



YONEL LBOVICI

A MASTER OF MOTION AND LIGHT, INTREPID FRENCH DESIGNER YONEL LBOVICI MADE SOME OF THE MOST CLEVER FURNITURE AND DECORATIVE PIECES YOU'VE NEVER SEEN

Before it became de rigueur for gallerists to pluck designers from near obscurity, promising flash and glitz in return for a collection of editions destined mainly for collectors—in other words, before it was common to think of design and art as synonymous—there was Yonel Lebovici. From the late '60s until his death in 1998, the French sculptor churned out dozens of pieces that effortlessly blurred the line between design and art. Lounge chairs in the form of binder clips, a giant aluminum tuna whose belly could open to reveal a fully stocked liquor bar—Lebovici's literally larger-than-life creations turned everyday objects into playful, Pop-inspired artifacts that were as beautiful as they were functional. In typically French fashion, he refused to sacrifice the integrity of his designs, producing each piece in small editions of usually no more than fifty. But "it wasn't like Andy Warhol's Factory, where there were 150 people working on the floor," says Benoist Drut, the New York gallerist who gave Lebovici his first-ever American exhibition at Maison Gerard in Manhattan's East Village last fall. "The production died with him."

Lebovici was born in 1937, and in his youth studied art and aviation, taking brief postgraduate stints, first with SNCASE, the French aeronautics company, and then with Serge Mansau, the famed perfume-bottle maker who created classic designs

for the likes of Rochas, Kenzo, and Dior. Lebovici's disparate interests would eventually resolve themselves in an obsession with industrial materials like Plexiglas, aluminum, and steel, and he would continue to explore motion and transparency in pieces like *Metronome* (1984), a lamp with fluttering aluminum flanks riveted like an airplane's wings, or *Aquariophile* (1965), a glass and Plexi table that houses a fish tank underneath its clear top.

Despite his meticulous nature, Lebovici—or Lebo as his friends called him—had an infectious enthusiasm. While Americans have always been reluctant to admit they find the French charming—perhaps part of the reason he never caught on here—it's hard to deny the sheer joy found in Lebovici's works. "You can't look at any of his pieces without smiling," says Barbara Deisroth, an independent appraiser who founded and ran the 20th-century Decorative Arts department at Sotheby's for thirty years. "His work was basically a permanent joke," agrees Drut, who chose as a centerpiece to the East Village show one of Lebovici's wittiest, most subversive works, *Les Yeux* (1988). Originally commissioned for the windows of a gallery on Paris's rue de Seine, the piece is a massive twin set of rusted steel doors, inset with aluminum "eyes" that open and close at random intervals. "You had to run from one window to the other to see the full content of the gallery because they kept opening and closing," laughs Drut. The doors were eventually taken down; he explains: "The gallery didn't exactly think it was contributing to sales."

Lebovici was at his most whimsical when working with light, and in the late '70s he hit his stride, creating in quick succession *Fiche Mâle* (1978), a cast-aluminum power plug that hid elegant fluorescent bulbs underneath its outstretched prongs; the *Maxi* (1978), a 2-foot-tall replica of a pocket flashlight beloved by French schoolchildren; and *Trombone* (1978), a floor lamp in the shape of a paper clip.

In that '70s heyday, Lebovici was adored by European cognoscenti like Yves Saint Laurent and Pierre Cardin, the latter of whom commissioned one hundred of Lebo's acrylic, Sputnik-like Satellite lamps for his Paris showroom. But Lebovici was never

widely collected—in part because of his relatively small output, but also because he was so ahead of his time. "In the '70s," says Deisroth, "I think the people who were buying him were collectors on the vanguard of contemporary design. Lebovici had gone so beyond deco, which was all that people were buying." "He did a lot of things that you might look at today thinking, Eh, I've seen that," Drut explains. "But he was the first." His *Epingule de Nourrice* (1980), for example—a giant safety pin recast as a standing lamp—has a very Claes Oldenburg feel but in fact this particular work predated Oldenburg's similarly celebrated sculpture of an open pin by almost twenty years. And Lebovici's *Lampe Oblique* (1979), a simple acrylic task lamp, is the kind of thing you can find today "in any Sam Flax," Drut jokes.

These days, Lebovici is collected by globe-trotting celebs and architects like Peter Marino, but he's still no household name. Pieces occasionally come up at auction, but until the Maison Gerard exhibition—which culled more than thirty instances of the designer's work from the private stash of French collectors Marie and Cyril Griziot—Lebovici's work was only on view at a private museum at the end of Paris's 15th arrondissement. (Designed by Robert Mallet-Stevens, the museum was originally the workshop of the famous art deco-era stained-glass maker Louis Barillet.) Drut hopes the New York exhibition will change all that, and he's dedicated to spreading the gospel: "We wanted to be the first one to show Lebovici's work," he says. "We have a lot of footwork to do, a lot of education, but that's the fun part of the job." **Jill Singer**

Clockwise from top left: *Thon Bar*, 1988. Photography Michael Stratton. Courtesy Maison Gerard, NYC; *Etui à cigarettes*, 1969. Photography Jean-Paul Weber; *Les Dessous de Table*, 1992. Photography Lawrence Perquis; *Le Tube*, 1969. Photography Jean-Paul Weber; *Fiche Mâle*, 1978. Photography Michael Stratton. Courtesy Maison Gerard, NYC

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