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How to
TRAVEL NOW
There Is a Way

—
Lost
Generation
2020
Are You Its Hemingway?

—
WALL STREET'S NEW HACK
C-SUITE
PANIC ROOMS

—
Lady Black's
REVENGE

HOW TO
Posing with
Pariahs
SURVIVE

SHARON
STONE
Gets the
Last Laugh



PALACE Intrigue

A family mystery, a doomed king, a cunning secretary. The true history of a design dynasty rediscovered.

BY OLIVIA HOSKEN

Growing up in Paris, Alexia Leleu listened to stories about the fantastical Maison Leleu, an interior design and furniture house founded by her great-grandfather Jules Leleu and his brother Marcel in 1910. "Our dinners were punctuated with anecdotes of outfitting the private residences of President Eisenhower, Prince Pierre of Monaco, and Brigitte Bardot, and crafting the dining room of the Elysée Palace," she says. Jules's children André, Paule, and Alexia's grandfather Jean all worked in the family business, taking on such ambitious projects as luxurious ocean liners and the United Nations office in Geneva. Maison Leleu furniture and designs adorned homes around the world, including royal residences. Then it abruptly closed, in 1973.

As a child Alexia accepted the stories as just that; for a career, she went into the pharmaceutical industry. But in her early thirties she wondered, Why did a company as successful as Maison Leleu shut its doors without so much as a whisper?

No one in her family had the answers (her grandfather died before she was born), so Alexia began tracking down former Maison Leleu employees and piecing together its unfortunate fate: In 1969 the shah of Iran hired Maison Leleu to create an installation at Persepolis celebrating the 2,500th anniversary of the founding of the Persian Empire. It was to be a grand affair—Lanvin designed the royal staff uniforms—and Leleu spent three years realizing a splendid display of 51 tents. But the shah never paid the bill, and, with the Iranian Revolution impending, he would never be able to. Maison Leleu shuttered to avoid bankruptcy.

"The matter was silenced," Alexia says. "Why that is will remain a forgotten secret with my grandparents. All I was able to discover is that they were devastated. They closed the workshops on Rue Saint-Sabin in Paris



Alexia Leleu revived Maison Leleu, the business founded by her great-grandfather Jules. From top: New editions of Maison Leleu furniture in rooms by Glenn Gissler and Maison Gerard; the newly released Coco sofa; Jules with his sons Jean and André.



and threw everything away."

Or so they thought. Alexia was able to locate her great-grandfather's secretary, Françoise Siriex, in 2017, and, she says, "after several interviews with Françoise, she revealed a secret." Siriex had gone through the garbage bins and salvaged almost the entire archive.

"She gave me everything she had: fabrics, wallpapers, carpets, furniture, sketches. I knew I had to bring Maison Leleu back to life."

In 2018, Alexia reopened the house and discovered that the world was more than ready for Maison Leleu's return. In just two years she has garnered a new generation of well-heeled clients: LVMH, Cartier, Claridge's, along with celebrities including "one of the Kardashian sisters," Alexia says coyly. So far two series of rugs have been released, and this year she launched furniture and lighting collections. Everything is meticulously produced in limited editions, with bespoke offerings for her clients. Alexia is picking right up where her grandparents left off, and half a century later Maison Leleu is getting the happy ending it always deserved. **T&C**