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ALL ABOUT THE MIX

by Julie L. Belcove

Among the very first decorators to mix contemporary commissions with period antiques — a practice today considered de rigueur — Frenchman Henri Samuel revolutionized interior design in the 20th century. Now, a new show at Manhattan's Demisch Danant gallery celebrates his illustrious contributions.



César Baldaccini created a number of bronze objects at the behest of French interior decorator Henri Samuel, including the Expansion Mural, 1970/2011. Photo by Philippe D. Brussels © 2014 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/ADAGP, Paris. Above: César's Expansion table is one of the highlights of Demisch Danant's exhibition devoted to Samuel.

In the hierarchy of interior design, there are decorators, there are French decorators, and then there is Henri Samuel. Often regarded as the *ne plus ultra* of his field, Samuel, who died in 1996 at the age of 92, commanded such influence that many of his ideas became as embedded in the language of interiors as paint, furniture and fabric.

One of his most imitated concepts, the incorporation of modern art and furniture with period pieces, was radical in his day. Even more daring was his fondness for tapping contemporary artists to create sculptural but usually functional furniture and objects. These he installed right next to priceless Louis and Empire antiques in both his own spectacular apartment and his clients' houses, a practice that served to instantly elevate the new. Though artists of the 1960s and '70s were already experimenting with furniture as a medium, Samuel's imprimatur gave them credibility and momentum. "He was really a patron of this movement," says Suzanne Demisch, a partner in the Chelsea gallery [Demisch Danant](#). "Henri Samuel's involvement helped bring it to the forefront."

Now, Demisch Danant, which specializes in 20th-century French design, pays homage to Samuel's eye for the avant-garde with "Paris Match: Henri Samuel and the Artists He Commissioned, 1968-1977," through January 31. Highlighting works by César, [François Arnal](#), [Philippe Hiquily](#), [Guy de Rougemont](#) and [Diego Giacometti](#), the exhibition features some exceptionally rare pieces. "Most of the material is in

private collections," says Demisch, noting that often editions consisted of only a handful of pieces. "It's gone, not on the market."



Demisch Danant's "Paris Match" exhibition, on view in New York through January 31, shows off Guy de Rougemont's *Table Nuage*, 1972/2006; Philippe Hiquily's *Side Table*, 1990; and, at the rear, *L'échelle de l'évasion et l'étoile de l'espoir*, 1939, by Joan Miró.

With deep-orange silk panels and white boiserie on the walls, the gallery is meant to evoke — but not replicate — Samuel's legendary apartment in a rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré *hôtel particulier*. Most of the pieces on view, the bulk of which are priced below \$100,000, were not the exact ones that occupied Samuel's home, but instead are typically from designs or artists he commissioned. For instance, a de Rougemont *Table Nuage*, or Cloud Table, whose electrified base glows a shade of blue evocative of 21st-century electronic gadgets, has a brass surface of six ellipses, while Samuel's own version had five. It was exceedingly difficult for the gallery to obtain, but Demisch says, "you have to have the Cloud Table."

César's brass *objets*, from his blob-like ashtrays to his spiky candelabra, hover between sculptures and accessories. Most dramatic, though, is his massive Expansion Table. Its cast-bronze base appears to be oozing like lava from the smoky oval-shaped glass top it supports. (Samuel placed a smaller Expansion console against one wall of his apartment.)

Other standouts include a leather-and-chrome rocking chair by Jean-Michel Sanejouand for the collective Atelier A, which looks like a cross between a [Mies van der Rohe Barcelona chair](#) and a child's teeter-totter; a selection of Arnal Plexiglas zigzag stools and tables; and a set of six steel chairs made by [François and Claude Lalanne](#) for a director of a coffee company. The four legs of each chair are shaped like the letter C, with the curves all touching gracefully in the center. The brown leather seats and backs are meant to allude to coffee beans, though Demisch notes with a chuckle that "some people think they look like breasts instead."



Guy de Rougemont *Table Nuage*, 1972/2006. Photo by Byron Slater, courtesy of Phillips Auctioneers LLC

“IT’S A STORY THAT HASN’T BEEN TOLD,” SAYS SUZANNE DEMISCH. “DECORATORS HAVE BASED THEIR CAREERS ON WHAT HENRI SAMUEL DID.”



Henri Samuel, considered to be France’s greatest interior designer of the 20th century, was a true master of the mix.

Samuel maintained that he came to decoration quite naturally, having grown up in sophisticated, elegant style. While his father was a prosperous banker, his grandfather had been an antiques dealer. After his own brief flirtation with finance, Samuel embraced his true love — decorating. He took a job with the well-regarded firm Jansen at the age of 21, eventually opening his own business in 1956. By the next year, he had won two highly desirable commissions: restoring both the Empire rooms at Versailles and, for the unofficial “Queen of Paris,” Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, the grand Château de Ferrières. A clientele of jet-setters, from Vanderbilts to Valentino, quickly followed.

His decor was palatial, to be sure, but decorator [Mario Buatta](#) insisted to *Women’s Wear Daily* in 1986 that even Samuel’s period rooms didn’t “look dated or stagy; they look like people live in them.” Samuel certainly was not stuck in the past. He explained his evolution: “When I was younger, I did mostly 18th-century houses or

apartments because most of my clients had furniture and objects of the 18th century. That’s what they wanted, plus a lot of paneling. But by and by their tastes changed, and so did mine, and I began to mix.”

Samuel’s eclecticism was far from haphazard; on the contrary, it was an outgrowth of his educated eye and intellect. His expertise in period design was so respected that even the Metropolitan Museum of Art entrusted him with overseeing the design of the Wrightsman Galleries for French Decorative Arts — Jayne Wrightsman was yet another client — and recreating a Louis XIV state bedroom.

As far as Demisch has been able to ascertain, “Paris Match” is the first gallery show devoted to Samuel, an oddity since his every gesture was gospel. “It’s a story that hasn’t really been told,” she says. “Decorators have based their entire careers on what he did.”



This room from Samuel’s apartment in a *hôtel particulier* on rue du Faubourg Saint-Honoré shows how he artfully combined antiques with modern pieces. Photo by Pascal Hinous, © 2011 Christie’s Images Limited

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Franois Arnauld gueridon for Atelier A Gueridon, ca. 1969. Photo by Jacob Krupnick, courtesy of Demisch Danant
