

GAGOSIAN

design anthology

Coming Out of the Canvas: A Conversation with Setsuko Klossowska de Rola
Today Gagorian Paris opens its first exhibition of the Japanese-French artist's ceramic sculptures and paintings. Earlier this week, Klossowska de Rola spoke with us about her influences, the exhibition and her collaboration with Astier de Villatte

Jae Lee



Setsuko Klossowska de Rola in her bronze studio. Image courtesy of the artist

‘I travelled the world in the nude but lived an alienated life very far from the real world,’ says Setsuko Klossowska de Rola, who for many years was only known as the semi-naked figure in her late husband Balthus's painting *The Turkish Room*.

Today, Setsuko keeps busy by making up for lost adventures. She lives between Rossinière and Paris, where her ceramic studio is located inside Astier de Villatte's factory. She is the designer behind the ceramic brand's iconic black terracotta cat incense burner, and was named a UNESCO Artist for Peace in 2005.

Just days before the opening of ‘Into the Trees’, her first exhibition at Gagorian Paris, Klossowska de Rola talked to us about her Gagorian debut and Shintoism, among other things.

Jae Lee: You left Japan to join Balthus at Villa Medici, where he was the director and was working on its restoration. How did that influence you as an artist?

Setsuko Klossowska de Rola: One thing that really struck me was watching Balthus replace the marbled floors with handmade terracotta tiles. When I first arrived at Villa Medici, the atmosphere was heavy with 19th century-style decorations. We removed all the gold leaf applications because originally, it was a remote, cosy residence where those touches would have been out of place. In Japan, I didn't study art. I read European literature and studied French, but when I arrived in Europe, I realised that art and beauty are universal, and that Japanese ideals like wabi-sabi existed in Europe.

When did you start making tree sculptures?

I started making them about four years ago, but I've always found my inspirations from nature. Have you seen the sacred old trees around Shinto shrines in Japan? From the Native Americans to the people of Ancient Mesopotamia, there has always been an adoration for nature, but modern society has forgotten a lot of that sentimentality.

Your ceramics are produced with Astier de Villatte, can you tell us more about this process?

The collaboration with Astier de Villatte began five years ago, but my friendship with the owners, especially Benoit, goes back a long time. His father was a resident of Villa Medici resident when I was the headmistress.

I work with their Tibetan artisans. I make samples first and then we work together to add the volume, especially on the large trees, which are about a metre tall. The artisans are always singing or chanting; I feel very serene when I'm with them.

What can we expect to see at the exhibition?

There will be glazed and natural terracotta tree sculptures; some of them function as an incense holder or a flower vase, so the plan is to have smoke flowing out of them at the opening. Aside from ceramics, there will be still-life paintings, which I've been making since the 80s in the Grand Chalet, as well as bronze trees.

What else are you currently working on?

I started working with bronze last year, so it's still a very exciting medium for me. Later this year, I may visit Asia for a fashion project. After Balthus's death, I wanted to come out of the canvas and leave the sheltered life behind. It took a long time for me to be young again, and I am open to everything now.



Chemin de vigne, 2016-2017. Enameled Terracotta, 63 x 50 x 40 cm. © Setsuko Klossowska de Rola. Photographs by Zarko Vijatovic, courtesy of Gagolian



Retour, 2015-2016. Terracotta, 100 x 74 x 46 cm. © Setsuko Klossowska de Rola. Photographs by Zarko Vijatovic, courtesy of Gagolian



Sentier de lierre, 2017-2018. Enameled Terracotta. 38 x 13 x 11 cm. © Setsuko Klossowska de Rola. Photographs by Zarko Vijatovic, courtesy of Gagosian. Sentier de vigne, 2016-2017. Terracotta. 91 x 40 x 40 cm. © Setsuko Klossowska de Rola. Photographs by Zarko Vijatovic, courtesy of Gagosian



Souvenir d'une vie 2, 2015-2016. Enameled Terracotta, 70 x 40 x 40 cm © Setsuko Klossowska de Rola. Photographs by Zarko Vijatovic, courtesy of Gagosian