

Benjamin Paulin with his wife Alice Lemoine in their Paris apartment, which is furnished with an array of Paulin prototypes. Far right: designer Pierre Paulin



Pierre Paulin's sensuous sci-fi designs are being appreciated afresh as the custodians of his archive release covetable limited editions. **Mark C O'Flaherty** reports. Portrait by **Emmanuel Fradin**

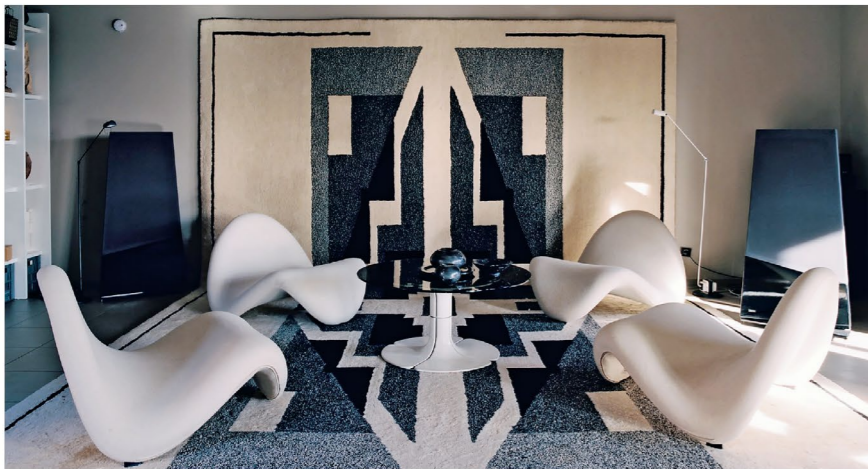
The Ralph Pucci showroom of contemporary design on West 18th Street in Manhattan is the penthouse of dreams. It is an ever-changing space full of modern art and furniture arranged like one incredible private apartment. The highlight right now? An installation of Pierre Paulin furniture, flanked by wraparound windows and white surfaces, occupying a substantial part of one floor. The Empire State Building dominates the view and a collection of Chris Makos's giant black and white photo collage portraits hang on the walls: Andy Warhol, Debbie Harry, Susanne Bartsch... people whose radical personal style in decades past has helped define the city as it is today.

The Paulin furniture, designed in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s, couldn't look more apposite in this setting. It has the dazzling aura of the next big thing but tells the ongoing story of one family's history and global influence. "One of the great things about all this work," says Pucci, walking around the brightly coloured Canapé Alpha deco-influenced sofas (two-seaters from \$34,680, pictured on final page) and a modular, white origami-style Tapis-Siège daybed (from \$49,800), "is that while its roots are European, it is entirely international in style. Now is the time for these designs. Midcentury work was about so much sameness, for so long. This is a breath of fresh air – and it can't be mass produced."

Pucci was approached by Benjamin Paulin, son of the late design genius Pierre Paulin, about two years ago to show newly manufactured pieces in a gallery format. As the head of Paulin, Paulin, Paulin in Paris – which he runs with wife Alice Lemoine (both pictured left) and his mother Maia – Benjamin oversees his father's archive, the production of classic and previously unrealised pieces and a global family business. "Few people realise it," Benjamin says, "but in the early 1980s my father became tired of industrial processes and wanted to get back to something more artisanal – to move into limited editions." The pieces produced by Paulin, Paulin, Paulin are to the exact specifications that Pierre – who died in 2009 – configured when he first worked on them. Several are available solely in limited editions – including the Rosace coffee table (\$74,820, pictured far left), first designed in 1971 and now available with lighting set into its floral-graphic base in an edition of 12. The same craftsman works on a single piece of furniture, from start to finish, for around 10 to 12 weeks. There is no production line.



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to his new position as head of menswear at Louis Vuitton – has several Paulin pieces. He believes it speaks profoundly to him and his peers. “In a nutshell, he is the link between historical design, authenticity and a younger generation,” Abloh says. Alice Lemoine agrees. “On the one hand, there is the purity of the design. It does not position the furniture within a trend,” she says. “On the other, there is the joy and conviviality of the models we have chosen to produce at Paulin, Paulin, Paulin. They represent reassuring feelings that our generation responds to – we are a generation that lives with a chorus of fear and anguish when we think about the future.” The future used to look a lot better than it does today. The Paulin family are bringing that vision back.

Paulin’s work certainly resonates with carefree nostalgia. It is dynamic and fantastical – immortalised on screen repeatedly in the lairs of James Bond villains and on Moonbase Alpha in *Space: 1999*. The Dune sofa (individual modules from \$5,400 to \$8,220, pictured above), originally designed in the 1970s, invites you to lounge at floor-level and looks like the most fun, luxe media room furniture of all time. It’s been selling well at Paulin, Paulin, Paulin in Paris and Pucci in New York.

Clients from Tokyo have found it particularly appealing. “We had several orders from Japan recently,” says Michael Pucci, who runs the business with his father. “I think they relate to the way it presents furniture that is lower to the floor.”

Alice and Benjamin live in an apartment (pictured on previous pages) in Paris surrounded by Paulin prototypes. One of Lemoine’s favourite pieces is the Tapis-Siège daybed, which has a kind of space-age *ryokan* aesthetic. It is wonderfully playful. “It’s a dream piece to live with when you have kids,” she says. “During the weekends, we like to read and play with our kids on it and later in the evenings we use it with close friends for fun, memorable moments.” Living and working with Paulin’s designs is all part and parcel of the family dynamic of the company. “It’s more than just business,” Benjamin says. “You are doing what you do to defend a creation – something that represents more than money.” A case in point is the family’s approach to sales – while there are many colour and fabric options for the pieces, Benjamin says a client’s own suggestion has to “fit the way of Pierre Paulin’s thinking – we don’t want to compromise the design.” The classic mass-produced Ribbon chair has suffered from one psychedelic textile collaboration too

many in its lifetime, a fate that won’t befall any of the pieces under the watch of Benjamin, Alice and Maia. The Paulin family story began when Pierre showed his designs at the Salon des Arts Ménagers in 1953. He then



“Nothing has been adapted for an industrial process,” says Benjamin. “They need real care and attention.” “Pierre Paulin had a wonderfully sensuous take on modernity,” says Deyan Sudjic, co-director of the Design Museum in London. “The free-flowing forms and vivid colours of his pieces still seem to say something fresh and new about the future, even 50 years after they were designed.” When the Alaïa store opened in London earlier this year, it was with two Cathédrale tables (available in limited editions of 72 per design; 12 in each colour – \$74,820 for the single version, pictured above, and \$102,960 for the double, pictured overleaf), featuring bright orange bases, as central pieces. Paulin’s Cathédrale design is one of his most distinctive, mixing neo-gothic ecclesiastical graphic lines with a touch of futurism. “The way the aluminium base is cut and

each element of the table is entirely individual make it a real piece of architecture,” Benjamin says. “My father wanted to create something that looked complex but was also simple.” Benjamin describes his father as an international rather than French designer. “To him, there was no French style. He was inspired more by Japanese and Yemeni architecture – and American and Scandinavian design. He was a citizen of the world.” Apart from the energy that his family channel into bringing the archive to life, it’s interesting to consider why Paulin is so visible right now. Fashion designer Virgil Abloh – who has taken the graphic design he became known for at his streetwear brand Off-White

From top: Dune sofa, shown with 25 pieces, from \$5,400 to \$8,220 per module. A set of Tongue armchairs, £1,784 each, in situ at La Bergerie, Paulin’s home in Cévennes. Cathédrale table, \$74,820, and Iena armchair, \$15,480. Above: Original Tulip chairs from Twentytwentyone’s picture archive



Clockwise from left: two-seater Canapé Alpha sofa, from \$34,680. Fauteuil Alpha chair with swivel base, \$22,440. A La Déclive recliner prototype and Osaka sofa, from \$3,332, in the Paulin family home in the south of France. A double Cathédrale table, \$102,960, adds a pop of colour to Alaïa’s London shop



began working with Thonet to create chairs using swimwear material – an innovative piece of design engineering that would help forge a long friendship with Azzedine Alaïa, who also began his career with swimwear – and who would go on to be one of the world’s most famous collectors of Paulin furniture. Indeed, it was a conversation that Benjamin had with Alaïa back in 2013 that resulted in the first Paulin, Paulin, Paulin production – a recreation of the undulating, tongue-like 1966 recliner La Déclive (pictured right). “I had seen a prototype that my father had given a museum,” says Benjamin, “and I was telling Azzedine that it had been so important to me in my childhood. He asked me to make one for him – and that was the beginning of this whole project.” A year after Alaïa’s death, plans are underway to make La Déclive part of the Paulin, Paulin, Paulin collection.

Another key collector of Paulin is former fashion editor Carla Sozzani, who was Alaïa’s right hand, muse and business adviser for most of his career. “I remember discovering a vintage book about Paulin in a shop in London years ago,” she says. “It had the orange Osaka sofa [designed in 1967, from €3,332 through LaCividina, pictured right] at the Nikko Hotel on the cover. I felt immediate love for its sensual, primitive, perfect shape. I started looking for Paulin vintage and re-edition pieces. I then wanted to meet my design hero. I did, and became friends with Pierre and Maia. They came to my home in Milan and couldn’t believe how many pieces I had.”

After his work at Thonet, Paulin worked on furniture for Artifort, experimenting with foam and rubber and bantamweight tubular frames. The shapes he created were whimsical and fresh but so much more: the Orange Slice (£1,670) and Tulip chair (£2,198, both from Twentytwentyone) took citrus peel and petals as their inspiration and forged something with timeless integrity. He created his award-winning Ribbon chair (£4,550, from Material Life) in 1966,



and interiors for Georges Pompidou at the Elysée Palace in 1971. He would subsequently furnish the office of François Mitterrand in 1983. Much of Paulin’s industrial work has remained in constant production since it was first designed. This year, Ligne Roset reissued a range of classic pieces, reworked in new materials, with tweaks to the engineering to make them more comfortable. The elegant curved “x” of his 1980s Curule chair (from £962) is updated in black-stained beech with a soft matching cowhide backrest. The soft, sci-fi ergonomics of his 1975 500 and 500/2 chairs are echoed in the Bonnie design (£3,080 for the sofa,

and £2,117 for the armchair), which embraces the body of the user in extraordinary comfort as they sink into it. Like the Paulin business, Ligne Roset is a family-run operation. There are exceptionally strong personal connections between the Rosets and the designers whose work they produce. “We had known Pierre for years,” says Olivier Roset. “It is thanks to his wife Maia that we stayed in touch. We enjoyed many visits to their home in the south of France, and Pierre and Ligne Roset had a common DNA – creativity, non-conformism, design, beauty, function and modernity. His work represents the ultimate modernity, from the purity of the drawing and the curved forms to the use of jersey textiles. Simplicity was the ultimate objective.”

Roset points to Paulin’s home in the Cévennes as the purest expression of that simplicity. The house, La Bergerie, is the heart of the family’s narrative – a space of raw stonewalls and natural daylight in the picturesque surroundings of a national park. Pierre Paulin restored a historic ruin to create the private residence that would also be a design retreat filled with his work. “In the late 1990s my father decided to quit the design agency he had formed with my mother,” explains Benjamin, who was a teenager at the time. “He wanted a wild place, so he came to Cévennes.” Since Pierre’s passing, the house has been a place of pilgrimage for designers and architects, invited by his widow Maia to explore the interior and archives. In 2016, a more formal arrangement was made, opening it to the public, but by appointment only. “We receive visitors from all over the world,” says Maia. “It is always emotional to see how people react to an environment where you have lived for so many years. Sometimes visitors ask for the permission to sit in every single seat.” ♦

PAULIN POWER
Artifort, artifort.com. LaCividina, lacividina.com. Ligne Roset, ligne-rosset.com. Material Life, material-life.co.uk. Paulin, Paulin, Paulin, paulinpaulinpaulin.com. Ralph Pucci, ralphpucci.net. Twentytwentyone, twentytwentyone.com.