

Leleu Anew

By **Jen Renzi**

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Leleu Anew

May 2010 Datebook

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Necessities for a New World

The Next Big Things

California Cool

Laurent le Bon

Turning the Tables

Best of the West Head East

Home Again

Across the Ages

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NEW YORK— Revisiting a 20th-century design sensation

Of the designer-decorator hyphenates who flourished in early 20th-century France, [Jules Emile Leleu](#) enjoyed one of the most enduring and prolific careers. From the 1920s through 1973, Maison Leleu collaborated with luxury brands like Baccarat and D. Porthault and envisioned bespoke furnishings and interiors for ocean liners, embassies, and high-profile private clients. Leleu's children joined the company in the 1940s and ran it after the patriarch's death, in 1961 at age 78, continuing his legacy of clean-lined, Neoclassical-inspired pieces.

Ironically Leleu's longevity seems to have debased his Art Deco currency. He has long been overshadowed by his contemporaries [Emile-Jacques Ruhlmann](#) and [Jean Royère](#), who had shorter careers and thus more cohesive bodies of work. It's only in the past decade that the cognoscenti have taken a new look at Maison Leleu, reevaluating and celebrating its approach to modernism.

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This rehabilitation is attributable in part to New York gallery **Maison Gérard**, which stages its fourth Leleu exhibition from May 20 through June 4. The show spotlights the designer's postwar period, when mother-of-pearl inlay and shagreen gave way to metal, plastic, and synthetic lacquer. "There is a building interest in Leleu's later work, which remains underexposed," says gallery co-owner Benoist Drut. Highlights include a 1963 lacquered cabinet, a pair of 1960 club chairs, and sculptor [Maurice Calka](#)'s 1970 fiberglass Boomerang desk — one of the last releases before Maison Leleu merged with Maison Jansen and shuttered its custom furniture division.

The exhibition's 50 pieces shed light on the brand's evolving style. "Leleu had a distinct vocabulary that was constantly updated to reflect contemporary tastes: floral inlays in the '20s, more modernist lines and less embellishment in the '30s, and then a return to inlays and parquetry in the '40s and '50s, when he strove to preserve French craftsmanship," explains Maison Gérard's other co-owner, [Gerard Widderhoven](#). "He always had a nose for the very best ebonists, *bronziers*, and other specialists." The result was a canny fusion of traditional handiwork and a modern outlook that has collectors sniffing out the designer's pieces today.

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