

# 1970s french furniture

Clean lines and innovative material combinations are the design survivors of this notoriously tricky decade, says Virginia Blackburn

**T**he 1970s have often been called “the decade that style forgot”, but, lava lamps aside, it’s a misnomer. Much furniture dating from that period has earned classic design status, and few countries were more adept at producing such pieces than France. Here designers played with interesting combinations of materials such as brass and Perspex, glass and stainless steel, to create pieces with clean, straight lines and, despite these modern pairings, classical proportions. The appeal of these designs rests, for many collectors, upon the fact that they sit easily with almost any style of interior, and the finest works have become increasingly desirable, particularly over the past five years.

“Perspex and stainless steel are materials that can flirt with a lot of styles, whereas the materials used in the 1960s, such as plastic, were more uncompromising,” says Liliane Fawcett, owner of postwar and contemporary furniture gallery Themes & Variations in London’s Notting Hill. “The recession of the early 1970s meant the happy, hippy period came to an abrupt end and prompted a change of approach: furniture had more controlled lines and became less exuberant, more serious.” She currently has several pieces for sale by acclaimed French designers of the period, including a pair of brushed-metal occasional tables by Patrice Maffei for Kappa for £6,800, and a stainless-steel panel by Michel Deverne for £13,000.

Many of the decade’s significant designers were sculptors and artists who turned their hand to furniture-making, and there is an inventiveness and flair to their creations that appeals to art collectors and design aficionados alike. Highly desirable works include those by sculptor Philippe Hiquily, who died last March; painter and sculptor Guy de Rougemont, a member of the Académie des Beaux-Arts; and Claude and François-Xavier Lalanne, a married couple of artist/designers who leapt to fame when Serge Gainsbourg selected their bronze work *L’Homme à Tête de Chou* (The Man with the Head of a Cabbage) for the title and cover of his 1976 album. Hiquily’s Coque armchair in aluminium or brass with a Perspex base was produced in a limited edition of 40 and now sells for around £25,000. An example can currently be found at Paris’s Gallery Yves Gastou (price on request). De Rougemont’s 1971 Cloud coffee table, made of Plexiglas and copper, fetches auction estimates of £25,000 to £30,000, while pieces by the Lalanès can command prices of £100,000 or more.

But not all collectable furniture of the period sits at such an artistically rarefied



level. “These pieces are sought-after because the French have a great eye for quality,” says Victoria Law, co-owner of London-based L & V Art and Design, specialist in 19th- and 20th-century British and European furniture, adding that collectors also value high-quality works of the period by established ateliers such as Maison Jansen and Maison Baguès. “Metalwork has always been important to French design – it’s a tradition harking back to ormolu [gilded-bronze] furniture,” says Law. The brass so beloved of these 1970s designers is usually still in excellent condition – although collectors should always check for corrosion; brass can be repaired, but it is expensive to do so. Last year Law sold a pair of brass and glass side tables after Maison Jansen, c1970, for £2,400, and a brass and smoked-glass magazine rack, c1970, for £285.

Indeed, the sensual appeal of smoky glass is a characteristic some collectors are particularly drawn to, especially when it comes to tables and *étagères*. The trend arose from a fascination with 1970s architecture that used dark glass and steel – such as the futuristic Centre Georges Pompidou, which opened in 1977 in

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Paris, the steel superstructure of which stands resplendent on the outside of the building. Indeed, darkened transparent glass has a seductive, secretive air about it; the colour is neither harsh nor jarring, and is mesmerisingly distinctive.

Aesthetes enjoy these stylistic synergies between the decade’s furniture and different design genres – another of which is jewellery. Philip Vergeylen, head



From top: brass and glass magazine rack, £285, from L & V Art and Design. Philippe Hiquily aluminium Coque armchair, price on request, from Galerie Yves Gastou. Patrice Maffei for Kappa stainless-steel side tables, £6,800, from Themes & Variations

of interior-design studio Nicholas Haslam, points out that not only were the 1970s almost certainly the first time that furniture mixed silvery metals with more golden ones, but that “it was the same for jewellery. White and yellow gold were used in the same pieces”. For example, a striking white- and yellow-gold open-link bangle-watch created by Omega.

Furniture with this colour combination gets snapped up quickly, says Vergeylen: his studio showed an expandable dining table in smoked glass with a mirrored base and brass and nickel details by Willy Rizzo (the Italian-born photographer-turned-designer who worked mainly in Paris) at the Olympia International Fine Art and Antiques Fair in June 2012, and it sold almost immediately for £6,800.

But established design shops aren’t the only places to discover these treasures. For collectors with a sharp eye, markets can provide pickings as fruitful as those of the specialist galleries. When Steven Collins, a London-based entrepreneur who co-owns Bird of Smithfield restaurant, which opened last May, began to furnish his home in the south of France with 1970s French furniture 25 years ago, the first piece he bought was “a desk and matching bookcase from a market in Nice. I paid about £300 for it, and it is worth about 10 times that now. I continue to buy from markets in Provence, where prices are not too expensive. I like the balance and scale of the furniture, and it can be combined with other styles.”

Paradoxically, collectors and style arbiters have been seduced by the glamour of French 1970s furniture because today’s more minimalist interiors provide a better backdrop for oversized coffee tables, brass and glass *étagères* and inventive limited editions than the original soft furnishings of the decade. Where once they were lost in a jungle of shagpile carpet, many examples can now be found in the most prestigious cultural institutions in the world, including Germany’s Vitra Design Museum and London’s V&A. ♦

**WHERE TO BUY** GALLERY YVES GASTOU, 12 RUE BONAPARTE, 75006 PARIS (+331-5373 0010; WWW.GALERIEYVESGASTOU.COM). L & V ART AND DESIGN, UNIT E7, 71 WARRINER GARDENS, LONDON SW11 (020-7819 9655; WWW.LANDVDESIGN.COM). NICHOLAS HASLAM, 12-14 HOLBEIN PLACE, LONDON SW1 (020-7730 8623; WWW.NICHOLASHASLAM.COM). THEMES & VARIATIONS, 231 WESTBOURNE GROVE, LONDON W11 (020-7727 5531; WWW.THEMESANDVARIATIONS.COM). **WHERE TO SEE** V&A, CROMWELL ROAD, LONDON SW7 (020-7942 2000; WWW.VAM.AC.UK). VITRA DESIGN MUSEUM, CHARLES EAMES STRASSE 2, D-79576 WEIL AM RHEIN (+4976-2170 23200; WWW.DESIGN-MUSEUM.DE). **WHAT TO READ** FURNITURE & INTERIORS OF THE 1970S BY ANNE BONY AND IVAN RAKOCEVIC (FLAMMARION, 2005). SEVENTIES STYLE BY DAVID HEATHCOTE (MIDDLESEX UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2006).