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The enduring legacy of Henri Samuel, decorator to the wealthy

Jennifer Krichels ◀ New feature

A new exhibition gathers together rare furnishings by artists who inspired the French designer in the 1960s and 1970s



Interior of Henri Samuel's apartment in Paris, 1987

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the French decorator Henri Samuel brought furnishings made by some of the era's most thought-provoking artists into the homes of well-heeled clients such as the Rothschilds, the Vanderbilts and the couturier Valentino – and they have stayed there to this day.

It was a moment when France threw out all its old rules. From students protesting against the conservative policies of president Charles de Gaulle with handmade street posters, to painters and sculptors experimenting with new subject matter and materials, artists waged a creative and social revolution. Ultimately, they expanded the definition of modern design and allowed it to spread into the creation of objects for everyday life.

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Whether out of professional instinct or personal interest, Samuel began to build the bridge between these groundbreaking artists and his clients. Philippe Hiquily, known for provocative sculptures with titles such as “Impotence” and “Stripteaser”, caught Samuel's eye in the late 1960s as he began working his ideas into the bases of tables.

When the sculptor César Baldaccini (known universally as César) met Samuel, he had created fewer than 20 furniture pieces in his life. But the two men shared clients and a mutual admiration, and Samuel began commissioning furnishings, including a grand, dripping bronze expansion table and a table lamp topped with a dripping shade of polyurethane foam. Both bear the sculptor's almost baroque approach to form.

“He had a big influence on César,” says Stephanie Busuttill-Janssen, César's longtime companion and director of his estate since his death

in 1998. “I know that they really liked each other, even if they were really different people.”

Samuel was elegant, from a wealthy French family, and César was from a poor Italian family. “But they had that kind of complicity and sensibility and finally spoke the same language,” says Busuttill-Janssen.

In addition to pieces by Hiquily and César, Samuel began commissioning work from Diego Giacometti, Guy de Rougemont and François Arnal – founder of pioneering artists' collective Atelier A, which inspired its members to unite different mediums and artistic theories with functional design, and gave rise to Italian design movements, including Alchimia and Superstudio.

Samuel had acquired his instinct for style early on in life, eschewing a career in finance to begin work in decoration with the Paris-based firm Jansen in 1925. Just a year after establishing his own firm in 1956, he was hired to restore the Empire rooms at Versailles, and from that point he had his pick of distinguished clients around the world.

It was with that captive audience and somewhat late in his career that he began to create interiors with striking juxtapositions of old and new pieces. The results were wildly popular – along with the decade's unrestrained social atmosphere, the bourgeois practice of matching furnishings gave way to a diverse sense of style that became known as the "Samuel mix".

In Samuel's own Louis XVI townhouse on Paris's Rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré, a 19th-century French Empire table and neoclassical chairs mingled with a 1965 Giacometti table and brass-and-Plexiglas armchairs by Hiquily.



'Symétrique rocking chair', by Jean-Michel Sanejouand, 1971



'Pair of expansion ashtrays', by César



'Table nuage', by Guy de Rougemont, 1971



Console 'Elice', by François Arnal, 1968

This winter, an exhibition at New York's Demisch Danant gallery is casting new light on Samuel's legacy with a collection of pieces close to those in his own apartment.

"Henri Samuel captured an environment that still resonates today," says Suzanne Demisch, the gallery's co-owner. "He represents a new age, a time of decorators who were successfully mixing historic material with contemporary art and objects in a very glamorous way."



'Pair of candelabras', by César Philippe

On view until January 31, the exhibition brings together rare furnishings by artists who inspired Samuel, most of which have not been exhibited publicly. Highlights include César's expansion table and lamp, as well as a set of golden bronze ashtrays and other small objects. A rare Plexiglas and brass guéridon by Arnal – and commissioned by Samuel in 1969 – complements a version of a smoked Plexiglas console, similar to one made for the decorator's apartment in Paris.

A low Hiquily table in steel was part of a group of metal furnishings Samuel used both in his clients' interiors and his own home. Once the centerpiece of Samuel's living room, a version of de Rougemont's lit-from-within Table Nuage was fabricated in 2012 based on the artist's original drawing.

Although pieces are curated to represent those in Samuel's own home, the show's contemporary setting – a white-walled gallery in the trendy Chelsea district – gives it a striking modern context.



'Guéridon', François Arnal, c1969

It is an indication that the decorator's philosophy of relaxed glamour is alive and well, as are the legacies of the artists that he commissioned. "Henri Samuel influences designers today in their own philosophy about collecting and putting together an interior," says Demisch. "Many say they are directly influenced by his style."

The interior designer Kelly Wearstler, who has been photographed sitting in her own Hiquily chair, is well-known for incorporating designs from Samuel's world into her interiors and furnishings. Rock star-cum-designer Lenny Kravitz used two Hiquily aluminium tables and a chair in his private Paris residence; another table by the artist sold at auction for \$312,000, which was almost twice its estimated price.

"Henri Samuel was not only a perfectionist, but he was also open to artists' visions," says the French designer Jacques Grange, who worked with Samuel early in his career, and is widely known for skilfully combining old and new pieces in his interiors. "I learnt, by working with him, the art of jumping with a great freedom from classicism to modernity."

While the end of Samuel's career may have represented the close of *une époque*, it was just the start of a new era for art in interiors.



Graffiti on a wall at the faculty of Nanterre, France, during the student protests of 1968

Busuttil-Janssen remembers visiting Samuel's apartment with César just after the decorator's death in 1996. "The house was exactly the same; nothing had moved and you just had the feeling that Henri was away for a few days. His dachshund was still in the flat.

"We were in his living room, with a beautiful Balthus hung on the orange wall and all of the objects he loved, and César was very touched.

"Almost 20 years later, the legacy of Henri Samuel is still alive."



'Expansion lamp', by César, 1976

'Paris Match: Henri Samuel And The Artists He Commissioned, 1968-1977', at the Demisch Danant gallery in New York, runs to January 31 2015; demischdanant.com

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