

# FRENCH DESIGN

CREATIVITY AS TRADITION

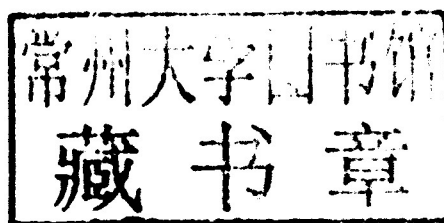


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TEXT BY ANNE BONY

OPENER PHOTOGRAPHS BY SOPHIE ZÉNON



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***Le Dessain du geste*** exhibition,  
from September 11 to October 10, 2012,  
at the l'Hôtel de Ville de Paris.

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# INTRO- DUCTION

ALAIN LARDET AND SCOTT LONGFELLOW

In France, quality craftsmanship remains an important value. Many companies have succeeded in conserving their *savoir faire*, the heritage built up over the years and now adapted to present-day lifestyles and needs by contemporary designers. The great manufactories created by Colbert during the reign of Louis XIV have now become leading brands, contributing to the prestige of French know-how. They developed significantly in the nineteenth century, impelled by a bourgeois clientele and shaped by the Industrial Revolution. Businesses of lesser renown, created at a later date, have also contributed to this traditional expertise, often inscribed in a specific geographical territory.

This exhibition seeks to show that a successful transformation is often the result of a technique that is fully mastered, a clearly conceived design, and entrepreneurial determination. Two objects have been chosen to illustrate this complementary relationship within each company: an object emblematic of the house in question, and an object resulting from collaboration with a contemporary designer.

## TECHNIQUE AND MACHINE

*Savoir faire* means the ability to transform one or several materials. Human skill plays the leading role in this process, for, unlike a machine, it takes into consideration the nuances and particularities of a context. The precision of the artisan's action and their sensitivity to material affect the quality of the object, in contrast with an industrial process, in which the operator triggers, stops, and ensures the correct mechanics of the process but does not determine the result.

Some artisanal products require several kinds of skill, several crafts. They are organized sequentially. Still, the process remains artisanal for all that. Industry uses standardized production. Conversely, artisanal methods aim to make each piece unique.

On the Aubrac plateau, each knife is individually made. The catalog of the Forge de Laguiole offers a certain number of models of knives in different materials and calibrated forms. No action is ever the same twice: on each occasion it is modulated. Each piece of horn or wood that is destined to become a knife handle is cut, adjusted, and polished with care. The genius of the artisan lies in adapting to the diversity of material. The subtleties of color, relief, and texture all contribute to the quality of the finished object.

Artisanship is not betrayed by serial production: every piece is the object of special attention. Crystal-makers in Lorraine might have produced certain glasses by the thousand, but their apparent resemblance is an illusion. Blowing the crystal paste in the mold and managing the temperature and the thickness of the crystal call for constant, close concentration. Likewise, the engraving and cutting of the cold crystal are acts of the utmost precision: a mistake would ruin the work of the craftsmen who have gone before.

The Christofle factory in Yainville brings together the *haute orfèvrerie* and gilding workshops. It is here that they make limited series in silver, whether prestigious trophies or exceptional services, and the *petite orfèvrerie* workshop, which produces flatware in silver-plated metal. Turners, planishers, chasers, and engravers, all genuine artistic craftsmen, master the production of their objects. Their know-how serves industry by providing in-house prototyping and project development. The production of flatware is mechanized. In this precise production process, the artisan intervenes in setting up the chain, and notably in the development of tools. The dies are thus machined and engraved in the *haute orfèvrerie* workshop. This mastery of technique is what enabled Marcel Wanders to create the *Jardin d'eden* range. For the first time in the history of flatware, the motifs appear on the handle, the flange, and the back of the spoon.



In all crafts, the machine can be used to complement, lighten, and refine the work of the artisan. Some companies subcontract part of their production when the element concerned requires technical expertise that is not available in-house. There are numerous instances of this, and we will not attempt to offer an exhaustive list here. When quality is your objective, it is important to recognize one's limits and call on the finest specialists. The *Zermatt* line, designed by Patrick Jouin for Puiforcat, was made with a block of stainless steel, using a technique not mastered in Pantin. However, house artisans supervised every aspect of this external collaboration with rigor and respect.

Technology often provides a complement to artisanal savoir faire. For example, most joinery and cabinetmaking workshops will have digital molding machines with multiple—five, sometimes seven—axes. At Pleyel and at Alki, digital machining is a timesaver and produces parts that will fit to the nearest millimeter. Cabinetmakers intervene before and after this operation. The cutting process allows for the checking of material and the coherence of the different parts for assembly. Artisans take back the pieces after machining to polish them and to work on the beveling, the edges, and the corners, thus ensuring a perfect quality of finish.

The relationship between man and machine is even more intense at the Orfèvrerie d'Anjou. Léon has been working pewter for thirty-seven years. He knocks out the metal on a chuck using a mechanical wheel. He designs new models, works on prototypes, and produces one-off pieces. He knows all about the material and knows how to produce a form, starting only with a design in his mind and a sheet of pewter. He records his technique using a 3D scanner, which reproduces it automatically. The machine becomes a tool for conserving his skills.

## DESIGN AT THE HEART OF THE BUSINESS

Design is an act of conceiving a precise project that is subject to constraints, ordering things in keeping with a formal intention. The purpose of artisanship and industry is to make an object according to a specific process. Know-how is an action, corporeal mastery, by means of which matter can be transformed. It is a confrontation with existence, an effort towards the creation of a reality.

The success of a collaboration is founded on reciprocal respect between the artisan and the designer. Some people are geniuses at combining both skills: conception and realization. The designer, who is not a party to the secrets of the worked material or the technique involved, has greater freedom when it comes to conceiving the form: he is therefore able to push the boundaries. However, the designer's intervention only partly determines the final quality of the object; the success of its realization is down to the skill of the artisan, who has a naturally complementary relation to the designer.

The uniqueness of each piece, which results from the transformation of a design, is not incompatible with respecting that design. The intrinsic quality of the object depends on the maker's appropriation of the designer's intentions, on the understanding they are able to bring to the process as it moves from concept to reality. Another essential figure in this maieutics is the company, the business, which chooses the designer and puts its brand at the service of the product's distribution.

These collaborations find their first expression in formal reflection on the objects. The house of Delisle is strongly attached to its decorative repertoire, which is inspired by the styles of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It generates the bulk of its sales with pieces that embody the

idea of the French art of living. Nicolas Aubagnac's proposition of a collection exploring an ornamental design inspired by papyrus enriches their formal repertoire. The point is not to break with tradition entirely but to take up position within the continuity of codes. Studio Putman brought the same talent for revisiting history to their collaboration with Lalique. Here, ornament is abandoned, but the signature savoir faire is found in the finishing of the crystal; the enduring codes inform the column-like architecture of the products.

Some collaborations raise the question of use. At Baccarat, the lighting designer Yann Kersalé revisited the traditional, portable lighting object. The availability of electricity has not made having a movable light source any less useful: the torch remains an indispensable accessory. *Jallum* is a portable, rechargeable light—a nomadic lamp. By imprisoning bubbles of air in a crystal cylinder, the designer designates the object's future environment: the garden, where nature and civilization meet.

Jean-Michel Wilmotte brought the revolution to La Cornue, by introducing induction technology and separating the oven from the hob, the combination of which—the element and the hob—the brand itself had innovated in the 1930s. The adaptation to contemporary uses is made by means of a formal break from the past. In this new kitchen, the lower elements disappear, thus lightening the furniture, making it like a table, while keeping the classic La Cornue features: the heat control switches and the towel rack.

At Drucker, a rattan specialist, Patrick Norguet has designed a chair without rattan. His aim is to open up new avenues for this brand by offering a product that is better adapted to contemporary uses. Even so, he has kept the rillsan weaving emblematic of its identity. The aluminum structure is conducive to stackability and more effectively

withstands the weather. The designer's intervention is thus intrinsically linked to the company's general strategy and development. His role goes beyond thinking about an object, about its form and use. At the Manufacture de Sèvres, collaboration with Christian Biecher provides an opportunity to go back to architectural ceramics. His vase, *Lace*, is in fact an element in a program that occupies the space in the manner of a screen wall by a logic of juxtaposition and accumulation. With its policy of limited series, Cat-Berro is appealing to the small circle of collectors. Domeau & Pérès have become a publishing house. Pleyel is entering the world of high-end furniture. These are some of many examples conveying the importance of design in business strategy.

With Ligne Roset and Cinna, Michel Roset has long placed creativity at the heart of his strategy. For him, creation, commerce, and communication—the three Cs—are key to developing his brands. The name of the designers is always well to the fore in communication for his brands. A new product and prototyping laboratory has been installed in the basement of his company building, a place that is off-limits to all but those who work there. That is where the ten or so new models launched each year are conceived. The creation of bold new products is winning Roset an increasingly prominent place among the great industrial producers of contemporary furniture, notably thanks to the *Facett* range of chairs and sofas designed by the Bouroullec brothers. These radical seats are the culmination of an interest in comfort and the skills of the factory at Briord. With *Ploum*, Michel Roset entrusted a very different mission to two designers: to create a bestseller comparable to *Togo*, a model designed in 1973 by Michel Ducaroy—a chair that expresses unequivocal comfort. The designer's role thus goes beyond the creation of new products. He collaborates with other parts of the company, such as communication, marketing, buying, etc. The creative



director then acts as an intermediary between designers and other departments in the firm.

Two companies with very distinct forms of *savoir faire*—Tolix and Alki—have made design central to their development strategy, in a broadened, multidisciplinary approach: Jean-François Dingjian and Éloi Chafaï managed to persuade the director of Tolix to engage in a policy of designer editions backed by coherent communication, encompassing both reissues of old models and new designs by Normal Studio, soon to be followed by other designers. The recent collections have been a commercial and media success. They revisit the formal vocabulary and propose new typologies of furniture while maintaining the Burgundian factory's core expertise of folding sheet metal. Since 2004, when Tolix was taken over, its turnover has increased seven times over.

A more recent example is that of Alki, whose name is Basque for "chair." This cooperative, created in 1982, produced rustic style furniture, notably chairs of Provençal inspiration. Aware of the fragility of such a market, in which competition was driving prices lower and lower every year, Peio Uhalde let himself be persuaded by Jean Louis Iratzoki—the two men were playing Basque pelota at the time—to make a radical shift into contemporary furniture. This was a revolution for the company, as regards both its skills and its market. Begun in 2009, the collaboration with Iratzoki is a success: some 75 percent of sales are generated by new products, and turnover is rising. The design is not radical. The idea is to create furniture that is humble and lovable, to which the user grows attached. Basque warmth is translated into these codes: light-colored oak, natural finishes, the use of baize, and felt, with raw edges, comfort announced by the visible padding, distinctive legs, the contemporary use of straw, etc. This in-depth work on the collections is evident in all the outward signals sent by the company, especially in visual identity. Within the framework of this strategy, the

commercial partners have changed: the big Parisian stores help distribute the products to the general public, while tastemakers and interior architects are responding strongly to the brand's new propositions. After designing the corporate headquarters of Quicksilver, Jean Louis Iratzoki saw new outlets for the Basque cooperative in the world of offices and contract furnishing, where the organization of work was becoming more informal. He then designed the "Landa" program for reception areas in offices and hotels.

## DESIGNER AND ARTISAN

At Daum, Jean-Marie Massaud's main intention when designing the *Kumara* vase was to magnify the crystal paste handled using the lost-wax process, a specialty of this manufacture in Nancy. Innovation was necessary when it came to engraving the interior of the plaster mold. It was not possible to polish the outside surface in-house, so this was entrusted to a marble-worker used to working on flat surfaces. At Saint-Louis, for his *Intervalle* collection, Pierre Charpin asked the artisans to cut a perpendicular pattern that could evolve in terms both of depth and material. It took a great deal of experimentation to achieve the exact technique. This example perfectly illustrates the fertility of the dialogue between designer and artisan. The diamond cut, produced by a very precise action, was enriched in the course of the project. The artisans did not just reproduce the design, they interpreted it, bringing their own talent into play: each one "improvised" in the confrontation with matter, engaging in a real physical act of research.

Bold projects by designers are sometimes seen as provocation. When Francis Cat-Berro decided to put his workshop in the service of projects by the Néotu gallery, and in particular of the creations by Elizabeth Garouste & Mattia Bonetti and Jasper Morrison, a number of artisans refused to follow him, while others mocked the new objects. In the end,

though, most of them appreciated the challenge: there were systems of assemblage to be devised, new finishes to invent, new types of wood and materials to be worked. Bonetti intervened with similar insight when designing a champagne bucket for Odiot. Behind the impression of superimposed layers of silver lies the reality of expert work on a pressed metal, creating a receding ground on a pressed form. In this instance the chaser's technique is applied to geometrical design: a real challenge.

Experimentation is at the heart of the mission of the Centre International d'Art Verrier (CIAV). François Azambourg looked to the tools of the glassblower for a formal element. He found it in the wooden mold that is responsible for the textural effect of his *Douglas* vase. The tool becomes a work of art and the artisan is thrust to the front of the stage. Designers often help celebrate the know-how of the artisans they work with. This admiration for those who turn a project into reality is embodied in their objects. This was also the case when Matali Crasset designed *Quand Jim se relaxe* for Domeau & Pères. While the work on comfort and color is coherent with her own style, the emphasis on the skeleton of the chair is a formal tribute to the skill of Bruno Domeau and Philippe Pères, respectively a saddler and an upholsterer.

The *Sellier* chair designed by Denis Montel and Éric Benqué for Hermès is another project that sublimates the work of the artisan. The structure, which this time is hidden, is simply a support for the covering. It is almost nondesign, for the leather or textile cover is essentially the expression of expertise. Martin Szekely showed the same respect for artisans when he worked with the silver workshop at Christofle. His *Reflets* collection eschews ornament of any kind the better to emphasize the osmosis of artisan and material. The broad, planished surfaces he has designed do not brook the slightest flaw. The brazed assemblage is

invisible. By emphasizing the nature of the material, he offers a powerful homage to the artisan and makes the masterpiece a moral position. "The rigor of perfect skill is a path to human fulfillment. It's very powerful. If we start to lose that, humanity will lose a part of itself. It's a serious matter."





# BETTENCOURT SCHUELLER FOUNDATION

**The Bettencourt Schueller Foundation supports  
the exhibition *Le Dessein du geste***

A body of recognized public utility, the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation was created in 1987 by Liliane and André Bettencourt and their daughter Françoise.

It co-creates, provides long-term support for, and finances original and innovative projects mounted by remarkable men and women, be they scientists, artistic craftsmen, or social actors. Intelligent in their approach and inventing new cooperative models, these projects all aspire to shift the frontiers of science, solidarity, and artistic creation, in an approach that brings professionalization and excellence to philanthropic activity.

The cultural engagement of the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation is manifested primarily in its promotion of French artistic crafts and the excellence of their savoir faire, which it rewards through the "Liliane Bettencourt Prize for the Intelligence of the Hand," created in 1999.

With this prize, which comprises awards for "Outstanding Talents" and "Dialogues," the Foundation encourages artists to renew their know-how, to perfect their mastery of their material, and to bring the artistic crafts into the world of contemporary design.

The Foundation is delighted to be taking part in the exhibition *Le Dessein du geste* where it will be showcasing the "Dialogues" award, celebrating the coming together of outstanding artistic craftsmen and creative figures from other fields (artists, designers, architects).

Through such collaborations, the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation supports and encourages opportunities for innovation and excellence in the artistic crafts.

# PLEYEL MANUFACTORY

## SINCE 1807

The Pleyel manufactory is a place of learning, of manual intelligence, and transmission, all of which preside over the conception and realization of objects. The successive operations are reiterated and followed with infinite precision, always dedicated to excellence.

As attested by the exhibition *Le Dessein du geste*, which Pleyel is partnering, the manufactory is charting its future by bringing together past and present, objects from its heritage and contemporary design, traditional know-how and new technologies.

The fourth dimension of its design, since 1807 the Pleyel sound has united voluptuous softness, dazzling high notes, powerful basses, and a balanced middle range. Curves, bending, wood, felt, steel, copper—such is the alliance that produces a perfect accord.

Lutanists, *ébénistes*, lacquerers, varnishers, polishers, tuners, harmonizers, adjusters—over twenty specialist skills serve the oldest piano manufactory in the world and the only one in France, which proudly bears the "Living Heritage Enterprise" label (one of only one thousand such firms).

Pleyel is a world created by Ignace Pleyel, a musician who published the first economical editions of musical scores, discovered Frédéric Chopin, and passed on his taste for progress to his successors: the auditorium in rue Cadet in 1830, the one in rue Rochechouart in 1839, the Salle Pleyel in 1927, "Art Deco" pianos with Ruhlmann, Herbst, and Prou in the 1930s, often for liners, and under the combined aegis of Hubert Martigny and Arnaud Marion in the 2000s, pianos made with artists (Marco Del Ré, Jean Cortot, Aki Kuroda) and designers (Andrée Putman, Hilton McConnico, Michele De Lucchi).

Savoir faire is the connection between pianos and furniture. A new form of expression that remains rooted in the history of the manufactory and its industrial strengths in cabinetmaking and lacquer work. It is a unique form of design, identified with cultural riches and a rigorous savoir faire for which sound constitutes the fourth dimension. A space of expression for creators whose only limit is gravity. Unique design and manufacture.

### SAVOIR-FAIRE SERVING THE ART OF LIVING

The Pleyel manufactory is located in Saint-Denis (93), at the gates of Paris. Its pianos and furniture can be seen at the Pleyel showroom at the Salle Pleyel, Paris.

### THE PLEYEL FOUNDATION

The not-for-profit Pleyel Foundation was constituted in Switzerland in December 2000, by Hubert Martigny. Its goal is to promote and encourage projects or creations that uphold, promote, develop, and showcase musical and operatic art, whether in Switzerland or beyond, whatever the medium and form of these expressions.

The Pleyel Foundation supports the enduring tradition of French savoir faire and the dialogue between master craftsmen and designers.

# HERMÈS

*Le Dessein du geste* spotlights what has always been one of France's greatest treasures: the talent of its artistic craftsmen, working to sustain the highest quality in forms that are constantly being renewed. The poetically polysemous title—*dessein* meaning "design" in the sense both of form and purpose—evokes one of the characteristics of this tradition: the goal pursued by these virtuosi of the decorative arts who dedicate their precise techniques and their life's work to imprinting form and thus transforming matter into objects. Today, more than ever, their crafts express passion and a commitment to our wellbeing, to the sensuous, personal pleasure afforded by fine objects.

Since 1837, Hermès has perpetuated its know-how and at the same time innovated by ensuring that techniques are handed down from one generation to another while pursuing a dialogue with visionary creators. Artisanry is more modern than ever: that is the spirit instilled into the manufactures. Whatever the field—leatherwork, printing on silk, or any of the crafts perfected by the houses that have joined the group, such as crystal (Saint-Louis) or silver (Puiforcat)—perfectionism is a constant.

The wealth of these houses derives from the alchemical combination of the commitment of their artisans, their dialogue with designers, an economic model adapted to our times, and fidelity to artisanal methods.

It is wholly by design, therefore, that the house of Hermès is an associate and supporter of this exhibition conceived and launched by that indefatigable and brilliant champion of the applied arts, Alain Lardet. Our thanks to him, but also to his team, who accompanied this great undertaking like a band of *compagnon* craftsmen.

[www.hermes.com](http://www.hermes.com)



# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank Madame Aurélie Filippetti, Minister of Culture and Communication, who kindly granted us the patronage of her ministry, and Monsieur Frédéric Mitterrand, her predecessor, for his enthusiastic encouragement when we first presented our project.

We are deeply grateful to Monsieur Bertrand Delanoë, Mayor of Paris, and Madame Lyne Cohen-Solal, municipal councilor in charge of trade, artisans, independent professions, and artistic crafts, who are hosting the exhibition at the Hôtel de Ville, as part of the action by the City, our main partner, in favor of artistic crafts and design.

This exhibition has been made possible by the support of our sponsors:

- the Bettencourt Schueller Foundation
- the Pleyel Foundation
- CODIFAB
- the house of Hermès

and by the availability of the directors and artisans of the manufactories and houses presented here, and of the designers with whom they collaborated.

Our thanks to them all for their attentive generosity.



We would like to express our deep gratitude to all the members of the small team who spontaneously joined us and made this project possible.

They shared our dream of paying homage to these houses and manufactories whose development is founded on savoir faire and creativity. They gave it all their heart and talent.

**Anne Bony** met a host of fascinating artisans and entrepreneurs, and shares all the pith and salt of their conversations with the same generosity in this book.

**Gilles Belley**, an extremely sensitive designer and exhibition specialist, has come up with a very elegant presentation to enhance the theme.

**Corentin Banzet** filmed these interviews with great humanity, producing images of great sincerity. Almost invisible, a camera and a microphone take us right up close to the artisans in their workshops.

**Sophie Zénon**, whom we met at Sèvres a few years ago, agreed to go back on the road in order to capture the magical actions of these artisans. She offers a series of splendid portraits whose subjects are like the officiants in holy ceremonies. But then is that now what we are talking about when we talk about artistic crafts?

We would also like to express our gratitude to Alice Ngo, Eduardo Coeto, and François Guillaume-Bohl for their precious work behind the scenes for this project.

Alain Lardet and Scott Longfellow,  
Curators of the exhibition