

THE COCO DE MER AN ARTIST'S MUSE

Story by Rowana Walton

The uniquely shaped female coco de mer nut has long been a source of inspiration for artists, poets and religious figures. It has become a symbolic object with a mythical, erotic and radiant aura and over centuries has given rise to numerous legends.

Endemic to Seychelles, the coco de mer palm was once thought (incorrectly) to have originated from the Maldives. The name coco de mer or 'sea coconut' came from the discovery of the nuts at sea by early sailors, who could not understand where they had come from.

Representing the amorphous shape of a woman, the coco de Mer was part of the reason that early explorer General Charles Gordon announced that the Vallée de Mai was the biblical garden of Eden and that the coco de mer represented the forbidden fruit.

The myths surrounding the coco de Mer and its natural beauty have been an inspiration and muse for many artists over the centuries. In Seychelles the coco de mer nut is a much sought-after tourist souvenir, and is also the basis of many beautiful locally hand crafted souvenirs and crafts. Mauritian born Jacques Charoux is a multi-medium visual artist and educator. Jac has been working with coco de mer since 1999. For Jac, 'The coco de mer epitomises duality in nature, when slowly revolved in one's hands they flow seamlessly from one another, constantly metamorphosing it's suggestiveness in a myriad of forms, yet still remaining minimal in its essence and absolutely pure in its simplicity'.

One of Jac's recent collections was called *Indian Ocean*, based on the form of the coco de mer using materials sourced from the Indian Ocean. Jac's pieces represent the simplicity and also the adaptability of the coco de mer. His work on the coco de mer has gained critical acclaim and he has held many shows of his work on this subject. Further details on Jac's collections can be found at his website - www.jacquescharoux.com.au

At the 2013 celebration of the Vallée de Mai's 30th anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the acclaimed French artist Marie-Laure Le Guay de Villepin (alias Viebel) joined Seychelles Islands Foundation (SIF) and held an exhibition of some of her coco de mer inspired art pieces.

Marie-Laure has been fascinated with the symbolism and shape of the coco de mer nut since 2006. Marie-Laure was entranced by the beautiful shape of the nut but felt that it needed more light to be truly glorious. After having studied and practised gilding for the past 10 years, Marie-Laure was struck by the idea of gilding the seed, and so began her love affair with the biggest seed in the world.

"The history, destiny and symbols of this magic seed have inspired me more and more with new shapes, engravings, sizes and materials, such as bronze and glass, all becoming part of my work," Marie-Laure said.



PHOTOS © J CHAROUX



Above: Jac working in his studio. Using materials from the Indian Ocean, Jac created these unique pieces from kelp, raffia and coconut fibre.



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Above (clockwise): A gilded coco de mer by Marie-Laure Viebel; Marie-Laure with one of her bronze coco de mer pieces in her studio; Marie-Laure and the 'Graine de Paix', her most recent coco de mer inspired work.

The art of gilding transforms the coco de mer into a 'seed of life', a sacred object. Similar sacred objects are revered in religions such as Buddhism and Christianity. "Gold is often considered as the most precious metal and it has a quality of light that reflects the divine light", says Marie-Laure, who displayed some of her unique gilded coco de mer at the Vallée de Mai last year. For more information on Marie-Laure's work visit www.viebel.com.

The exquisite beauty and precious value of the coco de mer cannot be underestimated. Unfortunately this is a double-edged sword, and it is this perceived value that has led to the poaching of coco de mer nuts from Seychelles. The kernel inside the nut is of great commercial value in the Traditional Chinese Market in Asia as its amorous shape has been

interpreted as a sign that the nut has aphrodisiacal properties. The illegal practice of poaching threatens the future survival of the coco de mer as the forest is not able to regenerate naturally. SIF, the custodian of the Vallée de Mai, is currently working hard to combat this tragic and wasteful practice and safeguard the future of the coco de mer, not only for its scientific value but also its cultural and artistic importance.

To find out more about coco de mer:

- Download the Vallée de Mai app through iTunes or Google Play
- Follow SIF on Facebook or Twitter
- Visit the SIF website and sign up for their e-newsletter - www.sif.sc