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**Feelin' Groovy**

**As circa-Seventies furniture begins to blip on collectos' radar, two Frenchwomen find themselves back in fashion.**

**By Robert Murphy**

With furniture collectors moving past the Bauhaus-meets-midcentury aesthetic, the over-the-top creations of the late Sixties and the Seventies are looking more and more right. Thankfully, this time around, disco-era décor is less about shag carpets and earth tones and more focused on sophisticated, one-of-a-kind pieces. According to Richard Wright of Chicago's Wright auction house, one country in particular excelled during the decade. "The French did the very best work of the 1970s," he says. "They have an incredible legacy of artisan-client culture."

Two Parisians in particular – Marie-Claude de Fouquières and Maria Pergay – are at the forefront of the revival. Both worked in materials that defined the time: de Fouquières in resin; Pergay in stainless steel. And until recently, both had been largely forgotten. Now, demand for Pergay's and de Fouquières's unique creations is building at a fevered pace, with prices vaulting firmly into 21<sup>st</sup>-century territory.

**Resin d'être**

Marie-Claude de Fouquières's career as a furniture designer lasted all of eight years, but during that time the prolific Parisian created an extraordinary oeuvre of some 1,800 tables, desks, lamps and screens – all of them in think, luminous polyester resin. In the Seventies her work was a veritable sensation among the rich and famous, from David de Rothchild and the Emir of Qatar to celebrated decorators David Hicks and Henri Samuel. De Fouquières's signature was what she calls her "exploded" style, which she created by initiating a chemical reaction in the resin to make it crack into wild, colorful, crystalline patterns that hang frozen under the surface.

"Her resin work is the most beautiful of the time," says Parisian antiques dealer Yves Gastou. "Only recently has she been rediscovered, and prices already are escalating. Last year a table at auction estimated at \$3,000 sold for over \$20,000. And I think we're still at the tip of the iceberg."

At 69, de Fouquières is in fine fettle, luminous and friendly. As she sits down for an interview in her roomy Left Bank apartment, which is surprisingly traditional except for the massive red coffee table and wild floor lamp – both of her own design – she offers a colorful account of the path that led her to her craft. "I started because I couldn't find a table I liked," she says. "It was as simple as that. My husband owned a factory that made industrial plastic pieces. One day he got tired of listening to me complain. He said, 'Just make it yourself. We can do it at the factory.' He probably thought it better that I keep busy than get bored and take a lover."

What began as a lark grew into a full-time job as de Fouquières's jet-setting circle – including Princess Maria Pia of Savoy and Parisian art dealers Denise and Philippe Durand-Ruel – grew enamored of her style. The Durand-Ruels introduced de Fouquières to artists like Arman, Fahri and César, with whom she often collaborated.

"David de Rothchild was practically my first client," says de Fouquières. "People would come to the house and see a table, or see a piece at so-and-so's house, and they'd say, 'Ah, that's wonderful. Can you make one for me?'"

Her sales and her social life, it seems were entirely intertwined. "We used to go out all of the time," she remembers. "After four nights in a row, I'd tell my husband, 'No, I refuse. I'm too tired.' He'd say, 'Just think, each time we go out, you sell a table.'"

Although the "exploded" works were most popular, de Fouquières also developed a color-block style and produced dozens of so-called "inclusion" pieces, with objects like dishes, bicycle pumps, cork, sponges, ball bearings and minerals playfully held inside or protruding out of the resin. "I liked the inclusions best. They were always one of a kind," she says and launches into a description of one table with floating resin molds of her thumb. "It horrified people," she laughs. "It never sold."

In 1977, at the height of her success, de Fouquières stopped making furniture almost as suddenly as she started. When her husband died, she locked up her studio and succeeded him as head of the factory. "I had two young children in school," she explains. "So I learned how to read a financial report. My time as a furniture maker seemed to have closed." Today, however, with interest in her work escalating, de Fouquières is considering a comeback. "I have ideas," she says. "You know, the other day I found a resin supplier. I don't see why I shouldn't start again."

### **Steely Determination**

Maria Pergay strolls into Paris's Hotel Lutetia for tea, cradling a broken left arm. "It was a silly accident," she says nonchalantly, slipping off her astrakhan coat. "It involved a rataouille at my house in the South of France."

Known for her stainless-steel creations, which combined rigorous geometry with fanciful details in wood, bone and mother-of-pearl, Pergay isn't letting the injury slow her down. At 75, she's as busy as ever, putting the finishing touches on the first exhibit of her work in years, set to open at Manhattan's Lehmann Maupin and Demisch Danant galleries on March 30.

"My problem is that I have too many ideas and, I feel, not enough time," she says. "I'm still working with the same passion and love as when I began."

Over her rich and varied career, the spirited Pergay has become an icon of the futuristic, sexy *Barbarella* aesthetic. Her chairs have sensual, serpentine lines and she is fond of surrealistic

touches like floating bronze skulls. As collectors start to rediscover the period, her designs are among the most sought after at auction, with prices reaching new records. Last year a dining table sold at Wright for \$120,000 and in fall 2004 a pair of chairs with a high estimate of \$9,000 went for \$66,000.

"It's scary," says Pergay of her prices. "Maria Pergay can no longer buy Maria Pergay. One of the things about being fashionable is that fashion can turn on you."

Pergay was born in Russia in 1930, but fled to Paris with her mother at age six after her father, a spy for Stalin, disappeared. After World War II, she studied costume and set design and then took off for America, where she sketched for a fashion firm. Her American dream was interrupted by the McCarthy era, which frightened her enough to precipitate a return to France. Back in Paris, she married and found work as a window dresser. She created iron figurines to complement her displays and soon began to experiment with silver. Eventually, she opened a shop selling silver decorative items. It was in 1968 that Pergay came to the material that would seal her reputation. An industrialist named Gérard Martel, one of France's biggest steel manufacturers, wanted to encourage designers to use his material and approached Pergay. She told that it wasn't suited to her small pieces but could work on a larger scale. "I told him I'd make furniture," she recalls. "Then it came like a wave."

Pierre Cardin purchased the entirety of her first collection, which included an undulating daybed meant to resemble a flying carpet and a chair of concentric circles that look like a target. Her designs debuted at the Galerie Maison et Jardin in Paris, where they were displayed alongside Old Master paintings and other antiquities. "My Flying Carpet daybed under an old painting – it worked," says Pergay. "It didn't look like a little fashionable knickknack."

"Her work was innovative," says Cardin, for whom Pergay later designed a couch that pops open like a clam and is covered in whole tortoise shells. "There is a purity in her forms, but also something baroque."

Pergay has also worked in interior design over the years, including extensive projects in Russia and a long stint designing palaces for Saudi royals. But, as her new pieces illustrate, steel furniture remains her passion. "Stainless steel is incredible," she says. "It's a material made for war, for missiles. But when you get the proportions right, you can give it warmth and even poetry."