

Interview

France honours its woman of steel

Maria Pergay, aged 81, is still designing remarkable objects, including pieces in the material that made her name

Of her recent, highly prized accolade, the designer Maria Pergay says: "It's like receiving a wonderful gift." Appointed this spring as a Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres—one of France's top honours—she joins a distinguished list of high-profile people acknowledged as having made a notable contribution to French culture internationally. Now 81, Pergay is still working, and she is showing new pieces, along with 1970s designs, at Demisch Danant (G08) at Design Miami/Basel this week.

Yet Pergay is typically modest about the prestigious award that marks more than 55 years in the decorative arts. "I was terribly surprised, as I had no idea my name had been suggested," she says. "France gave me everything—my education, my understanding and love of art—and I see this as a way to put something back."

Pergay was born to Russian Jewish parents in Chisinau (then in Romania and now the capital of Moldova). In 1937, aged six, she fled to Paris with her mother to avoid the imminent Soviet invasion and hid during the Nazi occupation of the French capital. After the Second World War, she studied costume and set design at Paris's Institut des Hautes Études Cinématographiques and took sculpture classes with the Russian-French artist Ossip

Zadkine. Shortly after leaving college, she married a business student, Marc Pergay, and raised four children before the couple divorced 20 years later.

In 1954, a college friend sought Pergay's help in decorating windows for Parisian boutiques. Her theatrical style created a buzz and she began to make one-off pieces in silver, with specialist artisans, featuring signature decorative touches. In 1960, she opened a small shop in the 17th-century environs of the Place des Vosges to sell her silverware, such as lights, boxes and trays. She also began to win commissions from fashion houses including Christian Dior.

Radical steps

Her approach to design changed, however, when she received a request from a company far removed from the decorative arts. Uguine Gueugnon, which owned France's biggest steelworks, commissioned her to work in stainless steel. Instead of reworking her small silver objects, Pergay decided to make steel furniture.

It was a bold move. The hip material favoured by designers in the early 1960s was plastic, and decorative artists generally worked in precious metals. Steel, which brought to mind early 20th-century modernists such as Marcel Breuer and Charlotte Perriand, wasn't fashionable. But then, as Pergay points out, "my work



Pergay "had no idea" she was to be awarded the Chevalier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres

has never been about fashion".

Having exploited steel's strength and pliability to create curvaceous shapes, Pergay realised she had found her métier. Her first pieces were the "Flying Carpet" daybed and the "Ring" chair, both produced in 1968. Other designs quickly followed, taking their inspiration from everyday experiences. "I was peeling an orange in a long ribbon and thought the spiral form would be interesting," she says of the "Ring" chair. "I don't work at ideas or repeat them. They just pop into my head." The designs that emerge from the workshop are almost identical to her initial drawings. "There are no prototypes," she says. "The object is in my head, and because I've worked with the material for so long, I know what to do. It's a bit like cooking a favourite recipe."

Pergay's first stainless steel designs were exhibited at the Galerie Maison Jardin, Paris, in 1968. The collection was snapped up by the fashion designer Pierre Cardin, and other collectors clamoured for private commissions. In 1977,

The "Ring" chair, 1968, and "Column Seat", 2012, are on show at Design Miami/Basel

she sold her shop in the Place des Vosges, and then focused on interior design projects for the next two decades: first in Saudi Arabia, where she designed palace interiors for the royal family, and then in Russia, where she decorated homes for the growing oligarchy.

In 2000, Pergay moved to Morocco to design and run a guesthouse in Essaouira. Four years later, Suzanne Demisch, the co-founder of the New York-based gallery Demisch Danant, found her there. Having discovered vintage designs by Pergay in a Paris flea market a few years earlier, Demisch and her partner, Stéphane Danant, asked the designer if she would consider creating some new pieces. Pergay immediately started to sketch ideas, and the collaboration resulted in her first show in New York for more than 30 years: Demisch Danant and Lehmann Maupin Gallery teamed up to show 15 new pieces in 2006.

In March, an exhibition of old and new work was held in Paris by Pergay's dealers, JGM Galerie and Demisch Danant, in the Place des Vosges, opposite the site of her old shop. "Some pieces were from 50 years ago and some were newborn. My surprise was enormous in seeing how timeless they looked," she says.

"I don't make any separation between her old and new work," says Demisch, who was instrumental in producing the first authoritative survey of Pergay's work, published this year. "Not only did she never stop working, but even her more recent designs reflect the same artistic core vision evident in her first pieces." Pergay's early work, meanwhile, commands increasing sums at auction. A pair of lounge chairs, around 1970, sold for \$79,200—more than ten times their estimate—at the Chicago saleroom Wright in 2004, and a "Banquet" daybed, 1967, fetched \$421,000 at Phillips de Pury in 2007, easily outstripping

its estimate of \$50,000 to \$70,000. Her status has also been boosted by museum acquisitions, such as last year's purchase of the "Wave" bench, 1968, by New York's Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Today, Pergay is busier than ever. She has produced more than 50 pieces in the past five years. At Design Miami/Basel, Demisch Danant is presenting selected works from the 1960s and 70s, including the "Flying Carpet" daybed and "Ring" chair, along with recent pieces such as the "Ammonite" and "Pyrite" tables, both 2010, and the steel and oak "Column Seat", 2012.

When I ask Pergay what she is currently working on, she

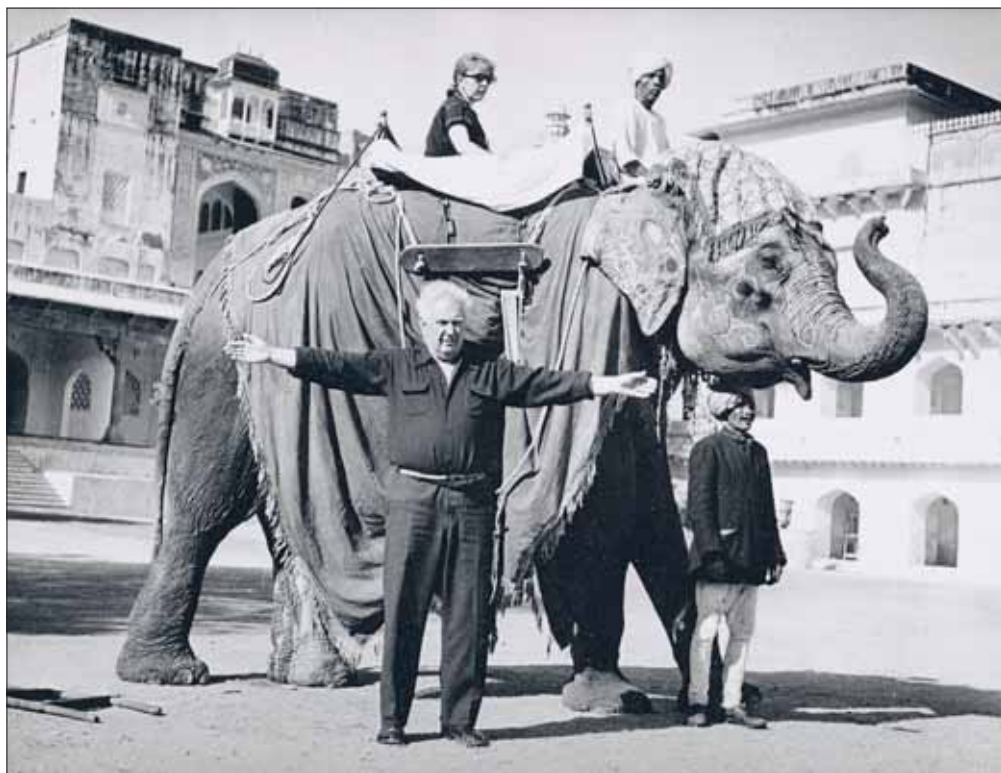
"I don't work at ideas or repeat them. They just pop into my head"

jokes: "You want to spend all day with me?" New lighting and mirrors in copper and bronze are due to be shown in November at Demisch Danant in New York, while commissions for a Venetian palazzo and a private villa in Monaco are also in the frame. And responding to such requests is never a problem, it seems. "I'm very lucky because right away I have a design answer in my head," she says.

Still, stainless steel can be mercurial. "If you do something good, it will love you. If you do it wrong or poorly, it will not forgive you," Pergay says. "The metal is heavy, the tools are heavy. You need to be very precise."

Does she have a favourite piece? "You always love the last baby," she says. "I do have an emotional involvement with my designs, but it's not difficult to let them go. They exist. The image in my head has become true." ■

Nicole Swengley
 □ *Maria Pergay: Complete Works 1957-2010* (£50) is published by Damiani



Alexander and Louisa Calder in India, 1955. Alexander Calder papers, 1926-1967, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

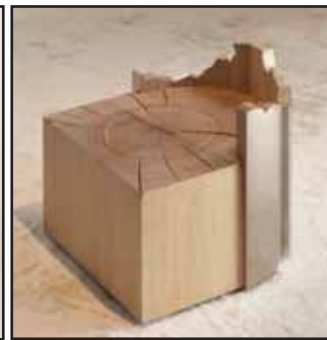
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