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# BLOUIN ART+AUCTION

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THE DESIGN ISSUE

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## Savoir Faire

Robust demand for early and mid 20th-century design from France compels galleries and auction houses to expand their horizons **BY C.C. SULLIVAN**

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DROP A CASUAL QUESTION about collector demand for classic French design from the first half of the 20th century, and even the most seasoned professionals appear a bit giddy with awe and excitement. The market is robust, effervescent, even explosive. Nobody calls it overblown, but as the best works continue to grow scarce, only the savviest buyers know how and where to find a steal.

For works from the canon of French designers stretching from the 1920s to the late 1950s—Jean-Michel Frank, Jean Royère, Jean Prouvé, Le Corbusier, Charlotte Perriand, and the Swiss-born Pierre Jeanneret—prices ranging from \$65,000 to \$1 million consistently exceed expectations. The buyer cohort is growing globally, with new money pouring in from Asia, South America, Russia, and the Middle East over the past several years, according to Cécile Verdier, director of 20th-century decorative arts and design for Sotheby's in Europe. Yet until recently, the consensus was that a healthy six-figure bid would come only for the rarest works and best-known names offered in a primed marketplace, like Prouvé's Gran Repos chair, which sold at Artcurial in Paris in late 2011 for €471,500 (\$646,000). Several years prior, record-breaking prices set at Christie's and Phillips hovered around a quarter million, exemplified by the 2005 sale of Prouvé's steel and lacquered-wood Trapèze table, circa 1951, for \$273,600 at Phillips de Pury & Company in New York.

Today, a Trapèze at auction would send ripples around the collector world. "Fewer yet more significant works are coming to market and selling above their estimates," says Craig Robins, a co-owner and principal of the Design Miami

art fair and an avid collector himself. "Galleries have been investing in major exhibitions that showcase the importance of work from this period, like the 'Calder/Prouvé' show by Patrick Seguin and Larry Gagosian," he says, referring to the partnered exhibition at Gagosian's Paris venue last summer.

"There is a very wide range of collecting categories within the periods of French early to mid 20th-century design, and they differ so greatly," says Meaghan Roddy, specialist and head of sale for the design department at Phillips New York. "Designers like Frank had a very limited output and worked in luxurious materials, often for prestigious commissions, so his pieces have garnered a following different from, say, Prouvé, a modernist who worked in industrial materials, often for civic commissions and on more of a production scale."

In recent years, however, collectors are more often and more readily mixing pieces. At a 20th-century auction, the same bidder can be seen vying for Art Deco objects and, minutes later, bidding on a Royère piece, says Verdier. "That was not true 10 years ago," she notes.

This speaks to the satisfying continuum of pedigree and style of French design. Frank's understated luxury was derived from simple, often stark forms, a complement to his Cubist contemporaries in painting and sculpture. The rectilinear details found in new-century style paved a path to the spare geometries of bent steel, wood, and glass of the 1920s and '30s. By the end of World War II, design turned toward social concerns such as affordability, as advances in automation, industrial methods, and even aeronautics

A current star of mid 20th-century French design is Jean Royère, whose Ours Polaire sofa, 1947, sold for a cool \$1 million at the Design Miami/Basel booth of Galerie Patrick Seguin in 2012.



# THE ASSESSMENT

From top: Two table lamps by Jean-Michel Frank rang up \$317,000 and \$305,000 (est. \$120-180,000 each) last December. They came to Christie's directly from their commissioned interior, indicating collector interest in material close to its origin. As objects become scarce, architectural lots such as Jean Prouvé's Maison Démontable 8x8, 1945, featuring furniture by Prouvé and Pierre Jeanneret, are becoming more frequent. Below, Prouvé's Gran Repos chair, which brought \$646,000 at Artcurial in Paris 2011.

inspired a productive optimism among designers. Frank's rich palette of lacquers, shagreen, and vellum gave way to chrome, plastics, and other synthetics. Hand-wrought craft took a backseat to mass production and prefabrication.

Nevertheless, even among the midcentury's most industrialized practitioners, "the items that show more hand-made, bespoke qualities seem to command higher prices than the more manufactured products," says Andrew Franz, an architect in New York who advises individual collectors. He offers as an example the designer and artist Line Vautrin, who emerged in the early 1940s with innovative jewelry and later produced decorative screens, tables, and lamps. "Even modern masters such as Prouvé and Perriand have a sense of craft by the maker, despite their modern and metal construction details. It's this variety and uniqueness that seem most appealing to our collectors. Every piece is different, even if manufactured with the intent of being identical or equal."

The postwar designers offer this broader appeal and also increased access, Verdier adds. "The prewar market is smaller and more difficult—very strong for masterpieces but more challenging for midrange pieces," she says. Many specialists see the postwar market as easier to navigate, and perhaps a better entry point for new buyers. Yet gallery and auction newcomers whose main interest is in decorating their homes will still find stiff competition from hardcore collectors.

At the top end, the best pieces rarely come up for sale. François Laffanour of Galerie Downtown in Paris—among the first in France to show Prouvé, Perriand, and Royère—characterizes the market as "very strong and international." Dealer Suzanne Demisch of Demisch Danant gallery, with outposts in Paris and New York, has similarly noted fierce competition for select works from as late as the 1960s and 1970s.

"If you have just average objects, they will last much longer and sit in the gallery, but there is a constant request for pieces that are exceptional and unusual. Demand is extremely strong on the upper tier of the market," says Hugues Magen, whose New York gallery,



Magen H, specializes in the mid 20th-century pieces. "People want to collect the best of the best."

Although the trifecta of Prouvé, Perriand, and Royère dominate, Royère is doing especially well. Seguin sold an Ours Polaire sofa by the designer for €800,000 (\$1 million) at Design Miami/Basel in 2012. His Liane lamp earned €505,000 (\$677,000) at Sotheby's Paris last November. Collectors zealously follow his Tour Eiffel bookcases and tables with signature diamond lattice, as well as his straw marquetry furniture in dazzling geometries.

For Prouvé's work, the most fervent bidding and top prices are reserved for his lamps, daybeds, and tables such as the Trapèze, 1950-54, and Granipoli, 1939. Another favorite, one of Prouvé's stocky, angled desks dubbed Bureau Présidence, sold at Phillips London last September for £198,000 (\$311,690). At Design Miami, Seguin sold a set including a Granipoli table and four Metropole chairs for \$650,000, one of the fair's highlights.

As the top end of the market continues its ascent, "it is getting harder and harder to find and buy major pieces" in the middle range, says Adriana Friedman, director of the DeLorenzo Gallery in New York. "There has been greater interest worldwide," due in part to the »



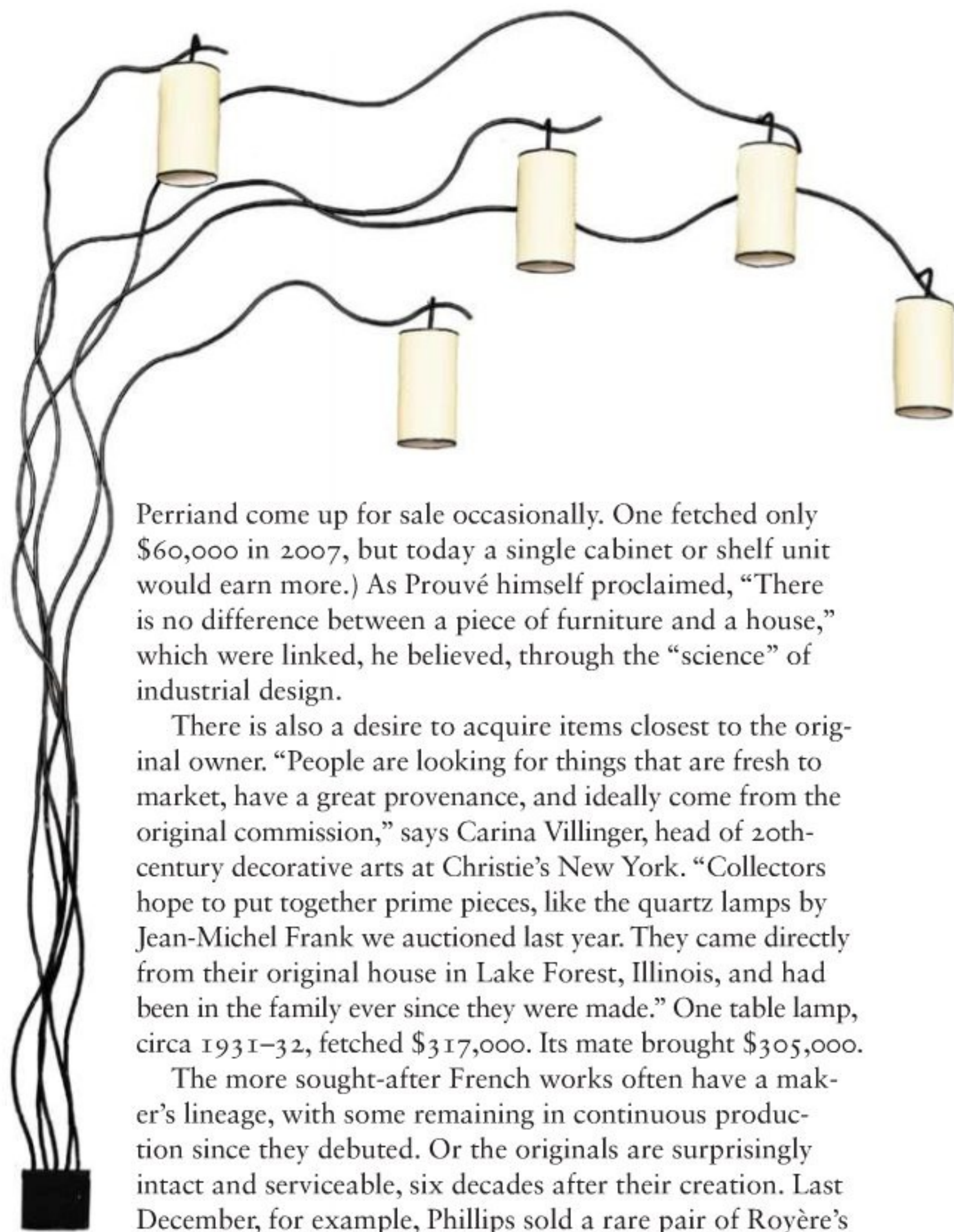
Right: A Liane lamp, 1960, by Royère, earned \$677,000 at Sotheby's Paris in November 2013. Designers accruing collector interest include Alexandre Noll, whose ca.-1945 mahogany dining set, below, took in a whopping \$905,000 (est. \$400-600,000) at Phillips New York this past December.

spate of films, books, and public lectures that lead collectors to discover works from this period outside the exhibition scene. A feature film about Eileen Gray is currently in production, and Marco Orsini is making a documentary on her life titled *Gray Matters*. "We have already been having a lot more customers from Russia, the Middle East, and Asia," says Friedman.

Collectors looking for values will see surprises in larger works from second-tier names with a good following. An example is Alexandre Noll, best known for abstract, biomorphic wood sculptures and smaller-scale works—*vides pôches*, dishes, and boxes. A premier sculpture sold for \$173,000 at Phillips New York last December, but a circa-1945 mahogany dining set raised eyebrows when it took in \$905,000 at the same auction, says Roddy.

Galleries and auction houses are exploring the periphery of this period to expand their audiences. This takes different directions. For Verdier and Magen, for example, ceramics from the late mid-century—by André Borderie, the Madoura studio of Suzanne Ramie, Pol Chambost, and others—present a good investment tack and an opportunity for sustained price growth. Others, such as Seguin, have expanded into architectural territory, selling entire estates, rooms, kitchens, and even complete mobile houses, such as the Jean Prouvé installation *Maison Démontable 8x8*, which drew crowds at Design Miami last year. More buildings are expected this season, including barracks designed by Prouvé for the Engineers Corps and the Ferembal house in Nancy, France, circa 1940, to be included in the Phillips "Architect" auction organized by architect Lee F. Mindel in London this month. "It's an architectural work from an important commission by one of the luminaries of 20th-century design," says Roddy.

Spurring this interest is the often inextricable link between household objects or furnishings and architectural works of the era: a house, an office headquarters, even Le Corbusier's 1952 *Unité d'Habitation* apartment building in Marseille, for which Perriand—hired as Corbu's furniture designer in 1927—created the prototype kitchen. (Other kitchens by



Perriand come up for sale occasionally. One fetched only \$60,000 in 2007, but today a single cabinet or shelf unit would earn more.) As Prouvé himself proclaimed, "There is no difference between a piece of furniture and a house," which were linked, he believed, through the "science" of industrial design.

There is also a desire to acquire items closest to the original owner. "People are looking for things that are fresh to market, have a great provenance, and ideally come from the original commission," says Carina Villinger, head of 20th-century decorative arts at Christie's New York. "Collectors hope to put together prime pieces, like the quartz lamps by Jean-Michel Frank we auctioned last year. They came directly from their original house in Lake Forest, Illinois, and had been in the family ever since they were made." One table lamp, circa 1931-32, fetched \$317,000. Its mate brought \$305,000.

The more sought-after French works often have a maker's lineage, with some remaining in continuous production since they debuted. Or the originals are surprisingly intact and serviceable, six decades after their creation. Last December, for example, Phillips sold a rare pair of Royère's Oeuf chairs with their original floral-print fabric and plastic labels—which are almost never intact—for a mid-estimate \$257,000, and a rare set of his Yo-yo armchairs for \$137,000, well above their \$30,000-to-\$40,000 tag. "His designs are very playful and whimsical but they're still functional, comfortable, usable," says Roddy.

To be considered a prime piece, good condition is a must, but novelty is an increasingly valuable attribute. Recent forays by sellers and a few market shifts have led to a fracturing of what was once considered a monolithic French genre. "In my opinion the long trajectory of growing interest in this kind of design," says Seguin, listing the core group of Prouvé, Perriand, Royère, Jeanneret, and Le Corbusier, »







“is going from a very strong market for furniture to new kinds of interest—for example, Prouvé’s architecture and demountable houses.”

New York architect and designer Lee H. Skolnick agrees. “This fragmentation has been going on for a long time, and it’s just exploding right now. Prices are soaring, and finding anything good is getting harder and harder,” he says. Skolnick has been focusing on works by Frank, Pierre Chareau, and other early 20th-century modernists more heavily influenced by the Art Deco movement. “But to find these, you need to look at estate sales and talk to brokers. It’s following the trend of luxury real estate and art.” So whether it’s André Borderie vases, Frank quartz lamps, or Prouvé demountables, collectors find leverage by focusing on less explored, lesser known niches—even by the best-known names—to find pleasant surprises and better values. Well on the margins of the core furniture and decorative groupings, these provinces hint at the depth and potential of this rich era.

**Still a classic, the LC4 lounge was designed by three of the category’s hottest names: Le Corbusier, Jeanneret, and Charlotte Perriand. This example brought \$4,400 at Bukowskis Auctions in Paris in November 2012. Below, a rare set of Royère Yo-yo armchairs soared past their \$40,000 high estimate in December 2013 to bring \$137,000 at Phillips New York.**

“Opportunities range from glassware and ceramics to lighting and large furniture pieces, in a variety of international styles,” says Lamarr Reid, an architect and designer with Pierre-Yves Rochon in Paris. Verdier and Magen are focused on ceramic works, for example, from the later midcentury as well as from lesser known expatriate artists and collectives that enriched the Parisian midcentury scene.

As for work from the new niches by the best-known names, gallerists such as Seguin and consultants like Franz are mining a few rich troves. Jeanneret’s design work for the modernist city of Chandigarh in northern India, for example, which he created to complement the urban planning and experimental architecture by his cousin Le Corbusier, includes teak chairs and tables, as well as lampposts, manhole covers, bookcases, and stools. This material has been seen in galleries and on auction blocks, where prices have climbed but legitimate works are scarce, and their condition is often very poor.

Considering the vigorous market and the importance of provenance, collectors should beware of weakly documented stories that sound too good to be true, as with some items attributed to Chandigarh. “This market is good to invest in, if you want to look at it that way, but there are lots of fakes,” says Villinger, “So you have to do your research and understand what you’re buying.” This has led many aficionados and new buyers to seek auction house specialists for both education and purchasing. “The auction scene seems to be where the trends are most conspicuously tracked and the interest and consumption evident,” says Franz. “Auction houses do seem to remain the best authority.”

In spite of the market’s acceleration, it’s still a very good time to buy, say specialists. Even the best works of 20th-century French design are seen as “still highly affordable for collectors,” compared with its art market counterpart, says Design Miami’s Robins. “But that won’t last,” he murmurs. ☒

