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# LAFFANOUR

## GALERIE DOWNTOWN/PARIS

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*By Sarah Medford*

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At Design Miami, or any of the other international fairs where François Laffanour exhibits, the French furniture dealer is a recessive figure, his wiry frame and dollop of silver hair sequestered at the back of his booth behind a table by Charlotte Perriand or a Jean Prouvé desk. But on the golf course, he's all action. Playing the front nine before lunch at his home club in Brittany, Laffanour, 66, covers the distance between holes like a jackrabbit, wheeling his cart through a pine-scented landscape that slopes down toward the pink granite coastline and turquoise sea for which this part of France is known. When he hoists his clubs into the back of his Jaguar XJ Executive, he nudges the trunk closed in a gesture reminiscent of John Cassavetes, the late American actor and director whom he somewhat resembles and admires for his aura of cool.

Back in Paris, Laffanour's gallery is one of a handful that have propelled 20th-century French furniture to the forefront of international collecting, and he's leveraged a 37-year track record to mount shows internationally and represent first-rate contemporary talents (among them the sculptor Takis and designers Ron Arad and Byung Hoon Choi).

But his biggest loves—and his bread and butter—are the icons of French postwar modernism: Perriand, Prouvé, Jeanneret, Royère, Mouille.



Alexandra Roos and Laffanour. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

“François has really created a brand,” says Adam Lindemann, the American art dealer and collector. “You don’t even need to see *Galerie Downtown*—you know immediately where you are. It’s not just in the work, but in the lighting, the installation, the whole recipe.” The two met over a decade ago when Lindemann was researching a book on collecting design. As he made the rounds in Paris, he recalls that Laffanour seemed to view the landscape from an entirely different angle than other dealers. “François is a bit more of the intellectual and somewhat introverted. He lets the quality of the work and the staging do the talking.”

Last winter, Lindemann invited the Frenchman to curate a Perriand exhibition at his New York gallery, *Venus Over Manhattan*. Perriand is close to Laffanour’s heart; he met the freethinking designer not long before she died and considers her work to be the apogee of modernism, a step toward a better world not only in its technical advances but in its forcefully humanist outlook. Among the pieces on loan for the current Perriand retrospective at the Fondation Louis Vuitton are some choice ones from Laffanour; and he’s just published a hefty volume, *Living With Charlotte Perriand*, that showcases the work in situ.

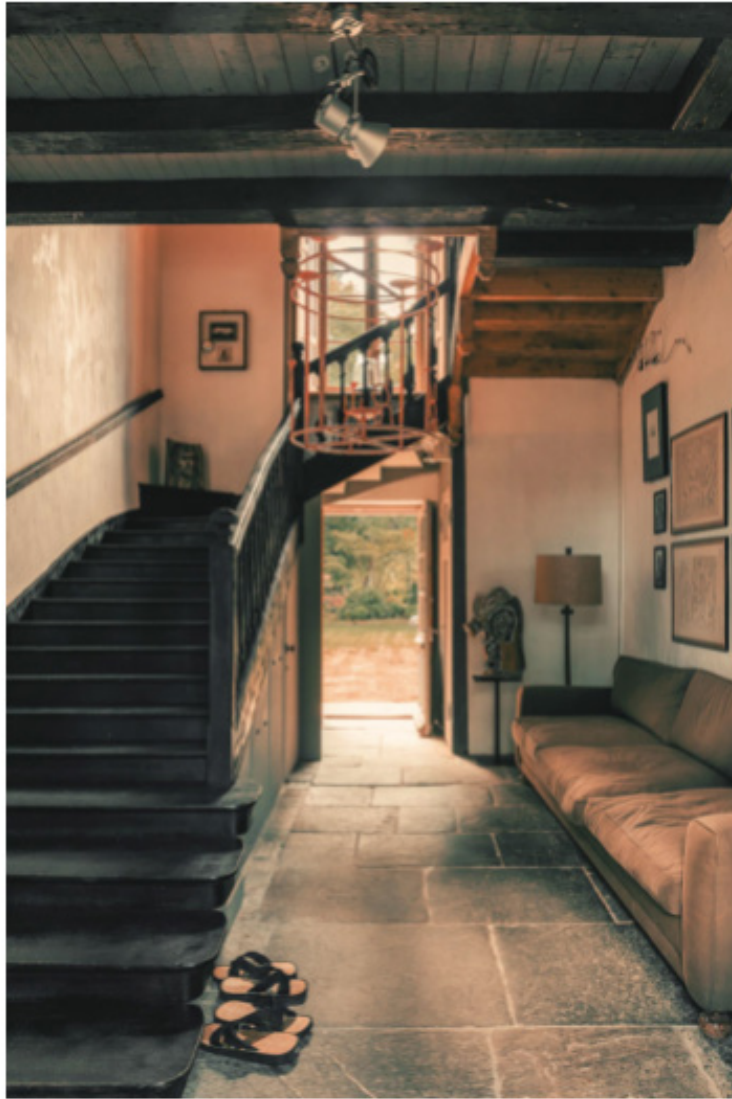




A 1970s sculpture by Claude Viseux in the garden. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

To reach the manor house in the Breton woods that Laffanour shares with his companion, perfumer Alexandra Roos, you can choose one of two approaches: a double allée of lime trees or a triple allée of beeches. Returning from the golf course, Laffanour opts for the latter and soon pulls up beside a bantam-size medieval château. Tucked behind it—in fact looming over it—is his own white stucco residence, which dates to 1750. The château once belonged to a noble in the court of Louis XV who hoped to install his land manager there, but the fellow took one look at its nearly windowless facade and opted to build a new place instead, one with all the advances of its late Baroque era—sunlit rooms on three floors, a grand staircase, four massive fireplaces, servants' quarters slipped in beneath a mansard roof.

Stylistically it is a *malouinière*, akin to the country retreats of St. Malo shipowners to the east. Since buying it 25 years ago from the estate of his grandfather, a Breton-born engineer, Laffanour has updated the grounds and outbuildings, converting a storehouse into a sauna and the former gristmill into guest quarters (the stonework is nearly complete). But the baby castle, souped up in the 19th century with chimney pots and a steeply pitched roof, still looms at the left shoulder of his dwelling like an awkward party guest.



The house's front foyer. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

"I want to buy it, but they don't want to sell it," Laffanour says, referring to the castle's absentee owners. "Fine. Nobody lives there. For me it's perfect." Though he and Roos spend holidays and the occasional long weekend in Brittany, their main residence is a townhouse in Paris's fashionable 6th arrondissement.

Shortly after buying the manor, Laffanour was having some painting done when a floor caved in; a wood fungus had crept up the walls from the dirt foundation and rotted away the interior framing. In rebuilding, he kept the impulse to modernize at bay and left the stately floor plan and the provincial Louis XV detailing intact. But he was just biding his time: Into the ancien régime shell, he decided to spoon some fresh-whipped 20th-century filling.

"I had an idea in my mind to put some modern objects, to make a contrast," he explains. "I wanted to adapt the house to me. I wanted some of the pieces I was selling. It was a little bit of a shock back then, the Prouvé. Today it's not. So it was my idea to make a little shock. It would be a good mix of new energy. For me, it was all my kids, who I love to have."



In a hallway on the third floor, Ettore Sottsass's Ultrafragola mirror stands alongside a stuffed bear sculpture by Charlemagne Palestine. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Today the kids have matured and appreciated, along with the entire market for French modernism, and Laffanour has to resist the urge to sell pieces that have become trophies, like his Jean Royère polar bear sofa, Perriand cupboards and Le Corbusier outdoor lights of cast concrete, shaped like cresting waves. These days, the shocks come via art and objects that have accreted over time as the dealer has indulged his own itch to collect.

In the entry hall, above a lineup of Japanese tatami slippers, are a suite of erotic drawings by André Masson, a neon sculpture by Faust Cardinali and photographs of Keith Richards and Bob Dylan, two of his heroes. Suspended from the ceiling is an homage to the airy bronze lanterns of Diego Giacometti by the dealer's friend Dominique Heidenger, encased in what appears to be pink tapioca. "I was in love with the Giacometti pieces, but I couldn't afford one," Laffanour recalls. "He said, 'I will make one for you in Malabar chewing gum.' "





From left: Ron Arad's snail-like steel bookcase, an Osvaldo Borsani chaise (left) and a Jean Prouvé chair.  
PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

When Laffanour was 10, he arrived at the house in Brittany not for the usual summer holiday, but to stay. He remembers the damp chill of the sea air and rooms stuffed with mismatched English furniture. For two generations, his family had made their full-time home in Algeria, where he was born and where his father ran an olive farm and later a printing business; but in 1962, the French colony's war for independence brought their stay to an abrupt end. Laffanour, his three siblings and their father (his mother had died when he was 7) fled the country late one night with little more than the clothes they were wearing. "I had a kind of traumatism," he says of the experience. "You can lose everything you have in 45 minutes. We lost."

Somehow Laffanour managed to dwell not on the trauma but on the rebound. He finished school in France, earning a master's degree in history at the Sorbonne, and planned to teach or perhaps go into journalism. To this day, he has the attentiveness of a man who's ready for anything.

"At a dinner in Paris last week, I was telling a Frenchwoman, 'It could all stop tomorrow,' " he says. "And she answered, 'I never think like this.' I thought, Wow, what a strength! But also, That's very boring. Those French people are not excited."

He and Roos are having coffee in the garden, at the center of which is a signpost displaying direction markers with the names of design greats—Jean Prouvé, Eileen Gray, Marcel Breuer. It's just the kind of absurdist piece Laffanour loves.

"Every time I'm going to a new place I think, I could buy a house here—this could be me," he says, animation in his voice. "In a way, it could be presented like something positive—originality, energy. But in my head, it's not always a positive. I always want to try to do something different."



A signpost sculpture in the garden. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Laffanour's path to becoming a dealer was uncharted, to say the least. In 1975, when he was 22, a motorcycle accident landed him in the hospital and later rehab for two years. With an insurance settlement in hand, he took the advice of a friend and bought a lease on a booth at Paris's Paul Bert Serpette flea market, with the idea of renting it out for cash, and eventually managed to make enough money to buy an old Jaguar. "It was a beauty, but a total nightmare," he admits. "It never worked. And I didn't keep any money."

After losing his tenant, Laffanour panicked and began canvassing competing flea markets, hunting for something to resell. "Like mad, running with my Jaguar at 3 or 4 o'clock in the morning," he says with a self-mocking smile. "And of course, I needed to hide my Jaguar a bit—who would sell something to me for 20 francs if I came with a Jaguar? It was a funny experience."

One day, at a booth showing metalwork, he bought three desks and a chair by Prouvé. "I didn't even know the background, but I thought they were nice. And that was the start." In 1980, he moved from the flea market to the 9th arrondissement, and two years later to a building at 18 rue de Seine, where he is today.





FORM AND FUNCTION In the master bedroom, Laffanour works at a Gaetano Pesce desk overlooking the garden. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

What Laffanour doesn't know about Prouvé or the rest of the French postwar modernists would fit into the glove box of his Jaguar. In the second-floor music room of the Brittany house, a familiar Prouvé Cité armchair sits by the window in an unfamiliar finish. "This is the last production he made for Tecta in the 1980s," the dealer says. "Prouvé was experimenting with chrome. I liked it; it cost nothing."

Elsewhere in the salon (originally intended, perhaps optimistically, as a bedroom for Marie Antoinette and Louis XVI—they never spent a night here), Laffanour has paired his Royère sofa with a reclining chaise longue by Osvaldo Borsani and mounted Ron Arad's bookcase, a wandering scroll of steel, on the wall above. Stacked amplifiers, an upright piano and several electric guitars take up the remaining space. "I play blues and rock 'n' roll, and Alexandra is playing her music," he explains, referring to Roos's former career as an indie artist (she released four albums before changing course in 2007). The couple also share a mania for kite surfing.





A bedroom. PHOTO: ROMAIN LAPRADE FOR WSJ. MAGAZINE

Closer to home, the hobby Laffanour is most taken with these days is gardening. Treading across the lawn in his tatami slippers, he points out a few experiments he has underway: a magnolia he's training into a vase shape with weights and twine, some maples he's subjecting to Japanese cloud pruning. A palm tree he knew as a child is still reaching skyward, a beneficiary of the microclimate Brittany enjoys in the wake of the Gulf Stream.

**“I had an idea in my mind to put some modern objects, to make a contrast. I wanted to adapt the house to me.”**

—François Laffanour

But the garden here pales, he says, beside his latest project, a 74-acre horse farm in Normandy he's begun converting into a sculpture park. “I took a landscape designer. He came, gave me some ideas, and honestly, when he left I thought, It will be the only place that I do in my life like this—I will do it myself.

“I did my apartment myself,” he continues, “and my house. I will make some mistakes.” He picks up a pair of pruning shears forgotten in the grass. “Funnily, at the end of this long trip of my life, I think, Why not do what I want?”