as the brooch, *Women and Flowers*, which uses glass, gold, and diamonds.

There are themes that recur throughout his career as a jeweler. The most important of these are nature and the female form. Of these, nature is dominant in work of the Art Nouveau period and in the work of Lalique. It is not simply a representation of nature that we see in Lalique’s work. He thrived on the dreamy image of nature and

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*Brooch*  
*Women and Flowers*  
c. 1904-1905  
Gold, glass, diamonds  
1 ¾ x 1 ¾ inches

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often included surprise elements. The pieces may not seem extraordinary from a
distance, but when examining Lalique’s work closely, “figures appeared to be in motion,
flowers drooped and died, leaves rustled, trees bent in the wind.” It is often the minute
details that make a piece so extraordinary.

For examples of nature, Lalique was prone to take photographs and use them as
models. His love for nature, “whether in photographs or jewelry, always returns to the
same motifs, which express Lalique’s intimate relationship with nature as well as his
personal experience: the pine avenue, the firs, the lake or pond, the willows, the swans—
all were photographed on his property at Clairefontaine.” In the following
comparisons, the relationship between Lalique’s photographs and the jewelry that was
inspired by the scenes is obvious.

Lake at Clairefontaine

Pendant
Two Swans
c. 1897-1899
Chased gold, enamel on gold,
plique-a-jour enamel, diamonds
2 3/8 x 2 ¼ inches

In addition to nature, Lalique focused significantly on creating female figures in his jewelry. “His female figures, which were his trademark, depicted fertility and the pain of creation. They were sensuous, cruel or boyishly on the verge of womanhood.”

The use of the female form in jewelry was not widely accepted initially. It was not unusual to find the female form in art of the time, but many women considered wearing jewelry featuring the female form to be inappropriate and tasteless. This reluctance did not stop Lalique from continuing to use the female form in his jewelry.

Some of Lalique’s most unique designs are those in which he combines nature and the female figure into one. Each piece on the necklace, *Insect Women and Black Swans*, includes the figure of an “insect woman” and two black swans. The combination

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is completely unique. Joan Rosasco, art historian and coordinator of the *Jewels of Lalique* exhibition that traveled the United States in 1998, says the following about the necklace:

This spectacular necklace is composed of alternating radial components: nine gold and enamel spatulate pendants in the form of insect women and nine large circular opals in spiky settings. The disquieting image of a composite female, at once human, insectival, and avian, who effortlessly bridges several species anticipates the fluidity of natural categories characteristic of Surrealism. As is so often the case in Lalique’s work, the trancelike quiet of the figure and the perfect symmetry of the design counteract the sense of strangeness, dispelling any anguish we might otherwise experience. A symbol of whiteness, the swan also embodies notions of purity and solar radiance that the black swan inverses.  

![Necklace: *Insect Women and Black Swans*](image)

*Necklace: Insect Women and Black Swans*

c. 1898-1899

Chased gold, enamel on gold, *plique-a-jour* enamel, opal, amethyst

Diameter: 9 ½; Large pendants 2 ¼ x 2 ¼; Small pendants: 1 3/8 x 1 ¼ inches

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The corsage ornament, *Dragonfly Woman* is another example of the fusion of nature with the female figure. The grotesqueness of this piece is described by Jennifer Schaefer Philby through its depiction of “a dragonfly holding a half-eaten female.”\(^{50}\) The notion that women would consider wearing such a piece of jewelry shows the changing state of fashion around the end of the nineteenth-century.

The use of the female form and nature and the unique way that Lalique fused them together continued to be a major presence in his work. He was consistent with his themes even as he experimented with materials. The real change was in the way that he depicted his scenes, always striving to use the materials that would be the most realistic. He eventually found that glass was his favorite material and had the most potential for realistic scenes.

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Lalique’s fascination with the potentials of glass was so great that between 1909 and 1912, he completely abandoned jewelry making and began a second career as a glassmaker. His first steps in this direction may have been as early as 1890, but it is clear that by the time he achieved his great success as a jeweler at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, he was already leaning toward a new career in glass. By the 1925 Exposition Internationale in Paris, Lalique had achieved the same, if not greater, success in glassmaking.\(^5^2\)

Lalique turned to glass just in time to escape the dying style of Art Nouveau jewelry. This style, which Lalique propelled through the turn-of-the-century, tore itself apart intellectually and ideologically. “The modernity of Art Nouveau was a result of tensions between options forced upon designer and consumer by the situation each found themselves in: tensions between the individual and society, the past and the future, morality and amorality, technology and the body, the rational and the mystical, the natural and the artificial.”\(^5^3\) The artists of the period split, some becoming Modernists, others becoming Surrealists. Some of these artists were able to survive and adapt to the newer styles, but others were unable to change.

Lalique was able to thrive in his new career in glass. His pieces, including perfume bottles and vases, had new purpose. As he became farther removed from his Art Nouveau period, he began “mass producing stemware, tableware, inkwells, clocks,

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chandeliers, and of course, vases…so many could enjoy [his work].” In the 1920s, he designed hood ornaments for cars while continuing his primary work as a glassmaker.

René Lalique will always be remembered for his remarkable work in jewelry and his later work with glass. His early work, that which dates before 1910, is some of the most unique because of the innovative ways that he combined glasswork with jewelry making techniques. His fusion of styles is responsible for his sophisticated work.

After his death in 1945, Lalique’s factory, which had been forced to close as a consequence of World War II, was reopened by his son Marc. Marc Lalique and his daughter, Marie-Claude, were successful in continuing the Lalique legacy. This legacy exists because work of René Lalique is among the most unique jewelry created in history. His skill and enthusiasm for experimentation helped to make the jewelry field the artistic discipline that it is today.

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