

# MAN OF THE YEAR

The work of French designer **Pierre Paulin** is collected by Tom Ford and Azzedine Alaïa and celebrated by Louis Vuitton. Writer Linda Lee explores what made Paulin—the subject of a retrospective at the Centre Pompidou and a solo show at Demisch Danant this month—so prolific.

**Furniture of a certain age**, from the late 1950s through the 1970s, can look simultaneously vintage, modern and contemporary. As the '50s moved into the '60s, austere bent plywood morphed into colorful padded furniture made of plastic, foam, laminate, bent steel tubing and stretch fabric. It was a cultural turning point, from serious to playful, from poetry-spouting beatnik to pot-smoking hippie.

By the mid-1960s modern furniture was casual, low to the ground and often soft. Some of it, like the 1969 beanbag chair, would not previously been considered furniture at all. It was meant for the young and modern: Cloé Pitiot, curator of an exhibit of Pierre Paulin design that will open at the Centre Pompidou in October, said the '60s were a time when young people “wanted to lie on the floor.”

Suzanne Demisch, of the Demisch Danant Gallery, which will have an exhibit of furniture by Paulin in May, is focusing on the designer's greater oeuvre, beyond the furniture that “wasn't for 80 year olds,” she says. “Our survey shows the other side of Paulin. It's an attempt to dispel what people think: the '60s pop image.”

Paulin, who died in 2009, was also a traditional industrial designer. His work began in the 1950s, when he made spare wooden shelves and furniture, influenced by Scandinavian design. A modest man—he preferred to number his designs and saw himself as not so much an inventor as a part of an evolving style—he was particularly taken with an upholstered Eero Saarinen side chair, a precursor to his *Tulip* chairs. “It made me want to design something extremely comfortable and pleasant, with a big cushion so that small animals as well as people could sit on it,” Paulin told Rem Koolhaas and Hans Ulrich Obrist in an event at the Milan furniture fair in 2008. That chair, *CM190*, made in 1955 for Thonet Frères, the French branch of the bentwood company, began his romance with Pirelli foam rubber and stretch jersey. His most familiar designs were made for the Dutch manufacturer Artifort. Holland and the Scandinavian countries were not as devastated by World War II and thus were better prepared to look ahead.

“The genius was for him to work with Artifort,” says Petiot. “The possibility to create with another company in another country. In France in the '50s it was impossible.” In the mid-1960s, he was in his 30s, handsome and raffish—he had abandoned an earlier career as an artist when he injured his left hand by putting it through a window during a fight. But he didn't do the romantic thing and die young. He continued working for another 40 years: commissions for the Élysée Palace for both Pompidou and Mitterrand, and industrial design, from home appliances for Calor to interiors for the French Airbus aircraft. In the 1990s, he settled in the south of France near Avignon with his second

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—Suzanne Demisch



Pierre Paulin's *Élysée* chair and stool, 1973

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near Avignon with his second wife, Maia Wodzislawska, and continued to work, even in retirement.

It was America, full of post-war optimism, a growing crop of baby boomers and full employment that provided the biggest market for Paulin's designs. (He was always better known in the U.S., where the Museum of Modern Art bought six of his designs for its permanent collection.) In 1966, *The New York Times* wrote about his *Trapeze* chair, shown at the furniture fair in Cologne that year.

He and other French modernists of this time, who included Pierre Guariche, Olivier Mourgue and Alain Richard, had some support from a project by André Malraux and the French government. But it seemed as though the modernist baton was passed from Scandinavia through France and straight to Italy. The famous show of modern domestic design in 1972 at MoMA had 100 pieces—all Italian.

In 1972, the biggest commission of Paulin's career, an entire ensemble for the American company Herman Miller, fell apart. Several decades passed when it seemed he dropped from view. Then, starting a decade ago, fashion designers, most particularly Tom Ford, Azzedine Alaïa and Nicolas Ghesquière, began snapping up vintage Paulin. Alaïa and Ghesquière not only decorated their homes with Paulin, they commissioned Paulin furniture for their showrooms and fashion shows.

Last December, Louis Vuitton put on an exhibit in Miami, "Playing with Shapes," of 17 of those never-produced Herman Miller pieces. "My father always spoke about the [unrealized] Herman Miller project as one of his big regrets," says Benjamin Paulin, who met Michael Burke, chairman of Louis Vuitton, after Ghesquière incorporated Paulin's *Osaka* sofas for the Resort show in Monaco last year and then proposed the "Playing With Shapes" project.

The *Tapis-Siege*, or carpet armchair, was one piece, a sort of instant conversation pit. Ligne Roset introduced several new Paulin reissues at Maison et Objet in Paris in January. Magis continues to sell Paulin designs as does Artifort. At Design Miami in Basel in June, three galleries, Jousse Entreprise and Galerie Kreo along with Demisch Danant will show vintage Paulin.

In May, the 17 pieces in the Demisch Danant show in New York will be inside a gallery tented in stretch jersey, an homage to Paulin's preferred material. Among the work, a *Ribbon* chair upholstered in a Jack Lenor Larsen fabric and a piece never before seen in New York, a smoked plastic bookcase designed for what now seems like a quaint idea: Pompidou's Smoking Room in the Élysée Palace.

"We're showing the breadth and depth of his work. How sophisticated and complex it was," Demisch says. Pieces will be priced from \$9,000 to \$100,000. In October, the Pompidou kicks off its show, which is sure to have surprises. "Cloé Petiot sent me a picture of a model I had never seen before," says Paulin. "My father was so prolific that I still discover a lot of things."



Paulin's *Dos à dos* chaise lounge, 1968





**Clockwise from top:** From the Paulin archive, Maison de la Radio, 1960; Pierre Paulin, 1972; a maquette of the designer's 1972 residential project for Herman Miller, part of Louis Vuitton's December, 2014 "Playing with Shapes" exhibition.



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—Teresita Fernández