

By Larry Weinberg

KELVIN LAVERNE

BY LOOKING BACKWARD, A SCULPTOR BLURS THE BOUNDARY BETWEEN ART AND DESIGN.

Kelvin LaVerne, the scion of the LaVerne atelier, has always seen himself as an artist rather than as a designer, and his output of cast, etched, and inlaid bronze and pewter tables, replete with scenes drawn from the Great Civilizations, as precursors of today's design/art fusion. It is really not surprising that in the decade following the first Design Miami, the groundbreaking art/design fair, prices for LaVerne pieces have been escalating. Cristina Grajales, a SoHo gallerist and participant in Design Miami, helped fuel interest with a successful exhibition in 2008. Recent results, recession and all, have been stunning: a commissioned console table brought \$57,000 at Rago Auction, and a "Les Femmes" cabinet, one of only four or five made, reached \$116,000 at Christie's, a world-record price for LaVerne at auction.

Perhaps due to his own reticence, there is little information available about Kelvin LaVerne, a situation he seems to want to rectify. Kelvin is a third-generation artist. His grandfather was a painter and itinerant muralist. Philip, Kelvin's father, picked up the mantle, segueing from drawing and painting to furniture design, first in wood, then in glass and plastic, and finally, by the mid-century, in metal. Kelvin grew up in his father's studio, and went to college to study art history. Wanting to work with his hands, he enrolled at Parsons, where he learned about interior and furniture design, then spent several years at the Art Students League, during which time he encountered the sculptor Seymour Lipton, and the techniques of welding, brazing, and torch work.

Kelvin's full collaboration with his father began around 1960, when he was 23, and continued until Philip's death at age 80 in 1988. Kelvin still marvels at his father's restless creativity and ingenuity, recalling constant experimentation, whether with the Asian soils used for patination, or the kinetic balance in an abstract table base. Together, the LaVerne's created their best-known work: the line of patinated bronze and pewter tables that merged contemporary shapes with classical motifs; the shock of the new with an ancient Egyptian, Greek, or Asian visage. Kelvin points out that form and pattern are linked architecturally—the base of a Greek table resembles a column, an Egyptian table a pyramid, and so forth. **FOR THE LAVERNES, THIS BALANCING OF NEW AND OLD SATISFIED THEIR SENSE OF HISTORY AND THEIR MUTUAL EMBRACE OF PAST CULTURES. FOR THE MARKET, IT PROVIDED PIECES THAT FIT INTO BOTH MODERN AND TRADITIONAL HIGH-END INTERIORS.**

These tables, along with wall reliefs, were exhibited by the LaVerne's in New York City, and were represented both here and nationally by Baker Furniture and other galleries. Even at a serial level, the pieces were approached as unique works. Hence, you will find that no two are alike, with variations in both coloration and patina. To a point, the LaVerne's continued making these pieces when commissioned. Inevitably, though, their creative energies focused on what Kelvin simply terms sculpture, by which he means abstraction, both figural and nonrepresentational, done as one-of-a-kinds, whether functional objects, free-standing artworks, or wall reliefs. **ULTIMATELY, THE LAVERNES SOUGHT TO BRIDGE THE GAP BETWEEN DESIGN AND ART, AN AVANT-GARDE IDEA PRIOR TO THIS CENTURY.** A number of these pieces remain visible on the first floor of the unassuming SoHo building that once housed the five-floor LaVerne workshop and showroom. A visit is like a walk through a museum, which is where many of these pieces may wind up.

Wooster Gallery was an avid collector of LaVerne work during the 1980s and 90s, keeping it in public view by selling to designers such as Nancy Corzine,

Fox-Nahem, and Sal LaRosa. At the time, some auctions referred pieces to Ralph Beatrice of Wooster Gallery. Today, the LaVerne bandwagon includes all the top auction houses, and galleries such as Todd Merrill and Donzella. At last count, 1stdibs, the online powerhouse with a brick-and-mortar presence in the New York Design Center, had several dozen LaVerne offerings.

Most of the pieces selling these days, Kelvin points out, are familiar works. The sculptures—the one-of-a-kinds—have not even begun to re-enter the market. When they do, expect prices to soar.

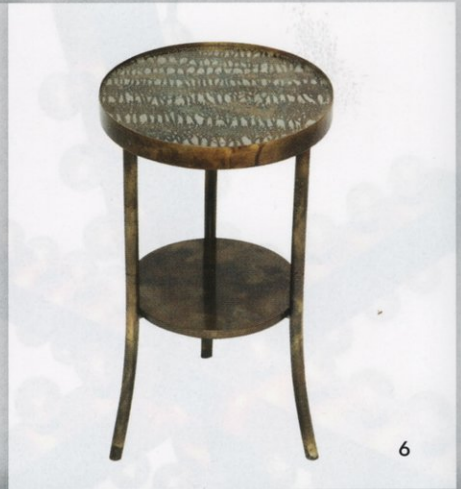




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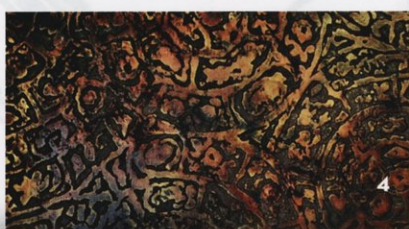
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1. "3 Graces." Unique sculpture, c. 1960s. Photo courtesy of Kelvin LaVerne. 2. "Chi Liang" table, c. 1960s. Photo courtesy of Kelvin LaVerne. 3. From "The Poetry of the Soul: Works of Philip and Kelvin LaVerne. Held at the Cristina Grajales Gallery in May, 2008. Photo courtesy of Cristina Grajales Gallery. 4. Detail from Cristina Grajales exhibition, May 2008. Photo courtesy of Cristina Grajales Gallery. 5. "Odyssey" table, c. 1960s. Photo courtesy of Kelvin LaVerne. 6. Drink table in "Eternal Forest" pattern, c. 1970s. From Galere. Photo courtesy of 1stdibs. 7. "Medici" cocktail table, c. 1970. From Donzella. Photo courtesy of 1stdibs. 8. Low table, c. 1969. From Gary Rubinstein Antiques. Photo courtesy of 1stdibs. 9. Facing page "Walking Woman." Unique sculpture, c. 1968. From Donzella. Photo courtesy of 1stdibs. All items showcased are available at 1stdibs@NYDC.