Pierre Paulin: Beyond Pop

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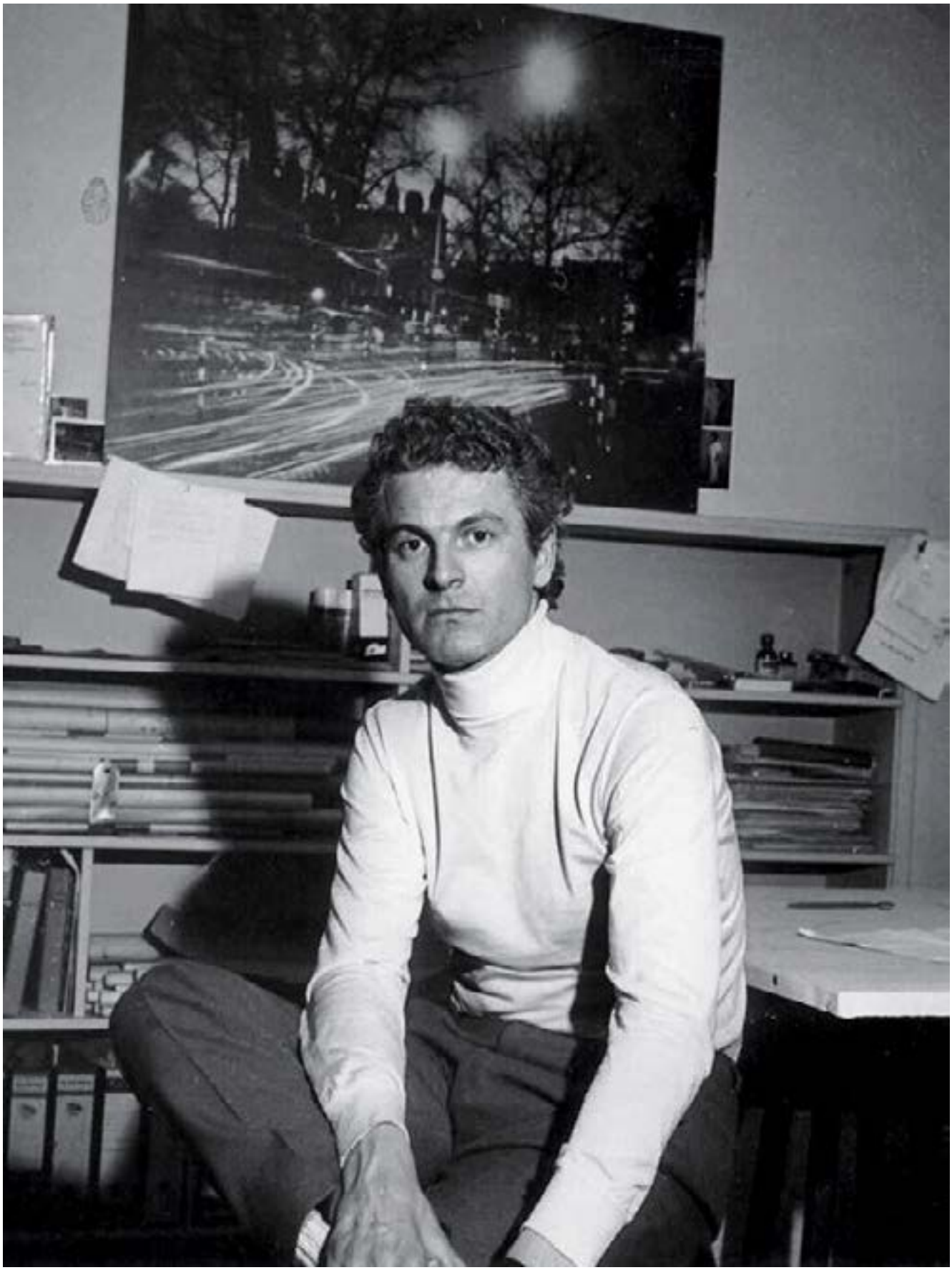
Slide Show | Beyond Pop A revival of interest in the iconic 1960s and ’70s work of the French designer has revealed an artist whose career was more varied and extensive than most realize.

Pierre Paulin, the late French furniture designer who died in 2009, outfitted apartments for presidents, designed steam irons for housewives and created perfume bottles for Courrèges, but history's memory is short. Lodged in the unconscious of a generation are Paulin's Mushroom (a jersey-covered foam armchair that looks, appropriately enough, like a forest-floor fungus), the Oyster (a padded chair in the shape of a mollusk shell) and the Tongue (take a guess). Nicolas Ghesquière, the artistic director of Louis Vuitton, spent his childhood in the '70s surrounded by the stuff. "When you see those things," says Ghesquière, now a Paulin collector and one of the designer's contemporary champions, "you don't forget them."

These pieces — even that indelible Tongue, a wavy low-slung chaise that looks like the seating equivalent of a French kiss — have been in regular production ever since they were introduced in candy colors by Artifort in the 1960s. They have fed the reigning notion of Paulin as a Pop designer, a '60s-era saboteur of the orderly restraint of midcentury design. Paulin's signal innovation was to wrap his pieces in colorful stretch jersey, softening them and concealing their inner steel and wood. In their casual, kinetic sprawl, his chairs not only offered an invitation to relax and lounge; they also took the temperature of the times. In Paris in the late 1960s, social unrest was in the air; by May 1968, students had taken to the streets to demonstrate against the establishment and its hidebound pieties. "Young people wanted to have a new life," says Cloé Pitiot, curator of the Paulin retrospective that opens at the Centre Pompidou in Paris this October. "They wanted to lie on the floor." Paulin's free, fluid designs catered to a new sensibility, both Pop and populist.



The designer in the 1950s.
ARTIFORT ARCHIVES

His comfortable exuberance, revolutionary in its own time, seems, after an interval of midcentury mania, revolutionary once again. In the wake of years during which the vogue in rediscovered design was for the upright chic of Prouvé and Perriand, Paulin's bright, cheerful squishiness feels fresh. A generation raised on a diet of "Mushrooms" and "Oysters" (not to mention the 1965 "Tulip" and the 1960 "Orange Slice," a grocery list's worth of décor) is now nostalgic for his accessible charm.

Thanks to the efforts of the late designer's family, and the attention-grabbing fandom of high-profile collectors like Ghesquière, a Paulin revival is afoot. Ghesquière, working with Paulin's widow, Maia Wodzislawska Paulin, and son, Benjamin, commissioned La Cividina to produce more than 30 serpentine Osaka sofas for Louis Vuitton's Cruise collection show in Monaco in May. In his high regard for Paulin he follows his friend, the couturier Azzedine Alaïa. Though Alaïa's new store on Rue de Marignan, which is filled with Paulin furniture — including Osaka sofas and stacking, U-shaped modular shelving — shed new light on his own Paulin ardor when it opened in the fall of 2013, he's long been a collector. "Azzedine was very competitive," Ghesquière laughs. "He was like, 'Come on, I got Paulin many, many years before you. Don't try to make me think you were there!' "

Working on the Cruise show led the Paulins to a subsequent collaboration with Vuitton to produce, at least in prototype, a series of modular pieces Paulin designed in 1972 as part of a never-executed proposal for Herman Miller. These were exhibited at Design Miami in December, where, in a nearby booth, the New York gallery Demisch Danant was displaying a trio of Paulin pieces resembling squashed pumpkins: a leather sofa and a pair of cream-colored wool chairs, all created in 1971 for Paulin's most famous commission, the Palais de l'Élysée apartment of Georges Pompidou, and produced for sale only briefly thereafter. (The original furniture is in the collection of the Mobilier National, which commissioned it.) The Pompidou items are the rarest and costliest of Paulin's designs, with a waiting list of collectors clamoring for each new piece that is exhumed. "I am always watching," says Ghesquière, who once bought an entire exhibition's worth of Élysée sofas in one fell swoop. As demand has climbed, so have prices. According to the gallerist Suzanne Demisch, they have increased tenfold in the past decade.

Paulin's new devotees are encountering a designer more nuanced and varied than popular perception suggests. His early collections in the 1950s leaned toward Scandinavian Modernism; in the '60s and '70s he was playful; and by the end of his career nearly 60 years later, he explored a more architectural, structured style of furniture, like the pieces commissioned for French president François Mitterrand. (On the subject of Paulin, at least, the left and right could agree.)

“My father never defined himself as Pop,” says Benjamin Paulin. “I’m trying to de-Pop my father’s image. That’s kind of my job. His oeuvre was larger than that.” With that in mind, in 2008 Pierre, Maia and Benjamin Paulin established Paulin, Paulin, Paulin, a family business dedicated to bringing the lesser-known pieces to light and into production. “To me they are like family members, almost,” Benjamin says. He is currently at work on a production run of a rarely seen prototype from the archive, the undulating Déclive sofa from 1966, which he glimpsed in the protective custody of a museum show and was frustrated not to be able to clamber aboard.

Several upcoming Paulin exhibitions will introduce the world to Paulin in all his versatility and breadth. Following its Miami success, Demisch Danant will mount a survey of Paulin’s work in New York in May. The exhibition will trace Paulin’s development from the 1960s through the early ’80s, setting his famous work alongside his largely unknown pieces, with the aim of debunking the prevailing view of his designs. “He was much more than we think,” says Demisch. “The way he approached seating and furniture was singular. I think he’s more important than anyone has realized and acknowledged.” Beginning this summer, Ligne Roset will release new editions of Paulin’s early Nordic-inspired wooden furniture, including a daybed and secretary from his first collection, in 1953. And in October, the retrospective opens at the Centre Pompidou. The show, which covers the entirety of Paulin’s career, from his early education at the studio of Marcel Gascoin in the ’50s to his death at the age of 81 (he worked until the end; “My father was never an old man,” Benjamin says) should help to erode the perception that Paulin was merely a savant of Pop.

To furnish the show, the museum is drawing upon its own archives, new acquisitions and loans. There will be a 30-strong chronology of chairs alone. Maia Wodzislawska Paulin volunteered her late husband’s drawings and sketches, his prototypes and even the contents of her home, Maison des Cévennes, which Paulin designed for their retirement at the base of the Cévennes mountains in the south of France. “I took the carpet and the chairs and the table,” says Pitiot, the curator. “We took everything.” Even so, the archive at Maison des Cévennes remains amply stocked with designs unseen and unproduced. They could fuel a Paulin revival for years to come.