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IDEAL HOMES & ART

Robb Report

MODERNIST MASTERS

International fascination with the works of masters of French mid-century furniture – major contributors to the history of design – is on the rise.

By **DIONNE BEL**

Green enameled steel and oak variant of Jean Prouve's 1952 Cite LC 22 double bed.

Photos ARTCURIAL, THE LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES, JAMES BURKE/GETTY IMAGES, ROBERT DOISNEAU, NICOLAS BERGEROT, CHRISTIE'S IMAGES

On 29 November 2016, Paris-based auction house Artcurial (www.artcurial.com) held a sale presenting the collection of an American collector passionate about French design. It achieved €4.5 million (\$6.8 million), almost double its pre-sale estimate and showing the buoyancy of the market. Among the highlights were the biggest names of 1950s French design whose works symbolised the modernist changes within society, including Jean Royere's iconic Polar Bear sofa and pair of armchairs in red mohair velvet, horsehair and solid oak that sold for €1.2 million, and Jean Prouvé's set of furniture for Villa Saint-Clair which was bought for €477,800.

The market for French mid-century furniture has been growing steadily over the past decade, and even more so in the last five years, with intense work carried out to support it by dealers, auction houses, fairs and the publication of monographs dedicated to French 1950s designers and decorators.

Emmanuel Berard, Artcurial's design department director, stated that its sales volume in 2015 had progressed by 22 per cent from 2014 to more than €11.5 million.

Thanks to the increasing international appeal of exceptional pieces by the French masters, four out of five of the highest prices were achieved by Asian collectors in its March 2016 sale.

Berard explains its strong reputation. "French mid-century design is very attractive

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for international collectors because of its wide range of styles, types and authors. This period is the meeting point of many contemporary concerns: post-war reconstruction, use of new materials (like Prouve with metal) and a better-living-through-design ideology that drove all these designers. From the traditional Western clientele of collectors, we saw the birth three years ago of a new generation of collectors from Asia (mainly China, South Korea and Japan).

“This new competition has made prices rise by at least 30 per cent.”

Sales at Design Miami last December were high and widespread, ranging from



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contemporary furniture by emerging designers to rare vintage works with illustrious provenance.

At the fair, Paris-based Laffanour/Galerie Downtown (www.galeriedowntown.com) presented a selection created by Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret for Chandigarh in India, the first time it devoted an entire exhibition to this furniture in the US.

Gallery director, Helin Serre, comments: “The rise in popularity of 1950s French design comes from several factors, starting with the fact



Le Corbusier (inset) created this *Les Musiciennes I* tapestry (top) in 1953.

that it is marketed and supported by merchants and relayed by collectors or institutions that have turned it into iconic furniture. Add to this the transformation that has taken place these last 30 years in the fields of fashion, contemporary art or interior decoration, where it is presented as icons of the 20th century. The actions of these various sectors allowed its development in a different way: commercial, decorative, intellectual.”

With its avant-garde spirit and aesthetic based on functionality and

rational fabrication following World War II, furniture from this period represented a break from tradition and contributed to resuscitating French industry. This generation of designers introduced a new concept to the art of furnishing, influenced by a need for freedom and practicality. The resulting pieces revealed refined forms derived from quality craftsmanship that emphasised materials and methods of construction.

French gallerist Patrick Seguin (www.patrickseguin.com) remarks: "Jean Prouve, Charlotte Perriand, Pierre Jeanneret, Le Corbusier and

Jean Royere were revolutionary designers. Since I opened my gallery in 1989, demand for these five designers has continued to grow steadily. Prouve and Perriand had a particular awareness of the world around them, particularly the social, environmental and economic issues of their time. They were always striving to solve contemporary problems and push technology to its limits, and this created the perfect aesthetic equation involving the balance of form and function."

Seguin observes how collectors today are particularly enthusiastic



These armchairs were designed by Pierre Jeanneret (inset), with a teak structure and leather seat, for the auditorium buildings of Chandigarh.





“The French post-war design market has existed for more than 30 years.”



about the synergy between French mid-century design and contemporary art, as the boundaries between them become less defined. He regularly collaborates with contemporary art galleries, where they organise exhibitions in each other's spaces to stimulate demand and demonstrate how collectors can mix French mid-century design and contemporary art in their homes.

Serre says: “What contemporary art collectors have mostly retained about 1950s design is the simplicity of materials, the minimalism of forms and the aesthetic appearance within the space it is re-employed. In numerous collections, it is often shown beside a Warhol, Basquiat, Richter or even a Thomas Struth, which quickly raised it to a level that we didn't expect 30 years ago!”

New York City-based 1950 Gallery (www.g1950.com) met with strong response for works by Prouve, Perriand and Jeanneret at Design Miami 2016. Founder Alberto Aquilino notes: “The French post-war

From above:
chairs by Jean Prouve made of bent steel and moulded plywood, circa 1950; Charlotte Perriand.

design market has existed for more than 30 years. It was created in the early '80s when a handful of merchants, such as Francois Laffanour and Philippe Jousse, began to introduce pieces that had been until then rarely exhibited. They showed how this minimal 1950s furniture – linked for the most part to architecture – could be compared with contemporary art. So they entered the domain of major contemporary art collectors of the '80s and '90s, which allowed its development. Additionally, for more than 30 years, there has regularly been a new generation of collectors.”

At the Christie's Paris (www.christies.com) May 2016 sale, Royere's rare straw marquetry sideboard achieved €373,500, while Perriand's colourful platform bookshelf specially commissioned around 1954 by an architecture model maker known simply as Harang, achieved €361,500.

Pauline de Smedt, design department director of Christie's Paris, says: “The French '50s have a



strong historical inheritance: there has always been in France a long tradition with the decorative arts, sophistication and high-quality craftsmanship, which goes back to the 18th century.”

What's exceptional about this category of design is that the works promote aesthetic values that are still at the heart of contemporary lifestyles.

De Smedt says: “French mid-century furniture combines very well with contemporary furniture because it has the same consideration for practicality and sober

Perriand's 1954 bookshelf was sold for €361,500, well over its estimate of €200,000 to €300,000, by Christie's in May last year.

sophistication in colour, form and materials – plastic, resin, metal and wood – which perfectly coincide with today's lifestyles and match the aesthetic of contemporary artworks and collectors.”

Berard concludes: “Some architects are able to match perfectly French mid-century design with contemporary interiors, for example Joseph Dirand or Delphine

The works promote aesthetic values that are at the heart of contemporary lifestyles.

Krakoff. French mid-century design pieces can be considered the 20th century's new classics and, as classics, they match very well with many things!”

