

CULTURE · FRENCH DELIGHTS

At the Musée Guimet in Paris, Wang Keping finds beauty in nature's accidents

The Chinese sculptor has been given a 'Carte Blanche' for an exhibit running until March 6, 2023.

By Philippe Dagen

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Wang Keping's "Carte Blanche" at the National Museum of Asian Arts Guimet (MNAAG) in Paris in 2022. ALINE WANG/WANG KEPING STUDIO 11

In the spring, 73-year-old sculptor Wang Keping showed monumental works carved from tree trunks in the park of the Rodin Museum in Paris. At the National Museum of Asian Arts Guimet, he is exhibiting, until March 6, 2023, 21 smaller works, carved wood pieces accompanied by some rare bronzes. They are arranged throughout several parts of this museum: the long gallery devoted to the ancient arts of China, the landing, where an aviary of 18th-century Chinese porcelain birds is arranged, and the dome, whose vast space lends itself well to contemporary creation.

In the first gallery, Wang's sculptures are placed near ancient pieces so as to offer comparison points. *Under the Moon*, which is cut and polished from a thick disk of cypress, sits next to a Neolithic jade carved and polished into the shape of a "pig-dragon" – as archaeologists describe it – which is ring-shaped, with carvings of the outline of the eyes and snout of a mythical animal.

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As both pieces are circular and their surfaces slightly shiny, a distant kinship brings them together. But in other cases, this suggested kinship is so distant that it becomes uncertain. The small nude or bent figures, which Wang stylizes with serpentine curves and clusters of hemispheres in high relief, have nothing in common with the Han period (206 BC-220 AD) mingqi statuettes that line the display case behind them, except that they are female representations. Their styles are almost opposite, allusive for Wang's and descriptive for the painted terracottas. Wang's knowledge of them is not in question. But there is not necessarily a connection just because they are Chinese and he himself is Chinese by birth. It would also be relevant to look for links elsewhere, for example with certain African or Mesopotamian statues, with which he has been familiar for decades, having lived in France since 1984 and exhibited his work all over the world.

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Geometric and pared-down pieces

The same observation comes to mind when looking at his animal motif pieces - birds. His were derived from the lines of two forked branches or the acute angle of a branch and trunk. His birds are literally born of wood thanks to the artist's ability to discover in the particularities of the raw material the outline or the beginning of a figure, which can be nothing more than simple and abstract. Then, thanks to the long work of cutting, incising, tapering and polishing, a form emerges.

"Bird" (2012) by Wang Keping, elmwood. COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND NATHALIE OBADIA GALLERY, PARIS/BRUXELLES

The art of capitalizing on nature's accidents is not new in the history of creation: It can be seen in the engravings and cave paintings that turn a slight relief in a wall into the eye of an animal, and in the sculptures of the same period that make a horse or a reindeer emerge from the initial shape of a bone or a tooth. Wang is just the most modern prehistoric sculptor.

The art of capitalizing on nature's accidents is not new in the history of creation. Wang Keping is the most modern prehistoric sculptor

This is evident under the dome, where works from the last two years are displayed. They owe their creation to a fortuitous circumstance: The possibility for the artist to acquire from a trader a batch of mahogany, an exotic wood that he had never used until then, knowing the species was protected. The wood was intended to be cut for the decoration of cars or luxury boats but could not find a buyer. The mahogany pieces had already been debarked and roughed up, unlike the wood Wang usually receives in its raw state from recently felled trees. Its extreme hardness was another difficulty, and the artist soon knew that he would not be able to work with his usual chisels and gouges (another woodcarving tool).

Wang Keping's "Carte Blanche" at the National Museum of Asian Arts Guimet (MNAAG) in Paris in 2022. ALINE WANG/WANG KEPING STUDIO 11

These works are also among the most geometrical and pared-down that he created: Trapezoids installed vertically, one of the faces of which is scored by sparse and shallow curves that barely indicate the anatomy of one or two bodies. In comparison, the menhir statues of the European Neolithic and the Cycladic idols are detailed and complete figures, but this is to show the degree of symbolic schematization that Wang has achieved here. The color of the wood is nearly black, with sinews of very dark red, which accentuates the physical presence of these timeless effigies.

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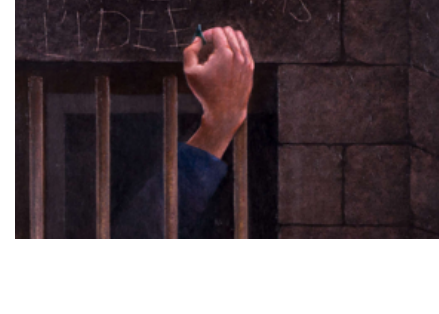
"Carte Blanche à Wang Keping," National Museum of Asian Arts Guimet, 6 Place d'Iéna, Paris 16th arrondissement. Until March 6, 2023, Wednesday through Monday from 10:00 am to 6:00 pm. Admission from €8.50 to €11.50.

Philippe Dagen
Translation of an original article published in French on lemonde.fr; the publisher may only be liable for the French version.

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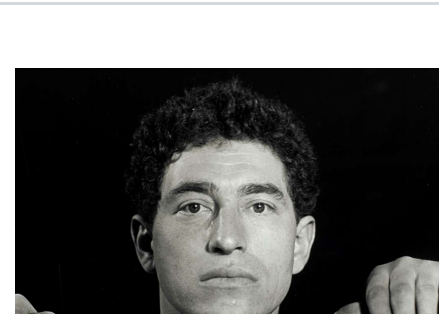
In Montpellier, the MoCo explores the history of museums in exile
Three collections are studied: the Palestinian National Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, the Museum of Solidarity Salvador Allende and the Ars Aevi Museum of Contemporary Art in Sarajevo.



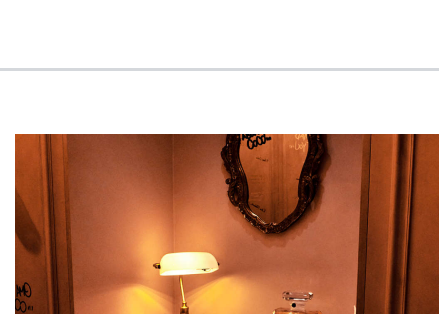
In Montpellier's Fabre Museum, Djamel Tatah explores the abstraction of his time
Some 40 paintings featuring anonymous male and female figures give visitors a chance to grasp the artist's singular language.



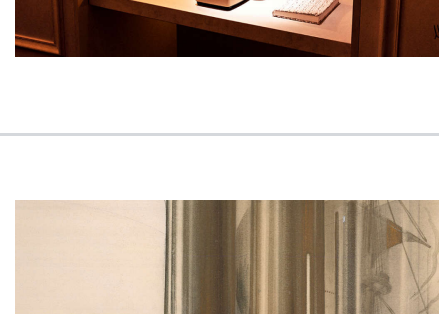
Exhibition: Giacometti and Dali, the history of an aborted project
The Giacometti Institute in Paris is taking an interest in the attempt by the sculptor and painter to collaborate on the garden at the Villa Noailles in the early 1930s.



An immersive experience into the heart of Chanel's iconic perfume
Until January 9, the famous fashion house is presenting its 'Grand Numéro' at the Grand Palais Éphémère, in Paris, an exhibition that smells as good as it looks.



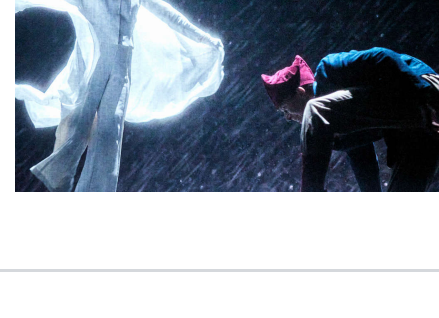
Art Deco, the intense creative Roaring Twenties courtship between France and America
An exhibition at the Cité de l'Architecture in Paris celebrates this exceptional period of artistic architecture, which conquered France in the 1910s and soon became a craze across the Atlantic



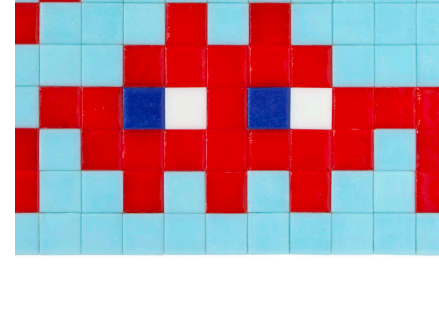
At the Comédie-Française, an interpretation of 'The Snow Queen' let's go of Disney's 'Frozen'
The 96-year-old doyenne of Hans Christian Andersen's fairytale, Johanna Boyé and Elisabeth Ventura have restored all the ambivalence and mystery of the original text.



Space Invader: French artist's famous pixels go from the street to the gallery
The famous French street artist who has installed 4,000 mosaics around the world, moves from outside to inside with the opening of his solo exhibition in Paris.



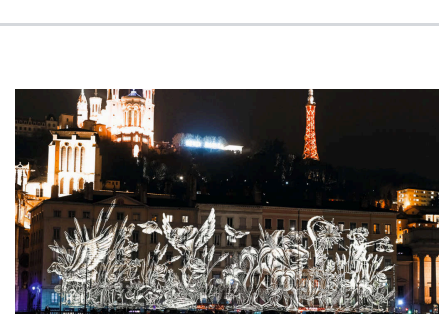
From Yves Saint Laurent to Frida Kahlo, the Paris fashion exhibitions not to miss this winter
From the golden finery of YSL to the secrets of kimonos, from Elsa Schiaparelli's surrealist fashion to Frida Kahlo's recovered wardrobe, the current Parisian exhibitions offer a fascinating history of clothing.



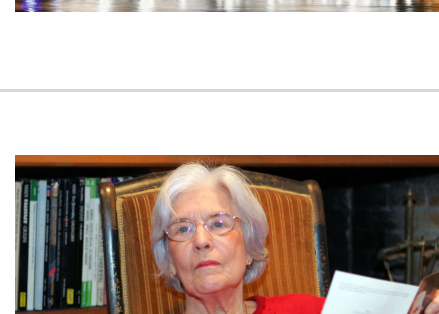
Lyon's Festival of Lights kicks off, seeking to mitigate energy costs
The event, which takes place this year until December 11, 2022, will run on low voltage as France's second-largest city is keen to demonstrate it acts responsibly.



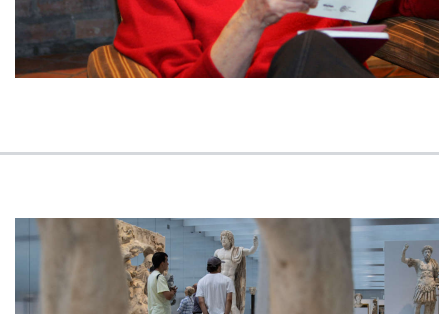
Composer Betsy Jolas: 'I'm aware I'm one of the last survivors of the Boulez and Stockhausen generation'
The 96-year-old doyenne of contemporary music, who is being honored at a festival in Nîmes, says she became a composer 'in spite of everything.'



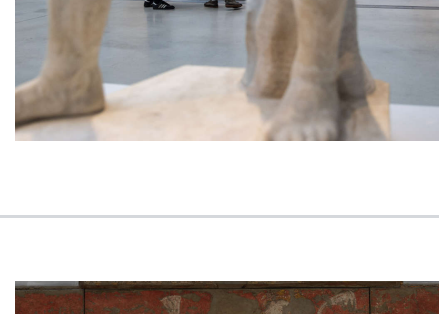
Louvre-Lens celebrates its 10th anniversary, with hopes of increasing tourism to northern France
Now well established in the mining community, the museum has yet to prove that it can contribute to the poor region's economic development.



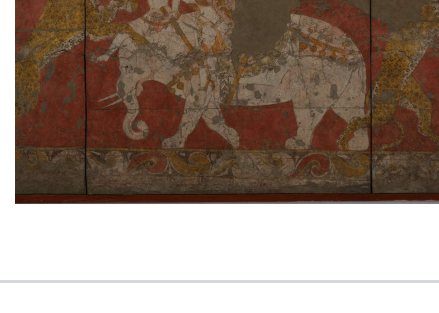
A journey through the 'crossroads of civilizations': Uzbekistan opens the doors to its treasures in Paris
Two exhibitions at the Louvre and the Arab World Institute want people to step inside the worlds of Samarkand and Bukhara, and discover some of the treasures that have never before left the country.



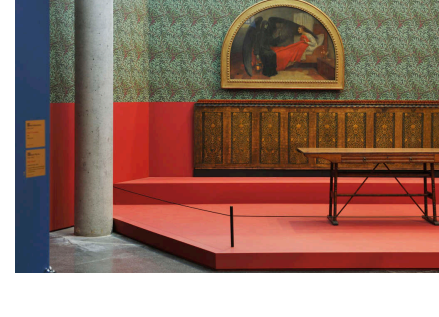
English design maestro William Morris celebrated in French exhibition
This British figure was an acclaimed creator of wallpaper for Victorian houses, a designer of furniture, books and stained glass, a socialist activist and a writer.



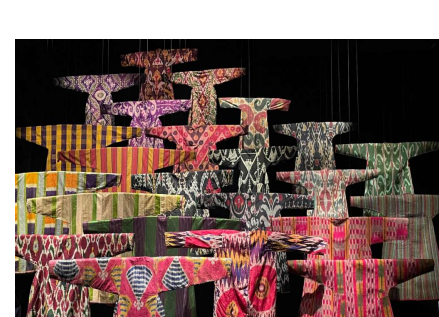
The symbolism of Uzbek fabrics at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris
An exhibition presents 300 treasures of late 19th century craftsmanship, intertwining the threads of imagination and geopolitics.



Paris exhibition showcases archaeological treasures of Afghanistan
The exhibition 'Afghanistan: Shadows and Legends' at the Musée National des Arts Asiatiques in Paris displays objects from a century of excavations.



New exhibit highlights how post-war Paris was a haven for foreign artists
'Paris and Nowhere Else' at the Museum of the History of Immigration presents works by 24 painters, visual artists and graphic designers who sought refuge in the capital from 1945 to 1972.



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