

A Passion for Design

DECORATOR BRIAN J. MCCARTHY FINDS MAGIC IN THE IMPORTANT AND SINGULAR WORKS HE LIVES WITH

Interview by DANIELLA OHAD



Two bronze Crocodile consoles designed by Claude Lalanne flank the doorway from the living room to the dining room of Brian McCarthy's New York apartment.

THOUGH KNOWN FOR HIS CLASSICALLY INSPIRED INTERIORS, the interior decorator Brian J. McCarthy is a collector of modern design. His highly personal collection is comprised of objects by such known designers as Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne as well as by undiscovered young talents from France and the United States. After working as a partner at Parish-Hadley Associates for more than a decade, he opened Brian J. McCarthy, Inc. in 1991. Among his most celebrated interiors are the private quarters of the American ambassador to the Court of St. James's in the official residence in London's Regent's Park.

McCarthy shares his home across from Carnegie Hall with his partner Daniel Sager. MODERN Magazine met with him to talk about his collecting philosophy, connoisseurship, and the role of taste.



You started your career in the legendary office of Albert Hadley and Sister Parish, who created homes full of chintz and English antiques for the Astors, the Whitneys, and the Rockefellers. This world had not yet embraced modern and contemporary design. When did you first become interested in collecting modern design?

It started in the 1990s when I was working in Paris. On regular visits to the galleries on the Left Bank, I was introduced to the work of French masters of the 1920s, and I found that I particularly liked those possessing a modern aesthetic sensibility, such as Jean-Michel Frank. My appreciation for modern design led me to start buying contemporary furniture, and I have not stopped since.

What inspires you in your own collecting?

I am inspired by what I see around me. I regularly visit museums and galleries, but often I see things in clients' homes that capture my attention.

Can you give an example?

I first saw one of French designer Hélène de Saint Lager's resin tables at a client's home. Hélène is inspired by nature and creates furniture of unique forms. Her resin tables are truly spectacular. We now not only own several pieces by her, we have also come to know her personally. I have to say that I find having personal relationships with the artists whose work I collect is important and rewarding. It is one of the great things about collecting contemporary design.

You own a number of pieces by "Les Lalanne," the husband and wife team of François-Xavier and Claude Lalanne. Tell me about your relationship with them.

I remember well the first time I was introduced to the work of Les Lalanne. It was in the mid-nineties, during a visit to the home of Jean-Gabriel Mitterrand, the founder and owner of JGM Galerie in Paris. There, standing in the kitchen, I saw the woolly sheep [the often life-sized sheep, first introduced in 1966 and collected widely by celebrities including, famously, Coco Chanel]. Over the years, I developed a relationship with the gallery, and learned more and more about the Lalannes and their art, which I find extraordinary. At one point, I was introduced to Claude and have visited her home/studio many times since. I generally do not collect the objects that were produced in large editions, but only the one-of-a-kind pieces or those made in very small editions. The Monkey table, for example is one of only three objects that Claude and François-Xavier designed together, which also makes it very important historically.

Since the work of the Lalannes began fetching astronomical numbers in auctions, many have come to criticize it as trendy, or tasteless.

I cannot disagree more, because to me they have always been innovative, important, and committed



to their art and to their special vision—and I equally love the materiality of their work. They have produced objects of surreal poetic quality, sculptures that are wild, imaginative, and whimsical. They take elements from plants and animals and turn them into magical objects. It is not that there haven't been other artists who have been inspired by the same sources, but the Lalannes defined a new and personal way of doing things. Their friendships with some of the central figures of the surrealist movement, such as Salvador Dalí have made an impact on their work. Claude's *Choupatte Moyen* of 2008, for example is an enormous cabbage standing on chicken legs.

Within the work of Claude and François Lalanne, what is great?

I consider the pair of crocodile consoles we own great. In the 1960s the Lalannes began to use the lost-wax method of casting, the same method used by Renaissance artists. The consoles were cast using the skin of crocodiles, and they have an interesting story. It all began when Claude was contacted by the Paris Zoo, which offered her two dead crocodiles. She draped the skin over a console and cast these extraordinary objects. Her chairs, her flatware which is more like jewelry, and her gates and staircases, all of these are poetic and breathtaking.

Clockwise from lower left: Marc Bankowsky's Round stool upholstered in Mongolian lamb of 2010 is seen in the foreground of this view of McCarthy's living room.

A prized possession is the Monkey table, one of the few pieces designed by Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne together.

A Hubert Le Gall bronze Daisies table, 2012, is a recent acquisition.



FRITZ VON DER SCHULENBURG PHOTOS

What is it in the work of the Lalannes that has captured the interest of so many art collectors—who are willing to pay millions for this work?

Collectors are interested in names. Big names. Beyond their superb craftsmanship, the Lalannes have been elevated to a level of star artists. While they have been familiar to European collectors since the 1960s, their presence in the international marketplace, with galleries representing their work in New York, Paris, and London, the retrospective at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Paris, curated by Peter Marino in 2010, all of these have made them into stars of the design world.

Do you buy at auctions?

No, it is too expensive.

Tell me about this armchair in your bedroom. It is a recent work by the Campana brothers but so different from anything they have done before.

We recently purchased it. A friend saw it at Galleria O in Rome and told us about it. We loved it at once, and bought it. While at first glance it looks different from what the Campanas have done before because it is cast, if you look closely, all of the elements are things, everyday objects, that the Campanas have used in their more familiar work—stuffed animals, scraps of wood, and recycled materials.



Top left: Claude Lalanne's bronze and galvanic copper *Nouvelle Pomme Bouche* of 2008 was issued in an edition of one hundred.

Top right: The Anhanguera armchair was designed by Fernando and Humberto Campana in a limited edition as part of their Baroque (Baroco) collection for Galleria O in Rome, 2012.

Bottom: A wood and steel prototype chair designed by Hubert Le Gall.



Is there anything you love in design, anything you respect, but won't collect?

Mid-century American design. While I think some of it was groundbreaking and just wonderful, it is not right for my collection because much of it was mass-produced. As a collector I am interested in objects made in small editions, in small workshops.

What was your last design acquisition?

A small table by French designer Hubert Le Gall, one of his Daisies tables. We have wanted it for a while, and on my last trip to Paris, I visited his studio and purchased it.

What does it mean to you to live with great furniture?

I couldn't have lived otherwise, because living with art and design brings me tremendous joy. I cannot tell you how many times I just wander through the apartment, looking, and looking, and looking again, exploring, and revisiting these objects. It happens to me every day, and it makes me happy. It is the connection with the objects that surround me that brings joy into my home. I constantly encourage my clients to develop this kind of passion for the arts at home because it is only this type of passion that can make homes more inspiring.