

Pascal Cuisinier On Why Pierre Paulin Shows Are a Must-See

BY JANA PERKOVIC | MAY 11, 2016



Pierre Paulin: Early Years, 1952-1959. From left to right: 119 low table, Meubles TV 1954; CM194 armchair, édition Thonet, 1958; CM193 desk, édition Thonet, 1959; 119 sofa, Meubles TV, 1954.

(Courtesy Galerie Pascal Cuisinier)

[Pierre Paulin](#) was a visionary: a furniture and interior designer, a pioneer of Modernism in France. Paulin designed strangely elegant mass-produced objects that were there to serve the body, offer comfort, and elegance. A prophet of the *savoir-faire* for the industrial age, Paulin was as fascinated with technical innovation as he was focused on beauty: his designs embraced new fabrics, materials, and technologies, while remaining true to that innate sense of style that characterized the French.

Today, Paulin is being revisited on the 50th anniversary of his career, with a spectacular exhibition at Centre Pompidou, as well as satellite exhibitions across Paris. With furniture, archival material, documents, and drawings,

exhibited in a re-appreciation of his output, the time has come to revisit Paulin's contribution to 20th century French design.

Pascal Cuisinier, the owner of a celebrated eponymous gallery that has for decades promoted the work of French designers of Paulin's generation, has been one of the instrumental figures behind the exhibition. Blouin ARTINFO has caught up with Cuisinier to discuss the legacy of [Pierre Paulin](#).

You have been collecting and following [Pierre Paulin](#)'s work for a long time. Why are the exhibitions in 2016 important?

Paulin is a member of the generation I collect and exhibit – French industrial designers born between 1925-1930. The exhibition at Centre George Pompidou is important, perhaps the most important design exhibition in Paris this year. Why? Because exhibiting works by a single designer, side by side, allows one to better understand the story behind, the evolution of a style, perhaps even the structure of the designer's process. Galerie Pascal Cuisinier will present an exhibition alongside the Centre Pompidou. The works we present are in the early period, Paulin's lesser-known works in which it is already possible to see the kernel of the future of Paulin's design. They will be presented first in my gallery, and then at Pompidou, where they will occupy an entire half of the exhibition.

Paulin is well known in design circles, but, generally speaking, outside of France he is recognized as a star designer. How would you describe his importance and heritage to someone who has never quite heard of him before, and who wants to know how Paulin sits alongside the canonical designers of the 20th century?

To be very honest, if I had to think about who will be known in 100 years' time, I wouldn't necessarily put my money on Paulin.

The importance of any important figure – be it a designer or a philosopher – accrues slowly. With time, we re-see, re-discover their work, time shines new light on the creator, and it's the time that makes the difference between the more important, and the less important names. Then there are the market

criteria, which are a complicating factor. The current market does not always align with importance in the history of design: golden, shiny pieces, for example, are currently not highly valued on the market, regardless of their historical importance. I believe that the designers from that era, that history will remember, are not the designers recognized by the market today.

Paulin was behind the market until now. As the market has become more stable, and saturated with Prouvé, Perriand, there is now space to recognize other designers from that time. The market has recognized Paulin, but behind him, there are other designers to discover – Guariche, Motte – which in the future might be more important than Paulin.

To summarize: Paulin was not recognized for his real value in his generation because of the market, but while Paulin may be the most recognized of his generation today, he may not be the most important.

Why is he important?

Today, on the market, Paulin's name is closely associated with his redesign of the Elysée Palace presidential suite in 1971 for Claude and George Pompidou. People want to have the same furniture as the French president, you know. However, that was a very, very, very small project for Paulin: just three rooms, wall fabrics, furniture, and lights. Designers didn't want to do this job at the time. They were occupied with bigger projects, such as airports. Paulin did it because he was a friend of the president's wife: he didn't have to work hard to get the project!

During his time, Paulin was very recognized for his textiles. He designed really new textiles, new chairs, and new shapes of chairs, and really new techniques to make the new shapes of the new chairs. He will continue to be recognized for this important work, I believe. His artisanal work will take the lead on the market, not his mass-produced pieces; but there are also some finer quality pieces produced in larger quantities, that deserve to be remembered.

So, how does his oeuvre sit within the French 20th century industrial design?

Ultimately, I think what most matters is that Paulin was a sculptor. The shape is not necessarily the most important factor in design – there is price, utility, ease of production – but it was for Paulin. He had trained in sculpture, working with stone and ceramics, and at the beginning of his career I think he was afraid of being seen as a sculptor, but continued to think as one. He always said: “The designer doesn’t have to be a sculptor; for a designer, there is a technical problem for which to find a solution.” But, even though I think Paulin was a really good technical designer, he continued to be a sculptor.

If you look at CM-194, one of his first chairs, in red jersey, the chair is constructed exactly like the human body, with a skeleton, padding (muscles), and a skin. The thinking of a sculptor is recognizable: what is inside? What is under the skin?

To understand his art-historical references, look at the two chandeliers he did in 1959 for Edition Pierre Disderot. They are almost identical to the metal artworks made by Harry Bertoia at the same time. This repeats across his work, references to top-tier sculptors of his time. In French, we call it ‘un fil rouge,’ a small constant in his work. He said it himself: “I see the shape before designing.” He designed objects starting from shape, exactly like a sculptor.

I understand that you are collaborating with Centre Georges Pompidou, on their upcoming blockbuster exhibition? How did this come about?

Two years ago, when I heard about the exhibition, I thought: “I’m sure they will present the same things as always: the Pompidou, the jersey chairs, the late work.” I decided to do a parallel exhibition of his early work: I have a collection of several beautiful, rare pieces.

The person from Centre Pompidou who came to visit the gallery for a discussion, however, was very impressed with the quality of the exhibits, and wanted to borrow them for their exhibition. Eventually, they decided to present half of my exhibition within theirs. I’m very happy that these pieces can leave my storage, and be exhibited at the Centre Pompidou – although I have had to come up with some creative ways to replace the objects in my

gallery, including borrowing from collectors, and printing large images of the missing images! (Laughs).

In any case, I don't think we can use the term 'collaboration,' but we will be the most important lender to this exhibition. I think it will be the first time that an exhibition on Paulin will present the beginning of his work.

What are the works that you are exhibiting?

There will be many pieces that are new on the market, that people genuinely don't know, haven't seen before. We have made a choice to present several different kinds of work from the first period: not only chairs – even though for many, Paulin is just a bunch of chairs. (Laughs).

There will be a beautiful, emotional early piece, from 1952: an early sideboard VB1, produced by his father, which may be a unique. A very beautiful low table produced for Meubles TV in 1954, which resembles a box on feet. And perhaps the most important piece, an extremely rare desk for Thonet, in 1959: very psychedelic, very rare. There is also a bowl on legs, a fruit bowl or a water lilies bowl, produced in a tiny edition of five: an unusual thing, something between furniture and an object.

And what is your favorite Paulin design piece?

Only one? I think it is the small sofa 190, produced for Meubles TV in 1954. It's an object with a triple function: a sofa, a low table, and when you put the back cushions on the table, you have a bed! It is very pure, very minimalist, very well designed, with perfect proportions. It is very complex, but very simple – and I continue to believe that less is more.

The [Pierre Paulin](#) retrospective will run from May 11 through August 28 at Centre Pompidou. “[Pierre Paulin: The Early Years \(1952-1959\)](#)” will run through May 28 at Galerie Pascal Cuisinier, Paris.