



Father-son duo Philip and Kelvin LaVerne often buried their works in special soil, which would age the metal and give it the appearance of antiquity, like the piece shown here.

# Past Perfect

ARTISTRY AND ANCIENT TECHNIQUES COMBINE TO CREATE FURNITURE THAT STANDS THE TEST OF TIME.

WRITTEN BY MARY JO BOWLING

It's been more than 30 years since the last piece of furniture left Philip LaVerne Galleries, but the demand for the richly detailed tables, consoles and cabinets has only grown. This wouldn't surprise their creators, a father-and-son team who knew they were crafting pieces with an enduring appeal even as they made them.

Philip LaVerne and his son, Kelvin, were able to use their prodigious artistic gifts to create sculptural bronze and pewter pieces prized by designers and collectors. Their story begins in the late 1800s when Philip's father, Max, immigrated to Brooklyn from Eastern Europe. "Max was a muralist, and he painted the ceilings of lobbies and churches," says Evan Lobel, the owner of Lobel Modern NYC and co-author of a forthcoming book about the LaVerne's. "When Philip was a child, Max would take him to the library, open an art book and ask his son to copy the images there. From an early age, Philip had a great talent and appreciation for art."

Those skills and inclinations were passed to Kelvin who, after graduating from art school in the 1950s, joined his father in creating one-of-a-kind pieces and selling them in a Midtown Manhattan showroom. The surfaces of their furniture frequently carry vignettes

depicting life in ancient civilizations or scenes from mythology. “They were a very intellectual family,” notes Lobel. “They were interested in history, religion and music. Their designs were inspired by the subjects they loved deeply.”

Their top-secret techniques created a look that’s immediately recognizable. Todd Merrill of Todd Merrill Studio describes the process in his book, *Modern Americana: Studio Furniture from High Craft to High Glam*, as a multistep endeavor involving hand carving a design in bronze and overlaying that with thin layers of pewter and more bronze. After that, a piece would be buried for six

weeks in soil the artists described as coming from the “Far East,” allowing it to oxidize and develop colors. The LaVerne monitored the process, encouraging hues with chemicals and setting them with wax when they achieved the desired shade. When unearthed, they would freeze or torch surfaces to develop patina or brightness. “The LaVerne were really advanced for their time. Their techniques, which they said were inspired by ancient practices, were never divulged,” says Merrill. “They were essentially painting with bronze and pewter, doing things that aren’t easily copied.”

In 1987, Kelvin closed the studio doors and took up photography. But, more than three decades later, the LaVerne legacy continues to grow. According to Darin Geise, owner of Coup D’Etat, the singular nature of the work explains its enduring popularity. “People have a new appreciation for LaVerne pieces, and they are having a moment,” he says. Lobel agrees, noting: “They used to run magazine ads calling their pieces the ‘antiques of the future’—and they were absolutely right.”

Current prices for LaVerne pieces, like the rare Tao Cabinet (below) and a table from their first series focused on historical civilizations (left), bear out the statement. Todd Merrill notes recent auctions that have seen LaVerne works command top dollar. “In early 2000, Sotheby’s sold a Bathers cabinet for \$90,000,” he notes. “If you had one today, you could ask whatever you wanted for it.”

# LaVerne Everlasting

DESIGNERS ON  
TODAY’S APPEAL OF THESE  
VINTAGE PIECES.

“At once avant-garde and traditional, a LaVerne work is always a fantastic focal point to any interior. **The burnished bronze and verde gris patina adds a touch of deceptive antiquity** and the plateaux quietly reveal a bas-relief scene akin to the face of an antique coin.”

—JON DE LA CRUZ

“**What drew me to their furnishings is that they can work anywhere**—either in a traditional or a modern interior. They are just as beautiful in either setting.”

—JENNIFER COHLER MASON

“The craftsmanship of a LaVerne piece is amazing. **Every detail is elegantly articulated and every time you study it, you see something new.** You have to wonder, how did they do it?”

—JACK LEVY



TABLE INSET: RICHARD POWERS. CONSOLE: COURTESY LOBEL MODERN NYC.