

ICONIC STYLE

Steeling beauty

# Maria Pergay

Half a century ago, in an era that was all about plastics, the Paris-based designer made a bold move to create sensuous, shapely furniture out of stainless steel.

By Jason Mowen

If it's true that something done with love is done par excellence, then the work of Maria Pergay, the French artist-designer who made stainless steel chic in the 1960s and '70s, shines in the most wonderful way. From her early days as a self-taught silversmith crafting exquisite, one-off decorative objects, Pergay seems only to have followed her heart, and never the market, when it came to her designs. Many did not become fashionable until years after they were created, but that's not to say she didn't attract a cultivated following of devotees along the way: her first collection of furniture, for example, exhibited at Galerie Maison et Jardin in Paris in 1968, was bought outright by couturier Pierre Cardin.

"You can't really categorise her," says Suzanne Demisch of Demisch Danant, Pergay's New York gallerist. "That's what has always made her so interesting." Born in 1930 to Russian-Jewish parents in Chisinau, then in Romania, Pergay and her mother fled to Paris in 1937 to escape an expected Soviet invasion, only to have to go into hiding when the Nazis occupied the city. After the war she studied costume and set design at the Institut des Hautes Etudes Cinématographiques, also attending sculpture classes with Russian-French artist Ossip Zadkine in Montparnasse.

In 1954 she began helping a decorator friend dress shop windows in Paris, one of which was next to Hermès. Her theatrical approach garnered much attention and within a few years she was crafting small decorative objects, such as her trademark silver boxes adorned with ribbons and belt-buckles for Hermès as well as Christian Dior, Jacques Heim and Givenchy. She made a silver rooster vase for Pierre Cardin and a gold butterfly set with semi-precious stones for Salvador Dalí. Spurred by the interest in her work, she opened a shop on the Place de Vosges in 1960.

Pergay's watershed career moment was in 1967, when France's largest steelmaker, Ugine Gueugnon,



PHOTOGRAPHER: LAURENT BUGHES (TOP RIGHT); ALL OTHER IMAGES: COURTESY DEMISCH DANANT

approached her to propose she work in stainless steel. Attracted to what she would later describe as the material's "samurai-like" qualities, Pergay went large and created her first collection of furniture — the one snapped up by Cardin. It included two of the most magical metal furnishings of the 20th century: the Lit Tapis Volant (Flying Carpet Daybed) and Chaise Anneaux (Ring Chair), the latter inspired by the spiralling form of an orange peel. "I was peeling an orange for my children, and thought how nice it looked," Pergay told *The New York Times*. "No one was doing stainless steel furniture then."

Other exhibitions, both in France and abroad,

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were to follow. Maison Jansen, for whom Pergay had created the master baths of the Tunisian presidential palace in 1960, began to sell her stainless steel furniture in their Paris showroom in 1969. The following year, she was commissioned, again by >>



**THIS PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP** Maria Pergay's Chaise Léopard, 2009. Chaise Anneaux (Ring Chair), Chaise X chairs and Lit Tapis Volant (Flying Carpet Daybed), all designed in 1968. **OPPOSITE PAGE** the designer in Paris with her chaise and console for Fendi Casa in 2013.





CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT Bureau Bar, 1969; Pouf Ruban (Ribbon Pouf), 2007; Table Galet, from Pergay's 2016 collection for Demisch Danant; Pergay and Pierre Cardin with her Canapé Tortue (Turtle Sofa), a custom piece commissioned by Cardin in 1977.



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« Jansen, to create the luxurious tent bedroom of Shahbanu Farah Pahlavi, wife of the Shah of Iran, for the 2500th anniversary of the Iranian monarchy. Whole interiors were to become her focus from the late '70s onwards, first in the Middle East for various members of the Saudi royal family and later for Russian oligarchs in Moscow. Following a brief 'retirement' in Morocco in the early 2000s, Pergay returned to Paris to produce new work after being sought out by Demisch, her gallerist-to-be. It was to be her first exhibition since the '70s and by the time the collection was shown with Demisch Danant and Lehman Maupin galleries in New York in 2006, interest in, and the value of, Pergay's early designs had soared: her Banquet one-arm daybed (1967), for example, sold for US \$421,000 with Phillips in New York the following year.

She now lives in Béziers in the south of France, and she has been producing around 5 to 10 pieces per year through various workshops in Paris. Her contemporary work often incorporates copper, bronze and exotic woods, although her beloved stainless steel is never far away. "It doesn't even occur to me to have boundaries," says Pergay. "The only thing I want is that the work not leave you indifferent, one way or another." **VL** Maria Pergay by François Halard (\$49, Demisch Damant); visit [demischdanant.com](http://demischdanant.com)

