

It's rare to find furniture and objects that look as fresh and imaginative today as at their debut 50 years ago. It's even more unusual to find their designer still creating pieces – half a century later – that are capable of whipping up a storm of interest among international collectors. Yet such is the case with the glamorous new work by Paris-based designer Maria Pergay that will be unveiled this spring by New York gallery Demisch Danant.

Pergay, now 82, is best known for her skill at turning an everyday, unforgiving material – stainless steel – into objects of aesthetic beauty. As Marianne Goebel, director of Design Miami and Design Miami/Basel, puts it: "Maria Pergay is not only one of the few female designers to have left their mark on design history, she is also one of the few to have influenced the way we perceive a certain material. The seemingly effortless way she shapes stainless steel into her whimsical yet elegant forms is unparalleled."

What is exciting collectors now, though, is her move towards a more naturalistic – even romantic – style in copper and bronze. Daringly different from her earlier designs, this new twist in Pergay's career is described as "astounding" by Jana Scholze, curator of contemporary furniture and product design at the V&A. "Her success in the 1960s and 1970s was remarkable. Even more so is her recent comeback, which shows that her popularity among collectors is truly enduring," she says.

"Pergay seems to have all the right things going for her at the moment," says Melanie Gerlis, *The Art Newspaper's*

Maria Pergay pictured in a Paris apartment sitting on her steel Ribbon Pouf, 2007, next to her new violet wood, stainless-steel and bronze Secret Garden console, 2012. Both price on request

Half a century ago, Maria Pergay astounded the design world with her extraordinary creations in stainless steel. Now, aged 82, she's making waves again with daringly different works in copper and bronze. Nicole Swengley reports. Portraits by Lea Crespi

STEELING THE SHOW



Above: Column seat in stainless steel and oak, 2012. Right: Pergay in a Paris apartment with the stainless-steel, shagreen and mother-of-pearl Caviar cabinet, 2005. Below: Ammonite table in stainless steel and metal, 2010. Prices on request

art market editor. “She is being bought by museums, she has a commercial gallery opening coming up [with Demisch Danant in New York], bronze is in the spotlight after the Royal Academy’s recent exhibition and she’s an established designer who is making new work. Most of her highest prices at auction have been made since 2007, which also suggests she’s rather recession-proof.”

Ron Labaco, the Marcia Docter curator at New York’s Museum of Art & Design, is equally enthusiastic. “Pergay is a very talented designer with a unique vision,” he says. “Her work is bold, beautiful, tactile and very inviting. The pieces have their own distinctive presence. She’s now exploring a new direction yet the work still relates to what she has done previously; it’s a reflection of all her experience combined with a response to current culture.”

It’s not hard to understand the passion Pergay’s work can evoke when you encounter creations such as the Secret Garden console (pictured with Pergay on previous pages; all pieces are price on request). Made from African violet wood, it has ribbons of stainless steel tumbling down its façade. At one end there is a small bronze tree enclosed in a glass case; on the outside, another tree appears to be growing through the floor, its branches encroaching on the glass section. “The idea is that the forest is invading the piece just like it did with Cambodia’s Angkor Wat, where it swallowed a whole city,” says Pergay.

Just as expressive is the new Tree lamp, a huge structure in bronze and copper that occupies the entire corner of a room. All its leaves are illuminated by tiny LEDs, which makes it seem as if sunlight is filtering through the branches. Its proportions and scale are elements not seen in her work before.

Then there’s a delicate dressing table, also in bronze and copper. “Again, I wanted it to be like something in a forest, where a tree is growing among the ruins of an old castle, so it feels as if you’re surrounded by branches, leaves and flowers as you sit at the mirror brushing your

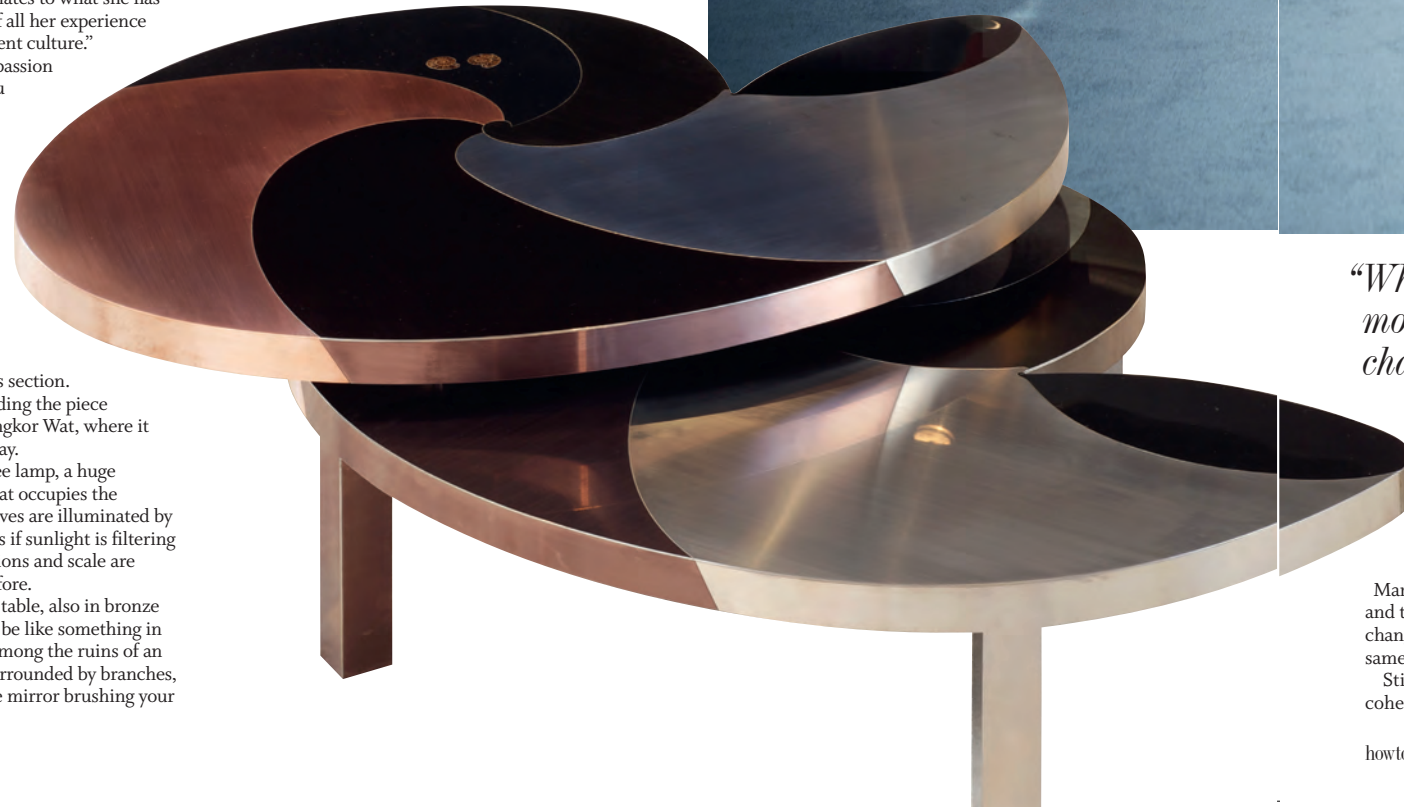
hair. It’s very naturalistic, as if you’re looking through a window into a garden.” No wonder collectors such as Johannes Huth, managing director of private equity firm KKR and a trustee of the Design Museum, are intrigued. “Maria treats her materials with a playfulness that’s very engaging,” he says. “She’s a fascinating person. I’m really passionate about her work and have collected several designs since meeting her some years ago.”

This sense of fun is evident in pieces such as the throne-like Column seat (pictured left), with its oak base and jagged, stainless-steel back, and the gleaming Ammonite table (pictured below), in which encrusted ammonites are set within tinted stainless-steel surfaces, whose fluid curves are reminiscent of fossil coils. Meanwhile, designs such as the Caviar cabinet (pictured with Pergay right) reveal her ability to create glamorous furniture that transcends the limitations of industrial stainless steel by combining it with luxurious materials like shagreen and mother-of-pearl.

Gallerist Suzanne Demisch, who, with co-gallerist Stephane Danant, works closely with Pergay and was instrumental in producing the first *catalogue raisonné* of her designs, *Maria Pergay: Complete Works 1957-2010* (Damiani, 2011), explains that her new work has “stemmed from a site-specific commission for which Pergay made a large over-mantel mirror with specially patinated copper branches, leaves and flowers flowing out to the sides. It reminded me of a piece she made for our gallery when she took a tree trunk and cast it in bronze, then added extra branches from a real tree. Both show a new facet to her creativity.”

Pergay admits that working with new materials has been an emancipating experience. “Copper and bronze are more like silver, which I worked with in the 1950s,” she says. “They are materials I can hit, burn, model and change. The

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designs are more sculptural and I can create, well, a bouquet of flowers. Stainless steel doesn’t forgive you if you make a mistake. You can’t go back and change it.”

New York-based collector Adam Lindemann, who owns pieces that span the full spectrum of Pergay’s designs, says: “What is exciting about Maria’s new work is that it’s more baroque, more ornate, and the production values are much higher. It has changed, yet the quality of the aesthetic has stayed the same. I like both the old and the new.”

Still, Demisch sees Pergay’s new work as part of a coherent oeuvre: “What’s extraordinary is that Maria’s

core vision has remained consistent for 50 years – it’s an amazing achievement. I don’t make any separation between her old and new designs. She has never worked to please the market,” she adds.

“Pergay’s new work shows how consistent she remains in her design process, yet she is still able to reinvent her style with a real sense for the zeitgeist,” says Patrick Perrin, president of the Société d’Organisation Culturelle. “Her unique viewpoint borders modernity and fantasy, bringing elegance, sensuality and a dream-like quality to strong, cold, stark materials. These aspects of her work are particularly relevant today, as a whole generation of designers, such as Jaime Hayon,

Tord Boontje, Marcel Wanders, Hella Jongeeri and Jurgen Bey, have incorporated these narratives.”

As for Pergay’s earlier work, saleroom results reveal a keen interest from collectors. Her Banquet daybed from 1967 fetched \$421,000 at Phillips de Pury in 2007, far outstripping its \$50-70,000 estimate, while at Chicago saleroom Wright, a cross-leg table from 1957 sold for \$112,800 (estimate \$60-80,000) in 2008. Museum accessions, such as the Wave bench from 1968, acquired by New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2010, have also elevated the designer’s status.

Pergay’s 55-year career in the decorative arts was formally recognised last year when she was appointed a Chevalier de l’Ordre des Arts et des Lettres. “I was terribly surprised, as I had no idea my name had been put forward,” says Pergay in her typically modest way. Yet the accolade seems fully deserved, given her development as a designer and her personal backstory.

Pergay arrived in France as a six-year-old émigrée in 1937. Born to Russian-Jewish parents in Chisinau (then



the boundaries of her contemporaries,” observes Demisch. Fashion houses including Hermès, Christian Dior and Givenchy began to commission items such as cigarette cases for their own collections or as corporate gifts. Soon the silverware was in such demand that Pergay opened a small shop in the Place des Vosges in 1960. Then, a chance request from an unlikely source radically changed her design trajectory.

In the early 1960s, manufacturers of stainless steel were looking for ways to extend beyond pots and pans, and a representative from Uguine-Gueugnon, which owned France’s biggest steelworks, approached Pergay, asking her to make her accessories in stainless steel. Declining to rework her original pieces, Pergay offered to design furniture instead. It was a courageous move. She had no experience of furniture design and had never worked with stainless steel. What’s more, the material in vogue in the early 1960s was plastic – not steel. But then, as Pergay points out, her work “has never been about fashion”.

Fortuitously, she found that steel “talked” to her and, undaunted by its technical complexities, she began to coax expressive shapes from its cool austerity. Her initial designs – the Flying Carpet daybed and Ring chair (pictured above and right), produced in 1968 – gave this utilitarian material a curvaceous sensuality that was an instant hit. When these and other designs were exhibited at the Galerie

Maison et Jardin in Paris in 1968, the entire collection was snapped up by fashion designer Pierre Cardin. Today the Ring chair remains sought after by collectors, with Demisch Danant selling an original for €45,000 at the Design Miami/Basel show last June.

Pergay continued to experiment with stainless steel: folding it, draping it and combining it with other materials, such as tortoiseshell and Plexiglas. In 1977, she sold her shop to focus on private commissions and interior-design projects, which included the palaces of

the Saudi royal family. In 2000, she moved to Morocco to style and run Dar Liouba guesthouse, and it was here, four years later, that Demisch tracked her down.

Demisch had stumbled across some vintage Pergay pieces at a Paris flea market a few years earlier. “It was the first time I’d seen her work and it really jumped out at me because it was so distinctive,” she recalls. “It made me curious to learn more.” It took a year to locate Pergay but Demisch’s visit was a key moment. “I had no idea if Maria was still creating anything or would want to,” she says. “I asked if she would consider designing some new pieces and she immediately started sketching ideas.”

This collaboration resulted in Pergay’s first exhibition in New York for more than 30 years, when Demisch Danant teamed up with Lehmann Maupin gallery to show 15 new pieces in 2006. These limited editions included the magnificent ebony-macassar Draper cabinets (pictured above), with their peeled-back stainless-steel curtain “held” in place by a giant safety pin. Since then, Pergay has exhibited internationally. Shows such as the one organised by Demisch Danant and another at JGM Galerie in a 17th-century Parisian townhouse in March last year have attracted a new breed of fans who, says Demisch, “appreciate the beauty, quality and precision of the work as well as Maria’s risk-taking. She is among a handful of designers of her generation who are still avidly working, and her creative flow is unstoppable.”

In the past five years Pergay has produced more than 50 pieces, working to private commissions or preparing limited editions for selling exhibitions. Her forthcoming New York show is, however, likely to be a game-changer. “Maria’s work has not always received the recognition it deserves, but now up-and-coming collectors will appreciate it and start following her,” predicts Huth.

Or, as Lindemann succinctly puts it: “This is the beginning of the Pergay renaissance.” ♦
Demisch Danant, 542 West 22nd Street, New York NY 10011 (+1212-989 5750; www.demischdanant.com); the new Maria Pergay exhibition is scheduled for late April.

in Romania, now Moldova’s capital), she fled to Paris with her mother to escape the imminent Soviet invasion and hid during the Nazi occupation of the city. She then studied costume and set design at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques in Paris and took sculpture classes with Russian-French artist Ossip Zadkine. Upon leaving college, she married business student Marc Pergay, with whom she had four children. They divorced 20 years later.

Her talents emerged in 1954 when a college friend asked for help dressing some boutique windows in Paris. Pergay’s theatrical approach created quite a splash and gave her the confidence to start designing one-off pieces in silver. They featured the decorative touches that were to become a hallmark of her work, for example, belt buckles “fastening” silver boxes. “Her silver objects set the tone for a lifelong tendency to work outside

From top: Draper cabinets in stainless steel, ebony macassar and palm wood, 2005. Flying Carpet daybed in stainless steel, 1968. Ring chair in stainless steel, 1968. Prices on request