

CALOUSTE GULBENKIAN AND RENÉ LALIQUE: A GOLDEN FRIENDSHIP

by Philippe Bouasse



'Throughout the 50 years of our friendship, René Lalique's talent never ceased to amaze me ... I feel privileged to own what is arguably the largest collection of his pieces.' When the Armenian art collector Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian's treasure trove of Lalique's jewellery, art and glassware was unveiled, it took the art world by storm. Despite today's ongoing infatuation with Art Nouveau, the tale of the two men's friendship and mutual admiration remains underexplored.

Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian (1869-1955) is well-known amongst Armenians. The mere mention of his name invokes admiration. Crowned 'Mr 5%,' Gulbenkian was a man of all trades and amassed one of the greatest fortunes of his times: he was a successful banker, diplomat and adventurer. Born in Scutari (not far from Istanbul) on 23rd March 1869, Gulbenkian relocated to Lisbon, where he stayed until he died on 20th July 1955. As well as holding five per cent of Turkish Petroleum's capital, he helped to set up Shell Petroleum when the Western powers were dividing up the petroleum riches of the Middle East. Today, Gulbenkian deserves to be remembered as more than an astute tycoon and multi-millionaire: like Howard Hughes and John Davison Rockefeller, he was a patron of the arts and a discerning connoisseur.

Portugal's capital, Lisbon, is home to the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, founded in 1969, which remains one of the wealthiest foundations outside of the US.* In 1942, during the

tumult of World War II, Gulbenkian escaped to Portugal, where he spent the last thirteen years of his life. Shortly before his death in 1955, he expressed his desire to see his collection united under one roof. In this way, the Foundation, with its affiliated museum, were set up. They showcase the 6,000 pieces that Gulbenkian assembled during his forty years as a collector. The Foundation features galleries devoted to Egyptian, Greek, Islamic, Oriental and European art from the eleventh through mid-twentieth centuries. It contains an astounding quantity of masterpieces from all periods and genres, including painting, sculpture, ceramics, tapestries, illuminated manuscripts, furniture and gold. One of the highlights is the Art Nouveau room, which dazzles the eye with an unrivalled display of Lalique's jewellery and glass masterpieces.

'Only the best is good enough for me,' was Gulbenkian's catchphrase; his artistic treasures were his children. His first Lalique acquisition was a choker, entitled 'Trees,' which was heavily influenced by photographic trends and seen as daring for its time. As the Foundation's former head curator, Maria Fernanda Passos Leite, explained, 'What makes his collection unique is that he acquired all of the pieces, save for one, directly from the artist.' Gulbenkian was a frequent visitor of Lalique's atelier and residence near the Champs-Élysées. The artist, meanwhile, was one of the few to have been granted entrance to Gulbenkian's Avenue d'Iéna mansion, which also

housed his art collection. As someone who preferred peace and quiet to society life, the collector rarely received visitors. Such artistic exposure made an indelible impression on Lalique. The two men's inspiration was mutually felt: Lalique was as impressed by the petroleum tycoon's ingenuity as Gulbenkian was captivated by his friend's talent, regardless of its dissimilar domain. It is possible to imagine the passionate discussions that they may have had about subjects ranging from art and travel to business.

The Belle Époque was the product of the turn-of-the-twentieth-century's transforming values. Responding to Paris's changing physiognomy, Lalique wanted to 'make something that had never been seen before' and contributed to the rise of Art Nouveau, the period that was named after Siegfried Bing's shop in Paris. According to his contemporary, Henri Vever, a jewellery historian and jeweller in his own right, Lalique was at the forefront of the action.

While Gulbenkian was a selective collector with a limited interest in modern art, Lalique's creations were the sole exceptions. Gulbenkian detected in his friend the makings of a jeweller whose artistic legacy would be timeless. The two men shared a passion for Nature and feminine beauty — themes that define Art Nouveau.

The Lalique collection in Lisbon contains pieces that were fashioned between 1899 and 1927: diadems and combs; necklaces and chokers; brooches and bracelets. It showcases the artist's flair for pairing opals, moonstones and chrysoprase with diamonds, sapphires and aquamarines. The ensemble of 82 pieces show off their sensuous lines and are historic documents in themselves: a number of them featured in the Exposition Universelle (1900) while others adorned some of the greatest female stars of the period, such as Sarah Bernhardt.

Snakes, peacocks, briars, bumblebees, orchids, dragonflies, thistles and pine branches, pepper plants and hazel trees, anemones, owls, hydrangeas, grasshoppers, scarabs, wisteria... Nature is everywhere, sublimated in the pieces of one of jewellery's greatest masters. The female form represents another dominant theme, which explains the many allusions to mythology, nymphs, naiads and goddesses that are carved out of ivory, rock crystal and glass. Aside from his career as a jeweller, Lalique made a point of his versatility, becoming a world-class glassmaker. He was always on the cusp of invention and patented a number of his revolutionary techniques.

Jewellery continues to celebrate the beauty of Nature. In a world straddling a decline in biodiversity and a rise in environmental regulations, René Lalique's oeuvre remains a relevant fountain of inspiration. For aspiring aficionados and long-time connoisseurs, Calouste Gulbenkian's collection is in a

class of its own. As the collector remarked, 'Lalique's pieces occupy a privileged place.' The bond between the two men gives Lalique's pieces a spiritual gleam that not even the most eye-catching pieces of the collection by Rubens, Gainsborough, Monet, Rembrandt and Renoir could surpass.

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* Further information:

<http://www.gulbenkian.pt/>

The Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation funds a number of projects in Armenia; most notably, it financed the Yerevan Matenadaran (one of the world's richest depositories of ancient manuscripts.)









