

BLOUIN ARTINFO

OBJECT LESSONS

Architecture & Design News



OBJECT LESSONS: Architecture & Design News

November 16, 2012, 9:23 pm

Joseph André Motte, A Father of French Modernism, At Demisch Danant

There's a world of difference a handful of years can make in design.



It's as true of furniture as it is of elections.

Chelsea gallery **Demisch Danant**'s latest show of work by modernist French designer **Joseph André Motte**, "Joseph André Motte: The Art of Living," is an immersive demonstration in the latter. Based on two past **Salon des Arts Ménagers** trade exhibitions of Motte's work, the gallery has split itself into two distinct living areas, separated by a wall and five years' worth of evolution in both technology and taste.

When visitors enter the gallery, they're greeted with the plush, bright enthusiasm of the Postwar reconstruction boom, a snapshot from the government-mandated comfort of French living as manufacturer **Charron** had envisioned it. There's a warmth that emanates from the incandescent lighting, the canary yellow paint job, and the luxe shag carpeting. The most modern achievements involved novel uses of wood: the 1949 Tripod chairs and the 1954 rattan Sabre chair comprise woven rattan, an old artisanal form that was a liberating discovery for mid-century designers.



A pair of Motte's 1949 Tripod chairs



While all those warm and inviting sentiments were the jumping off point for modernism, they were washed away by the retrofuturistic cool of the '60s, as represented by the adjacent space. Fast forwarding six years (which only requires that the viewer walk about 10 feet) erases the shag and texture of natural materials as they give way to the streamlined contours and space-age forms. Seatbacks recline less comfortably. Palettes shift toward steely greens and greys and shades of blue. The dramatic evolution of taste that favored vinyls and laminates was informed by the technological advances of the moment. Multi-functional pieces lent themselves to reducing clutter; hewing the extraneous out of this newly minimal aesthetic, Motte took the liberty of installing lights into his nightstands and coffee table, illuminating them through white opaline glass surfaces rather than facilitating the need for something as cumbersome as a lamp.

Although French mid-century is most famously associated with **Jean Prouvé** or **Charlotte Perriand**, Motte and his peers, a collective called Studio ARP that included **Pierre Guariche** and **Michel Mortier**, were responsible for the quotidian objects that defined the era. Although Motte is one of the most successful in terms of commercial production, he styled more than the home: Commissioned by the government, he redid the interiors for public spaces, including the metro and the airports of Roissy, Lyon, and Orly (just at the tail end of the Jet Age, the height of airlines' concern for [the passenger experience](#)). He's truly an under-appreciated figure for all the contributions he made to the look and feel of 1960s France, and the show is a step towards rectifying that. *“Joseph André Motte: The Art of Living” in on view at Demisch Danant through February 9.*
