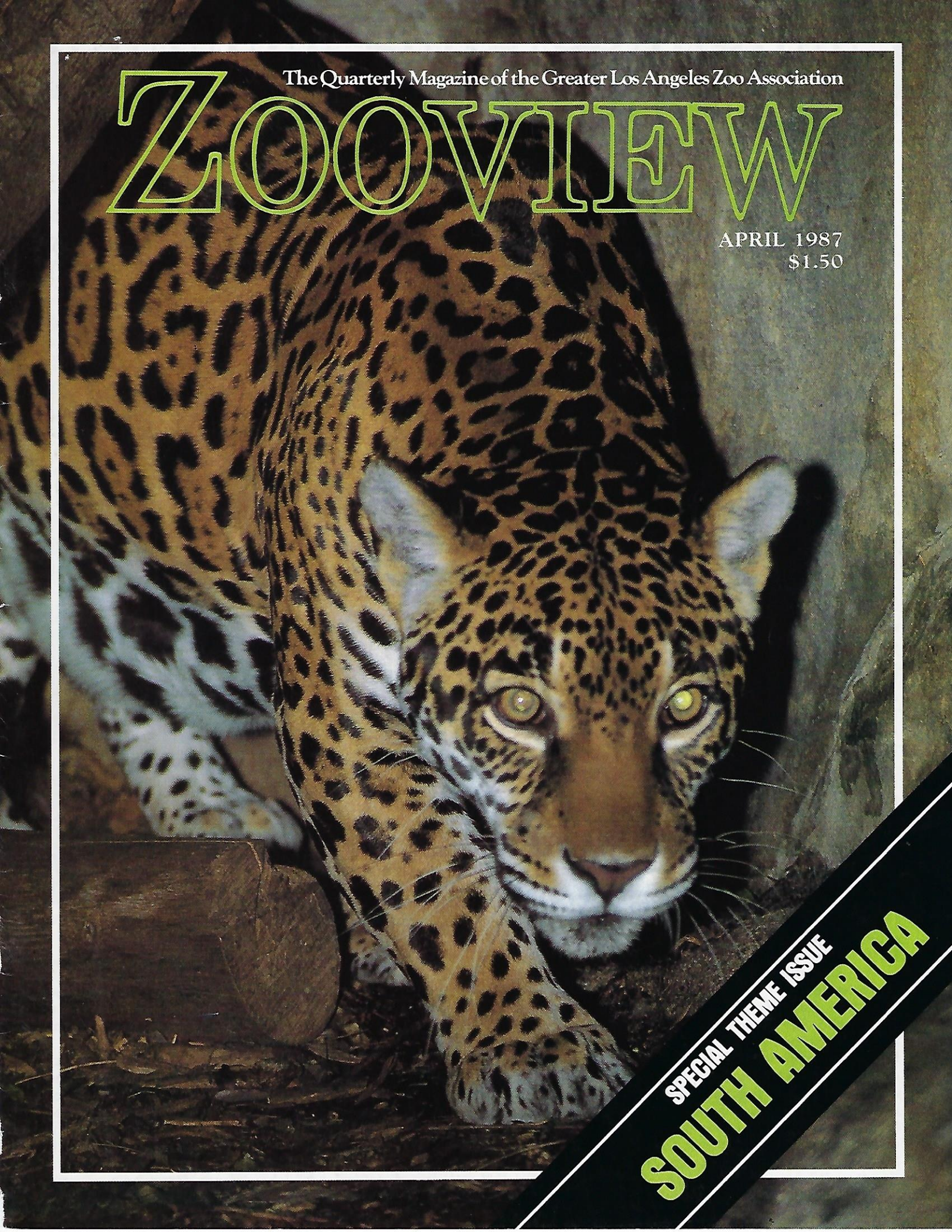


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Few women enjoy the company of reptiles and most actively avoid insects; a well-modulated shriek is usually all the greeting these creatures get should they stray into a room. Yet around the turn of the century, when it was considered lady-like to swoon and faint at the sight of anything that crawled or slithered, women not only tolerated them, they encouraged their presence. Far from being repelled, women were captivated by the strange beauty of grasshoppers stepping daintly around their throats, snakes coiling around their handbags and giant beetles fighting on their coats.

These creatures of horns, silk and silver were not alive, of course, but were the creations of René Lalique, the undisputed master of Art Nouveau jewelry. An exceptional artist as well as a superb craftsman, Lalique was obsessed with the idea of jewelry as a work of art. He was entranced by

THE ART NOUVEAU ZOO-ELRY OF RENÉ LALIQUÉ

by Sharon Elaine Thompson



A Two seahorses float in an enamel sea. Lalique used sea animals to give a feeling of movement to his work. Frances and Sydney Lewis Collection, Courtesy of the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts.

B In order to express the changing roles of women in the 19th century, Lalique often used the female figure in combination with insect wings, as in "La Sylphide." Private collection, New York.

C The cold, floating light of moonstones simulates the moonlight through which bats dart, eternally searching for their prey. Private collection, New York.

D Two snakes eye each other speculatively. Lalique's animals seemed as if they were only awaiting the magic word to come alive. Private collection, New York.



nature and in the creation of his jewels, he sought to capture its essence—the fragility of an insect, the coiled power of a tiger, the elusive fragrance of a blossom. It was his ability to recreate the vitality of life that made his work unique. Silk and silver snakes, knotted and coiled together, hiss and glare at each other over the clasp of a suede handbag. Their sinuous strength is held in suspense only by Lalique's magic; if the spell were to be broken, the snakes would surely strike.



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Art Nouveau developed around the end of the 19th century as artists sought ways to respond to the staggering changes in society that took place during the 1800s. The industrial revolution, with its emphasis on machines, had replaced pastoral life and in the process men seemed forgotten. Rational, scientific thought began to come of age as Darwin and Freud published their controversial theories and Schliemann discovered Troy. Women strained against the conventions of society and there was apprehension and excitement as the century drew to a close.

The study of botany was all the rage in the 1800s; the number of zoos increased and the public became aware of exotic animals. Drawing upon this growing body of knowledge, Lalique included subjects from nature in his designs to symbolize new ideas and describe the mode of his times. The introduction of animals and plants acted as a reminder of man's closeness to nature. Twining, sensual lines, inspired by plant life, reintroduced romance and passion. Winged creatures, especially when used in combination with the female figure, expressed women's growing freedom from the constraints and Lalique's use of the

snake recalled the scheming serpent that engineered the downfall of Adam and Eve. Eagles and tigers spoke of strength, vitality and youth in the face of the dying age, while the use of buds and tendrils, pistils and stamens, often highly stylized, represented growth, regeneration and the exciting possibilities of the future.

One event of the mid-1800s that had a tremendous impact on Lalique's work was the opening of Japan to the west. The Japanese artists' emphasis on simplicity, assymetry and nature gave Lalique a powerful new way to express himself. But it was the Japanese use of color that Lalique transformed and made his own.

Lalique became fascinated with enamel and the potential for adding color to his jewelry without the use of expensive stones. His choice of plant, animal and insect designs gave his unlimited opportunities to show off his deft touch. And show off he did. Lalique used enamels like watercolors to recreate the springtime beauty of pansies or impressionistically to capture the iridescent splendor of a peacock's tail. But he is best known for his "plique-a-jour" enamelling. Like miniature stained glass panels, plique-a-jour gave his work transparency and lightness, as well as color. This kind of fragile work enabled Lalique to duplicate the gossamer delicacy of a dragonfly's wing or the spectacular color of the butterfly's. It's small wonder that Lalique frequently used these insects in his work, taking advantage of the natural coloration of their wings to display his unsurpassed skill.

Lalique used the swan in order to emphasize the beauty and gracefulness of the human form. Lillian Nassau and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy of the International Exhibitions Foundation, Washington D.C.



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Lalique's jewelry is fascinatingly beautiful by itself, but, like any artist, in order to make his work unforgettable, Lalique tried to involve the viewer in his work. First he beguiled the fingers as well as the eyes. The braided handle of the handbag imitates the soft texture of the snake's skin as does the embroidery of the snake itself. One can imagine the lady to whom it belonged idly stroking what she would never have touched if alive. Lalique's sensitive use of "soft" or "warm" materials such as ivory or horn, sorely tries anyone who must look at his work behind the glass of a museum showcase. (Continued on Page 20)

(Continued from Page 19)

One of Lalique's most engaging techniques was his use of gentle humor to intrigue the viewer. The ceaseless activity of moths and bats enamelled on a Lalique pocketwatch gently reminds us that "time flies." There is also humor in the fact that, although the bats may be hunting the moths, the moths flutter eternally just out of their reach around the curve of the watch case. In a visual pun, moonstones provide the "moonlight" through which the bats dart while searching for their prey. In another neckpiece, Lalique depicts a powerful eagle placidly nibbling blackberries. Although it may seem as if his natural history is a little faulty, Lalique may very well have been making another little joke.

Lalique did not always use animals realistically. Some of his most beautiful, yet bizarre, creations combined human and animal forms. The exquisite brooch called "La Sylphide" is one such combination. It is the slender figure of woman who has the wings of a butterfly and whose legs merge into a swallow-like tail. Lalique has captured this delicate creature the moment before she makes a downstroke with her bejeweled wings, a lush display of Lalique's plique-a-jour. Although today we say a woman with a slender, graceful figure is sylph-like, originally, a sylph was supposed to be a soulless mortal who inhabited the air. Knowing that Lalique often designed his pieces with a specific client in mind, one wonders who this client might have been. (Interestingly, "sylph" is also the common name sometimes applied to a group of fork-tailed hummingbirds found in South America (*Agelaiocercus kingi*). However, it's uncertain whether or not Lalique was familiar with the name and whether or not he intended the pun.)

Lalique is often credited with introducing female nudes into his jewelry, expressing sensuality but also acting as a reminder of the importance of man in a mechanized society. After the initial shock wore off, nudes simply became a popular design element in Art Nouveau. However, by the juxtaposition of graceful animals with his figures, Lalique was able to continue to make his point, and to make it with more force than if he had used the nude by itself. A Lalique necklace with female nudes flanked by black swans naturally recalls the story of Leda and her seduction by Zeus in the form of a swan. But at the same time, the softness of the feathers and the gentle curve of the swan's neck accentuates the soft, grace-

ful curves of the woman's figure. It also emphasizes the frailty and beauty of the human form and the natural place of man in nature.

By 1912, Lalique had stopped making jewelry and turned to making glass, for which his name is most well-known. However, his unique jewelry, sometimes shocking, sometimes amusing,

but always beautiful, will certainly continue to be a "joy forever." By his adroit use of animal subjects in his designs, Lalique taught us a lot about ourselves and reminded us that in an age of ever increasing mechanization (or computerization), man is still a creature of nature.

Adoptions

"BEAM," a Canada goose
friends of Laurie Griff

"SHIRLEY JEAN," & "THOMAS,"
yellow-footed rock wallabies
in memory of Shirley Thomas

"WHITNEY," a western euro
Whitney World

"HAROLD," a yellow crowned night
heron
for Gwen & Fred Simons

a radjah shelduck
John & Sharon Biard

"MAXI-FORD," a great hornbill
Betty Burton

"CLEOPATRA," a tufted capuchin
for Maya Popkin

"SNAKEY," a Dumeril's boa
Robina Suwol-Baker & Michael D.
Baker

"CHARLIE," a purple glossy starling
in memory of Clare Conzett

"ALICE," a ring-tail lemur
in memory of Alice Wilson Phillips

"LIEBLING," a woolly monkey
in memory of Eugene R. Umland

"JEANNE," a bat-eared fox
The Shiach Family

a rock hyrax
in honor of Mr. & Mrs. Herbert Tobin

"SAM," a western lowland gorilla
Ronald Mandell

"ANELYA," an American flamingo
in memory of Anelya Sembroski

"SNEAKERS," a serval
Jackie & Ken Kinkade

"SPOOKY," a spectacled bear
from Smokey Wendell

"ASBURY," a lesser whistling duck
Helen Mae Almas

a superb glossy starling
for Roger Dunn

"NOTTOWORRY," a southern
lapwing
for Kathryn Anderson

"SCRABBLE," a glossy ibis
in memory of Dee Mandeson

"THOMAS," a squirrel glider
Joan & Herb Stark

"RAINBOW," a grey peacock pheasant
in memory of Scott Macdonough

"SYDNEY A. HART," a western euro
Mike & Kathy Doyle

"CHATA," a capybara
Mona Soland

"VOYAGER," a squirrel glider
Elliott, Erica, Karen & Leslie Duetsch

"HARPO," a lesser whistling duck and
"HEUY," a gelada baboon
Kenlyn Somppi

a Sudanese red spitting cobra
Willow Elementary School
Kindergarten Class

"CLEARCHUS," a capybara
Larry & Melissa Marak

a gelada baboon
for Timothy Owens

"FIGBY," a great grey kangaroo and
"ANSEL," a black & white ruffed
lemur
in honor of Al & Sue Dorskind

a great grey kangaroo
for Kathlyn Perlmutter