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The late French artist Claude Lalanne at her atelier in Ury, France, in 2015. Photo: Luc Castel/Getty Images

CULTURE + LIFESTYLE

These Pioneering Female Artists and Designers Are More Relevant Than Ever

Curators, gallerists, and auction specialists weigh in on the trailblazers whose fame is on the rise

By Stephanie Sporn

November 18, 2021

Thanks to numerous international exhibitions and bidder-fueled auction frenzies, [Claude Lalanne](#) has ascended the ranks of art and design history in the two years since her death. This September, [Christie's](#) sold a bronze and copper butterfly-laden [chandelier](#) she designed for €3.7 million (roughly \$4.3 million in U.S. dollars), achieving a new auction record. (Her late husband François-Xavier recently set his own record at Sotheby's for €8.3 million—\$9.6 million—for a [leopard sculpture](#).)

Claude Lalanne is one of many female artists and designers the auction house Christie's has seen rapidly gaining momentum in recent years. Daphné Riou, head of the design department at Christie's New York, says that the other most sought-after women at auction now include French postwar designer Charlotte Perriand, American entrepreneur [Florence Knoll](#), Clara Driscoll—head of Tiffany Studios' Women's Glass Cutting department—and architect and industrial designer [Eileen Gray](#), whose Dragons chair remains the most expensive work of 20th-century design ever sold at auction since fetching €21.9 million (\$25.2 million) at Christie's in 2009.

Signifying women's long overdue moment in collectible design, [the Vitra Design Museum](#) in Weil am Rhein, Germany, is spotlighting more than 80 female visionaries in its current exhibition, "Here We Are! Women in Design 1900–Today." As one of the show's curators [previously told AD PRO](#), "There are so many [women designers] that we could have 10 exhibitions focusing on different genres." Here, *AD* speaks with leading gallerists, curators, and more to hear which historic women are finally getting their dues.



A curved pencil reed bamboo sofa by Gabriella Crespi on [Chairish](#). Photo: Courtesy of Chairish

The craze for Crespi

While [1stdibs](#) and [Chairish](#) are also seeing spikes in sales relating to the aforementioned female titans of design, the two marketplaces also separately noted growing interest in Italian designer Gabriella Crespi and pieces inspired by her. “Trained as an architect, Crespi created [iconic designs](#), many from the 1970s, that exemplify jet-set chic. Shiny, rich metallics; striking silhouettes; functionality and adaptability—these are some of the hallmarks of Crespi’s work,” says Anthony Barzilay Freund, editorial director and design expert at 1stdibs, on the designer’s “dramatic uptick in demand.”

Another hallmark of Crespi’s pieces that Anna Brockway, Chairish’s cofounder and president, says customers are “bananas for” is “sculptural wicker, rattan, and cane.” She says of Crespi: “Her work inspired looks that break the mold of what we normally think of rattan and wicker—it feels modern and sophisticated, and would look just as chic in Palm Beach as it would in NYC.”

[Lobel Modern](#) gallery president Evan Lobel believes the power of Crespi’s work lies not only in its aesthetic attributes, but also in its creator’s spirituality. “She believed in movement and evolution of the soul,” Lobel says. Crespi did not produce many pieces, and Lobel believes her prices will continue to climb as more people learn the designer’s story. “After finding success as a furniture, lighting, and art designer in the 1970s and ’80s, she decided to go to India and spent 20 years in the Himalayas working on her personal evolution. I find that totally inspirational,” Lobel says. “As we move towards a world where balance and personal development are more and more important, hopefully life stories like hers will continue to stand out and impress us.”

Form, function, and feminism

Like Claude Lalanne, another French artist and maker whose pieces are exploding on the market the last five to 10 years is Line Vautrin. When there was a shortage of silver, gold, and other luxurious materials at the end of World War II, she turned to gilded and silvered bronze to design mirrors, boxes, jewelry, and objets d’art. “In a time when deprivation was a part of everyday life, [Vautrin](#) became known for the whimsy and double entendres layered onto her beautiful pieces,” explains Benoist F. Drut, gallery principal at [Maison Gerard](#).

In addition to the collectability of Vautrin’s works—thanks to their one-of-a-kind designs, range of sizes, relatively attainable price points, and beauty when displayed in constellations—Drut finds people are connecting with them today because of their “fantasy and romance.” He adds the gallery recently sold a large Vautrin mirror to replace a Picasso painting on the buyer’s yacht.



A *Roi Soleil* mirror by Line Vautrin at [Maison Gerard](#). Photo: Matt Coats/Courtesy of Maison Gerard

Beyond bronze, women's contributions to art history in more physically demanding materials, like stone, should not be overlooked. In 2018, Evan Lobel curated a show on one such artist, [Naomi Feinberg](#), who began sculpting in the 1940s and was a member of Studio 725, a collective of female visual artists and sculptors who shared a studio in Manhattan. "The name of the show was 'A Woman Sculpting in a Man's World' because had she been a man, she would be in a lot of museums, instead of just the Smithsonian," Lobel says, adding that most of the pieces in his show have since sold.



An installation view of "Ruth Asawa: All Is Possible," a show being staged at David Zwirner, New York, from November 4 to December 18, 2021. Photo: Courtesy David Zwirner

Meanwhile, Japanese American artist Ruth Asawa has been experiencing a rediscovery in the art world. The latest exhibition to spotlight her is David Zwirner's "[Ruth Asawa: All Is Possible](#)," which is organized by Helen Molesworth and opened on November 4 in New York. "On purely formal grounds, there are few artists who can claim to have successfully created sculpture that can objectively be considered 'drawings in space,' a notion often applied to the work of sculptor David Smith," explains Jonathan Laib, the gallery's senior director. With common industrial wire, Asawa ditched "the pedestal that encumbered much of mid-20th-century sculpture" and formed mesmerizing structures.

[Salon 94's](#) Jeanne Greenberg Rohatyn also makes amplifying female voices and visions, especially those who've been lost to history, one of her chief priorities. In January 2022, her gallery will present an exhibition on Kate Millett, a trailblazing queer feminist writer, artist, and leader. Greenberg Rohatyn also recommends two additional multidisciplinary creators who created furniture as functional art: American artist Gloria Kisch and French artist Nicola L., whose interactive sculptures combined Pop aesthetics with countercultural feminist messages.

Revolutionizing craft and fiber-based art

[Charlotte Perriand](#) "was initially turned away from a job in Le Corbusier's studio with the riposte, 'We don't embroider cushions here,'" recalls Maria McLintock, the displays curator at the Design Museum, London, which held a landmark [exhibition](#) on Perriand this year.

In its flagrant sexism, the rejection reflects the long-held belief that textile-based practices were confined to the domestic, decorative sphere. Although we know many women, like Perriand, who would go on to become legendary in furniture and architecture in spite of gendered obstacles, a certain group of women stuck to their convictions that fiber-based work could be high art.

Mariska Karasz, Lenore Tawney, and Dorian Zachai were some of the key figures of the 1950s through 1970s that revolutionized the medium of fiber, says Elissa Auther, the [Museum of Arts and Design's](#) deputy director of curatorial affairs and William and Mildred Lasdon chief curator. Many of these women were trained as weavers or embroiderers but elevated the medium by creating abstract, sculptural assemblage works, fully intended as art.



Charlotte Perriand's *Unique Bibliothèque*, circa 1950, will come to the block at Christie's New York [this December](#). Photo: Christie's Images Ltd. 2021

In the case of African American educator and maker Ruth Clement Bond, quilt art became a powerful tool for sharing the Black experience. In the 1930s, the activist worked with families of Black construction workers for the Tennessee Valley Authority home beautification project, where she designed patterns for the workers' wives to make. The resulting quilts eschew common floral motifs in favor of bold iconography evoking the figures of Harlem Renaissance artist Aaron Douglas. "She was thinking ahead in the field of quilt making, away from geometric patterning to more narrative storytelling," Auther says on Bond's invaluable contribution to art history.



Lenore Tawney's *Jupiter*, 1959, is on display at the Museum of Arts and Design's "Craft Front & Center" show, on view through February 2022. Silk, wool, wood; woven. Photo: Sheldan Comfert Collins



Another piece in the show, by Olga de Amaral, is called *Muro tejido 1 (Wall Hanging 1)*, likely from 1969. Hand-spun wool; double woven slit tapestry. Photo: Eva Heyd

Olga de Amaral, Sheila Hicks, Kay Sekimachi, and Marilyn Pappas are among the pioneering artists still working today whose fiber-based works are being increasingly appreciated—the latter three were recently featured in [R & Company's](#) "Objects: USA 2020" exhibition, which presents numerous female artists, including late ceramicists Toshiko Takaezu and Maija Grotell.

"You'd be hard-pressed to go to an art fair or major group exhibition and not see a lot of works made in fiber nowadays," Auther says. "Most people aren't aware of the history of these women pioneers who transformed what you could do with fiber, considered in their day as a marginalized medium that was dismissed as a lesser form of art. They are the ones that refused that designation and began working in ways that deflated this hierarchy of art and craft."