FOR 100 YEARS and more, Van Cleef & Arpels has narrated natural history through consummate feats of the jeweller's craft. Since the house's earliest years and to the present day, successive designers have taken motifs from nature, from the plant and the animal kingdom. For decades, the Van Cleef & Arpels representations of flora and fauna, rendered in precious metals and stones, have evolved, growing and flourishing with the cycle of the seasons.

This month, the 121-year-old jeweller will present for the first time in Asia a menagerie of animals in a collection of high jewellery called L'Arche de Noé, French for Noah's Ark. Van Cleef & Arpels will show the collection at the Asia Society in Hong Kong, in an exhibition designed by acclaimed theatre director and visual artist Robert Wilson.

"The maison often creates a dialogue between its own identity and heritage on one hand, and broad historical themes and references from other cultural spheres," says the president and chief executive of Van Cleef & Arpels, Nicolas Bos. "This was the case for the high jewellery collection, L'Arche de Noé, inspired by a Jan Brueghel the Elder painting."

The discovery by Europeans of what they called the New World was followed in the 17th century by an upsurge in curiosity about natural history. Brueghel was appointed as the painter at the court of Archduke Albert and the Infanta Isabella of Spain in 1609. The artist had collected exotic animals from around the world for his menagerie in Brussels. Brueghel studied the animals and painted many of them – lumbering elephants, frolicking leopards, graceful birds – in his 1613 work *The Entry of the Animals* into Noah's Ark.

Wilson's exhibition for Van Cleef & Arpels is engineered to capture the spirit of Brueghel's famous painting. The American designer is something of an aesthetic alchemist: his concepts for the stage integrate in unconventional ways a wide variety of the arts, including dance, sculpture, music and the written word.

ANIMAL MAGIC

The Asia Society in Hong Kong hosts Van Cleef & Arpels' latest exhibition, L'Arche de Noe, on its debut in Asia

His images are emotionally charged and his productions have earned the applause of audiences and critics worldwide.

Wilson has collaborated with stars in the firmament of American culture such as Tom Waits, Susan Sontag, Laurie Anderson, William Burroughs, Lou Reed, Jessye Norman and Heiner Müller. He has left his mark on productions of masterworks including Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, Goethe's *Faust*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* and Verdi's *La Traviata*.

The design of the Van Cleef & Arpels exhibition conjures up an adventure in a far-off land populated by mischievous monkeys, bounding kangaroos, galloping horses and exotic birds poised to take wing – more than 40 pairs of animals in all, represented in pieces of jewellery.

The jeweller created its first hummingbird in 1925. It crafted a wheeling seagull and a sly fox in 1926. It hatched a resplendently feathered bird of paradise in 1927. Those pieces anticipated the exoticism of the 1960s and 1970s.

Some bird clips could be worn in a hat or in the hair, by day or by night, pioneering Van Cleef & Arpels adaptable jewellery.

A whole park-full of animals made up the Van Cleef & Arpels boutique collection of 1954. The collection comprised more casual, young-at-heart jewellery meant for a more egalitarian kind of wearer. The park was populated by quirky characters in the form of rabbits, bulldogs, squirrels, lions, giraffes, elephants, butterflies, frogs and there was even a teddy bear.

L'Arche de Noé has butterflies of white and pink gold all aflutter with round diamonds, buff-topped sapphires, spessartine garnets, black spinels and tourmalines. It has unicorn clips in white gold, wondrously set with marquise-cut emeralds and baguette-cut sapphires. It has stately, slender giraffes in pink gold, and host of other beasts.

The collection is the work of Van Cleef & Arpels at its extravagantly artistic best, miraculously turning the ephemeral into the eternal. #