

# French Modern Furniture

Designers of the 1950s Explored Form and Function in Radical Ways

By John Loring

**H**OME FURNISHINGS GENERATED by the great burst of reevaluation and creativity that took place in France during the reconstruction following World War II have in the past several years surged from relative obscurity into the spotlight of interior design. Names like Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Per-

riand, Serge Mouille, Alexandre Noll, Mathieu Matégot, Georges Jouve and Jean Royère were far from household terms in 2000; however, today their works are collected by every connoisseur of 20th-century design, exhibited in leading art galleries from Paris to Los Angeles and have attained prices equal to or higher than the

furniture of France's 17th- and 18th-century masters.

Around a half century after their creation, the works of these brilliant designers have achieved what they set out to do, which was, in the words of Georges Fontaine, a noted critic of their generation, "to prove that modern furnishings conceived with proper proportions and executed with a maximum of modern perfection are quite equivalent to the glories of the 17th century."

If these French modernists changed the face of design in

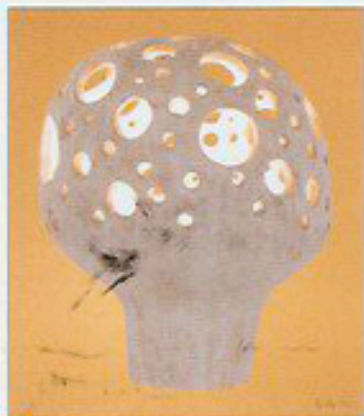
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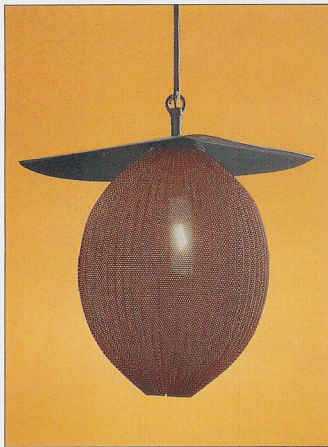
## ANDRÉ BORDERIE

*Below: Lamp, circa 1960. Glazed earthenware; 17" x 14". The head-shaped light fixture, studded with holes, redefined mid-century style. Jousse Entreprise, Paris.*

## CHARLOTTE PERRIAND

*Synthèse des Arts Stacking Chair, circa 1955. Painted plywood; 26" x 17". Eastern and Western styles influenced Perriand's diminutive design. Jousse Entreprise, Paris.*





**MATHIEU MATÉGOT**

**LEFT:** *Satelite Hanging Lamp*, 1953. Sheet metal; 14½" x 9". Once a set designer, Matégot brought a theatrical touch to his light fixture. Magen H. Gallery, New York.

**ALEXANDRE NOLL**

**RIGHT:** *Table and Chair*, 1952. Ebonized wood; table, 27½"; chair, 34" x 16½". Noll's shapes contrasted with the angular lines of industrial furniture. Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris.



They changed the face of design with a Renaissance spirit of heightened humanism.

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was trained as a metalworker and was devoted to precise lines and surfaces of steel and aluminum. Alexandre Noll, like Perriand, saw furniture as a form of sculpture, where furniture could become some-

thing organic and sensual. Serge Mouille, quite the opposite of Noll, was trained as a silversmith, a technically demanding branch of metalworking that had changed little in 2,000 years. He moved on to the masterful manipula-

tion of black-enameled tubular and sheet metal light fixtures of almost gravity-defying linear configuration.

Hungarian-born Mathieu Matégot, who began his career as a theatrical set designer in Paris, only learned his metal-

working skills during the war. His best-known designs of perforated sheet metal, often pleated like tulle, are typical of his finely finished work using inexpensive materials to witty, charming and often theatrical effect.

Georges Jouve frequently collaborated with Matégot, but he was a ceramist—not a metalsmith—committed to leading pottery closer to sculpture. He brought a sensuality to pottery similar to Noll's approach to wood.

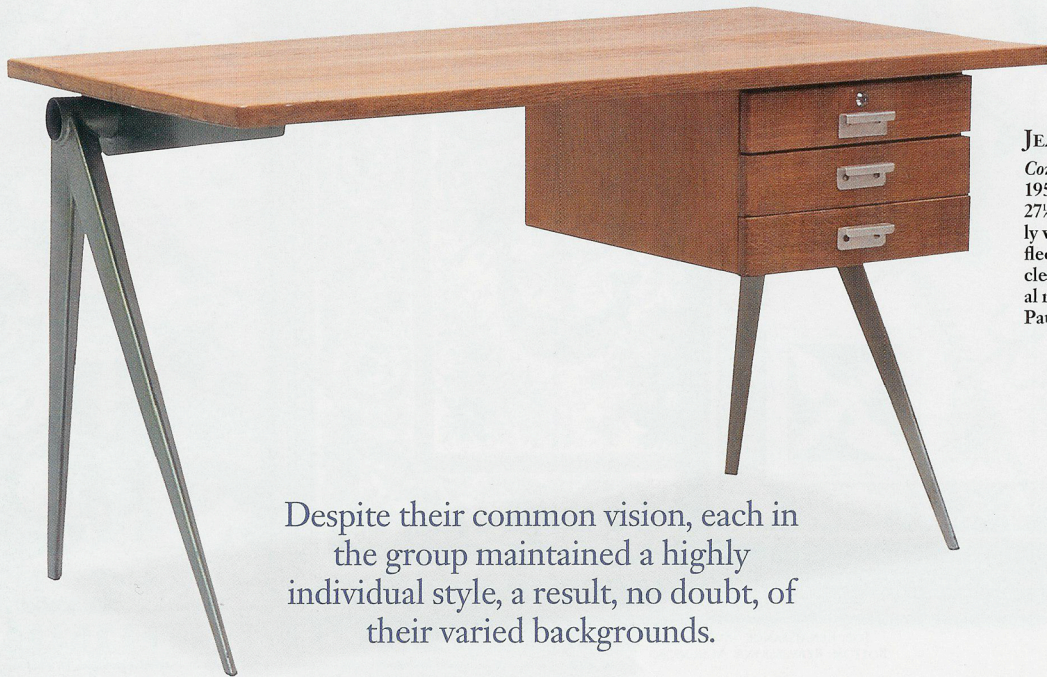
The maverick was Jean Royère, a self-taught independent thinker possessed of both great wit and great originality who delighted in an intentional disrespect for materials, treating wood like wrought iron and wrought iron like giltwood, perching massive forms on thin undulating steel rods and putting rich surfaces on austere forms.

With all their variety, the French modernists created a cohesive body of work in home furnishings whose freedom and originality is as refreshing and seductive today as it was in the '50s. □



**JEAN ROYÈRE**

**Tour Eiffel Table**, circa 1950. Iron, bronze and marble; 29½" x 43". The rods forming the base of Royère's table were modeled after the Paris tower. Galerie Jacques Lacoste, Paris.



**JEAN PROUVÉ**  
*Compass Desk*, circa 1950. Wood and steel; 27½" x 55". The roughly welded desk reflects Prouvé's eye for clean lines and textural materials. Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris.

Despite their common vision, each in the group maintained a highly individual style, a result, no doubt, of their varied backgrounds.

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that postwar period, they did it in an entirely positive way, with a Renaissance spirit of heightened humanism and intellectual probity.

Unlike Renaissance artists, they preferred the greater fluidity of form found in nature. And so it follows that their freedom of thought led directly to freedom of line and form, though their creations utilized the precision of mass-production technology. The artistic forebears of many were Le Corbusier, the unchallenged master of proto-modernism, and his cousin and collaborator, Pierre Jeanneret, who had led the way toward modernism's rich brew of free or austere form coupled with raw materials or richly sensual surfaces, all called into service under the banner of functionality.

Function and practicality were as important to them as aesthetics. Hugues Magen, a New York dealer and devotee

of '50s French modernism, is eloquent in his enthusiasm for this group of designers. "Using the most inexpensive materials, they created some of the most outstanding works of art of the century. It was all done in the most rational, brilliant way.

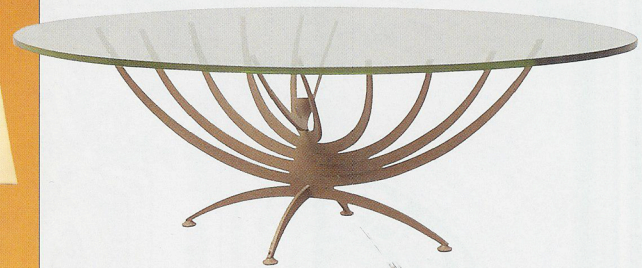
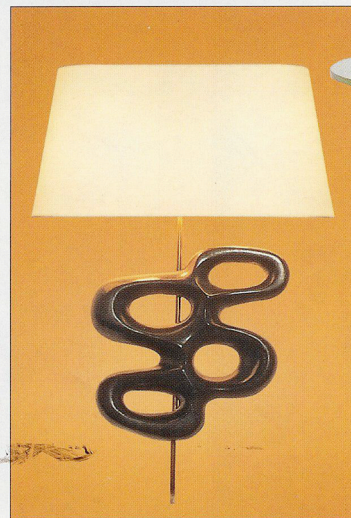
"They developed a design vocabulary of lines that appeared to float in space, that

characterized a total freedom from tradition in work and thought," he adds. "The furniture was not there to be beautiful, but it became sublime."

Despite their common vision, each in the group maintained a highly individual style, a result, no doubt, of their varied backgrounds. Perriand and Prouvé had both collabo-

rated with Le Corbusier and Jeanneret, but Perriand was devoted to the volumetric use of wood in furniture design and had spent several years in Japan, where she acquired a love of asymmetry and irregular form as well as an eye for simple, natural materials.

Prouvé, on the contrary, *continued on page 132*



**GEORGES JOUVE**  
 LEFT: *Lamp*, circa 1955. Glazed ceramic; 24" x 12". Sensual forms characterized Jouve's designs, as with this undulating lamp base. Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris.

**SERGE MOUILLE**  
 ABOVE: *Coffee Table*, circa 1960. Sheet metal and glass. Mouille, a metalworker, created functional furniture that seemed to defy gravity. Galerie Patrick Seguin, Paris.