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Carlo Bugatti
Animal Spirits

THIS MONTH, the Sladmore Gallery of Jermyn Street in London will be showing a selection of 20th-century animalier sculpture. The gallery, which specializes in 19th- and 20th-century bronzes, has a long history with the wildlife genre. Founded in 1965 by Jane and Harry Horswell, it was named after the farm where the Horswells kept a real-life menagerie of exotic birds and animals as well as a collection of sculptures by Rembrandt Bugatti, the great early-20th-century animalier sculptor. The Horswells' son Edward carries on the family tradition by maintaining the gallery's prominence in this field and, most recently, by writing a book, Bronze Sculpture of "Les Animaliers" 1900-1950, a sequel to his mother's volume on 19th-century animaliers, published five decades ago. The book will be released in October.

Animalier sculpture exploded in popularity during the 19th century, especially in France. Its pioneer was Antoine-Louis Barye, who found his calling while sketching in Paris' Jardin des Plantes in the 1820s. As Horswell explains, the rise of zoos in 19th-century Europe, which gave artists the opportunity to observe wild creatures at length, was a major factor in the development of animalier art. The growing middle classes loved animal sculpture, as did King Louis Philippe, who championed the genre and patronized many artists. The 19th-century sculptors tended toward realistic renderings, but as the 20th century dawned, styles changed. "The exhibition and its accompanying book will illustrate the changes in sculpting techniques and styles that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century," says Horswell. "Hyperrealism and attention to detail gave way to impressionism; later came simplification, streamlining, and modernism."

A prime example of modernist animalier work in the show is l'Envol ("The Flight"), a 1926 sculpture by the Hungarian artist Joseph Csaky that conflates a soaring bird with its mechanical counterpart, an airplane. "It incorporates many elements of its time," says Horswell, "Cubism, Egyptian, and Aztec influences, and a fascination with engineering, especially aviation. This rare bird was rescued from oblivion by Sladmore; it had been stored upside-down in a private house, without a plinth with the detail of the feathers suppressed.

Other highlights include a beady-eyed crow by François Pompon, a French sculptor who led the Groupe des Douze, a group of 12 animalier sculptors founded in 1931, and three ducks by French artist Charles Artus, a member of the Groupe. And Bugatti himself is also represented, with pieces including a luxuriously stretching panther. (Sladmore also has show up through June 26, "Bugatti: Father and Son," about Rembrandt and his father, Carlo, who designed furniture and silver, with pieces recently returned from exhibitions at the Nationalgalerie in Berlin and the Mullin Automotive Museum in Los Angeles.) Bugatti was a tragic figure, an artist with a profound connection to animals who committed suicide at the age of 31, overcome by depression during World War I. He was particularly affected when the animals he had been sculpting at the Antwerp Zoo had to be put to death for lack of food brought on by the war.
Furnishing a

Say “Bugatti” and people immediately think of a car. Or if they are art aficionados, sculpture may come to mind first. But long before Ettore Bugatti designed his first racer, long before his brother, Rembrandt, rendered his first wild animal in bronze, their father, Carlo, was designing furniture that is second to none in terms of untrammeled creativity and idiosyncratic beauty. While Carlo Bugatti’s asymmetric, biomorphic pieces, clad in vellum, ornamented with répoussé brass and draped with dangling tassels of silk, could hardly be said to have given rise to a school, he paved the way for later Italian masters of extravagant invention such as Carlo Mollino, Piero Fornasetti, and even the Memphis Collective. From the 1880s through the first decade of the 20th century, Bugatti created pieces of furniture, whole room designs, silver sets, and jewelry for a discerning few whose taste was as exquisite and daring as his own. Many of those works are still extant, in museums but primarily in private collections, and whenever they come on the market they are eagerly sought by connoisseurs.

To be in the presence of a Bugatti piece today, especially a large one, is to be astonished. A cabinet with mounted mirror, made around 1900 in Milan, is currently being offered by the New York antiques dealer James Infante. Standing over six feet high, it is made of mixed woods, bronze, brass, glass, bone, pewter, vellum, and a mysterious material that Infante says is probably camel fur. The surface is decorated with lead poured into incised designs representing abstract versions of birds in flight and stalks of vegetation seeking sun and water. The ornamental details, in contrasting light and dark woods set off by bone, evokes Moorish architectural elements, as do the cabinet’s windowed doors, which could be the doors of a room-scale dream version of the Alhambra. Nothing is quite symmetrical, nothing is duplicated—everywhere you look there is something new. Two of
The extravagant, eccentric designs of Carlo Bugatti transcend the Italian Art Nouveau era to occupy an imaginative realm all their own.

By John Dorfman

the three drawers have handles that mimic ancient Roman coins, while the third handle is in the form of a twisting, crawling lizard. This cabinet, more of a curiosity than anything it could contain, seems to belong in the palace of the kind of oriental potentate that a late-19th-century writer of fantastic stories would have conjured up.

That putative prince would need a throne to sit on, and Bugatti obliged him there, too. A circa 1898 throne chair, also offered by Infante, has a circular seat and semicircular back, both of which are hung with dense, tufted tassels. The two upright wooden elements anchoring the back are asymmetrical; one rises much higher than the other, topped by a removable staff ornamented at intervals with pieces of turned wood. Other Bugatti thrones achieve asymmetry by having a single strip of vellum slanting diagonally across the back. The seat and back of this one are covered with vellum, a calfskin parchment traditionally used for book pages and bindings. Bugatti loved the pale-colored material for its expressive pliability as well as because it could be written or drawn on. Bugatti loved to augment his designs with graphic decorative elements, either forms suggesting flora or fauna or invented “scripts” that look vaguely Japanese or Arabic. The seat and back of this throne chair are covered with delicate bamboo-like stalks and leaves. Another
Furnishing a Fantasy

chair, whose back is in the form of a disk, is similar to this one in having wooden staffs of unequal length, and the asymmetry is heightened by the way the back is tethered to the longer staff by parallel lengths of rope. Bugatti’s use of mixed textures is always interesting, and it reinforces the sense of dynamic tension created by the lack of symmetry.

A Bugatti writing desk also features enigmatic inscriptions, some inlaid with poured lead on the drawers and the top, other, blockier ones—resembling the runes or hieroglyphs of some forgotten ancient culture rather than the graceful cursive of the inlaid script—are carved into the wood along the sides, next to the drawers. The desk is covered all over with brass ornamentation, a key part of Bugatti’s neo-Moorish aesthetic. Hammered into the metal pieces are stylized floral motifs.

The boldness of conception, the quirky details, and the unique aesthetic of this furniture were part and parcel of the man himself. Carlo Bugatti was a self-made artisan who set his own path early on and fol-

lowed it unswervingly. Biographical detail about him is scarce; he wrote little, and even basic facts of his life and career—for example, dates—can be maddeningly uncertain, making the man as enigmatic as his works. Nonetheless the basic outlines are as follows: He was born in Milan in 1856. His father, Giovanni Luigi Bugatti, was some kind of designer or artisan, either an architect, a stonemason, a woodcarver, a chimney-maker, or perhaps all of these. He was also an amateur scientist and apparently something of an eccentric, as he is said to have devoted a good deal of time and energy to building a perpetual-motion machine—a pursuit at least somewhat more heard-of the mid-19th century than it is today.

Carlo’s education is not well documented, but it is believed that he attended the famous Brera Academy of Arts in his native city, starting in 1871 when he was 15, majoring in architecture. A few models he made then survive, although none was ever realized. Perhaps the most important influence on him at the Brera was not from a teacher but from a fellow student, Giovanni Segantini, who would go on to win fame as a painter of Alpine landscapes in a style akin to Divisionism and
Symbolism. In the late 1870s Segantini married Bugatti’s sister Luigia, and Bugatti’s first executed furniture design was of a bedroom suite for the newlywed couple. Segantini would continue to have a artistic impact on the Bugatti family until his untimely death in 1899; he nurtured his nephew Rembrandt’s creative impulses at the outset of the animalier sculptor’s career.

Carlo Bugatti may also have studied at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris; in any case, during the 1880s he began a connection with France that lasted for the rest of his career. By 1888, he had a furniture studio up and running in Milan, and during that summer exhibited a variety of pieces at the Italian Exposition in Earl’s Court, London. An illustration in The Queen: The Lady’s Newspaper from July 7, 1888, described them as “quaint furniture.” His designs melded a number of ethnic motifs, though Bugatti never traveled in Asia or made any formal study of non-Western design. These styles were in the air during the closing decades of the 19th century, and Bugatti seems to have absorbed them by osmosis and transformed them with a personal alchemy that yielded something entirely new. As Infante puts it, “Bugatti’s furniture designs are an amalgamation of Moorish, japoniste, fantasy, and futuristic inspirations. He thought and created outside the box.”

During the 1890s, as his reputation grew, Bugatti showed his work at

From top: Writing Desk; Cabinet with Mirror, circa 1899.
exhibitions in Antwerp, Amsterdam, Turin, and Paris. Assisted in his workshop by his sons Ettore and Rembrandt, he was building a client base that included the English aesthete and arts patron Cyril Flowers, Lord Battersea, who commissioned a complete interior design from Bugatti that represents the culmination of his "oriental" style. And proving that this Near Eastern-esque fantasy had appeal to actual Near Easterners, in 1900 an Ottoman noblewoman, through the French architect Antoine Losciac, tasked him with furnishing her Istanbul residence.

Around the turn of the new century, Bugatti changed his style. His passion for vellum increased, to the point where he was wrapping entire pieces of furniture in the material so that it smoothed over all the hard edges. Ornament was reduced drastically, and the forms became simpler, lighter, and more curvaceous. The circular elements that had appeared in the earlier furniture took over, and the designer seemed obsessed with void forms. At the 1902 Prima Esposizione Internazionale d’Arte Decorativa Moderna in Turin, Bugatti showcased these streamlined, biomorphic pieces in a mind-boggling interior scheme known as the "Snail Room." At the center of the room was a semicircular banquette with drinks cabinet that was made to look like a snail’s shell, and the walls were completely covered with larger versions of the wooden circles seen in his earlier furniture, each covered in vellum and with a hammered brass plaque in the middle. The four “Cobra” chairs in the room were particularly radical in their design: The legs had disappeared, and the seats and backs, all sealed in vellum, formed one continuous, sinuous curve.

This design departure, while prescient of later developments in modernism, did not find favor in the Art Nouveau era. Bugatti, undeterred, moved to Paris in 1904, where he continued making furniture, albeit in smaller
quantities, and also turned to crafting silver and jewelry. Clearly the
man could turn his hand to just about anything. His tea and cof-
fee services are particularly impressive—in 1907, he created boar’s
head, elephant-trunk, and dragonfly-themed sets. The animal spirits
incarnated therein may owe something to his son Rembrandt, who
by then was at the peak of his powers as a sculptor of animals. Then
again, Carlo’s sculptural style in these tablewares is a fantasia based
on animal forms rather than the emotionally astute observation of
real animals that distinguishes Rembrandt’s work.

Carlo Bugatti spent the last 30 or so years of his life in retire-
ment in Pierrefonds, France, painting, sculpting, making jewelry,
and watching his son Ettore and grandson Jean make their mark
in the automobile world. (Rembrandt had committed suicide in
1916.) There was a strong family resemblance in the work of all
the Bugattis—not necessarily in the actual details of the work but
in the desire they all shared to create an overarching aesthetic and
control all aspects of its implementation. They also shared an inde-
fiable but unmistakable grace that is visible in everything they
made. Carlo, Ettore, and Rembrandt had another trait in com-
mon—they all designed their own clothes, partly out of dandyism
but also because their design visions were all-embracing and so
much a part of themselves that it had to find expression in every-
thing they touched and that touched them.

Writing in the late 1960s, Carlo’s granddaughter L’Ébé summed
up his creative nature: “He should have lived a century earlier for
his powers to have been appreciated to the full, for he was a painter,
sculptor, woodcarver, and architect, and also made stringed instru-
ments of his own invention, and developed a new style of furni-
ture. Everyone called him ‘the young Leonardo’ because of his
energy and new ideas.”