

René Lalique – Masterworks of Art Nouveau Jewellery

BY DR. SIGRID BARTON

René Lalique (1860–1945) was the genius of Art Nouveau jewellery and the harmony of materials, technique and expression in his work has never been equalled since. He was born in 1860 in Ay, a little town in the district of Champagne. Soon after his birth his family moved to Paris, so that the French metropolis became his real home. The death of his father made a deep impression on his life. He had to leave school to start an apprenticeship at the age of sixteen. Talented in drawing he got a place in the workshop of the well-known jeweller, Louis Aucoc, for two years. In the evening he irregularly attended courses at the School of Decorative Arts. It was common at that time for young goldsmiths to go to foreign countries to acquire their skills so René Lalique went to London and studied at Sydenham College, an art school connected with the Crystal Palace.

Back in Paris he sought his fortune as a goldsmith and jewellery designer for great shops like Cartier, Hamelin and others. To further his education he attended courses in modelling at the Ecole Bernard Palissy. Later this became evident in the shaping of his jewellery.

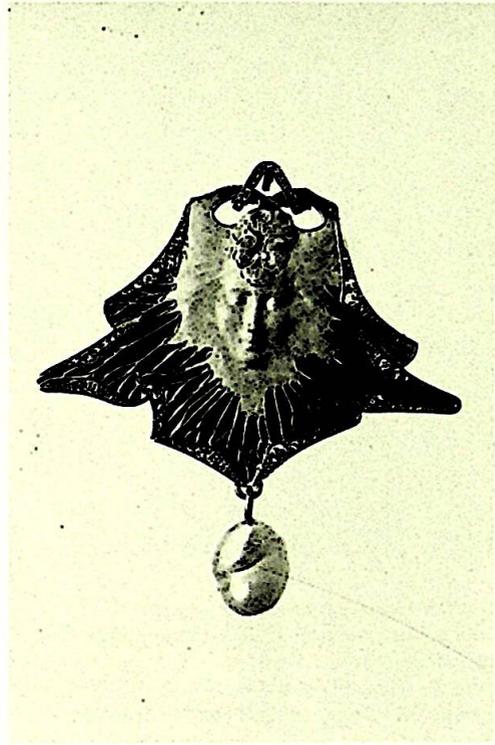
At the age of 35 he was happy enough to take over a completely furnished workshop of his own from Jules Destape, who was on the point of retiring. Nevertheless Lalique continued to work for Veveer and Cartier, no longer only designing now, but also executing diamond-set jewellery. Soon this and a second workshop became too small. In 1890 he took an apartment and a workshop at 20 Rue Thérèse, very close to the Avenue de l'Opera. Even there, he had no shop at street level, but his clientele nevertheless found their way to the first floor of the building.

Already by the 'Fin de siècle' Lalique's jewellery was expensive and appealed to aesthetic women of style. No wonder Lalique's clientele was limited to the progressively minded aristocracy, to the demi-monde and to artists and a few politicians who set the fashion. Lalique's works were intended for private and distinguished occasions rather than official receptions or banquets because they were meant to be seen up close. In 1895 the Salons in Paris at last admitted the decorative arts. Before then they had shown paintings and sculptures exclusively. At the annual exhibition of the Salon, Lalique received his first official distinction, and at the same time his work became known to a larger public.

After his enormous success at the Paris World Fair of 1900, one exhibition followed another, always with new and surprising objects: 1902 in Torino, two one-man shows in London in 1903 and 1905 (Grafton Gallery and Agnew & Sons), 1903 in Berlin and 1905 in Liège. His jewellery was shipped across the ocean to the World Fair at St. Louis in 1904.

In 1902 René Lalique built a house of his own at 40 Cours la Reine in Paris (today Cours Albert 1er), which still exists. For the construction of this five-storey building he involved his own ideas. The Lalique family apartment was located on the fifth floor, while his atelier and exhibition rooms were on the ground floor. The decoration for the main entrance was made of glass and wrought-iron. The balcony

and even his showroom were dominated by his pine-tree motif, a motif that appears also on his jewellery. In 1905 Lalique finally opened a 'real shop' at 24 Place Vendôme, where he showed glass-ware as well from 1907 onwards. In 1907 the house of Coty asked Lalique to design and produce perfume bottles which prompted the artist to pay more and more attention to glass as a material. A year later he rented and then bought a glass-manufactory near Paris and after the First World War he bought a second larger manufactory at Wingen-sur-Moder, which is still working to-day.



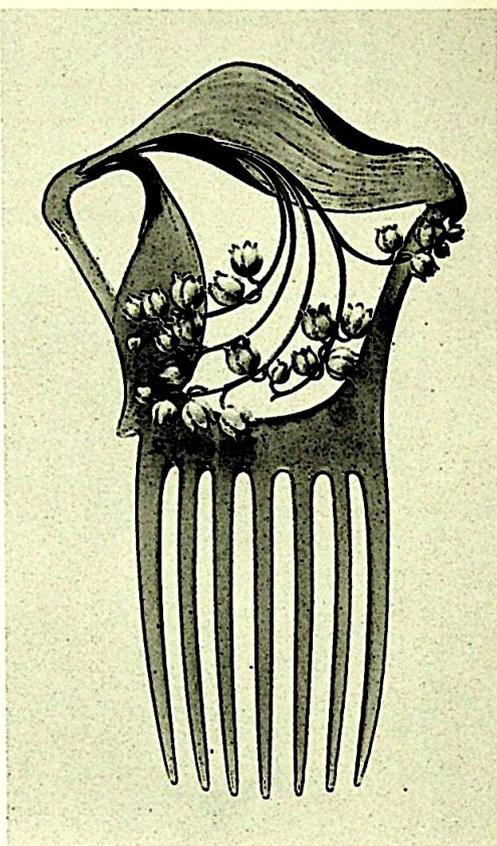
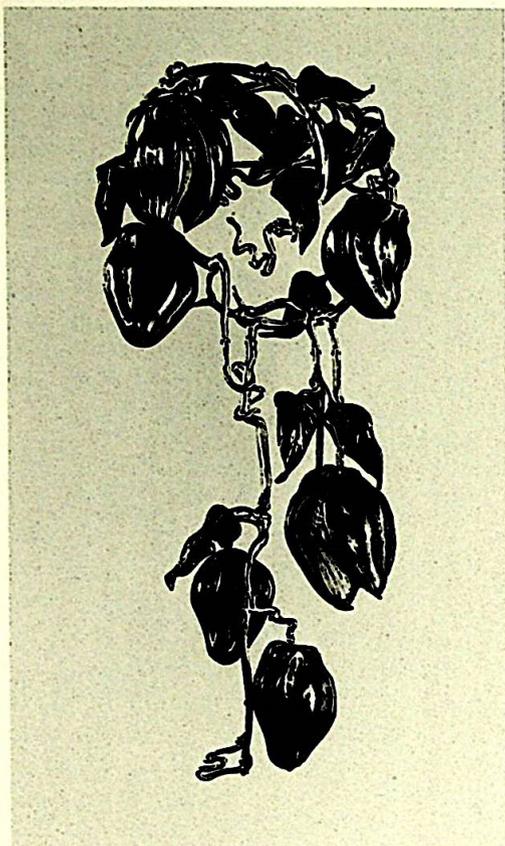
René Lalique: Brooch, 'Female head with poppy-flowers', silver, gold, crystal, enamel, baroque-pearl, H. 9.1 cm, 1898 – 1900, private collection, France.

The poppy flowers in the hair are a symbol for sleep and dreams. This brooch is not only a work of jewellery, but a miniature sculpture at the same time.

René Lalique: Pendant-brooch, 'La pensée', gold, enamel, brilliants, baroque-pearl, H. 6.8 cm, 1899 – 1901, private collection, Germany.

The French name for pansy has a double meaning, the flower and the thought. This is expressed by the centre with the appearance of a female head, crowned by a small pansy, while the whole shape of the object shows a fading pansy.

There have been two very distinctive artistic periods in Lalique's life: the first dedicated to outstanding jewellery until about 1910, the second and completely different dedicated to highly finished pressed and moulded glass.



René Lalique: Brooch, 'Clematis',
gold silver, enamel, H. 15.7 cm, 1899–1901,
private collection, France.

Although quite large, this brooch is to be worn comfortably, because the tender scrolls and stems are movable in links, so that they will not break.

René Lalique: Comb, 'Lily of the valley',
horn, gold, enamel, H. 15.5 cm, 1900,
Paris, Musée des arts décoratifs.

The head of the comb is formed by two leaves framing the tender stems of the white enamelled flowers. Horn is a material Lalique often used for tiaras and combs.

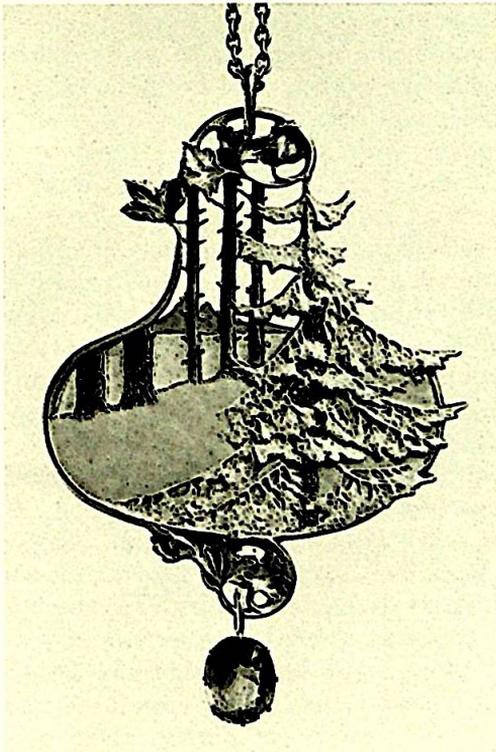
In order to understand his work we must recall the state of the jewellery market when he started work. Industrialisation had made many social changes. The upper middle-class and the 'nouveaux riches' had come into money, which they wanted to invest and to show off at the same time. The value of the diamonds was much more important than the artistic and skilful elaboration of the jewellery itself. On the other hand, the decorative arts were marked by many styles typical of the historicism of the period. Up to 1890 Lalique had designed mostly jewellery set with diamonds, brilliants and precious stones for the large shops. These pieces were not signed by him. Unfortunately, nearly all of these have now been lost.

In several European countries around 1895 – or even earlier – attempts were being made for a renewal in the decorative arts. They were searching for a new style

to fit the period that would get rid of the historicism with its' backward orientation. René Lalique, together with a few other artists like Emile Gallé, belonged to the forerunners of this movement. In the field of jewellery he was the first to try to liberate it from conventional eclecticism. René Lalique dared – against protests in the beginning – to create an image with expression and symbolism which was more than merely ornamental. At the same time he rediscovered materials, techniques and motifs from the Renaissance. Without any doubt Lalique got inspiration from the Renaissance and showed the human figure in three-dimensional form and relief.

The secret of Lalique's fascinating jewellery is that he understood how to join the effect of painting and sculpture together for his compositions. He enriched glass, mother of pearl, ivory and horn by cutting and carving reliefs and sculptures, surrounding them with sensibly coloured enamels on gold. These materials were not in general use for jewellery making at the time. Precious stones and pearls he only used for effective accentuation.

Apart from his use of unusual material, it was his style that made his jewellery so striking and convincing. Lalique showed the young female figure in context either with others in group form, or with flowers. His brooches and pendants are extremely expressive showing a face carved in ivory, semi-precious stones or moulded in glass. Landscape is another field quite unusual for jewellery. On this subject Lalique worked mostly around 1900. The next step in Lalique's iconography leads from the landscape to the plant. The oldest and most natural adornment in the world for René Lalique was a living thing and not just for pure decoration. Every single flower, even of the same species, showed him its' individuality, its' own



René Lalique: Pendant, 'Winter landscape', gold, enamel, sapphire, H. 9.4 cm, 1898 – 1900, Hamburg, Museum für Kunst und Gewerbe. This pendant was acquired at the World Fair of 1900 in Paris. The snow-covered fire-tree in the foreground is used as a 'repoussoir' motif for the trunks in the middle ground and the hills in the back. Compositions like this are inspired by Japanese woodcuts.

face. His remarkable powers of observation opened up for him many areas which others had passed more or less unnoticed. Using them as models, he transformed the most unpretentious flower to a real object of value. At the same time he was far from imitating nature. This is one of the characteristics and secrets in Lalique's art. The vegetation inspired him, but his flower-branches made of gold, enamel and glass are authentic personal creations. Lalique was able to give life to the dead matter by seizing one fleeting moment of blooming or fading in the life of a flower. There are so many different plants which inspired his jewellery. Among those he generally had a special affection for were the scented varieties, with petals in white, pale blue or violet, growing in single blossoms, umbels or clusters. In addition he preferred climbing plants and those with berries, as well as branches of certain shrubs and trees. It is evident that all the plants that occur in Lalique's jewellery are to be determined botanically. Although he was not educated in botany like Emile Gallé, the glass artist from Nancy, it was his love and passion for nature that made him respect the individual appearance of the plants. Many of these plants have an intrinsic symbolic meaning, often no longer known nowadays.

Lalique also paid attention to insects, being close to the plant world, such as butterflies, bees and dragonflies. Also elegant birds such as the swan and the peacock can be seen in his compositions.

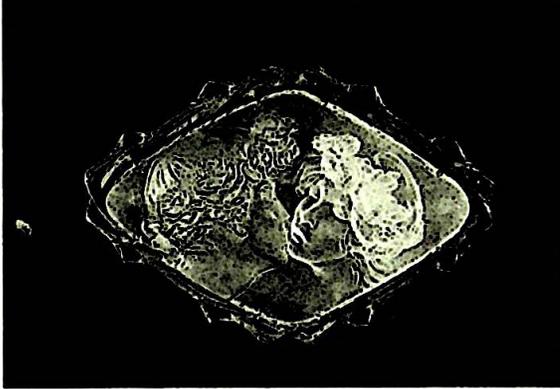
There is hardly any kind of jewellery Lalique did not make. Some of them have now gone out of fashion like tiaras and combs. Earrings or pendants are quite rare, as well as bracelets. Lalique more often designed finger rings, chokers, collars, chains, brooches, pendants and belt buckles. He also designed lorgnettes and watches which could be worn on long chains.

When Lalique chose the materials for his jewellery he did not consider the value. Most important for him was the enamel either translucent or 'champlevé-technique' for the colour. Whenever it covered a larger space of gold, a contra-enamel – often in pale blue or dark green – had to stabilise the contractions whilst firing. Often the reverses of Lalique's creations were as perfectly worked. Most of his creations were executed only just once, apart from a very few exceptions.

Lalique's works are not only very attractive worn on a discreet dress by a beautiful lady, but they are at the same time works of art 'sui generis'. This is proved by the phenomenon that at that time important collections of his pieces were acquired by men as they are to-day. Calouste Gulbenkian, for example, the Armenian petrol multi-millionaire, collected exquisite paintings, sculptures and works of decorative art from early periods to the 19th century. But the art of 1900 is exclusively represented by René Lalique with his most spectacular and important pieces, which can be seen to-day in the Museum C. Gulbenkian in Lisbon. During Lalique's lifetime his jewellery was so expensive that the large European museums of arts and crafts could only afford a few pieces. But nobody knows how many jewellery objects by Lalique have been destroyed between the two World Wars, when Art Nouveau was completely out of fashion.

Around 1905, Lalique's jewellery became more rigid and symmetrical, colours became more and more pale and marvellous combinations are given by juxtaposition of colourless crystal and cut diamonds. A severe crisis became evident in the field of decorative arts. The blooming Art Nouveau of 1900 began to fade and industrial products showed a bad, shoddy and often misunderstood imitation of Art Nouveau ornaments. At the decline of the movement René Lalique then turned his back more and more on his unique and very expensive jewellery, facing now

costume jewellery made of moulded glass and produced in series. A few years later, at the age of nearly fifty, and after a world-famous career as a jeweller, René Lalique dedicated his indefatigable strength of creation to the production of highly finished moulded glass. In this field again he became an outstanding artist, and some of his models are still executed to-day.



René Lalique: Brooch, 'The kiss',
silver, crystal, H. 4.8 cm, 1904–1906,
Paris, Musée des arts décoratifs.

The rim of the crystal-plate bears the inscription 'je rêve aux baisers qui demeurent toujours'. The female head is carved from the back, while the male head is a relief on the front. This technique underlines the impression of space.