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WSJ. MAGAZINE | DESIGN

Late-Furniture Designer Pierre Paulin's Masterpieces Live on in His Former Mountainside Home

In the Cévennes mountains of southern France, Pierre Paulin's family is bringing his iconic designs to life in the home he spent his final years



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By **JOSHUA LEVINE**

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IN 1993, AT THE AGE OF 66, French furniture designer Pierre Paulin retreated to the country house he built high in the Cévennes mountains of southern France. From this windy perch, on a clear day, you can just make out the faint sparkle of the Mediterranean 45 miles away, but none of its beachy warmth reaches here. This is some of France's hardest country—"rock, nothing but rock and razor-sharp shale" is how the 19th-century historian Jules Michelet characterized it. That's why Paulin chose it: a

flinty place for a flinty person.

When he moved here from Paris, Paulin had recently been pushed out of the industrial design firm he and his wife, Maïa Wodzislawska-Paulin, founded in the mid-'70s and then sold in 1992 to the giant French ad agency that is now Havas Worldwide. It was a crushing end to an illustrious career, and he was bitter about it. He spent the rest of his life, until his death at 81 in 2009, sequestered here. His glory days behind him, he continued to design, placing his drafting table in the living room so that he had a view of the rugged Cévennes peaks.

From the outside, the slant-roofed house that Paulin named La Calmette looks like many of the neighboring homes, but its style isn't what Paulin originally had in mind. His first scheme was to burrow directly into the rocks, and he drew up plans for a fantastical subterranean dwelling. The local authorities, not so fantastically minded, rejected the plan and insisted Paulin build something more in keeping with the chaste Cévenol idiom.

Inside, Paulin's brash, brightly colored early works are arrayed all around the main living spaces—his Mushroom and Globe chairs from 1959, the Tongue chair designed in 1963, the Ribbon chair from 1966. So too are beautiful prototypes for pieces he never saw commercialized in his lifetime—the Cathedral table from 1981, for instance, so called because its pedestal is formed by what look like intersecting cathedral arches. Paulin considered it his masterpiece. In the *bergerie*, the old stone hut that came with the property, the 1966 model for La Déclive, a kind of five-person chaise longue made from adjustable aluminum ribs upholstered in bright red, gives the fluid impression of a magic carpet, frozen mid-flight.

La

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Calmette's charm comes from its dramatic windswept site and the interplay of Paulin's ludic designs with their sober surroundings. "The furniture is in direct conflict with the hard, gray stones, and that's where you sense the duality of my father—his emotional austerity on the one hand, and the sensuality and generosity of his work on the other," says his son Benjamin Paulin.

A hidden rigor underlies everything at La Calmette, even those elements that seem least fussed over. A scattering of large boulders on the lawn looks directly deposited by the glacier, but Paulin made sure to position each of them with Japanese precision. “The house represents everything my father was,” says Benjamin, 37, who closely resembles his dad, down to the high tuft of hair.

La Calmette lies over an hour's drive northwest of Nîmes, with the last few miles of sharp switchbacks taking up a good part of the trip. From this remote locale, Maïa, 74, and Benjamin are writing the next chapter for Pierre Paulin's work. Not long before the designer's death, Maïa and Benjamin created a family enterprise called Paulin, Paulin, Paulin. The idea sprang from Paulin's wish late in life to see some of his unrealized designs produced, but it has turned into something bigger—a mission to win him the wider recognition he craved but couldn't bring himself to pursue. In fact, you could even say he impeded it. “Pierre was never his own best promoter,” says Benjamin. “He just stirred up trouble for himself.”



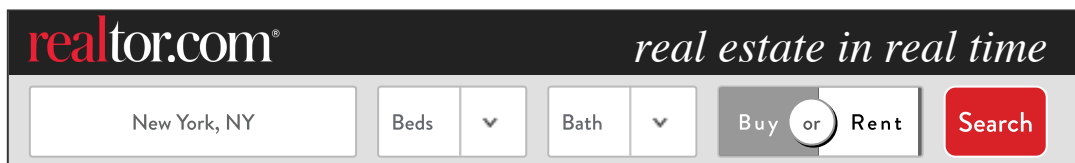
EN FAMILLE | From left: Maïa Wodzislawska-Paulin, Alice Lemoine, Benjamin Paulin and Alice and Benjamin's daughter, Irène, with a family dog, Doki Doki PHOTO: FRANÇOIS HALARD FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Without Paulin's “haughty modesty,” as Maïa puts it, holding them back, the family is making headway advancing his cause—too late for the man, but not for his legacy. Over the past several years, Maïa has signed deals with Holland's Artifort (the original producer of much of Paulin's best-known work), France's Ligne Roset and Italy's La Cividina to re-edit over 40 of his pieces. The Paulins have also engaged some of the

original French and Italian craftsmen who worked with Paulin to produce prototypes of designs that had never made it off the drawing board. And they have worked with some of Paulin's biggest fashion-world fans, Azzedine Alaïa and Louis Vuitton creative director Nicolas Ghesquière among them, to place these prototypes in boutiques and runway shows.

In 2014, Ghesquière seated the audience for Louis Vuitton's 2015 cruise presentation on rows of Paulin's snakey Osaka sofas from 1967. Soon after, the Paulins contacted the French fashion house with an ambitious project in mind: the fabrication of 18 prototypes from an unrealized collection Paulin designed for Herman Miller in the early 1970s. Crafted with oversight from Michel Chalard, Paulin's trusted collaborator, these pieces became the subject of the exhibition Louis Vuitton staged that year as part of an Art Basel Miami Beach satellite show. The architect Daniel Libeskind wandered by and was stopped in his tracks by the display's bulbous purple sofa.

"It was the size of a large car, but oh, it was so beautiful," recalls Libeskind. "I bought it immediately. To get it into my apartment, they had to close the street and hoist it through the window with a crane. I immediately got rid of all my Corbusier, all my Mies. My living room is almost completely empty now except for this incredible sensuous object. I think Paulin is really more of an architect the way his pieces shape the space."



Gallerist Emmanuel Perrotin also visited the Vuitton exhibition, at the Paulins' invitation. Thus began a relationship that resulted last year in *Paulin, Paulin, Paulin*, a show at Perrotin's Paris gallery featuring limited-edition furniture that had previously existed only as drawings or prototypes. "Everybody knows Paulin's iconic pieces from the '60s—they are part of our collective unconscious," says Perrotin. "Now people are keen to discover the lesser-known ones, or the ones that have never been produced before and would never otherwise exist." The extraordinary Déclive chaise was among them, as was the Cathedral table, and interspersed were works by artists like Tara Donovan, Jesús Rafael de Soto and KAWS. John De Andrea's mannequin-like human figures lounged on the upholstery, and a Candida Höfer photo showed Paulin's Borne banquettes in the Louvre.

A different version of the show, renamed *Pierre Paulin*, is at Perrotin's New York gallery from June 22 to August 19. The mix of pieces has changed: It now includes new editions of the 1984 Diwan carpet from La Calmette's living room, the rose-window-like 1971 Rosace coffee table and two sofas designed in 1968 for the cultural center in the French

'The furniture is in direct conflict with the hard gray stones, and that's where you sense the duality of my father.'

—Benjamin Paulin

city of Rennes. Video art by Xavier Veilhan, Jesper Just and others plays alongside.

Further insight into Paulin can be gleaned at Paris's Centre Pompidou, where a comprehensive retrospective of the designer's work is up through the summer. "Paulin never got boxed in by a particular style," says Cloé Pitiot, who curated the exhibit. "With each producer, you get a sense you're seeing a completely different designer. You have a hard time getting a sense of the whole body of work, but for me, what I hear throughout is the same music."

Maïa Wodzislawska-Paulin still lives most of the time at La Calmette. Benjamin and his wife, fashion designer Alice Lemoine, 30, come down frequently from Paris. The three were recently gathered around the table in the homey kitchen, discussing family history over roasted monkfish. Maïa was working as a designer's agent when she met Paulin in 1969, and she offered to represent him. He said no, and then, three years later, he said yes, first professionally, then personally. The youngest of Paulin's children—the designer had a daughter and a son from his first marriage—Benjamin came along in 1978. In France, he has a successful singing career (his latest album, *Meilleur Espoir Masculin*, debuted June 3), but his main focus these days is the family enterprise. What gets him particularly riled up is the "pop art" label that stuck to his father after his splashy '60s hits. "We've got to get him out of the pop box!" Benjamin says with some heat.

Paulin was able to break the hold of the stiff classical tradition that trapped so many French designers in a kind of gilded pillory. His chairs and sofas were sinuous, sculptural, truly new. In 1959, when most chairs still looked pretty much like chairs, Paulin stretched bathing-suit fabric over an oblate steel-tube frame cushioned with Pirelli foam rubber. Whoa! The resulting Mushroom chair looked like a special order for Alice's hookah-puffing caterpillar.

The Ribbon chair followed the Mushroom in 1966, and when the Tongue chair was released in 1967, New York's Museum of Modern Art pounced on it for its permanent collection. Produced in a range of bright colors, these chairs caught the mood of the freewheeling '60s. They exuded grooviness and fun, even if their austere creator did not.



The living room's Diwan rug was designed to rise from the floor up the wall PHOTO: FRANÇOIS HALARD FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

(Paulin, for example, disliked the nicknames his organic forms inspired. For him, the Mushroom remained the F560.)

Whatever you call the chairs, it is pure pleasure to curl up in them. Paulin viewed human beings as the final moving pieces of his furniture. Everything had to fit well together. This body-friendliness is one reason so many fashion designers dig him—not just Alaïa and Ghesquière, but also Tom Ford and Christian Lacroix, who collect Paulin's furniture, and Miuccia Prada, who used Paulin's Iéna chairs and Jardin à la Française rug in a 2014 Miu Miu show. When it came to his own flesh, though, Paulin favored mortification. "He worked standing up and always chose the coldest room in the house," recalls Maïa.

In 1969, President Georges Pompidou resolved to show the world that France could master the idiom of modern design. This being France, the call went forth to the modern version of the king's furniture-maker, known as the Mobilier National, and Paulin, who had already worked with the agency on plans for museum seating, was summoned. Amid the rococo stage sets of the Élysée Palace, he installed three delightfully funky spaces for Pompidou's private quarters—a smoking lounge, a small salon and an intimate dining room whose ceiling is cloaked in plastic partitions that look like inverted petals, evoking the inside of a giant flower.

Afterward, Paulin might have done himself a world of good with a few whispered words in the president's ear. "He refused to use what he was given: A simple phone call, an introduction to this minister or that minister, and he could have been off redoing every French embassy around the world," says Maïa. "But for Pierre, *jamais!*"

PIERRE PAULIN came by his contradictions honestly. His father was French, his



Pierre Paulin's Osaka sofa at the Paulin home in France's Cévennes region *PHOTO: FRANÇOIS HALARD FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE*

mother Swiss-German, and a kind of Franco-Prussian War raged within him. The Prussian forces were led by his formidable maternal grandmother, who gave Paulin his stiff spine and insisted he speak only German to her. (This stopped abruptly one day in 1933, when his grandmother announced that “little Pierre will no longer speak German because Monsieur Hitler is not a gentleman.” Yet deep inside, he said, he remained a little Swiss-German boy.)

The path Paulin chose owed much to two uncles he admired greatly. His father's brother Georges Paulin, a dentist by training, came up with an ingenious system for a folding car roof. He sold it to a Peugeot distributor and spent the rest of his short life designing sleek roadsters. (The Germans caught him spying for Britain in 1942 and shot him.) Pierre Paulin always loved cars. What is a steel-tube frame cushioned with foam and covered with stretch fabric, really, but a car seat?

Paulin's great-uncle Freddy Stoll was a sculptor, and this is what Paulin finally resolved to become. After the war, he trained in ceramics and stone carving. The dream ended when Paulin put his right arm through a plate-glass window, severing several tendons. He could never use his hand freely after that.

It may sound too neat to ascribe the sculptural depth of Paulin's pieces to his uncle's influence, but there's no denying that his furniture is meant to be walked around and not taken head-on. "For Pierre, an object had to be beautiful in 360 degrees," says Catherine Geel, a design historian who helped organize Paulin's shambolic archives at La Calmette.

In 1950, Paulin enrolled in the *École Camondo*, the prestigious Parisian design school that opened its doors near the end of the war. But Paulin's education there had less influence on his values than did his early trips to Scandinavia and especially the United States. This is where he learned to prize utility over decorative flourish, to see how industrial might could spread good design to everybody and to appreciate how forward leaps in style could spring from the bottom up, not as in France from the top down.

"The French always had their noses stuck in their glorious past and weren't interested in modernity," Paulin told Geel in a series of 2006 radio interviews. "When I saw the production of the American world [of Herman Miller and Knoll], which is to say an American-German world, I was blown away!"

Paulin worshipped Charles Eames, but he felt a closer kinship with the great George Nelson. Like Nelson, Paulin considered himself a "functionalist," but he and Nelson added "two little drops of poetry," he said, while Eames did not. For all that, Paulin refused to call himself an artist, "a word that has been cheapened in the worst way." He considered himself much closer in spirit to an artisan.

In the early '70s, Paulin got his shot at a design partnership with Herman Miller, which was looking for the next Eames and Nelson. He spent three years working on a complete modular system for the home—low platforms with seating that popped up and down in origami-like panels; modular shelving that made new rooms within rooms.

Alas, the project was not to be. Herman Miller was moving more toward office furniture and declined to make the huge investment Paulin's system required. It was a major blow. All that remained were the tiny scale models over which Paulin had labored so long. (The maquettes are now in the Centre Pompidou's permanent collection.) So it was cause for celebration when Louis Vuitton finally built the prototypes, and Paulin, Paulin, Paulin has now put several of these designs into limited-edition production. Brought to life, the pop-up platform, part of the Perrotin show, looks like an overgrown child's toy—in the best possible way. Anybody with an ounce of playfulness would have a hard time resisting it.

Though the collapse of the Herman Miller contract by no means signaled the end of Paulin's career, as time went on his work grabbed less and less attention, mostly because he refused to do any of the grabbing himself. Benjamin tells the story of a big

commission from an industrial furniture producer that fell through when his father refused to write a marketing text to accompany his designs. To Paulin, the whole exercise was pointless.

Later in his career, Paulin dabbled in artisanal furniture made from rare woods—just the kind of thing he had run away from early in his career. President François Mitterrand even commissioned several Paulin pieces for his office. On the whole, however, Paulin turned increasingly to industrial design through the firm he founded with Maïa. But the world is unlikely to remember the fondue pots, steam irons and razors that came from his pen.

Throughout their life together, Maïa did her utmost to prod her husband, but he rarely budged. He had no stomach for either the clangorous American-style rough and tumble or the sly politicking of the French. In the end, he chose what Maïa calls his “flight to the Cévennes.” La Calmette became Paulin’s refuge from all the buffeting of the world below. It’s heartening to see it now, transformed by his widow and son into a springboard for his shadowed reputation. Maïa puts it this way: “Pierre was the king of the pains in the butt, but he was fabulous.”

Corrections & Amplifications

The show “Pierre Paulin” opens at Galerie Perrotin New York on June 22. An earlier version of this article listed the opening date as June 23. (*June 16, 2016*)

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